

**Communication, social, and critical thinking skills
of students with low-power-distance teachers
in a high-power-distance country ¹**

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Abstract

This paper is aimed at giving a clearer picture of the power gap that exists between a group of Filipino students and their teachers in a laboratory school in a state university in the Philippines. This study emerged from the assumption that power distance between Filipino students and their teachers could help explain the level of their ability to communicate, socialize, and think critically. A survey of a group of Filipino students' perceptions of their teachers was conducted. Evidence shows that a low power-distance relationship exists between the students and their teachers. This finding is contrary to the view that the power-distance culture in the students' family is similar to the one that exists in school. Evidence suggests that it is possible for an educational institution to insulate itself from a high-power-distance culture of the students' home or family environment. Most of the students in this study agree that their teachers, in general, have significantly contributed to the advancement of their social, communication, and critical thinking skills owing to the low-level power-distance relationship that exists between them and their teachers.

Keywords: Power distance, communication skills, social skills, critical thinking skills, Filipino culture

Many scholars in education share the belief that schoolteachers' knowledge of their students' backgrounds and contexts is an important influence in the enhancement of teaching-learning situations (Collins, 2009; Eberly, Joshi & Konzal, 2007; Gay, 2010; Piazza, Rao & Protacio, 2015). This initial step in instruction is primarily aimed at creating an environment that is highly conducive to learning—a situation in which the teachers' manner of dealing with their students have been calibrated according to the traits, preferences or learning needs of the students themselves. Without sacrificing the value of student respect for educators, a learning environment could also be one that is dominated by the spirit of informality and friendliness between teachers and students (Yoo, 2014). However, figuring exactly what to do to create an optimal teaching-learning situation could be a real challenge on the part of a teacher, especially if the students do not have the inclination, confidence, or interest to freely express themselves orally, in writing, or in both. In situations where the teachers have allowed a wide gulf to exist between them and their students, the former will most likely fail to make their teaching more responsive to the educational needs of the latter.

Studies about student-teacher relationship in different parts of the world suggest that a certain cultural behavior could stand in the way of learning (Kasuya, n.d. ; Hadley, 2001; Yoo, 2014; Zhang, 2013). Such a barrier could pose a gargantuan challenge to both the teachers and students, especially if their accepted beliefs and common experiences could weaken the teaching and learning interaction between them. It has already been noted in several studies on the teaching-learning dynamics in some Asian countries (e.g., China, Taiwan, Singapore, Japan, South Korea) that a considerably wide power gap between students and teachers (Zhang, 2013; Yoo, 2014; Hadley, 2001; Kasuya, n.d.) could be an obstacle to the development of students' ability towards effective communication and learning.

Power Distance in Education

“Power distance” is one of the value dimensions that Geert Hofstede (1997) used in his attempt to paint a general picture of the culture that defined each country that he studied. Drawing from the study of Mauk Maulder (1977), Hofstede (1997) described power distance as “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (p. 28). For instance, in high-power-distance cultures, students tend to quietly conform to most of the values and beliefs of their

teachers (Li & Guo, 2012). In these cultures, students tend to maintain their silence even when they disagree with their teachers' statements and pronouncements. Moreover, students would maintain distance from the teachers by using formal titles (*i.e.*, “sir” or “ma’am”), which are indicators of high-power-distance culture, even if the teachers themselves would allow the use of first names. Most students in high-power-distance cultures may be described as those who have already accepted that they are in no position to question what is being taught to them, to engage the teacher in a sustained reasoned or argumentative dialogue, or to require the teacher to clarify a lesson that seems to be difficult for them to comprehend.

The place of power distance in various areas of education, teaching and learning, and in the development of various skills among students is considered a vital one (Arnold, 2009; Hadley, 2001; Tananuraksakul, 2013; Yoo, 2014). However, it has not been studied extensively across cultures, and has yet to be examined closely in the field of education research. It appears that most of the studies on power distance in education are mainly focused on second language learning. Li and Guo (2012), for instance, found that Chinese English teachers tend to acquire certain western values in the course of studying and teaching English in China. Evidence from the study of Li and Guo (2012) suggests that the Chinese English teachers' use of open-ended questions, as opposed to the Chinese non-English teachers' use of yes-or-no questions contributes to the reduction of power-distance level when students are learning how to speak in English. Another study in Japan shows that having a deeper understanding of the role of power distance in English language teaching could substantially help teachers develop an approach that could lead to a more productive interaction between them and their students (Hadley, 2001). Having such understanding could likewise help in the construction of a teaching methodology that responds well to the emotional needs (Arnold; 2009; Hadley, 2001) of students. Sensitivity to the culture of learners was also emphasized as a vital component of effective teaching in English for foreign learners class (Yoo, 2014). In Thailand, Tananuraksakul (2013) found that reduced power distance level produces better results when it is coupled with the use of positive reinforcements for Thai students of English.

Other studies suggest that utmost care should be exercised when describing culture in general and a certain country's culture in particular. For instance, Terzi argued (2011) that Hofstede's categorization of Turkey as a low-power-distance culture is not wholly true as institutions in Turkey are capable of developing varied cultures. In Turkey, the level of power distance could vary from one organization to another (Terzi, 2011). In Japan, it had been

observed, too, that level of power distance could vary within a school, *i.e.*, from one classroom to another (Kasuya, n.d.). The foregoing observations indicate that Hofstede's general descriptions of different cultures might have gone beyond what his evidence permits. Ly (2012) cautioned that scholars should use the concept of "power distance" in the context of relevant considerations like age, gender, and cultural exposure of people whose power distance relationships are being ascertained (Gooderham & Nordhaug, 2003, as cited in Ly, 2012).

Filipino Students and Power Distance in the Philippines

Evidence from Hofstede's research shows that Filipinos tend to "accept a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place and which needs no further justification" (The Hofstede Center, n.d.). Such structure has been associated with "inherent inequalities", where "centralization is popular" and "subordinates expect to be told what to do and the ideal boss is a benevolent autocrat" (The Hofstede Center, n.d.). One may observe thus that many Filipino students, if they are not completely quiet are generally polite with or respectful to their teachers (Halagao, 2004). Filipino students are also inclined to keep academic dialogues with their teachers at a minimum to avoid being thought of as rude by the latter (Cagasan, n.d.; Halagao, 2004). The same patterns of behavior could be observed among Filipino children, even outside school settings. In Philippine homes, where the young ones are first taught certain patterns of behavior, for instance, children are instructed with the intent of inculcating in them values like submission to parental authority (de Torres, 2002) and respect and obedience to older or more senior members of the family.

It may be said that the high-power-distance culture in the Philippines is an outcome of various processes that have encouraged extreme obedience to and respect of authority, which goes a long way back to Philippine history (Agoncillo, 1990) and extends to the modern homes and families, schools, churches, and society in general. In the Philippine education landscape, the same processes are probably repeated and further highlighted, if today's school administrators and teachers themselves were raised and schooled in the tradition of high-power-distance culture that Hofstede (1997) described. Hofstede (1997) said that people may treat school and work authorities in the same way they treat their parents. In the same vein, we can also intimate that Filipino students, just like many of their counterparts in high-power-distance countries like Japan, South Korea, and Malaysia, would view their teachers as having much authority and may

not question or challenge them, even if there are probably good reasons to do so. It is in situations such as this one where, according to the principle of transfer of attitude (Hofstede, 1997), the power that teachers hold becomes easy to maintain, as students tend to accept that the role they play in the school context occupies that of a lower power position, and that they are basically subject to the authority of the more powerful teachers. These are seen as conditions that could lead one to a general picture of the Philippines as being a high-power-distance culture.

This study was thus conducted to give a clearer picture of the power distance that exists in the Philippines, especially in both contexts as in the classroom teaching-learning involving teachers and their students and in the homes involving parents and their children. It is hoped that this work could shed light on the implications, which this power distance between Filipino schoolteachers and their students, on the one hand, and Filipino children and their parents on the other hand, have for these students' acquisition of fundamental skills, such as critical thinking, social, and communication skills.

Method

Though the Philippines has been classified as a high-power-distance culture, this study is aimed at answering whether there are groups of students who treat their teachers as their quasi-equals and, if any, whether the power gap between them significantly contributes to the advancement of the students' social, communication, and critical thinking skills. We, the researchers (Filipinos), are professors of psychology and philosophy of education at a teacher education institution in the National Capital Region of the Philippines. Two of us have experience teaching at the basic education level, but the participants in this study have never been their students. Also two of us have a doctoral degree in philosophy of education and the other one has a master's degree in educational psychology and is now a doctoral candidate in the same discipline.

Participants

The data for this study were obtained through convenient sampling of junior (grade 9) and senior (grade 10) high school students from a laboratory school of the college of education of a state university in the Philippines. Being in the last two years of the 10-year basic education cycle in the Philippines, it had been assumed in this study that the junior and senior students are in the best position to provide data as to whether the power distance between them and their

teachers had contributed to the development of their social, communication, and critical thinking skills. The participating school in this study offers both elementary and secondary degrees, and is considered an autonomous public school in that its administrators and faculty have the liberty of designing their own basic education curriculum, which is not necessarily identical to the general education program implemented by the Philippine government’s Department of Education or other laboratory schools, which may be private or public, in the country.

Instrument

We used a 40-item Likert-type survey instrument in English, with response options ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Using our professional knowledge as teachers of psychological and philosophical foundations in the Philippines and our experiential knowledge in the region where we are teaching, we developed and revised the instrument three times over a period of four weeks to ensure clarity and high-reliability of each item. Before we subjected the instrument to reliability analysis, 16 first-year education undergraduate students from our college were also consulted for instrument face validation. Consensus as to the readiness of the instrument for reliability analysis was unanimously arrived at by us, the researchers.

Initially, fourteen (14) perception statements were prepared for each category (i.e., social, communication and critical thinking) of skills. The three sets of items were separately subjected to reliability analysis (see Figure 1). The Cronbach’s alpha for social, communication, and critical thinking skill survey items are .86, .78, and .69, respectively. No items were removed

	1	2	3	4	5
3. I can say in class, without fear or hesitation, my doubts, if any, about my teachers’ opinions or beliefs.	<i>strongly agree</i>	<i>agree</i>	<i>neither agree nor disagree</i>	<i>disagree</i>	<i>strongly disagree</i>
16. My teachers create an environment that fosters collaborative learning.	<i>strongly agree</i>	<i>agree</i>	<i>neither agree nor disagree</i>	<i>disagree</i>	<i>strongly disagree</i>
26. My teachers’ behavior and language are encouraging enough to make me want to participate in class discussions.	<i>strongly agree</i>	<i>agree</i>	<i>neither agree nor disagree</i>	<i>disagree</i>	<i>strongly disagree</i>

Figure 1. Sample items from the survey. Each set of skills were color coded and distributed alternately in the questionnaire. Distributions are as follow:

- SOCIAL SKILLS:** items 1, 4, 7, 10, 13, 16, 19, 22, 25, 28, 31, 34, 37, & 40
- COMMUNICATION SKILLS:** items 2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 17, 20, 23, 26, 29, 32, 35, 38, & 41
- CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS:** items 3, 6, 9, 12, 15, 18, 24, 27, 30, 33, 36, & 39

Data collection and analysis

With the informed consent of the principal, parents of the students, and students, one of us, the researchers, took the task of personally distributing and administering the survey questionnaires to and collecting the same from a total of 171 Filipino junior and senior high school students, ten (10) of whom failed to answer the questionnaire completely, hence their responses were discarded. Utilizing a 30-minute homeroom period, the survey was personally administered in a classroom by a researcher. The students, as well as their parents, were informed in writing that the students' participation in this study is voluntary and they may withdraw, without penalty, their responses until before the data collection is completed. Of the 161 responses that were processed, 84 (52%) were collected from male respondents and 77 (48%) from female respondents. Of the 82 junior high school student respondents, 38 (46%) were aged 14 and 44 (54%) were aged 15, and of the 79 senior high school student respondents, 36 (46%) were aged 15 and 43 (54%) were aged 16.

A one-way analysis of variance was performed to measure the differences between the social, communication, and critical thinking skills of students who were grouped according to their mothers' or fathers' parenting styles, which were classified as "permissive", "authoritative", and "authoritarian". In the students' profile section of the survey instrument, the participant indicated his or her mother's and father's parenting styles. In the same section of the instrument,

a “permissive parent” was defined as someone who is open to suggestions from, being questioned by, and/or having friendly discussions with his or her child, who is the respondent. An “authoritarian parent” was defined as someone who imposes his or her will or beliefs on and is often or always not open to suggestions from, being questioned by, and/or having friendly discussions with his or her child. And an “authoritative parent” is defined as someone whose parenting style is a cross between permissive and authoritarian.

Results

Power distance between parents and their children: impact on students’ learning of social, communication, and critical thinking skills

Of the 161 respondents, 35 (22%) said their fathers are permissive, 119 (74%) said their fathers are authoritative or a cross between permissive and authoritarian), and 7 (4 %) said their fathers are authoritarian. A one-way analysis of variance was performed and revealed that there is no significant difference between the social skills of students who were grouped according to their fathers’ parenting styles, $F(2,158)=2.28, p<.05$. The same analysis yielded a similar result on the communication skills of students who were grouped according to their fathers’ parenting styles, $F(2,158)=1.67, p<.05$, and on the critical thinking skills of students who were likewise grouped according to their fathers’ parenting styles, $F(2,158)=2.65, p<.05$.

Table 1. *One-Way Analysis of Variance of Students by Father’s Parenting Style*

Source	df	SS	MS	F	p
Social skills: Between groups of students with permissive, authoritative, authoritarian father	2	235.51	117.76	2.28	.11
Within groups	158	8148.55	51.57		
Total	160	8384.06			
Communication skills: Between groups of students with permissive,	2	128.98	64.49	1.67	.19

authoritative, authoritarian father					
Within groups	158	6090.90	38.55		
Total	160	6219.89			
Critical thinking skills: Between groups of students with permissive, authoritative, authoritarian father					
Within groups	2	141.35	70.68	2.65	.07
Total	158	4220.29	26.71		
Total	160	4361.64			

Of the 161 respondents, 31 (19%) said their mothers are permissive, 116 (72%) said their mothers are authoritative, and 14 (9%) said their mothers are authoritarian. Another one-way analysis of variance was performed and revealed that there is no significant difference between the social skills of students who were grouped according to their mothers' parenting styles, $F(2,158)=1.12, p<.05$. The same analysis yielded a similar result on the communication skills of students who were grouped according to their mothers' parenting styles, $F(2,158)=.66, p<.05$. And still the same result was obtained on the critical thinking skills of students who were likewise grouped according to their mothers' parenting styles, $F(2,158)=2.08, p<.05$. (See Table 2.)

Evidence suggests that regardless of the participants' fathers' and mothers' parenting styles, the power distance between the students and their teachers, when it comes to the learning of social, communication, and critical thinking skills from the teacher, is narrow. This is a finding that is contrary to the general observation that the Philippines has a high-power-distance culture. The study shows that the schoolteachers in this research have introduced their students to

Table 2. *One-Way Analysis of Variance of Students by Mother's Parenting Style*

Source	df	SS	MS	F	p
Social skills: Between groups of students with permissive, authoritative, authoritarian father					
Within groups	2	117.29	58.64	1.12	.33
Total	158	8266.77	52.32		
Communication skills: Between groups of students with permissive, authoritative, authoritarian father					
Within groups	2	51.82	25.91	.66	.52
Total	158	8384.06			

Within groups	158	6168.07	39.04		
Total	160	6219.89			
Critical thinking skills: Between groups of students with permissive, authoritative, authoritarian father	2	111.87	55.93	2.08	.13
Within groups	158	4249.77	26.90		
Total	160	4361.64			

a learning culture that is different from the power-distance home culture of students, most of whom claimed to have parents who are authoritative.

Power distance between Filipino students and their teachers: impact on the social, communication, and critical thinking skills of the students

It is assumed that when students manifest higher scores in their learning or acquisition of particular skills, the power distance in the classroom between the teachers and these students is lower. This is because of the general view in education that a more open and flexible classroom setting (*i.e.*, where students and teachers can converse and interact with each other freely, and where students can raise questions to their teachers, and the like) make for more effective learning among students.

In this study, Figure 1 below presents the data on the power distance between teachers and their students, and on these students learning of social, communication, and critical thinking skills. In particular, the student participants' claim that power distance between them and their teachers are low or below average, especially when it comes to their learning of social (34 points), communication (38 points), and critical thinking (34 points) skills. The orange bars in Figure 2 represent the average scores of the students in the survey. The same bars indicate the level of the power distance between the students and their teachers.

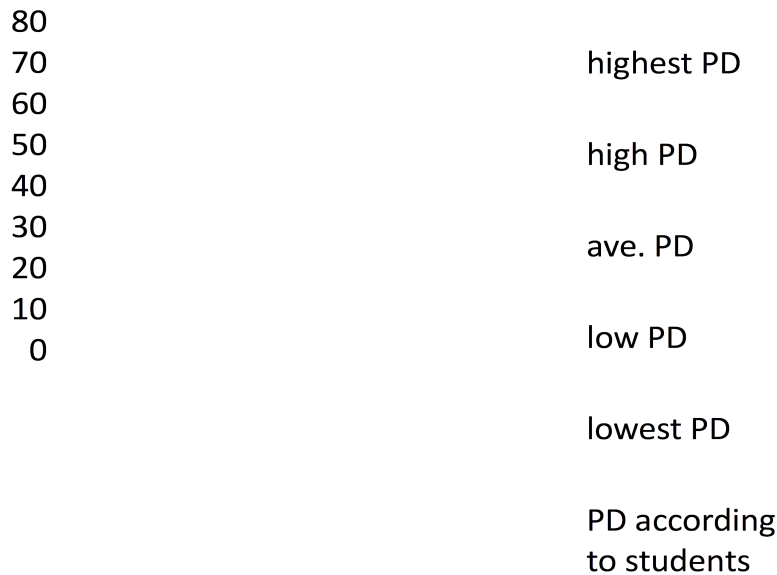


Figure 2. Power distance between students and teachers as indicated by students' claimed learning of social, communication and critical thinking skills from their teachers

A score of 75 on the learning of social and communication skills and 65 in the learning of critical thinking skills indicate highest power distance between the teacher and students. A score of 15 on the learning social and communication skills and 13 on the learning of critical thinking skills indicate lowest power distance between the teacher and students. A score of 45 on the learning of social and communication skills and 39 in the learning of critical thinking skills indicate average power distance between the teacher and students.

Discussion

Educators consider that learning can best occur in contexts and situations where interactions between the teachers and students are more open and flexible, and where the climate of free exchange of ideas is fostered and nurtured (Collins, 2009; Eberly, Joshi & Konzal, 2007; Gay, 2010). Scholars encourage this kind of climate to improve students' learning and acquisition of curricular knowledge and skills (Hadley, 2001; Kasuya, n.d .; Piazza, Rao & Protacio, 2015; Yoo, 2014; Zhang, 2013). However, there are certain contexts and cultures whose processes could hinder the creation of a classroom climate that encourages more open and flexible settings

and interactions between teachers and students. Such processes may have started within the home environment and were further reinforced in various social contexts (Hofstede, 1997), where interactions are comfortably separated, as a matter of culture, between the authority figure and the one that is subject to his/her power. This social situation is defined by high-power-distance culture (Hofstede, 1997).

Various institutions in Philippine society, which are considered to have high-power-distance culture (The Hofstede Center, n.d.), are believed to be venues of power-distance creating processes. As was pointed out, these processes are fostered in Philippine homes and further developed in other social settings, such as school and classroom contexts (Halagao, 2004;). It may be observed that in the Philippines, the interactions between parents and their children, as well as between teachers and their students, are structured, if not solidly rigid, and in such interactions, children and students are expected to yield to parental and teacher authorities, respectively (Alampay & Jocson, 2011; Halagao, 2004; Tolentino, 2004).

In this study, however, the data revealed that it is possible for low power-distance relationship between students and teachers to exist even if the students are being raised in a high-power-distance home environment. It was found in this study that most of the students' are from a high-power-distance home culture, but their characterization of their relationships with their parents did not carry through in their interactions with their teachers in school. In sum, evidence shows that there is a reversal of culture from the home to school environments.

This finding is inconsistent with the theory that a similar level of power-distance relationship exists between children and their parents, teachers, and future supervisors in the workplace (Hofstede, 1997; Hofstede, 1986). Contrary to the observation of Hofstede (2001), evidence in this study shows that education does not necessarily perpetuate high-power-distance home culture. It may instead pose a challenge to the prevailing or other cultures by introducing or encouraging practices and values that are different from the ones acquired outside the school setting (Terzi, 2011).

Power-distance culture in the Philippines is arguably high (Tolentino, 2004) and it is common in various social contexts (e.g., family, school, government, church) (Filipino Customs, n.d.; Wikipedia, 3 Jan. 2016). But the low-power-distance relationship that was observed between the students and their teachers in this study is diametrically opposite to the prevailing power-distance culture outside their school, and, perhaps, even in other basic education institutions in the Philippines. Generally, in the broader spectrum of Philippine society and in

most of its social institutions and local contexts, a wide psychological distance is normally assumed, maintained, or created by the occupants of various institutional positions vested with power to supervise or direct those who are subject to their authorities. The general tenor and timber of the language of the authority figures and of those under their supervision, when they address each other, is often enough to tell who occupies a higher position of power. It may be said that the medium of communication used is often all that is needed in order to reveal to a third-party listener from another culture who the authority figure is or the one in command and who has the role to conform even if disagreement or argument ensues between two individuals occupying two different social positions. In Philippine schools, the sight of Filipino students, children, or subordinates arguing or having a friendly informal chat with teachers or parents is uncommon (Halagao, 2004). The occurrence of which could be perceived as an act of irreverence or inappropriate boldness on the part of the supposed subordinate. Hence, addressing or talking to a person of power as though you are equals is often frowned upon in many Filipino social contexts.

High-power-distance teachers in the Philippines must consider turning down their power-distance dial if the object of their teaching is to get the students to learn to connect with them or with other people in a more productive way. Doing so may help all those who are engaged in educational interactions to resolve issues that may otherwise be difficult to overcome in a high-power-distance situation (Paulus, Bichelmeyer, Malopinsky, Pereira & Rastogi, 2005). Teachers, on the other hand, may think or feel that they are being disrespected when students question or try to argue with them. In other cultures, it is also possible that, while some teachers have a positive attitude toward low-power-distance culture, they may soon feel that there is a tendency for a number of students from high-power-distance culture to abuse, if not disrespect, the friendly relationship a teacher is trying to establish with them (Yoo, 2014; Hadley, 2001).

Reframing the teachers' highly authoritative view of their role (Kasuya, n.d.) is important for it is difficult to get the learners to socialize, communicate, and think critically if the teacher does not encourage their students to interact with them without fear of being thought to be disrespectful (i.e., overly, inappropriately, or offensively bold). The teachers can always impact and influence optimum learning "because the teacher has more power over the learning situation than any single student" (Hofstede, 1986, p. 314). In this study, the student participants claimed that they could express themselves freely to their teachers and that their friendly relationship

with them has contributed significantly to the advancement of their ability to socialize, communicate (orally), and think critically.

But regardless of the power-distance culture in educational institutions being attended by Filipino students, it may now be said that it would certainly be beneficial to them if they are able to adjust their gestures and language according to the prevailing classroom culture, which, of course, is often largely determined by the teachers' fundamental view of their role in the teaching-learning continuum. When they enter college, for instance, these students might find themselves in a class of high-power-distance professors. While these professors may not necessarily disallow their students to express doubts over what they say in class, it would be "safer" for the students to adjust the tenor and timber of their language when casting doubts over what their teachers say. This is to keep high-power-distance professors from thinking that the students are being disrespectful, or are out to place these professors in embarrassing situations.

Even in our school, a state university with a comparatively very low-power-distance culture, only a small fraction of students, if any, could bring themselves to address their teachers on a first name basis, even if a teacher would repeatedly and seriously advised the students not to call him/her "sir" or "ma'am." This observation applies to our graduate students, many of whom are several or many years our senior. They would adopt the same role undergraduate students have accepted. Except for the very few, if any, Filipino students, whether they are undergraduate or graduate students, regardless of their age, could not bring themselves to call the teacher "Mike," "Vanessa," or "Maricris" or to talk to them without using titles like "sir", "professor", or "doctor" or other similar expressions, that are considered an equivalent of the Japanese or Korean nod or bow before a person of authority. In our experience as college students and professors, only few professors in the Philippines have or had ever succeeded in getting their students to comfortably interact with them on a first-name basis.

The power-distance culture in the Philippines and the findings in this study direct the stakeholders in education to the crucial role classroom instruction plays in enhancing more positive interactions between teachers and students. In modifying a classroom setting into an environment that could facilitate the development of relevant knowledge and skills that students are expected to acquire and develop, teachers have the power to reverse, this study shows, cultural practices that may stand in the way of learning.

Endnote

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