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Tough Teachers Actually Care: An Ethnographic look into the ‘Problematic’ Role of Teachers as Figures of Authority under Learner-Centered Education

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Abstract: Teacher authority is culturally valued among Filipinos. This authority however poses a threat to the fundamental principles of learner-centred education as it arguably perpetuates ‘teacher-centered’ instruction and obstructs positive student-teacher relationships which are necessary for student learning. This problematic role of teacher authority is examined in this study by investigating what constitutes good pedagogy in one class within a rural school in the Philippines. With this research problem, this study used ethnographic research approach to examine what students and teachers understand about ‘classroom authority’ and its perceived value in good pedagogy within a specific and cultural place. Ethnographic data in this study suggest that teacher authority is central in understanding good teaching within specific classroom contexts as this cultural valuing of teachers as ‘authorities’ may support student engagement and foster student-teacher relationships which are built on ‘academic care’. This ‘academic care’ could offer a practice which bridges the presumed binary between teacher-centered and learner-centered pedagogies.

Keywords: learner-centered education; cultural impediments; good pedagogy; Philippine education; teacher authority; teacher-centered instruction; Philippine schools

Introduction

Under strong global imperatives for education reform and in the face of international comparisons, the Philippines moves in the same direction with its Southeast Asian neighbours towards a learner-centred education by overhauling its national curriculum by virtue of the Republic Act (RA) 10533. This national reform policy mandates that the Philippine “curriculum shall be learner-centered” in a way that “teacher-centered pedagogical strategies [must be] applied to a lesser extent” (Republic Act No. 10533 2013, 2; SEAMEO-INNOTECH 2012, 44). This is because these teacher-centered forms of teaching arguably attributed to the ‘lack of interest in attending school and low participation rates’ among students and the ‘decreasing National Achievement Test rates’ (Philippine House Bill 6643, 13). Thus, in its attempt to transition to learner-centred education in 2013, the Philippines placed its approximately 400,000 elementary and secondary public schools under long and extensive in-service training which prescribed the “use pedagogical approaches that are constructivist, inquiry-based, reflective, collaborative and integrative” (Republic Act No. 10533, 2013, p. 2). Such prescription is stated in the SEAMEO-INNOTECH K to 12 Toolkit

which “encouraged [teachers] to use appropriate learner-centered teaching approaches, such as experiential/contextual learning; problem-based action learning; differentiated instruction; health skills-based education with life skills and value-based strategies” (SEAMEO-INNOTECH 2012, p. 44).

The K to 12 reform policy therefore clearly indicates the Philippine “Department of Education’s discursive shift to a learner- rather than a teacher-centered education” (Bautista, Bernardo, and Ocampo 2009, 8). This shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered education aligns to the country’s attempt to provide a Filipino education that is “globally competitive based on a pedagogically sound curriculum that is on par with international standards” (Republic Act No. 10533 2013, 2). Despite this radical shift however, the Filipino education arguably remains traditional and teacher-centred in the way that learner-centeredness is not working out as intended in Philippine classrooms where Filipino teachers still assert their authority (del Valle 2021; del Valle 2019; Adarlo and Jackson 2017; Magno and Sembrano 2007; de Mesa and de Guzman, 2006).

The emphasis on the role of a teacher as a classroom authority is a particular target of criticisms among proponents of learner-centred education. This is because, as learner-centered advocates raised, teacher authority underlies issues of power in the classroom and perpetuates ‘teacher-centeredness’ (Weimer, 2002). Such power concentrated upon the teacher as the classroom authority arguably poses a threat in creating a supportive democratic learning environment. Heavy emphasis on teacher authority is claimed to impose classroom rules for punishment rather than discipline (Crumly, Dietz, and d’Angelo, 2014); stress teacher control and reliance on textbooks (Cuban, 1983); reduce opportunities for social interaction and cooperative learning where higher cognitive functions are developed (Cohen & Lotan, 2006); obstruct positive student-teacher relationships (Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, 2010); and disempower students in regulating their own learning (Weimer, 2002). Student disengagement arguably results from this restrictive ‘teacher-centred’ and ‘authoritative’ classroom environment. With this, advocates of learner-centred education promote the shift from teacher-centred to learner-centred education to encourage positive classroom relationships thereby increasing students’ engagement and learning.

Implementing learner-centred education however was found to be particularly problematic in developing countries particularly in the Southeast Asian region where teacher authority is culturally valued. This is noted by Michele Schweisfurth whose long and extensive studies on learner-centred education in developing countries found that teachers struggle to implement learner-centred pedagogies “because of the profound shifts required in teacher-learner power relations” as they balance control and attain greater sense of democracy in the classroom required in learner-centred education (Schweisfurth, 2011, 427). Such notion is supported in recent studies conducted in Southeast Asian countries where there is sweeping reform towards learner-centred education. These studies report that students still require teachers to maintain their ‘infallible authority’ as content experts (del Valle 2021; 2019; Pham 2016; Tyrosvoutis 2016; Song 2015; Hashim 2007)

The perceived value of teachers as classroom authorities can be understood in the way that, as Tan (2016) explains, Asian countries (of Confucian heritage i.e. China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore) and those with colonial histories find the implementation of learner-centered education challenging. The challenge arises from how learner-centered education requires teachers to relinquish their central role as the ‘authority’ of academic content. This proves problematic in these countries given a common regard towards teachers as content experts and authorities of knowledge (Magno 2010). It is also perceived in these countries that learner-centered education does not provide a strong foundational knowledge for students and only dilutes academic rigour which is highly valued in these cultural contexts. Such challenges can attest to Schweisfurth’s (2013) claim that

learner-centered education is riddled with stories of failures, particularly those around the problematics of culture and issues on power relations between the teacher and the students. With this, it becomes difficult to suggest for some developing countries that the ‘historic tight control’ of teachers as authorities must be relinquished as schools transition to a learner-centered education as part of their national reform agenda (Tyrosvoutis 2016). This then points to Schweisfurth’s (2013) claim that specific cultural conditions (i.e. local ways of teaching, fostering classroom relationships, and cultural valuing of teachers as an authority) could obstruct the implementation of learner-centered education in specific classroom contexts in ways that teachers “retreat to traditional practices” when confronted with (cultural) classroom realities (67). It is this cultural barrier to learner-centered education which this study seeks to examine by investigating what students and teachers understand about ‘classroom authority’ and its perceived value in good pedagogy within a specific and cultural place. To achieve this aim, this study takes a cultural lens and uses ethnographic methods to examine teacher practices as well as the teaching and learning experiences and perspectives surrounding teacher authority and good pedagogy among teachers and students in one class within a rural public school in the Philippines.

In the next section, I provide a brief review of the related literature surrounding the criticisms raised by the proponents of learner-centered education against ‘teacher-centered instruction’ and the way these perspectives generated particular conclusions about ‘teacher authority’.

Effective Teachers as Strong Authority Figures: A Literature Review

Teacher authority is found to be a significant factor in student engagement and learning (Brophy 2006; Weinstein and Woolfolk Hoy 2006; Marzano and Marzano 2003). Often referred to as ‘classroom leadership’, teacher authority holds its centrality in the context of effective classroom management. In his comprehensive review of the history of classroom management, Jere Brophy (2006) noted that early research on classroom management in the 1960s show findings that authoritative leadership is preferable to the extremes of either authoritarian or laissez-faire classroom leadership styles. Such findings are supported by Marzano and Marzano (2003) in a much later meta-analysis of research on teacher actions in the classrooms and student achievement from the late 1980s to 1990s. In the late 1990s to early 2000s, similar findings are further supported by Weinstein and Woolfolk Hoy (2006) in their review of studies on classroom management. In examining student perceptions of ‘good teachers’ as effective classroom authorities, Weinstein and Woolfolk Hoy (2006) found several factors that are central students’ perception of ‘good teachers’. Two of which are (1) the ability to *establish positive interpersonal relationships* with students; and most importantly, (2) the ability to *exercise authority* and to provide structure without being rigid, threatening, and punitive (p. 183, emphasis added). Of these two factors, Weinstein (2003) suggests that the second factor on ‘teacher authority’ is particularly significant in the students’ perception of ‘good teachers’. In interviewing elementary and secondary students from urban and suburban schools, Weinstein (2003) found that students desire for structure and limits in the classroom. As part of their perceptions of ‘good teachers’, the students report that

teachers need to be a strong authority figure; teachers need to tell kids what they expect; teachers need to show strength; teachers need to come off as someone who has control" (Weinstein, 2003 cited in Weinstein and Woolfolk Hoy, 2006, p. 185, emphasis added).

Such perceptions of students send a powerful message that when they call for their teachers to be stricter, they are thinking of a particular kind of disciplinary practice (Weinstein and Woolfolk Hoy 2006, p. 186). While students require their teachers to be tough and in control, they also desire for their teachers to demonstrate a sense of relational care. This then suggests that students are able to distinguish teachers who are unreasonably punitive from those who are strict but caring. The kind of care which students perceive they need however depends on their individual contexts as learners, and most importantly, their cultural backgrounds. Several studies have reported that culture is central to understanding the kind of care which students need (Phelan, Davidson, and Cao 1992; Garza 2009; Panthi, Luitel, & Belbase 2018; Velasquez, West, Graham, & Osguthorpe 2013). For instance, high-achieving students of a specific cultural background were found to associate caring from teachers who provide structure in the classroom and assist them in academic matters, whereas low-achieving students of a different cultural background recognize care from teachers who listen to them and show concern in their personal lives.

Cultural Value of ‘Teacher Authority’ and ‘Relational Care’

The varying cultural dimensions between personal caring and academic caring are “recurring themes among recent studies that explore student perceptions and teacher authority” (Weinstein and Woolfolk Hoy 2006, p. 183). In their meta-analysis of available studies on effective teaching and teacher authority, Weinstein and Woolfolk Hoy (2006) found that students of disadvantaged backgrounds perceive care from teachers who are concerned about their home lives, personal problems, and futures (personal care). Successful students, in contrast, tend to value teachers who care for their academic work and help them attain good grades (academic care). But both disadvantaged and successful students require their teachers to show authority. This shows that students perceive teachers who demonstrate authority as ‘good teachers’ because they use their authority to establish structure and order in the classroom. This teacher authority is valued for the purpose of creating an environment which supports student engagement and learning—which is exactly what the original concept of authoritative classroom management seeks to achieve, as Jere Brophy (2006) argues based on his analysis of early studies on effective teaching, the line of research which later on was labeled as ‘teacher-centered’ instruction.

So far, I have discussed the way in which the perceived value of teacher authority in student engagement and learning is highly cultural. With the cultural elements behind *teacher authority*, *student engagement*, and *perceptions towards good teaching*, research on good pedagogy must therefore situate itself within a culture. In the next section, I discuss how the use of ethnography as a research method could allow for a deeper investigation of the cultural elements which are at play beneath what is perceived as good pedagogy within a specific classroom context.

Methodology

The earlier discussions so far have shown that there is a critical need to examine ‘good pedagogy’ in a deeper level of culture. This is critical because, as Schweisfurth (2013) puts it, there might have been some ‘loose understanding’ over how learner-centered has been defined as it undergoes the contested process of being ‘transplanted’ in different cultures. This could be achieved in ethnographic studies which examine not only how learner-centered education is defined, but more importantly, understood and valued in various local classroom

contexts. Ethnographic studies could then provide a more informed ground in understanding ‘teacher authority’ and ‘good pedagogy’ in a deeper level of culture. This ethnographic study sought to answer three questions. First, *how do teachers in a junior class within a rural high school understand, value, and practise classroom authority within the context of good teaching?* Second, *which teacher roles and practices do the teachers’ students find helpful in their learning?* Third, *to what extent are these teacher and student views consistent with what the researcher observes as practices of good teaching within the class in the study?*

To address these three research questions, I used ethnography as research approach to gain understanding of a certain reality that students and their teachers have about good teaching. In the succeeding sections, I describe in more detail the ethnographic methods of in-depth teacher interviews, classroom observation, and student focus groups.

Selecting Participants and Fieldwork

Consistent with the traditions of ethnography, the sampling technique in this study is both purposive and opportunistic. The purposive element of my sampling allowed me to select a rural school in which my sampling was opportunistic, as I took the direction of the school principal, who determined which class group and set of teachers I should study. This class is composed of mixed-level ability students aged thirteen to sixteen. This grade-eight class of 39 students, 22 boys and 17 girls, is where the top-performing junior rural students are placed. There are eight teachers in this class who all have a master’s degree in education and have more than ten years of teaching experience. Furthermore, all these eight teachers have completed the state-mandated training on Learner-centered Education as part of the national reform in the Philippines.

In-Depth Teacher Interviews

To understand the meaning teachers place behind their pedagogical practices and address the research question, *how do teachers in a junior rural high school understand, value, and practise their classroom authority within the context of good teaching*, I conducted semi-structured interviews with the eight teachers who work with the one observed class in the rural school. These semi-structured in-depth interviews allowed me to ask teachers about what I observed in their classes. Most importantly, these interviews provided me with the flexibility to ask questions and follow any unexpected topics which the teachers raised during the interview. When required, I asked probing or follow-up questions to seek clarification for answers that were unclear or necessitated further exploration (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Participant Classroom Observation

To address the research question, *to what extent are teacher and student views consistent with what an observer sees as practices of good teaching*, I then conducted daily classroom observation in the junior class in the rural school for four weeks. As a researcher, I stayed in this junior class for approximately a month and spent about nine hours a day from seven in the morning until four in the afternoon for the daily classroom observation.

Taking Fieldnotes

Consistent with my ‘observer-as-participant’ role as an ethnographer, I engaged in what Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2001) describe as the core activity in ethnography and participant observation; that is taking fieldnotes. I took note of what teachers do in the classroom, what their teaching practices look like, what they talk about and the questions they ask, and how their students respond and behave while they teach. This way, my fieldnotes became written accounts which captured a certain ‘reality’ within the natural classroom setting (Atkinson 1992; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 2001).

Student Focus Group Interviews

In investigating what constitutes good and effective teaching, it is necessary that students’ perspectives are included, which then requires listening to the stories they tell. This is necessary because their stories carry discourses which allow possibilities to rethink teacher role(s), disrupt the confining student-teacher binaries, and generate pedagogies of change (Cahill & Coffey 2017).

To address the research question, *which of the teacher roles and practices do rural students find helpful in their learning*, I conducted a total of six focus group interviews with the students who took part in this research. The interviews lasted for one hour, with six to seven students in a group. These interviews were conducted once a day within the final week of observation.

Ethics of the Study

I understand that the rigours of ethnographic study and its ethics are equally fundamental to the conduct of any ethnographic research. With this, it becomes imperative for me as the researcher that all participants in my study are fully informed about my study. Informed consent for the students was obtained from them, their parents, and their class adviser. Consent for teachers were obtained from them and their school principal. Arrangements were made to ensure that processes of my study posed no risks to the participants, even to those who wished to withdraw participation. Anonymity of the participants and the schools in the final write-up to prevent their identification was another ethical responsibility undertaken. To assist in protecting the identities of the participants in this study, pseudonyms were used for each teacher and student, including the name of their schools. Ethics approval was received for the conduct of this research.

Data Analysis

In doing this ethnographic research, the participants and I produced thick and rich descriptions of data. The ethnographic data and the transcripts of both student and teacher interviews were subject to detailed thematic analysis. I personally transcribed verbatim and translated from the recordings of all interviews, which added benefits to the data analysis. One is that when the researcher who analyses the data also the conducts both the observation and interviews, the interpretation fully accounts for the research contexts, adding depth to data analysis (Green, Willis, Hughes, Small, Welch, Gibbs, and Daly 2007).

In the tradition of qualitative research and ethnography, the results and findings in this ethnographic research are reported in descriptive accounts and narrative discussions of

analysed themes. Presenting ethnographic findings in narratives or ‘stories’ is, as Bishop (1999) puts it, an ethnographers’ attempt to provide readers rich and thick descriptions of data to give them a holistic picture of a social group being studied. The closer the readers of ethnography are to understanding the ethnographer’s point of view, the better the story and the science (Bishop 1999). The themes were then examined in the light of broader literature (as shown in the Findings and Discussion in this paper) as I sought to locate these themes in a much more extensive tradition of research literature investigating similar questions in other contexts and settings. This process indicates the final step of data analysis which requires the researchers to ‘turn to the literature’ and link the results of their research “with what we know about people in other settings” through “an explanation or, even better, an interpretation of the issue under investigation” (Green et al. 2007, 549).

The Rural School in this Study

The town where the rural school is located is one of the oldest towns in the Philippines having been created by a royal decree in the 16th century when the Philippines was still under Spanish Colonial rule for 333 years. Majority of the locals, the Bicolanos, speak Bicol and Tagalog, the two regional languages, and of course, English as the entire country was under American occupation for more than 40 years in the 1900s. Given this, English is predominantly the medium of instruction among schools in the country, which reflects Adarlo and Jackson (2017) observation that “the Philippine education system (and society) remains reminiscent of its colonial history, first under Spain then under the United States of America” (210).

Surrounded by acres of rice fields, this rural high school is a public and nationally-funded educational institution. It is located approximately 30 kilometers away from the city center and close to the foot of Mt. Isarog, the highest peak in the province of Camarines Sur, which is one of the 7,107 island-provinces in the Philippines. At the time of my class observation, this rural school has an average of 483 enrollees each year coming from nearby farming communities of around 1,571 households. The families in this village are mostly living in makeshift housing or classified as informal settlers registered with high cases of poverty, malnutrition, and illiteracy. With its total population of 7,917, this rural village has the record of the highest rate of poverty threshold in the province. This rural village also has the high rates of high school dropouts with 41.8 percent of its children, aged twelve to fifteen years old not attending high school.

Why This One Rural Class and its Two Teachers?

The above-described context provides a frame through which to consider the special nature of the class I observed in the rural school. There are two teachers chosen for this study, both are teaching the same class of rural students. First is Mrs. Kislap, a History teacher whom I perceived to practice good teaching as she sets aside her classroom authority and uses learner-centered teaching strategies. The rural students however did not perceive her to practice good teaching. Instead, it is Mrs. Alab, an English teacher whom these rural students reported as to have practiced good teaching despite my observation of Mrs. Alab’s use of traditional ‘teacher-centered’ lecture methods and her strong demonstration of teacher authority through classroom order, discipline, and control. While I did not perceive Mrs. Alab as the teacher who practices good teaching given her emphasis on ‘teacher authority’, the rural students, on the other hand, perceived her ‘teacher authority’ and her seemingly

‘teacher-centered’ teaching strategies not only as practices of good teaching, but also as enactments of care. Mrs. Alab therefore provided an interesting case in that the narratives of this one rural class in this study gained through teacher interviews, student focus groups, and classroom observations seem to challenge the notions around ‘teacher authority’ within available literature on learner-centered education. This rural class of Mrs. Alab therefore offers a venue to further examine the cultural value assigned to ‘teacher authority’ and how this value shapes the perceptions of good teaching within a specific classroom context.

Findings and Discussion

‘Good Teaching’ According to Mrs. Kislap

Among all eight teachers I observed in the junior class, it is Mrs. Kislap, the History teacher, whom I noted to practise teaching strategies which are aligned to those prescribed in available literature on learner-centered education (in McCombs & Whisler, 1997; 2000; Weimer, 2002; Cornelius-White & Harbaugh 2010). Mrs. Kislap’s learner-centered practices can be noted in the way she sets aside her classroom authority and adopts a more democratic approach of classroom management. I also observed that Mrs. Kislap’s learner-centered teaching strategies are shown in the way she incorporates games and arts into her classroom practice of what she calls ‘groupwork’.

Mrs. Kislap as a ‘Democratic Facilitator’

On my first day of observation when her lesson was about Egyptian civilization, Mrs. Kislap creates a timeline on the board and lets the students chronologically arrange the milestones of the Egyptian culture by posting colored metacards and pictures on the board. From here, the class starts a lively discussion on the Egyptian culture, from pyramids to pharaohs and hieroglyphics and even aliens. Before the class ends, Mrs. Kislap asks the students to reflect on the contributions of the Egyptian culture to the modern world. She tells the students to write a short thank-you letter to one of the pharaohs they liked best and spell the pharaoh’s name in a ‘modified hieroglyphics’ they made up during the discussion. Mrs. Kislap was also able to let the rural students identify the similarities between Ancient Egypt and pre-Hispanic Philippine civilisations. A group activity where the rural students have to act as mummies wrapped in old newspapers waits for them the next day.

In observing Mrs. Kislap’s class for one hour every day in a month, I noted that she puts her ‘authority’ aside and adopts a more democratic approach in classroom management. I also noted that a large amount of time is allotted for student ‘groupwork’ (a form of cooperative learning in this rural school, as prescribed in the K-12 education reform policy in the Philippines). On my first two weeks of observation in Mrs. Kislap’s class, I noted that she required the students to learn in groups of five to six students. For Mrs. Kislap, good teaching makes use of groupwork, which for her is a strategy “*used by teachers for the purposes of teaching students the value of teamwork and cooperation*”.

On the third week that Mrs. Kislap assigned a ‘groupwork’ in her class however, I observed that as soon as she instructed the students to go to their respective groups, it took the students quite a while to move, and they seemed less enthusiastic as they walk towards their assigned groups. As the students joined their groups, they seem disengaged compared with their behaviour during individual tasks and seatwork given by their other teacher, Mrs. Alab, whom I observed to use only lectures as her teaching method and practise authoritative classroom management approach. At this point, it becomes necessary to obtain a more holistic view of these rural students’ class under Mrs. Alab. This then allows for a better

understanding why these rural students perceived Mrs. Alab as the teacher who practises good teaching despite her strong emphasis on teacher authority and her frequent practise what I observed as ‘teacher-centered instructional’ methods. This is what the next section seeks to achieve.

‘Good Teaching’ According to Mrs. Alab

This section discusses the teaching practices of Mrs. Alab whose instructional methods, although seemingly teacher-centered given her emphasis on her ‘teacher authority’, are identified by the rural students in this study as practices of ‘good teaching’. I use this discussion of findings to examine the contested issue of the role of teachers as ‘figures of authority’ using Weimer’s (2002) notion of balance of power in learner-centered classrooms and Schweisfurth’s (2013) notion that student engagement varies based on local expectations of education and cultural respect for teachers. I highlight the ways in which Mrs. Alab maintains her ‘authority’ while she fosters personal relationships with her students and their rural communities. I also discuss the influence of student-teacher relationships upon student engagement and learning using this discussion to challenge Weimer’s (2002) notions on power under learner-centered education, arguing that in this rural setting teacher ‘authority’ engenders meaningful relationships and learning. Most importantly, I argue that Mrs. Alab nurtured a deep sense of *academic care* albeit that this is exhibited in practices which appear teacher-centered.

Mrs. Alab as the ‘Classroom Authority’

Within my four weeks of observation in Mrs. Alab’s class, I noted her strong emphasis on her ‘teacher authority’. In my interview with Mrs. Alab, she explains that her practice of authoritative teaching approach allows her to maintain classroom order and discipline in the way she makes her students “*sit down, stay in the classroom, listen, and learn*”. Classroom order appears very important to Mrs. Alab because as she explained, it helps her “*achieve [her] lesson objectives when [her] students are attentive in class*”. She further comments, “*How can learning take place if there are students who are noisy or cutting classes?*”

As Mrs. Alab mentioned about students who have records of truancy or what is called in the Philippines as ‘cutting classes’, I observed a particular student who regularly leaves the room in any of his classes under different teachers. I did not observe this student’s truant behavior in Mrs. Alab’s class. Should this student be out for more than five minutes, Mrs. Alab sends two students to look for him. One time, on my second week of observation, this student, Pedro, asked Mrs. Alab’s permission to go out. She asked Pedro if he already completed his workbook exercise. He scratched his head and returned to his seat. Noticing that I looked concerned about this student, Mrs. Alab sat beside me in the back row whilst the students were busy with their seatwork. She explained to me that Pedro has a consistent record of truancy. Mrs. Alab further told me that the other teachers let him go out as he pleases as they have grown tired of him sneaking out of class. Disturbed by Pedro’s frequent truant behavior, Mrs. Alab visited his house, as she recalled, and found out that Pedro leaves school to help with farm work and harvest rice, as told to her by Pedro’s father. Everyone assumed that he was ‘cutting classes’ but Pedro was actually helping his family. Mrs. Alab continued to tell me that she talked to Pedro’s parents to encourage them to support Pedro to stay in school and complete his high school education.

According to Mrs. Alab, cases like Pedro's made her decide to be stricter with her students. This is because in their rural school, as Mrs. Alab further narrates, "*some five kids drop out of this school every year*". Mrs. Alab disclosed that parents in the rural village would "*keep their kids away from school*" because "*they'd rather have their kids work on the farm so they can bring home rice or money for the day's work.*" This narrative provides a glimpse of a much larger issue on increasing dropout rates in rural public schools in the Philippines. This high incidence of Filipino students dropping out of school could be attributed to, as Okabe (2013) suggests, the 'indirect cost of education'. While the Philippine constitution states that public education is free, Okabe observes that Filipino students are bound to spend for their education given the cost of transportation, school materials and clothes as they wear uniforms starting primary grades. With this, Okabe claims that in the Philippines, "free education is in fact not free, especially for poor households" (24). Moreover, in poor rural communities, there is a notion of 'foregone income' among Filipino children who are at school and not on the farms. Thus, at an early age, youth in rural communities are expected to contribute to their household. This explains why Filipino rural youth are compelled to drop out of school to earn for the family. It is this context that we can understand Mrs. Alab's strong belief towards the value of her role as a 'teacher authority' in maximizing her students' school participation and retention.

Whilst trained on how to practise democratic and learner-centered pedagogies in her classroom, Mrs. Alab emphasized that teacher authority must be exercised and maintained particularly in rural schools. She argues, "*my twenty years of teaching here in this school taught me that rural teachers need to be strict, so students realize that they need to stay in school*". She further comments that "*even if they say that the new K to 12 curriculum in the Philippines has to be learner-centered, the Filipino teacher is still and will always be the classroom authority.*" This response shows Mrs. Alab's emphasis on her role as a classroom authority, a role which is often associated with teacher-centered instruction and has been a subject of debates on power relations in discussions about learner-centered education (Weimer 2002; McCombs, 2000; McCombs and Whisler 1997).

Teacher authority is a contested issue in learner-centered education. The complex issues surrounding this 'teacher authority' are broadly discussed by Weimer (2002), a significant figure among those who strongly promote learner-centered practices in the classroom. Weimer pushed towards a rethinking on the role of teachers as an authority in the classroom and argued that pedagogies which place emphasis on teacher authority poses a threat to the fundamental principles of learner-centered teaching. This is because a strong focus on this 'teacher authority' discourages the teacher to practice teaching strategies that promote student engagement and learning. Moreover, authoritative teacher roles arguably magnify the gap between teacher and students, obstructing *positive interactions* and *relationships* to flourish in the classroom. Available literature on learner-centered teaching, particularly the works of Weimer (2002) have pushed for a shift of power from the teacher to the students, making the dynamics in the classroom more egalitarian and democratic. Under learner-centered education therefore, a way of teaching that highlights the teacher's role as an 'authority figure' may not only limit student engagement but also obstructs opportunities for positive student-teacher relationships. This is because for Weimer (2002), power dynamics in the classroom has critical implications on teaching and learning, to the extent that it frames and even distorts classroom interactions in the classroom, especially the teachers' effort to care.

Mrs. Alab is Tough but Caring

While Weimer (2002) argues that a heavy emphasis on teacher authority could obstruct positive student-teacher relationships from fostering within the classroom, I observed however that Mrs. Alab, despite maintaining her classroom authority, demonstrates a strong sense of relational care towards her students. I also noted that her students react positively towards Mrs. Alab acts of care and show fondness of her as their teacher. I noted this positive relationship between Mrs. Alab and the students early on during my first day of observation. When the students are having their seatwork, I observed Mrs. Alab circulates the room and randomly asks students how they are doing. There are times when she sits beside a student and listens.

In engaging in conversations with Mrs. Alab, I noted her desire to care for her students as she narrates stories about her students. Mrs. Alab opens up, *“my students come from poor families. As much as I want to give, I could not as I am poor myself. So, in my own way of helping them, I make sure that they finish high school”*. Holding back her tears during our conversation, Mrs. Alab continues, *“the rural kids here want tough teachers. They tell me they need one so they can stay in school. It’s difficult to stay in school when one is poor.”* She further mentions, *“I also need to be tough because the rural community expects me to be in charge of keeping their kids in school. This is therefore my commitment as a rural teacher.”* This response sends a powerful message that Mrs. Alab’s decision to maintain her classroom authority is significantly shaped by two factors. Firstly, are the expectations of the rural community towards its teachers as figures of authority; and secondly, is the expressed need of her student s for her to be tough so they can become successful in school. In the succeeding sections, I discuss this first factor—the cultural valuing of Filipino teachers as ‘figures of authority’. The second factor, the students’ expressed need for an authoritative teacher to complete their high school education is discussed later in the section under the rural students’ perceptions of good teaching.

‘Teacher Authority’ in the Philippines

Respect for authorities is a deeply valued trait among Filipinos. For the Filipino sociologist and ethnographer F. Landa Jocano (1997), respect for authority figures, particularly in a school context in the Philippines, can be traced from how much Filipinos give great value to education because it is considered instrumental in securing a better future and achieving personal life goals. Filipinos perceive that authority figures in schools have a crucial role in the success of student learning, to an extent that their influence impacts student drive and motivation to attend school and achieve in class (Jocano 1997). Given this, it is essential for students to engage themselves in positive and respectful interactions with authorities such as the teacher. This can be shown by showing courtesy when speaking with teachers, restraining themselves from answering back when being reprimanded, and even projecting a pleasant demeanor when their work is critiqued (Jocano 1997; Magno 2010). Such demonstration of respect is valued to facilitate harmony and even learning in the classroom.

The respect students give to their teachers as figures of authority becomes the Filipino child’s gesture that she or he values education. For Filipinos, education is a part of a legacy that parents leave to their children. Because of this orientation, the child continues to value this legacy by exerting effort and working hard in school as expected by her or his family and community (Magno 2010). Filipino students are commonly expected by their parents and their community to be successful in school and complete their education. The child exerts

effort to meet these expectations because it is valued in the family and in the community (Magno 2010). It is valued because completing school paves the way for the Filipino child to be a responsible wage earner (Naval 1979) in the future and eventually becomes the hope who draws the family and the community out from poverty. It is this deep cultural valuing of teachers as classroom authorities among Filipinos which could have shaped Mrs. Alab's strong views towards preserving her authority as a teacher in sustaining her students' engagement and participation in school.

At this point, it becomes necessary to understand the rural students' perceptions of good teaching and their valuing of teacher authority as embodied by their English teacher, Mrs. Alab. Such understanding also sheds light into why these rural students appear disengaged under the class of their other teacher, Mrs. Kislap, the History teacher, whom they did not perceive to practise good teaching despite her use of a more democratic and learner-centered approach in teaching. This is what the next section seeks to achieve.

Good Teaching according to the Rural Students

The rural students in this junior class have eight teachers. Of these eight teachers, it is Mrs. Alab whom they perceived as the teacher who practises good teaching despite strong emphasis on teacher authority and her practice of seemingly 'teacher-centered' teaching. These students refer to Mrs. Alab as the 'strict but good' teacher. One of these students is Pedro whom Mrs. Alab mentioned as to having a record of truancy in the rural school. Pedro narrates, *I like [Mrs. Alab] the best because she's really strict. She's the voice in my head saying, 'Go to school! Come to class! She's the reason why I'm still in school even there are times when I feel it's better to just work on the farm for the money.'* Pedro continues, *"My other teachers don't care at all like Mrs. Kislap if I leave the room. Tough teachers like [Mrs. Alab] are the ones who really care"*. Another student, Isha compares her other teachers with Mrs. Alab whom she perceives as a good teacher because Mrs. Alab makes her *"feel protected in class"* and keeps her *"free from distractions, not like Mrs. Kislap who ignores noisy and rowdy boys in class. It's difficult to focus when the class is disorderly."* Clearly, as Isha's response suggests, students perceive good teaching towards tough teachers who are able to achieve an orderly classroom environment (Weinstein and Woolfolk Hoy 2006, 210). It can be noted in Pedro and Isha's responses that they can distinguish between strict teachers who care for them and strict teachers who are unreasonably controlling. It also appears that they perceive good teachers from strict teachers who have the "ability to exercise authority and to provide structure without being rigid, threatening, and punitive" (Woolfolk Hoy and Weinstein 2006, 183).

Why the Rural Students Prefer Tough Teachers

To probe further into the rural students' perceptions towards Mrs. Alab as a good and caring teacher despite her being tough and strict, I conducted an extra focus group interview with eight randomly selected students. These students reveal particularly telling stories which provide insight behind their perception of good teaching from Mrs. Alab's authoritative classroom practices. One of the eight students in the focus group, Pido, expresses that he finds Mrs. Alab's exercise of her teacher authority in maintaining classroom order and discipline not only as a practice of good teaching, but also as an enactment of care. This is because, as Pido explains, *"she understands that when I go to school, I really want to learn something—to read, to write, to compute, to speak English, to study, because there is no other place to*

learn these but in the classroom". Pido's classmate, Dida, expresses her agreement, "*the classroom is for studying [...] if the classroom is noisy where can we study? The moment we go home, we literally don't have the time to study anymore. Like, I have to take care of my baby sisters as soon as I am home from school*". Hearing this from Dida, her other classmates also shared with the group their responsibilities at home which prevent them from doing their homework or studying for the next day.

The responsibilities that these rural students have at home explain their need for the classroom to be a conducive place to study—an orderly space for them to focus on their academic studies. This explains their preference towards tough teachers like Mrs. Alab. For these students, when Mrs. Alab maintains her authority, classroom order is also maintained, thus providing them a space without unnecessary learning distractions. As Dida explains, "*other teachers like Mrs. Kislap don't have a clue of our struggles at home [...] They don't even understand our deep desire to learn academic stuff so these teachers don't care if the class is too noisy*". Pido agrees with Dida, saying that "*students like us need strict teachers who create order in class*". Dida then remarks, "*by being tough, [Mrs. Alab] actually cares*". This interchange between Pido and Dida sends a powerful message that a teacher's demonstration of her authority can be perceived by her students as an act of 'academic care'. This academic care is required by these rural students because the only opportunity for them to study is *inside* the classroom. After school, they are expected to help in house chores and farm work and do not have the opportunity to study at home. Dida continues, "*[Mrs. Alab] actually cares that's why she is strict in class. But outside school, she is our companion.*"

Mrs. Alab as a Caring Companion

The rural students' stories about Mrs. Alab as a companion are particularly telling. These stories bring to light the 'compassionate care' of Mrs. Alab as she shifts her role from a 'classroom authority' to a friendly neighbor and caring companion'. These stories also capture the lived experiences of the rural students as volunteers during a typhoon which hit the province where this rural school is located. Cory recounts her experience as a volunteer with Mrs. Alab who "*helped [their] fellow villagers make [their classrooms] into make-shift homes for the families days before the typhoon hits*". Ben recounts how Mrs. Alab "*helped prepared meals for the affected families after the typhoon*". Another student, Arnel, narrates how Mrs. Alab "*even brought extra clothes and mats for us to use. [She] really shows 'malasakit' (care) for us like how our neighbours help each other during typhoon*". Arnel expresses his appreciation for Mrs. Alab, whom he regards as "*the one who is one of us and with us in the rural community*".

The stories of these rural students convey an important insight about the duality of roles of Mrs. Alab as a teacher. Their narratives show that as Mrs. Alab steps out of the classroom, her role as a teacher changes. As her role shifts, so too does the relationship between Mrs. Alab and the rural students. The relationship becomes more caring as it is fostered not simply for the sake of positive student-teacher relationship but for this strong sense of profound empathy towards one's neighbour called *malasakit*. A Filipino concept which roughly translates to 'compassionate care', *malasakit* can be understood more concretely during challenging times such as in the occurrence of calamities or in how Jocano (1997) explains, even in the day-to-day experience of poverty at home. *Malasakit*, which is rooted in *-sakit* (difficulty) allows one to share one's difficulty and go the 'extra mile' to help, resulting in the personal engagement in the welfare of the community as one's own (Adviento and de Guzman 2010).

In examining these narratives, it appears that these rural students have clear expectations from their teacher *inside* and *outside* the classroom. Outside the classroom, for instance, these rural students expect their teachers to be approachable, caring, and compassionate. *Inside* the classroom, on the other hand, these rural students expect their teacher to be strict and tough, because as Dida explained, a tough teacher assists them in their “*need to prioritise academic learning*”. The next section discusses the reasons behind the priority these students give to academic learning.

Why the Students Prioritise Academic Learning

In engaging in the stories of these rural students within the focus groups, I noted that they prioritise academic learning. Moreover, in listening to stories of the rural students, I noted that there is a strong common theme of ‘*helping their family*’ across all five student focus group interviews. This theme constantly appears among student narratives which tell stories of both their challenges and strong determination to stay in school. These rural students speak vigorously about their aspirations for their family, goals which they believe can be achieved by studying hard and completing high school. This is evident in the response of Niño who explains why he perseveres to stay in school and how he views Mrs. Alab’s toughness as a teacher assists him in realizing this dream. Niño explains, “*To fulfil my dream, I want my teacher to help me learn academic stuff. I don’t find teachers like Mrs. Kislap who are too gentle and gives too much fun group activities in class helpful, what can I learn from them?*” He continues, “*I need my teacher to be tough and push me to stay in school because stopping school means stopping my dreams for my family. [Mrs. Alab] understands this. That’s why she’s tough with me. That’s why she cares.*”

In engaging in the narratives of these rural students, we see that a caring relationship is central to their perception of ‘good teaching’. This relationship however requires far beyond a rapport between the student and the teacher. The relationship desired by these rural students is not confined within the classroom walls but rather extends towards the community. This relationship calls for the rural teacher to build strong ties with her students’ families and neighbours, transforming her role from a classroom authority to her students’ ‘companion’ as she becomes fully aware of their challenges at home. These students tell us that as the role of the rural teacher is stretched to include school and community life, so too is the relationship between her and the rural students. This relationship becomes grounded on this deep sense of compassionate care (*malasakit*) and concern towards students’ learning and most importantly, their personal aspirations towards school. This relationship which is built on *malasakit* is perceived as ‘*academic care*’ by the rural students. This academic care is recognized when teacher, whilst being authoritative and tough in the classroom, understands that behind her students’ everyday struggles in attending school is a strong desire to complete their education and ultimately, help their family upon graduation.

Conclusion

As perceptions of good teaching in the rural school are deeply anchored in a cultural orientation where ‘teacher authority’ is valued for its influence in promoting student learning and student-teacher relationships, the arguments raised by learner-centered education advocates and reformers wherein teachers must relinquish their roles as authority figures, sensible and attractive as it is, however fails to acknowledge the cultural dimensions of ‘teacher authority’. This therefore becomes problematic considering that *teacher roles* and

classroom relationships are understood and valued differently in diverse cultural and geographical contexts. Such problematics give context to Schweisfurth's (2011) notion that "the history of the implementation of learner-centered education in different contexts is riddled with stories of failures grand and small" (425). Much of this failure can be accounted for in what appears as an omission of considerations of culture in the decisions made about education reform policies while "culture is so pervasive a shaper of education and educational realities that it cannot be possibly ignored" (Alexander 2008a, 19).

A consideration of the 'local culture of teaching and learning', particularly the expected roles of a teacher within a cultural setting is therefore critical in understanding the practice (or non-practice) of prescribed learner-centered classroom practices in various contexts. This is because, the practice of learner-centered teaching in some cultures, as Schweisfurth (2011) maintains, is particularly demanding in general "because of the profound shifts required in teacher-learner power relations" (427). This is particularly the struggle that the rural teacher in this study faced when is expected by her local community to maintain her 'authority' whilst in class (presumed as a teacher-centered practice) but also extends *caring relationships* to the rural community outside school (regarded as learner-centered). The rural teacher in this study is then placed in a difficult situation where her practice of 'perpetuating' her classroom authority is perceived as 'teacher-centered' or 'bad', when within the context of the rural school, such 'authority' is required and highly-valued as an ideal practice of a 'good teacher' as this 'authority' actually allows for student engagement and learning. This therefore appears to challenge the polarizing views towards teacher-centered and learner-centered pedagogies which suggest that perpetuating 'teaching authority' only obstructs student-teacher relationships that are essential for student learning and engagement.

The ethnographic data in this study has illuminated the ways in which the student and teacher perceptions of good teaching could not be confined to one end of a spectrum (learner-centered) or the other (teacher-centered) but lies within a whole range of teacher practices, moving back and forth in a continuum to respond to and uphold what is valued about teaching, learning, and most importantly, student-teacher relationships within a cultural place (del Valle 2021). Good teaching in this study therefore implies a set of teacher practices and roles which are perceived of value within a culture, particularly those which fit the local ways of (1) how teachers are respected within a community; (2) how student-teacher relationships are built and fostered; and (3) how students understand their roles at home, at school, and in the community.

Implications for Practice and Policy

This study has shown that teacher authority and caring student-teacher relationships are both central to what is perceived as good teaching. With such value of teacher authority and caring student-teacher relationships in helping students learn well, it appears that the bridge that crosses both learner-centered teaching and teacher-centered instruction is the relationships built on *academic care*. It is important then for policymakers, researchers, and teachers to examine further this value of student-teacher relationships which are built on *academic care*. This is because in this rising tide of learner-centered education as a global reform policy among many countries, this *academic care* could allow for a reframing of the understanding of good and effective teaching within specific classroom contexts, especially those which strongly uphold and value 'teacher authority' as part of their local and cultural ways of teaching, learning, and building student-teacher relationships.

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