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Through Bronfenbrenner's Eyes: A look at Grade 1 teachers' attempts at implementing a Reading Instruction Program

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This study investigates how Grade 1 teachers who are enacting a Reading Instruction Program in remote island communities in Central Philippines navigate through the complexities of program implementation in their local contexts using Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory (1979) and his Process–Person–Context–Time Model (1989). Narratives generated from eight Grade 1 teachers showed various strategies employed to effectively exercise their agency within the “complex reciprocal interaction” (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) among the various layers of interrelated systems (biological, micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-) within a period of dynamic curricular changes in the Philippines; the K-12 reform initiative. The findings also suggest that, despite the various structural constraints that impact teacher enactment of the program, teachers find creative ways to position themselves socially and politically to contextualize the program and meet their goal: to make each child a reader in the mother tongue by the end of Grade 1. Findings suggest that, in these small island communities, such commitment is driven by a deep faith in God, who they believe is the author of the many privileges they are enjoying and who would eventually hold them accountable for the children in their care. On the other hand, such commitment may be driven by socioeconomic interests in that failure of students may result to high dropout rate, which in remote island communities with small student population may result in the closure of the school. This consequence may not be in the best interest not only of the community but also of the teachers themselves.

Keywords: Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory and Process–Person–Context–Time Model — Application in education; Teacher agency in literacy instruction program implementation; Literacy Instruction Program Implementation — Philippines

INTRODUCTION

Urie Bronfenbrenner contributed to the shift in perspective of developmental psychology when he emphasized that studying the individual without considering the many environmental and societal influences on human development is myopic and ill-conceived. In fact, he criticized the prevailing developmental psychology of his time as "...the science of the strange behavior of children in strange situations with strange adults for the briefest possible periods of time" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 19)

Bronfenbrenner then proposed the bioecological systems theory in 1979, where he posited that the development of an individual is impacted by several layers of social relationships, each influencing the other in a bidirectional manner. Bronfenbrenner emphasized that a person's biological endowment defines the person's potential; however, how this potential is realized or developed over time depends on a multiplicity of environment and social factors, which interact among each other and affect the individual's development. On the other hand, the system is also impacted by the individual's interaction with these layers of social and environmental factors, thereby producing a dynamic, bidirectional relationship which takes place within a given period.

Bronfenbrenner identified six interacting systems that influence an individual's growth (or lack of it). The first layer is the microsystem, which comprises the persons within the immediate environment of the individual and with whom s/he interacts most frequently. Socialization within the microsystem is "influenced by those who are emotionally and practically closest to the individual. Much of the contact at this level is face-to-face but often limited to dyadic relations" (McGuckin & Minton, 2011). The microsystem typically includes family, peers, or close friends and colleagues. Relationships in a microsystem are bidirectional, which means that the dynamics in the relationship among people within one's microsystem is also influenced by the individual's actions and reactions.

The second layer of interrelationships is the mesosystem. This consists of the interactions between the different elements of a person's microsystem, which indirectly impact the individual's development. For example, the relationship between the school supervisor and the principal impacts the development of the teacher in a school. Characterized by the relations between multiple microsystems, the mesosystem is about 'connections between contexts' (e.g., the interrelationships between the home and the schools).

Ultimately, the stronger and more diverse these links are and the higher the levels of communication between the socialization agents involved the more powerful an influence the resulting systems will be to a person's development (McGuckin & Minton, 2011).

The third layer in the bioecological system of an individual is the exosystem. This refers to a setting or "the larger social system in which the person does not function directly" but is affected by it. This includes decisions and decision-making that do not involve the individual but nevertheless impact his/her development. For example, although a teacher may not be involved in the decision-making on the promotion of a colleague to a principal position, the decision and succeeding action may affect the dynamics in the school or the professional development of a certain individual.

The fourth level is the macrosystem, which Bronfenbrenner defined as a context encompassing any group ("culture, subculture, or other extended social structures") whose members share value or belief systems, "resources, hazards, lifestyles, opportunity structures, life course options, and patterns of social interchange" (Tudge, Makrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009). The macrosystem is the outermost system that influences and is being influenced by all of the inner systems.

Bronfenbrenner posited that the macrolevel provides "the broad cultural, ideological, and organizational patterns within which the meso- and exosystems reflect the ecology of human development. While at first seeming far removed from the immediate ecology of the child's development, the macrolevel is not static and may change through, for example, revolution, economic recession, war, or technological change" (McGuckin & Minton, 2011). One's macrosystem includes larger political systems and structures, the national economy, the country's international relations, globalization and its influences, one's spirituality, customs, and local, national, and international laws and agreements and cultural values, which have a positive or negative effect on an individual's development (Santos, EDFD 301 lecture notes, based on Berk, 2000). For example, the K-12 curriculum, which teachers are mandated to implement, is a product of political decisions grounded on the economic needs of the country in the context of the global economy.

These dynamic interrelationships among the five levels (the child's biological endowments and the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems) take place within a specific "temporal component", called the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1989), in which the ecosystem is immersed. The chronosystem

“accommodates the on-going reciprocal periods of development between the individual and the environment across the lifespan” (McGuckin & Minton, 2011). For example, changes in socioeconomic status over time may have an influence on teacher decisions and actions and perception of his/her identity.

The assumption that underlies Bronfenbrenner's theory is that a person develops within a nest or constellation of systems of relationships that form his/her environment. On the other hand, systems within one's environment are affected by the individual's decisions and actions. In fact, Bronfenbrenner (1979) reiterated that effects are at their strongest when the relationship is bidirectional. Thus, it may be said that Bronfenbrenner was considering an open system where each layer of systems impacts and is impacted by the inner and outer layers.

Despite the relative popularity and influence of his Bioecological Model of Human Development in the field of educational psychology, Bronfenbrenner critiqued his own theory for emphasizing too much on the context of human development such that the bioecological systems theory failed to focus on the role the person plays in his or her own development and his/her ability to modify the context that s/he is in (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). Within this perspective, he and his colleagues presented an “operational research design that permits the systematic investigation” of what he proposed as the Process–Person–Context–Time Model (Tudge, Makrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009).

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) advanced two propositions in relation to the PPCT Model. First, they posited that “human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment”. For development to take place, the interaction between the dynamic biopsychological human organism and relevant persons, objects, and symbols within the immediate context of the individual must occur on a “fairly regular basis over extended periods of time”. Such enduring forms of interaction in the immediate environment are referred to as proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p. 996).

In explaining the concept of proximal process within the context of the Process–Person–Context–Time Model, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) argued that

[t]he form, power, content, and direction of the proximal processes effecting development vary systematically as a joint function of the

characteristics of the developing person; of the environment—both immediate and more remote—in which the processes are taking place; the nature of the developmental outcomes under consideration; and the social continuities and changes occurring over time through the life course and the historical period during which the person has lived (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p. 996).

The second element in the model, *person*, refers not only to the biological endowments of the individual but also to the personal characteristics that s/he brings into any social situation namely, his demand, resource, and force. One's demand characteristics refer to an individual's personal qualities that act as immediate stimulus to another person, e.g., age, gender, and skin color. One's resource characteristics are not immediately visible but are sometimes "induced, with differing degrees of accuracy", from the more visible demand characteristics. Resource characteristics include "mental and emotional resources such as past experiences, skills, and intelligence and also to social and material resource" such as access to food, housing, and educational opportunities.

Force characteristics refer to one's temperament, motivation, persistence, and the like. Bronfenbrenner emphasized that one's *person* may be used to change or alter his/her environment. The change can be relatively passive. A person changes the environment simply by being in it, to the extent that others react to him or her differently on the basis of demand characteristics, such as age, gender, and skin color, to more active [the ways in which the person changes the environment are linked to his or her resource characteristics, whether physical, mental, or emotional], to most active [the extent to which the person changes the environment is linked, in part, to the desire and drive to do so or force characteristics] (Tudge, Makrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009).

The third element of the PPCT Model, the context, involves the four interrelated concepts in the bioecological systems theory namely, the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems. Finally, the fourth element of the model, time, includes the "microtime [what is occurring during the course of some specific activity or interaction], mesotime [the extent to which activities and interactions occur with some consistency in the developing person's environment], and macrotime [the chronosystem]. For Bronfenbrenner, developmental processes are likely to vary according to the specific historical events that are occurring as the developing individuals are at one age or

another (Tudge, Makrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009). For example, students and teachers who experienced the earthquake that shook the islands prior to the conduct of this study may share a similar experience, which impacts their development as individuals, yet their “developmental trajectories” would vary because they experience the tragedy at different points in their lives.

The interaction among the four elements of Bronfenbrenner's PPCT Model is shown in Figure 1 below.

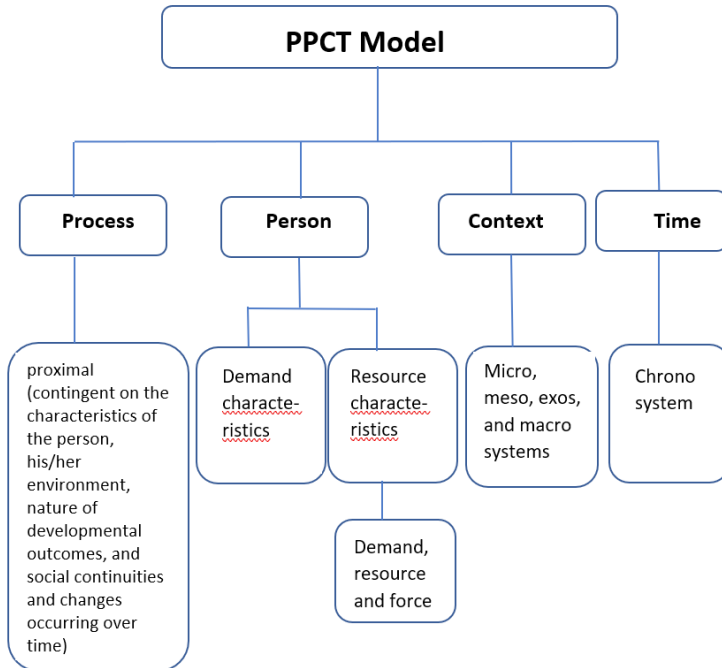


Figure 1. The Process–Person–Context–Time Model (Adapted from Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

Although Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory was initially intended to explain child development, it has been applied in several related areas. For example, the model was used in the study on school achievement in 2010, bullying in schools (McGuckin & Minton, 2011), and studies in teacher education curriculum and the development of teachers' identities (Lopes & Pereira, 2012), among others.

This study attempts to employ Bronfenbrenner's theory to explore and explain the dynamics of teacher enactment of a literacy instruction program

after having participated in several teacher trainings on language and multiliteracy instruction in the early grades, within the context of the recently implemented K-12 education reform program in the Philippines. For the purposes of this study, the program will be called Reading Instruction Program in the Early Grades (RIPEG). The study seeks to answer the question: What are the experiences of Grade 1 literacy teachers in implementing a reading instruction program in their local contexts? How may teachers' enactment of the reading instruction program be explained using Bronfenbrenner's Process–Person–Context–Time Model?

METHOD

Participant Selection

Eight Grade 1 teachers who were, at the conduct of the study, going through several trainings on language and multiliteracy instruction in relation to the newly legislated K-12 education reform program participated in the research. All of the participants were teaching in the various districts in an island province in southern Philippines. One of the participants was also a teacher-in-charge in the school where she was assigned to and was a teacher trainer in an early grades literacy instruction training. All of the participants were female, with an average teaching experience of 14 years. All of them came from remote island communities. Remoteness, here, is defined based on the Department of Education parameters, which include distance from the DepEd Division Office, travel time, and travel cost (Pante, Umali, & Ongkiko, 2015).

Instrumentation

All of the participants were asked to recall their experiences in three areas: 1) their own literacy experiences when they were in their early grades, 2) highlights of their teacher education training, and 3) their experiences as implementers of a literacy instruction reform program after a series of trainings that they had recently attended.

The interview schedule used was composed of loosely framed questions since the researcher wanted to generate narratives of the participants' experiences. Most of the researcher's statements typically began with phases like Tell me about... How was your _____ experience? What do you

recall about your...? What comes to mind when you think about...? The purpose of using loosely framed prompts and questions is to ensure that the interviewee was not led towards any particular direction or orientation during the interview. Also, the researcher was keenly aware of her positionality: she was among the teacher trainers of the Reading Instruction Program (RIPEG) and engaged in reflexive critique during the analysis of the data.

All of the interviews were conducted in the participants' first language, Binisaya. Seven of the eight interviews were done through telephone conversations. The eighth participant, who was also a teacher trainer, was interviewed in person during one of the training schedules.

Procedure

The researcher contacted ten teachers by telephone to seek permission for an interview about their experiences in implementing a reading program related to the K-12 reform program. They were informed that the interview was primarily for research purposes and that it was not in any way related to program evaluation but that the research may be published in a journal or presented in a forum. The participants were assured that anonymity and confidentiality would be respected and ensured. Of the ten who were contacted, seven agreed to participate in the study. The eighth participant was with one of the interviewees at the time of the interview and volunteered to participate in the study.

Seven of the interviews were conducted by phone since the participants came from various parts of the island, and one came from a separate islet which is still part of the district. The researcher had a personal interview with the eighth participant since she is both a Grade 1 teacher and a teacher trainer. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed and analyzed based on Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory and his Process–Person–Context–Time Model of Human Development.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

In this study, Bronfenbrenner's Process–Person–Context–Time (PPCT) Model is used to analyze Grade 1 teachers' experiences in implementing a literacy instruction program in their local contexts.

Persons and Proximal Processes

The interviews with the eight teacher-participants consistently showed that teachers bring into their daily decision-making their demand and resource characteristics, particularly when confronted with challenges in the use of the New Teacher's Guides (NTGs) and instructional materials that they were required to use as participants of the multiliteracy instruction program and implementers of the K-12 program of the Department of Education. The teachers employed "mental and emotional resources such as past experiences, skills, and intelligence and social and material resources" (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, cited in Tudge, Makrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009) in order to make critical decisions whether to follow the NTGs that were given to them and with which they were trained to teach. In fact, a majority of the teachers described several points of departures from the NTGs and why they decided to deviate from the plan. For example, when the big books necessary for read aloud activities indicated in the NTG did not arrive in time for the lesson, they made use of big books they made in their previous K-12 trainings or made their own story books using local stories and characters. One teacher said:

Some of the activities [in the NTG] were too long the children no longer paid attention. So, I only focused on activities that I believe the children need best. ... We need to consider the "mental capacity" of our children, which may be different from those assumed by the writers of the NTG, no matter how well written they might be.

Most of the teachers said that, from their experiences with several rushed K-12 trainings, they were already used to materials arriving late or not arriving at all. So, they strategized to ensure that the objectives indicated in NTG were met, with or without the materials that were supposed to be provided for use with the NTG. One teacher narrated:

The materials [indicated in the NTG] for this week have not arrived yet. It is supposed to be the big book detailing a story about a child's friendship with the moon. So, I asked the children if they saw the moon in the previous nights. The timing was perfect as it was full moon. Then, we talked about the full moon, what they saw, what stories they heard about it, and what they thought about the moon. I made a story about the moon based on

the discussion guide questions in the revised NTG. I did an impromptu dramatization, like a monologue so the children would enjoy it. I also made a related leveled text for the children to read. I just wrote it on a manila paper so everyone could read it. (Participant 2)

The teachers employed resource characteristics such as their past experiences and training and skills already learned through years of experience and several trainings attended, as well as their training in the teacher education institutions (TEIs) as they made online decisions to ensure that the lesson objectives were met despite existing conditions that could have potentially derailed it. Such decision may not always be consistent with the principles of literacy instruction espoused by RIPEG. For example, the teacher said that, in the absence of the leveled reader indicated in the Revised Teacher's Guide, she wrote on manila paper a leveled reader that she composed for the children to read. Leveled readers are intended to be read by children who have similar reading ability. These are carefully written considering the length; layout; structure and organization; illustrations; high frequency words; structure of phrases and sentences; literary features such as the level of complexity of the characters, setting, and plot; and familiarity of theme or topic so that the leveled reader matches the child's reading level (Pinnel, n.d.). Since it is unlikely that students in the same class have the same reading level, making the whole class read the same text is not consistent with the principles of the use of leveled reading. However, given the lack of books, the teacher did what she believed would meet the objectives in the NTG. She relied on her experience as a teacher and contextualized the lesson. She used her skills in improvisation and "impromptu dramatization", which had always worked with the children in the past years. The teacher exercised her agency to modify the lessons based on a constant appraisal of the resources at her disposal in the immediate environment at that particular moment.

Bronfenbrenner (1998) stipulated that the context of the proximal processes, which includes a nest of systems that impact human development, should not be perceived in a unidirectional manner. This is because the person, with her biological and genetic endowments, also brings with him/her in any social situation three forms of characteristics which facilitate her ability to modify, alter, or change the force and direction of the interaction. These forms of characteristics include the person's demand characteristics, i.e., personal stimulus such as age, gender, and physical appearance that may influence

social interactions because of the expectations that are immediately formed by others; resource characteristics such as past experiences, skills, intelligence, and social and material resources such as educational opportunities, access to good food and housing, and caring parents; and force characteristics such as differences in temperament, motivation, persistence, and commitment.

The *force characteristics* of the individual, which refer to one's temperament, motivation, persistence, commitment and the like were also demonstrated by the teachers as they negotiated their identities and navigated through the complexities in implementing the multiliteracy reform program in their localities. All of the eight respondents claimed that the source of their motivation to be the best and do the best for the children was anchored on their spiritual beliefs as Catholics. A teacher reiterated that she had a covenant with God when she took the licensure examination for teachers despite the fact that she was unable to attend any review class because of financial constraints. These force characteristics, particularly motivation and commitment, were exemplified when she said:

Ako, I made a promise to God because I had no money for the review. So, I took the LET without taking review classes. I promised God that if I pass the LET, I will do my best as a teacher. Lisod nga dili tumanon ang promise nato sa Ginoo [It is difficult not to keep a covenant with God]. Not only did I pass the LET, I was accepted in all four schools where I applied. ...I promised God that I will give my heart the children. Some of the teachers say that we should only work commensurate to the meager pay that we get. That's not right. (Participant 5)

This was a recurrent theme in the narratives. The majority of the participants claim that their motivation to make the RIEG work for their students is their faith in God and a sense of gratitude to a divine being for the "blessings" that they enjoy. This is aptly said by one of the teachers:

Motivated ko to do my best to teach kay paninglan unya tas Ginoo [I am motivated to do my best because God will ask me to do an accounting of what I have done]. Our island is culturally deeply religious. Many are devoted Catholics. (Participant 4)

In fact, the majority of the participants have responsibilities in their local

Catholic church. One teacher said:

Maybe, our inspiration to become better teachers stem from our values. Our island is deeply spiritual. Catholicism here is so deeply rooted. Most teachers are also active in church. I am the lector during the mass in our church every Sunday. (Participant 9)

One's spirituality is part of his/her macrosystem, a super structure that influences all the other systems [exo-, meso-, micro-] and is integral to the proximal processes that take place as part of human development. Bronfenbrenner posited that, for proximal processes to be effective as contributors in human development, they have to occur in a fairly regular basis and must be enduring. Religion is grounded on one's history and replete with rituals; and spirituality, in the context of the island in this study, is so ingrained in the participants' social identity it is in fact an integral part of who they are. Thus, it is a strong element in the development of the teachers as literacy instructors.

This is clearly manifested in the ways teachers use their previous knowledge, experiences, skills, and even their demand characteristics such as their authority as teachers in the local contexts. Teachers as persons/actors engaged in proximal processes strategically employ available resources to achieve the goal of developing beginning reading and writing skills among the children. They position themselves in stances of power and exercise their agency to make the program work but within the limits of the resources at their disposal. The implementation of the RIPEG is mediated by a web of interrelated sociopolitical structures and relations that the teachers negotiated with during particular moments and in particular situations to meet particular objectives. However, the strategies they used, e.g., contextualization and localization, endure through the various education reform programs that they have attempted to implement in their classes, such that these have become part of their professional identity. Amid structural constraints vis a vis program implementation, teachers make do, and in continually making do, they become.

Bronfenbrenner posited that "human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment". When these processes

are sustained, they will effectively contribute to human development and learning. Such enduring forms of interaction in the immediate environment are referred to as proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p. 996). These processes “constitute the engines of development because it is by engaging in these activities and interactions that individuals come to make sense of their world and understand their place in it, and both play their part in changing the prevailing order while fitting into the existing one” (Tudge, Makrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009).

CONTEXT AND CHRONOS

Bronfenbrenner is perhaps better known for his first proposition on the bioecological systems theory (1979), where he posited that human development takes place within layers of systems, from the person's biology to his/her relations with the tangible immediate environment. An example of these layers of system would be teachers' interactions with their students, their parents, peers, and direct administrators (microsystem); their interactions and relationships among the elements in the person's microsystem, e.g., the lack of community or parental support to the schooling of their children affects the teacher (mesosystem); and the important contexts in which the individuals whose development is being considered are not actually situated but which have important indirect influences on their development (the exosystem). In these small island communities, teachers had to understand when at specific periods, many of the male students would be absent because they are expected to assist their parents in fishing. The teacher is not actually situated in the relationship between the children and the parents and the family's long held practices of communal work. Yet s/he is affected by the situation and therefore learns to modify her expectations, decision, and actions to accommodate the new situation.

The outermost layer of system, the macrosystem, includes such encompassing social structures such as one's cultural beliefs, spirituality, political philosophy, socioeconomic conditions, and such international structures as globalization, free trade, and agreements. All of these take place within given a moment or a stretch of time. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) wrote about time as constituting microtime (what is occurring during the course of some specific activity or interaction), mesotime (the extent to which activities and interactions occur with some consistency in the

developing person's environment), and macrotime (the chronosystem), which means that developmental processes are likely to vary according to the specific historical events that are occurring as the developing individuals are at one age or another (Bronfenbrenner, 1989, in Tudge, Makrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009). This is shown in Figure 2 below.

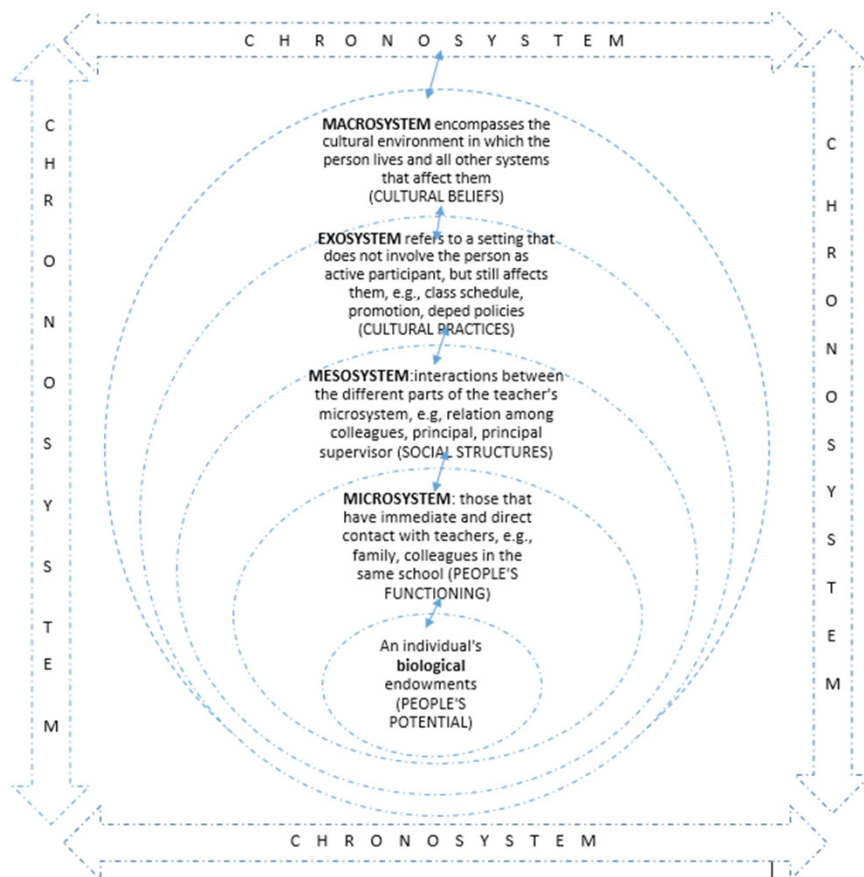


Figure 2. The teacher's bioecological system
(based on Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1989).

The teacher's microsystem includes her relationship with her students, the parents of the children, the immediate community, her peers, and her direct administrators. The teachers' daily interactions with the children influence her decisions and actions. In this study, all of the participants claimed that their commitment to the program was grounded on their concern for the

children and their desire to “produce” readers by the end of the school year. This commitment is anchored on the teachers’ macrosystem, e.g., their belief that they are accountable to a higher being who had entrusted the children in their care.

Such larger structures, i.e., the exosystem and the macrosystem, also affect the teachers’ microsystem. For example, one participant said that several students in her class had to walk at least six kilometers to get to the classroom, having had only one boiled banana for breakfast and bringing one banana for lunch. Poverty is not within the control of the teacher as it is closely tied to local and national socioeconomic program and policies (macrosystem). Yet the teachers did what they could to help provide for the basic needs of the children. One teacher narrated:

I promised to give my heart the child. I had one who was so smart but so poor. When I asked her what she wants to be, she said: Mauwaw ko mangandoy ma'am, kay pobre me kaayo [When I asked her what she wants to be, she said, “I am ashamed to dream because we are so poor”]. I was so moved because she was teary-eyed as she said it. I told her that if she studies hard, she can make it, since high school is free. Then, then she could work. I told her that I worked myself through college. She said she wanted to be like me. I helped her with her basic needs. I spent time with her.... She's already graduating now. I met her once because she won in an essay writing contest, and I was there. Pinakalami jud nga feeling, ma'am [It was a wonderful feeling, ma'am]. My thinking is this... Our time here is limited, so if you give, you must give all.

The teachers’ mesosystem, that is, the relationship among the elements in her microsystem, impacted the teacher’s agency to enact the reading program in her class. For example, two participants mentioned that looting and vandalism often happened in the school. She was disappointed and angry when these incidents happened, but these were an indication not only of the abject poverty that pushed some members of the small island community to steal school properties but also suggesting a poor relationship between the school and the community. One teacher lamented:

We have several problems that also affect us as teachers. This may not be... [the Reading Instruction Program's] concern, but in a way, it affects the

implementation of the program in our school. Our classroom was looted. Our instructional materials were vandalized. They poured ink on our things. Our problem is not the children. It's the larger society. I feel safe, but our school is not given the respect it deserves by some people in the community. They use the children's toilets without the school's permission. They made it like a public restroom, and they leave their dirt there. We already raised this concern to the barangay captain, but this has not been addressed until now. It is disappointing, discouraging.

Several systems appear to be at play in this context. While it may be true that the concern on vandalism and use of school restrooms as public toilet may be an indication of poor relationship among the school and the community (mesosystem), the fact that the community turned to the school for this basic need is a manifestation of the inability or failure of the local government unit to provide toilets for the community or to establish a program on health and sanitation. This, in turn, is a reflection of the national program and funding for health, hygiene, and sanitation and is clearly a manifestation of the economic depravity of the community (macrosystem). Finally, the decision and/or inaction of the barangay captain and the local government unit in general is part of the exosystem of the teacher. The Grade 1 Reading teachers were not directly involved in such decision-making, but such action had demoralized the teachers, and these feelings affected the teaching–learning experiences and the implementation of the RIPEG at the ground level. Also, the series of salary increases, which was part of the government salary standardization scheme, may have positively impacted the development of the teachers. Several of the participants mentioned that there was little reason to complain since the government had started fulfilling a promise that teachers held on to for decades. They said that, although the series of “rushed trainings” that they were required to attend as part of the newly implemented K-12 curriculum was “burdensome”, they had to do it as part of the DepEd system. Participant 8 said:

Some teachers do not really understand the demands of implementing something like this Reading Instruction Program, so we need to make them understand. Some complain to me: Why do we work harder than the others when we get the same pay? Some asked why they need to change the way they have always taught when their students in the past years also learned

to read without RIPEG strategies and materials. I explained to them that if computers need updating, we do, too, because times are changing and the demands on our children are much greater now than before. Our teachers need encouragement. Many of them are the family breadwinners. Some help out several siblings. They have many things in their mind. I encourage the teachers in my district to take MA units with me. I tell them we have to be forward-looking... I also tell them that, since our pay now is so much higher than before, we need to give more. We will not have blessing and peace if we shortchange the children.

Indeed, several layers of the system are also working together to ensure that the RIPEG was given the support it needed to ensure that the children in the various districts would be able to access the benefits offered by the program. On the mesosystem and macrosystem levels, the division superintendent launched a program called Agak (Guide), which required all public school teachers to adopt the poorest of the poor among their pupils and provide them the basic necessities. The goal was to encourage the children to attend classes and not drop out of school to earn a living. Most of the participants said that, even before Agak was institutionalized, they had already adopted many children. Moreover, they were glad that their effort was presented as a legitimate program of the local DepEd. In fact, the majority of participants have adopted not just one but several children. Participant 8 said:

... ako, walo ka bata ag akong gi-agak ron [I am helping eight children this year]. Every teacher is encouraged to take care of at least one child. We are asked to choose the one needing the most help. We provide the child's basic needs and support the child in terms of tutoring and emotional/psychological concerns. I feed them, I buy secondhand clothes for them. But sometimes, I cannot help but reprimand them, because I do not understand why some still fail to attend classes daily. Then I realized, sometimes, it is the parents. Kulang intawon silag support [The children lack parental support]. Some parents do not seem to care. I called some of them several times already. Naa man jud pod single parent. Galisod sad intawon [Some of them are single parents. They are really hard up].

Participant 8 believed that her main challenge as a Reading teacher was how to keep the children's interest so that they would return to her class the

following day. For her eight kindergarten children, the hook was the Read Aloud activities using colorful big books and the use of LCD projector. She said:

Some of teachers in our school asked me why I used my own money to buy the LCD projector. I tell them that when I was first assigned to this school, I had no classroom. So, I invested in amakan, nipa for the roofing, and asked the parents of my children to help out in building my classroom, so their children will have a good place to study in. The parents appreciated my initiative.

This teacher said that the LCD projector was an effective tool to keep the children in school. She said that when it is harvest time or planting season, when children are told by parents to help out in the farms, she would entice the children with beautiful short movie clips. “Dili ko mo-absent kay magpasalida sa ma’am ugma” [I won’t be absent because we will watch a movie tomorrow]. For these children, the school is the only place to watch a film and to see and touch big, beautifully illustrated books.

In the context of these small island communities, the first order of the day was not Reading Instruction Program. It was getting the children to school. It was getting the parents to understand the importance of schooling and education for their children’s future. The first order of the day was not teaching the children to decode and comprehend the text. It was giving them food so that they would truly enjoy the beautiful stories set in beautifully-illustrated big books provided by the program. In this context, teachers constantly negotiated with other structures within the system to position themselves in stances of power so they could modify constraints into possibilities within a chronosystem of education reform initiatives. They continued to initiate strategies to effectively implement what they believed were a viable, feasible aspect of the program for the best interest of the children in their care. In the end, what mattered most to them and drove their decisions and actions were the children: “It’s all about the children”, one teacher said. “What inspires me to be better are the children.” It appeared that this deep sense of commitment to program implementation was forged from the interactions and negotiations teachers constantly engaged in given the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems where they operated in daily and over a long period. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1989) reiterated that “human development takes place through processes of

progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment, and to be effective, the interaction must occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time". The narratives of the Grade 1 teachers who were implementing Reading Instruction Program demonstrated this. Their experiences demonstrated the unique context, where commitments and actions are grounded by one's faith and sustained by one's spirituality.

On the other hand, teachers' decision to extend beyond the conventional role of teachers as facilitators of learning to teachers as providers of basic needs of their students may not be primarily motivated by philanthropic initiatives but by self-serving socioeconomic interests. In a sense, students' failure to attend classes because of socioeconomic reasons might result in high dropout rates, which in remote island communities with small student population might result in closure of the school. This consequence might not be in the best interest not only of the community but also of the teachers themselves.

Also, although the teachers' use of personal funds to "adopt" the poorest of the poor among their students may be commendable, when such was required through an official program of the local DepEd authorities, one might wonder where and how this positions teachers and how this would impact their perceptions of their professional identity. It appeared that teachers were expected to "give more" because of the series of salary increases that they recently received. However, this "initiative" of the local DepEd leadership might unnecessarily burden teachers whose mandate was to prioritize the literacy development of their students and not to address the failure of the government to provide programs towards the upliftment of the prevailing socioeconomic concerns in the community. That the parents were unable to provide for the basic needs of their children was a reflection of the government's lack of program to alleviate the economic condition of the poorest sectors in the society. That the teachers were expected to meet this need was an indication of the government's lack of understanding of the socioeconomic challenges that the teachers themselves face within the complex macro-, exo-, meso-, and microsystems that they were interacting within at a time when multiple education initiatives were thrust upon them and entrusted to them.

CONCLUSION

In the context of the K-12 education reform program, teachers' decisions and actions seem to be made based on a constant appraisal of the circumstances and resources available. In this case, teachers engaged in an ongoing evaluation of the resources at their disposal as they negotiate with powerful others in a nest of systems of relationships that form his/her environment; the strongest and most enduring of which are their spiritual beliefs. Teachers strategically position themselves so they could exercise their agency amid a host of social relations and structures that could potentially derail program implementation for the accomplishment of program goals and objectives. The findings also suggest that, despite the various structural constraints that impact teacher enactment of the program, teachers find creative ways to position themselves socially and politically to contextualize the program and meet their goal: to make each child a reader in the mother tongue in Grade 1. As agentic mediators of the program, the teachers in this study continually reconfigure the program based on shifting local circumstances.

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