Research Article

Negotiating Multilingual Identities: Language Practices among Subanen Children in Last-Mile Indigenous Schools of Southern Philippines

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This paper explores the process of multilingual identities being negotiated by Subanen children who attend two last-mile Indigenous schools in Dipolog City, Philippines. With a mixed-method design, data on sixty pupil-respondents and six multigrade teachers using a quantitative approach were analyzed together with the observations and interviews in the classrooms. Findings showed that there existed a loud gap between high-pride (M = 4.70) and very low use (M = 1.03) and ability (M = 0.03) of the language among the pupils. There was a uniform use of English as the medium of instruction and constant code-switching to Cebuano but no use of Subanen. The qualitative data revealed the structural, ideological, and meaningful limitations of the dominance of the English and Cebuano subjugating Subanen in the classroom. The paper comes to the conclusion that Subanen identity is an emotional centre of learners but it is linguistically relocated under the existing multilingual-bureaucracies. Results indicate a pressing necessity to use culturally responsive, translanguaging-driven pedagogies to reestablish Indigenous language practices and affirm learner identities in Philippine public education.

Cite this article:

1. Introduction

There are more than 180 different languages in the Philippines which is the manifestation of the multilingual environment which has appeared due to the centuries of cultural exchange and influence of the colonial policy and atmosphere of education. Language can thus be used as a resource of learning as well as a hall mark of identity. There is no better place to see this than in the case of indigenous learners wherein the home languages of these individuals are suppressed and relegated to the periphery of the school system.

Children in Subanen communities of Zamboanga del Norte are brought up in a setting where there are three dominant languages, Subanen, Cebuano, and English that coexist although they do not have the same roles in everyday life. Cebuano is the region lingua franca and English and Filipino are both institutional languages in educational and administrative practices. The inherent language of the people known as Subanen is now rapidly becoming an instrument of ritual or symbolism only, and it is an irreversible though slow process of language loss (Fishman, 1991; Edwards, 2009).

In 2009, the institutionalization of the policy of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) in the Philippines aimed to turn this trend around by recognizing the linguistic and cultural background of learners as the basis of learning (Department of Education, 2017). However, in real life, the implementation of the MTB-MLE even in the communities of

Indigenous people is weak. The teachers are not native speakers of local languages, and they do not receive any pedagogical preparation in multilingual and intercultural education (Tupas and Martin, 2017; Nolasco, 2008).

As a result, the language practices of the Indigenous face general conflict with the policy and practice where multilingualism ideals are shadowed by the supremacy of Cebuano and English (Heugh, 2011; Spolsky, 2004). This paper draws on sociolinguistic as well as identity-based approaches towards language that consider it not as a medium of communication but as a form of social practice rooted in power practices (Bourdieu, 1991; Woolard, 1998). The language that learners use, be it speech, comprehension or pride in their heritage, will be an act of language negotiation in unequal language formations (Norton, 2013). Both the micro-level forces (peer interaction, home language use) and macro-level systems (educational policy, teacher attitudes) influence such negotiation. The theory of translanguaging by Garcia and Wei (2014) also helps to understand how using a multilingual repertoire, flexible access to linguistic resources by the speakers can help them create meaning, prevent being pushed to the periphery, and maintain a sense of belonging to the community.

The process of language shift among the Indigenous community in the world is associated with the historical displacement and the proliferation of mainstream languages of instruction (Smith, 2012). The case of the Subanen reflects this

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provision: unlike culture pride, the case of intergenerational transmission is becoming weaker. The affective identification of the Subanen language is strong in children but in the domains of home is limited what Fishman (1991) refers to as a terminal stage of shift, that is, the remaining of the emotional but the loss of functional competence. This gap is the key to developing educational strategies that would assert the identity of Indigenous peoples and also help to develop multilingualism.

Therefore, this paper discusses the way Subanen children who study at the schools located in the last mile bargain their multilingual identities in both school and home situations. The research is important to the existing body of work in that it explores the ways language hierarchies are adopted and refuted in disfavored education spaces by focusing on their language practices, self-images, and views on Subanen, Cebuano, and English. Contextually, the researcher is the School Principal of the Virginia Elementary School and Kepiyanan Elementary School; both last-mile Indigenous peoples schools located in the Subanen southern community of Barangay Diwan, in Dipolog City, Zamboanga del Norte- the latter can only be accessed by foot through vis-a-vis mountainous landscapes and streams. This positionality gave access to closeness and understanding of the realities of multilingual classrooms. Being an educational and community-based leader, the researcher had a first-hand experience of issues confronting teachers and learners striving to balance the educational systems in English without losing their identity and culture.

In the long run, the research will contribute to culturally responsive language planning and language pedagogies that would appreciate the voices of the Indigenous people in the larger multilingual canvas of Philippine schooling. Particularly, it looks into how much Subanen, Cebuano, and English are used and valued by Subanen learners; the learners based on their attitude along with emotional attachment to the heritage language; as well as, the implication of such language practices about identity negotiation and educational inclusion in Indigenous settings. To target these, this study answers the following questions:

1. How frequently do Subanen children use the Subanen language in their daily interactions, particularly at home and in school?

2. What attitudes and emotional attachments do Subanen children express toward their heritage language?

3. How confident are Subanen learners in using English in classroom interactions?

4. How do Subanen children self-assess their language abilities in Subanen, Cebuano, and English?

5. What do the results reveal about the relationship between language use, attitude, and identity among Subanen children in last-mile Indigenous schools?

2. Literature Review

In addition to language shift and translanguaging, the study of language policy and ideology describes the influence of institutional organization by the everyday classroom practices. The model of the language policy proposed by Spolsky (2004) as practices, beliefs or ideologies, and management, assists in explaining the disjuncture between the policy texts of the policy on the English-centric practices in the texts presented here and the actual practices of the English-centric policy. The ideologies (Woolard, 1998) of language naturalize such practices by giving prestige to the English language and assigning the Indigenous languages a symbolic role. The social and negotiated identity development in additional-language contexts is also a social and negotiated process. The concept of investment provided by Norton (2013) reveals how the identity and the prospects of

learners organize their actions in the English-based classrooms; the idea explains why the learners become shy in English and yet orienting to its capital. The theory of ethnolinguistic vitality (Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor, 1977) also explains the role of status, demography, and institutional support in explaining the low functional presence of the Subanen even though it has high levels of pride.

Ecologically, the languages exist in systems whose interdependence is interdependent (Haugen, 1972; Hornberger, 2002). Intergenerational transmission implies constant input, purposeful areas of use, and scaffolded participation, which is implied by the continua of biliteracy (Hornberger, 2002) and language socialization scholarship (Ochs and Schieffelin, 2012), which Subanen in school currently lacks. Indigenous research methodologies (Smith, 2012) and funds-of-knowledge approaches (Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez, 1992) recommend the reliance on the community knowledge and values to make the instruction culturally sustaining.

As the empirical studies of the issue of MTB-MLE and Philippine multi-lingual classrooms have revealed, it is crucial to mention that the effectiveness of the implementation will be determined by the teacher preparation, locally-made materials, and the community involvement (Benson and Kosonen, 2013; Heugh, 2011). The review of policies conducted in the Philippines has recognized the endemic prestige of English and disparities of resources as issues limiting the use of mother tongue within as low as the first grades (Nolasco, 2008; Tupas and Martin, 2017). The argument behind the strategic and fluid use of linguistic repertoires to promote participation and learning is supported through evidence on the international translanguaging research (Creese and Blackledge, 2010), in which the same approach teachers are becoming emerging researchers.

The research related to the language shift and identity underlines the intricate character of the connection between the linguistic behavior, affective attachment, and social context. The Reversing Language Shift (RLS) framework that was created by Fishman (1991) shows that it is impossible to develop the positive attitude towards the heritage language without intergenerational transfer and its everyday use. On the same note, Edwards (2009) and Baker (2011) observe that multilingual identity is dynamic and is shaped by inner convictions and external forces.

Regarding the case of the Philippines, Benson and Kosonen (2013) suggest that the effectiveness of the approach to implementing the idea of MTB-MLE is determined by the willingness of teachers, the access to resources and the involvement of communities. Garcia and Wei (2014) propose the idea of translanguaging, whereby the speaker of multiple languages is seen as flexibly resorting to all his or her linguistic resources, dismantling the idea of language separation in education. Hornberger (2002) and Cummins (2001) also add to the idea of linguistic interdependence, noting that the skills in mastering one language may be used to support the learning in another in the case of their pedagogical interconnection. Collectively these theories define the research problem of this study which seeks to explore the interaction of Subanen, Cebuano, and English in the classroom and the way learners formulate multilingual identities in language hierarchies.

The availability and confidence of the teachers and learners were made easy by the position of the researcher as the School Principal of the schools involved in the research. This privy status was managed with a reflexive consciousness to remain neutral and keep ethical research in place so that no participation was mandatory and judgmental.

3. Methodology

The research design adopted in this study was a mixed-methods research that combined quantitative survey research and qualitative observation research to investigate multilingualism in Subanen group of learners and teachers in multigrades. The study was done in two geographically remote Indigenous Peoples (IP) schools namely Virginia Elementary School (ES) and Kepiyanan ES- both of last-mile institution in Dipolog City Division, Zamboanga del Norte, Philippines.

The sample size used in the research was 60 (60) Subanen learners in Kinder to Grade 6 (a total of 49 learners in the Virginia ES and 11 pupils in the Kepiyanan ES in the School Year 2024-2025), and 6 (6) multigrade instructors -4 teachers in the Virginia

ES and 2 teachers in the Kepiyanan ES. The survey of pupils was used to assess language use, pride, shyness in English and self-rated ability in Subanen, Cebuano and English. The teacher quantification template evaluated language of instruction, frequency of code-switching, language of response by learners, markers of identity and multigrade interaction. Thematic interpretation of qualitative data and descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were used in data analysis.

The protocols were followed closely in terms of ethics. Their parents of the participating schools were given permission. Before the data were collected parental consent and learner assent were sought. All the participants were given pseudonyms, and the confidentiality was ensured during the course of the study.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Pupils' Quantitative Results and Discussion

Item	Count	Mean	std	min	25%	50%	75%	max
Item 1: Subanen Use at Home (1-4)	60	1.033333	0.18102	1	1	1	1	2
Item 2: Pride Speaking Subanen (1-5)	60	4.7	0.497451	3	4	5	5	5
Item 3: Shy Answering in English (1-5, Reverse)	60	1.9	0.837672	1	1	2	3	3
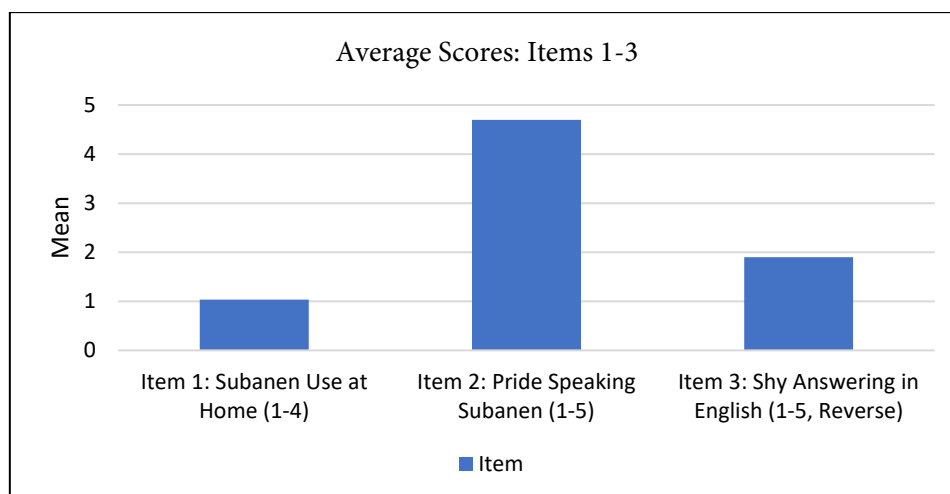
The descriptive statistics were used to analyze quantitative data of sixty (60) pupil-respondents. On 4-point scale as indicated in the summary tables, Item 1 (Subanen use at home) registered a mean of 1.03 (SD = 0.18) which suggests that Subanen was not frequently used in interactions with home.

This is unlike in the case of Item 2 (Pride in speaking Subanen) that had a mean of 4.70 (SD = 0.50) which indicated a very strong affective attachment and positive attitude towards the heritage language. The result of item 3 (Shyness answering in English, reverse-coded) with a mean of 1.90, SD=0.84 means that a good number of learners remain shy or have low confidence in using English to communicate.

In the case of the self-rated language abilities (Item 4) on a 0-4 scale, the results were as shown below; learners rated very low in Subanen (M = 0.03, SD = 0.18), very high in Cebuano (M = 4.00, SD = 0.00), and moderate in English (M = 1.53, SD = 0.50). Cebuano grew to be the most important functional language whereas Subanen is less spoken and comprehended although it holds a special place in the hearts of the people in Cebuano.

The results show that there is an evident disengagement between linguistic pride and linguistic practice. Although the level of emotional identification with Subanen is high, the very low level of self-rated capacity and home use indicates an advanced

state of language shift towards the Cebuano language. This confirms the reversing language shift model presented by Fishman (1991), whereby the positive attitude cannot be used to maintain the language without any transmission and daily usage to the generations. The homogeneity of Cebuano is an indication of its lingua franca status in the area serving as a means of communicating with peers as well as informal school communication. In the meantime, moderate level of English proficiency and ongoing shyness in the verbal practice can be associated with the identified educational policy paradox English is the official language of study, but it is not an integrated part of linguistic repertoires that learners use in their daily lives.

These findings support ethnographic evidence that teachers in last-mile schools rarely use and know Subanen, which makes the classroom dynamics favor Cebuano and English. The mismatch between affective and functional use is an indication that translanguaging and the inclusion of Indigenous language in the early education system are necessary, thus allowing students to identify with classroom activities. In general, the quantitative results are that Subanen identity continues to be an emotional anchor, despite the fact that the linguistic form is being degraded and worn down by systemic multilingual influences.

4.2 Teachers' Quantitative Results and Discussion

Average Language abilities (Item 4) - Refined
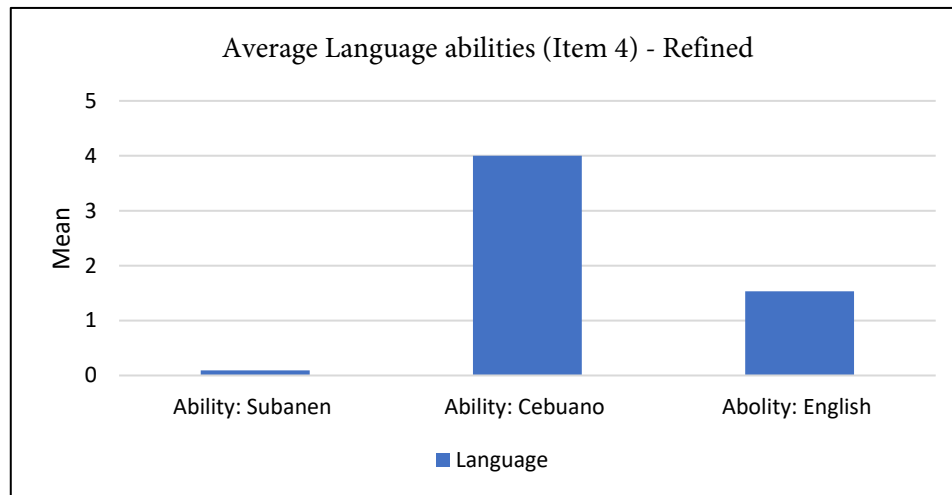
Item	Count	Mean	std	min	25%	50%	75%	max
Item 4a: Subanen Ability (0-4)	60	0.03333333333333333	0.1810203347193925	0	0	0	0	1
Item 4b: Cebuano Ability (0-4)	60	4	0	4	4	4	4	4
Item 4c: English Ability (0-4)	60	1.5333333333333334	0.5030977485864634	1	1	2	2	2

Summary of Teacher Quantification Results

Language Used – M = 4.00, SD = 0.00
Code-switching Frequency – M = 3.00, SD = 0.00
Learner Response Language – M = 4.00, SD = 0.00
Identity Markers – M = 1.00, SD = 0.00
Multigrade Interaction – M = 0.83, SD = 0.41

The data of six (6) multigrade teachers in the two last-mile Indigenous Peoples (IP) schools were collected using quantitative classroom data. It was analyzed using the language use, code-switching, learner response, identity markers, and multigrade interaction. Each of the observed sessions was 60 minutes long maintaining consistency in the duration of cases.

As demonstrated in the descriptive summary above, the language of instruction was at a mean of 4.00 (SD = 0.00) on a 4-point scale (1 = Subanen, 2 = Cebuano, 3 = Filipino, 4 = English) meaning that there was uniformity in the language used as the medium of instruction. A record of the frequency of code-switching showed a mean of 3.00 (SD = 0.00), which was construed to mean high frequency of switching of English with other languages. The language of response of the learners also possessed an average of 4.00 (SD = 0.00) and this indicates that the pupils spoke in English mostly.

The identity markers identified in lessons, including allusions to local traditions, values, and Subanen symbols, had the mean of 1.00 (SD = 0.00) on the scale of 0-2, which corresponds to the lack of integration of Indigenous elements of culture. In the meantime, multigrade interaction gained a mean of 0.83 (SD = 0.41) indicating that most lessons consisted of some amount of cross-grade interaction, which is common in multigrade rural settings.

The findings demonstrate a strong presence of English in the teaching and the responses of students, and prove the fact that the formal curriculum still is linguistically centralized in spite of the Indigenous environment of the schools. The preference of English by teachers is an indication of the language policy of the Department of Education as well as the high social status of mastering English in the society. This too, however, strengthens a lack of association between the instructional language and the home linguistic repertoire of the learners in which the Subanen language is never much used.

Though they used a lot of code-switching, the code-switching was between English and Cebuano and not Subanen. The trend highlights regional but not heritage bilingualism- teachers modify teaching with Cebuano when they need to be clear but rarely use Subanen linguistic materials. The fact that the low identity marker score is shown by the near absence of Subanen terms, songs, or narratives in lessons depicts the situation where the Indigenous knowledge is described as peripheral or tokenized as opposed to being systematically embedded in the teaching practice.

The fact that both the teachers and learners spoke English almost as a monolingual language implies an institutionalized monolingual habitus (Bourdieu, 1991), where a language is used in the name of power, prestige, and compliance to external assessment criteria, as opposed to identity in the community. Although they are teaching in IP schools, teachers seem to be walking the fine line between conflicting demands: teach standardized content and work with linguistically diverse students. This will lead to a pedagogical compromise- code-switching in order to be accessible, but within the limits of dominant languages.

The intermediate level of multigrade interaction (M = 0.83) suggests that the teachers use flexible grouping and common activities which are typical of small rural schools. Nevertheless, such interactions are based on academic collaboration and not interlinguistic exchange, and Subanen has little place as a tool of socialization or knowledge exchange.

Combined, the data of the teachers confirm the systemic marginalization of the Indigenous language used in classrooms in line with the previous results with the students with Subanen pride existing alongside low ability and minimal use of the language. The two bodies of data indicate a policy-practice gap: DepEd advocates Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd) and Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE); however, the realities in classrooms are still determined by the extrinsic testing and English-based accountability systems.

4.3 Summative Quantitative Results (Pupils and Teachers)

The aggregate findings of both pupil surveys and response of teachers in their classrooms show a uniform trend of linguistic displacement in the last-mile Subanen schools in Dipolog City. Both data sets verify that though Subanen is a significant identity marker, no significant usage and practice among learners and instructors are almost zero.

The learners themselves are very proud of speaking Subanen (M = 4.70) but this is quite opposite with very low home use (M = 1.03) and almost zero ability (M = 0.03). This mismatch represents a kind of symbolic identity practices- children display an expression of affective loyalty to Subanen heritage despite the lack of linguistic skill. Meanwhile, Cebuano prevails as the functional language (M = 4.00) of daily communication, and English is performed only in a rather limited but prestigious position, with shyness and the lack of confidence (M = 1.90).

These tendencies are supported by the data of the teachers. All the noted multigrade teachers employed English as the first language of instruction (M = 4.00), and code-switching (M = 3.00) was often to Cebuano, not Subanen. The language used by the teachers reflected the reaction of the learners, which meant that there was no Subanen in the educational setting as well as in the interactional setting. The cultural or linguistic allusions to the Subanen heritage only showed up infrequently (identity markers M = 1.00), and there were no sessions when Subanen language was intentionally included.

The combination of these two sets of data indicates that there is a policy-practice gap in the delivery of the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) and Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd) programs by the Department of Education. Although the use of local and Indigenous languages at the early education level is supported by national policy, the reality of the school level is still dominated by English and regional lingua francas. The code-switching behavior of teachers is an attempt to facilitate understanding, though such accommodations are biased towards Cebuano instead of the native language of learners.

This hierarchy of power of language -English > Cebuano > Subanen- demonstrates a vertical ordering of the power of language which fits into the model of Reversing Language Shift described by Fishman (1991) in the course of which, despite a steady emotional attachment, heritage languages lose functional domains. The juxtaposition of pride and linguistic loss among students and the fact that teachers are not very cultural integrators is an indicator of a severe disjuncture between affective identity and communicative practice.

In general, both of the quantitative results prove that learners and teachers are put in a transitional multilingual ecology where Subanen identity continues to exist in symbols but functions practically in a displaced manner in favor of the dominant languages. The situation highlights the critical necessity of language planning, teacher education, and pedagogical creativity, specifically, translanguaging and heritage language literacy strategies, in order to reposition Subanen language and culture as part of the daily classroom life.

4.4 Results and Discussion Qualitative

Observation and interview with teachers found that English is becoming the dominant classroom language in all grades. The teachers were always using English as a way of preparing the pupils to higher education and also meeting the standards of the curriculum. Practically, though, this decision restricted the involvement of the learners and was biased towards memorized answers rather than natural speaking. The Cebuano code-switching was done strategically with instructions or explanations

being the most common, but Subanen was not employed in any way besides random greetings or mentioning places in the area.

The attitude of teachers towards multilingualism is ambivalent. Although their views on the importance of Subanen as a source of their cultural identity and the local heritage were similar among the majority, the majority of them linked English and Cebuano to success, fluency, and confidence. These stories depict a mental conflict of cultural appreciation and training. Teachers interchange professionalism and academic legitimacy with use of dominant languages, which in the context of Garcia and Wei (2014), is dubbed the monoglossic ideology- an ideology of perceiving languages as separate and hierarchical, as opposed to fluid and interrelated.

In the interactions with learners in English, they usually kept silent, but in the interactions with Cebuano speakers or mixed language, it is possible to observe that they were more responsive. Their silence in English and enthusiasm in Cebuano represent a form of linguistic negotiation in which the identity and comfort are articulated using the means of codes which are easily available but non-Indigenous. The process of language shift in learners is a sign of resilience as well as evidence of language shift, a theory that was postulated by Fishman (1991).

Teachers identified a number of institutional obstacles that impede Subanen inclusion: unavailable localized teaching resources, insufficient time to learn the English language, no training about Indigenous language orthography, and systemic demand on English-based testing. These limitations reflect those of Benson and Kosonen (2013), who observed the structural problems in using MTB-MLE in Indigenous settings.

Although these limitations are present, some of the teachers were aware of the necessity of linguistic balance. One of them said, I would enjoy Subanen materials. Another bounced back, "Perhaps we had better begin humble--with greetings or narratives by the elders. Such utterances are indicators of agency in the making as well as critical reflexivity that may indicate a transition to translanguaging pedagogy wherein educators freely and easily utilize various languages, including Subanen, to between the home and school worlds.

The general analysis of the qualitative data indicates that multilingualism in the classroom is shaped by three dimensions, which are: (1) structural factors that privilege English, (2) ideological conflicts between professionalism and dominant languages, and (3) the new consciousness of teachers who want to practice on cultural basis. These layers make up a multilingual hierarchy that gives prominence to English as an expression of prestige, Cebuano as a means of communication and assigns Subanen to symbolic expression.

5. Conclusion

The given study concludes that Subanen language and identity are in the state of symbolic survival, yet effective degradation. Students are very proud of their ethnicity but they do not have the skills and the possibilities to use it in the real life. This linguistic hierarchy is unintentionally reproduced by teachers, who are forced by the requirements of institutions and the curriculum. Culturally-based teacher training, localized learning resources and translanguaging-based pedagogy are the immediate solutions to fill this gap. It is not just necessary to revitalize language among Subanen learners by including Indigenous language in the classroom but also to create equity, affirm identity, and educational justice.

6. Acknowledgement

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