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CONTEXTUALIZING PEACE AND CONFLICT STUDIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: COMMUNITY-BASED LEARNING AND NGO PARTNERSHIPS FOR SUSTAINABLE PEACEBUILDING IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED REGIONS

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ABSTRACT

The history of Conflict-Affected Mindanao has been shaped by complex conflicts involving minority groups, Indigenous communities, and settler populations. While numerous peace agreements, governance reforms, and autonomy arrangements have been implemented, achieving sustainable peace requires long-term educational interventions that cultivate critical awareness, intercultural empathy, and civic engagement among younger generations. Higher education institutions therefore play a significant role in advancing human rights education and peace literacy in conflict-affected regions. This paper presents a curriculum innovation integrating a one-unit asynchronous course on Peace and Conflict Studies into the academic programs of Davao del Sur State college. The program was developed through collaborative partnerships with non-government organizations (NGOs), community elders, Indigenous knowledge holders, and local peace practitioners. The course contextualizes peace education within historical, cultural, and socio-political realities by combining community-based learning, experiential reflection, and dialogue with local peace actors. The curriculum incorporates four core learning components: community-based engagement, historical and cultural conflict analysis, human rights and governance frameworks, and reflective peacebuilding exercises. Through these modules, students examine key issues such as minority struggles, Indigenous resistance, inter-ethnic tensions, and contemporary peace initiatives including regional autonomy arrangements. Narratives from a student participant and a community leader illustrate how experiential learning fosters empathy, intercultural dialogue, and grassroots conflict transformation. The study demonstrates that community-

engaged peace education strengthens human rights awareness and civic responsibility among students. By institutionalizing community-based peace education, Davao del Sur State college provides a replicable model for universities seeking to integrate human rights education and participatory peacebuilding within higher education systems in conflict-affected societies.

KEYWORDS: Peace Education, Conflict-Affected Regions, Community-Based Learning, Human Rights Education, Indigenous Peacebuilding, Higher Education Curriculum Innovation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Conflict-Affected Mindanao has long been characterized by complex historical tensions rooted in colonial legacies, land dispossession, cultural marginalization, and competing political identities. These conflicts have involved multiple actors, including revolutionary movements, Indigenous communities, settler populations, and state institutions. While several peace agreements and governance reforms have been implemented over the past decades, the region continues to experience sporadic violence, displacement, and unresolved social grievances.

The historical struggle of minority groups for self-determination has been a central dimension of the conflict landscape. Armed movements emerged during the late twentieth century in response to perceived political exclusion, land dispossession, and cultural marginalization. These movements sought autonomy and recognition of minority identity within the national political system.

In addition to minority struggles, Indigenous communities have faced longstanding issues related to ancestral land rights, cultural preservation, and resource governance. Many Indigenous groups continue to experience displacement and socio-economic marginalization due to development projects, resource extraction, and armed conflicts occurring within their ancestral territories.

Despite these challenges, Conflict-Affected Region X has developed strong traditions of community-based peacebuilding. Local mediation practices, interfaith dialogue initiatives, Indigenous governance systems, and civil society organizations have played critical roles in facilitating conflict resolution and reconciliation. These grassroots peace efforts demonstrate the importance of culturally grounded approaches to peacebuilding that emphasize dialogue, respect, and shared responsibility.

Education has increasingly been recognized as a vital platform for promoting peace literacy, human rights awareness, and intercultural understanding. Universities and colleges serve not only as institutions for knowledge production but also as spaces where young people can develop critical perspectives on conflict, governance, and social justice. In conflict-affected societies, higher education institutions have the potential to cultivate future leaders capable of engaging in dialogue, mediation, and community-driven peace initiatives.

Recognizing these possibilities, Davao del Sur State college developed an innovative curriculum initiative aimed at contextualizing Peace and Conflict

Studies within the lived realities of local communities. The initiative integrates a one-unit asynchronous course on Peace and Conflict Studies into the college's academic programs through partnerships with NGOs, community leaders, and Indigenous knowledge holders.

This study examines the design, implementation, and initial outcomes of this curriculum innovation. It explores how community-based learning, experiential narratives, and collaboration with local peace actors can enhance human rights education and contribute to sustainable peacebuilding.

Conceptual Framework: Peace Education and Human Rights Learning

Peace education has emerged as a multidisciplinary field that seeks to address the root causes of violence and conflict through transformative learning processes. Scholars emphasize that peace education goes beyond the mere absence of violence and instead promotes values of justice, empathy, dialogue, and respect for human dignity.

Sustainable peacebuilding requires long-term social transformation that engages multiple levels of society, including grassroots communities, civil society organizations, and institutional actors. Education plays a crucial role in this process by enabling individuals to understand conflict dynamics and develop skills for dialogue and reconciliation.

Human rights education complements peace education by promoting awareness of fundamental rights, social justice principles, and democratic governance. In regions experiencing historical marginalization or identity-based conflicts, integrating human rights frameworks into educational curricula can strengthen civic participation and foster inclusive social dialogue.

Experiential learning is another important component of effective peace education. Learners analyze real-life experiences to construct deeper understanding. Community-based learning models apply this principle by connecting classroom instruction with direct engagement in local communities.

In the context of Conflict-Affected Region X, peace education must be rooted in local histories, cultural traditions, and Indigenous knowledge systems. Indigenous mediation practices, customary laws, and community rituals often embody principles of restorative justice, collective responsibility, and reconciliation. Integrating these practices into formal education enriches academic learning and validates the cultural heritage of local communities.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to document and analyze the development and implementation of the Peace and Conflict Studies curriculum at Davao del Sur State college. Data sources include curriculum design documents, reflective narratives from student participants, and experiential learning reports generated during community engagement activities. Two narrative case accounts – one from a student participant and another from a community leader – are presented to illustrate the experiential learning outcomes of the program. The analysis focuses on identifying how community-based learning and partnerships with NGOs contribute to peace education and human rights awareness within higher education settings.

2.1. Program Design and Community Partnerships

The Peace and Conflict Studies course at Davao del Sur State college was designed to provide students with both theoretical knowledge and practical exposure to grassroots peacebuilding initiatives. The development of the course was made possible through collaborative consultations with NGOs, peace advocates, Indigenous elders, and local government leaders engaged in community-based conflict transformation.

A key institutional partner is an international NGO specializing in civil peacebuilding. The organization provided technical inputs, peacebuilding frameworks, and experiential learning perspectives that helped contextualize the course within ongoing grassroots initiatives in the region.

The initial conceptualization and crafting of the syllabus were also supported through academic collaboration among several regional higher education institutions. Faculty members and peace advocates from these institutions contributed to curriculum workshops and consultations aimed at integrating regional peacebuilding experiences into higher education teaching frameworks.

The course is delivered through an asynchronous learning format supported by university-supported digital learning platforms. This flexible structure allows students to access lectures, case studies, and reflection activities while participating in community-based learning engagements.

3. CURRICULUM COMPONENTS

3.1. Community-Based Learning Modules

Students engage with local elders, peace facilitators, and community leaders through dialogue sessions and field reflections. These interactions provide opportunities to learn directly from individuals who have experienced conflict mediation, peace negotiations, and reconciliation processes.

3.2. Historical and Cultural Case Studies

Students analyze historical cases involving minority struggles, Indigenous land disputes, and inter-ethnic tensions. This analysis fosters a deeper understanding of how historical injustices, colonial policies, and socio-economic inequalities contribute to contemporary conflicts.

3.3. Human Rights and Governance Integration

Students explore transitional justice mechanisms, peace agreements, and governance structures within regional autonomous arrangements. These modules encourage critical analysis of how policy reforms and institutional arrangements influence peacebuilding outcomes.

3.4. Reflective Dialogue and Simulation Exercises

Guided reflection exercises and simulations develop skills in mediation, negotiation, and conflict analysis. Online discussion forums allow students to share insights and reflect on experiences in community engagement activities.

3.5. Transformative Narratives from the Field

Narrative 1: Student A

Student A grew up in a conflict-affected community where land disputes and family rivalries created tension. Initially, she believed peace meant merely the absence of violence.

Through dialogue with local elders and peace practitioners, she encountered stories of reconciliation, trauma healing, and mediation. During a community engagement activity, Student A facilitated a youth dialogue among previously conflicting families. Reflecting on the experience, she said:

“You don’t have to be an expert to help build peace.”

Inspired, she plans a career integrating peace education into public teaching.

Narrative 2: Community Leader B

Community Leader B served as a mediator for several years. Initially skeptical of student

involvement, he observed that students approached the community respectfully, adhering to Indigenous protocols.

During a mediation on a long-standing dispute, participants were encouraged to share experiences and acknowledge each other's pain. Community Leader B reflected:

"Peace is different when pain is understood first."

He continues collaborating with educational institutions and NGOs to promote community-based peace education.

4. DISCUSSION

The initiative demonstrates how higher education can contribute to grassroots peacebuilding through community-engaged learning. By integrating local knowledge systems, experiential narratives, and human rights frameworks, the program bridges the gap between theoretical learning and practical peacebuilding.

Experiential learning transforms students' understanding of conflict, highlighting the importance of empathy, dialogue, and community participation. Partnerships with NGOs and community leaders strengthen the program's credibility and relevance.

The initiative also contributes to human rights education by encouraging students to examine social justice, cultural recognition, and governance reform, providing insight into how historical grievances shape contemporary social dynamics.

5. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Future plans include expanding the one-unit course into a comprehensive academic offering or a specialization track in Peace and Conflict Studies. Additional initiatives include developing advanced experiential learning projects and integrating digital storytelling technologies to document community peace narratives.

Davao del Sur State college aims to position itself as a regional hub for peace education and contribute to broader efforts toward sustainable peace and human rights promotion.

List of Abbreviations

- LGU – Local Government Unit
- NGO – Non-Government Organization
- PCS – Peace and Conflict Studies
- HEI – Higher Education Institution
- IKSP – Indigenous Knowledge Systems and

Practices

DECLARATION: Ethics approval and consent to participate

All documentation complied with Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) protocols under the Philippine Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (Republic Act No. 8371). Research activities were validated through formal resolutions of tribal councils and witnessed during community assemblies.

Consent for Publication: Consent for publication of non-restricted materials was obtained through FPIC documentation processes and community validation assemblies. No restricted sacred knowledge is disclosed in this manuscript.

Availability of data and material: Data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this published article and its supplementary files. The full provincial cultural database remains community-restricted in accordance with the memorandum of agreements and may be accessed only upon approval of the respective councils.

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Authors contributions: The author led conceptualization, project implementation, and manuscript preparation. Research team members conducted documentation, archiving, validation assemblies, and community coordination. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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Figures and Tables

Table 1. Peace and Conflict Studies Curriculum Framework at Davao del Sur State college.

Curriculum Component	Learning Focus	Teaching Approach	Expected Learning Outcome
Community-Based Learning	Dialogue with local elders, peace facilitators, and community leaders	Community immersion, guided reflections, participatory dialogue	Development of empathy, cultural awareness, and grassroots peacebuilding skills
Historical and Cultural Case Studies	Examination of regional conflict history	Case study analysis, documentary reviews, facilitated discussions	Critical understanding of historical and structural roots of conflict
Human Rights and Governance Integration	Study of peace agreements, transitional justice, and governance structures	Policy analysis, lectures, reflective essays	Understanding of rights-based approaches to conflict transformation
Reflective Dialogue and Simulations	Conflict mediation exercises and dialogue facilitation	Online forums, role-play simulations, reflective journals	Development of communication, mediation, and conflict analysis skills

Table 2. Stakeholder Contributions to the Peace Education Initiative

Stakeholder	Role in Program	Contribution
Local Elders	Cultural advisors	Provide Indigenous conflict mediation knowledge
NGOs	Peace facilitators	Conduct training and dialogue sessions
Faculty	Academic facilitators	Integrate theory and experiential learning
Students	Program participants	Engage in dialogue and community reflection
Community Leaders	Community partners	Provide real-life conflict mediation experiences