

Masé Té: Promoting the Creation of Age-Appropriate and Context-Specific Books for Children from Indigenous Groups in Mindanao through an Inclusive Book Development Process

By Abigail C. Castillo and Diane Renee P. Carasig

ABSTRACT

Existing bodies of literature show that beginning readers use their background knowledge and familiar experiences to relate to texts, recognize words, and understand stories. Seeing oneself represented in the characters, authors, and illustrators engages children in reading. In the Philippines, although there is a significant number of children's books in local language (Filipino), getting access to high-quality children's books that reflect indigenous culture, language and dialect variation, and family life remains a challenge.

This paper titled *Masé Té*, which means "let's read" in the Blaan language, describes how First Read's inclusive book development process led to the creation of more age-appropriate and context specific books available for children 0-4 years old from indigenous groups of Blaan, Tagakaolo, and Tboli from the Southern part of the Philippines, Mindanao.

The inclusive book development process involved representatives of these three tribes to create books that reflects their interests and community life for children aged 0 – 4 years old. This resulted in the production of eight original titles and translation of existing titles developed by local children's books publishers. The design of First Read's inclusive book development process facilitates and ensures the sustainability of the community's commitment to the creation of age-appropriate and context-specific books.

Early literacy and the building blocks of development

Children experience incredible growth and development during the first three years of life (Zero to Three, 2003). Contrary to popular belief that learning takes place only when a child learns to read and write in school, literacy begins at home during the early stages of infancy (Zero to Three, 2003; Zeiler, 1992).

Parents, primary caregivers and other adults who have direct interaction with children aged 0-4 years old are responsible in fostering interest and love for literacy among children. The adults' primary goal should be aimed at supporting, becoming role models, and providing venues where children can enjoy literacy events, which are opportunities for young kids to enjoy print. (Zeiler, 1992)

Children's experience with literacy materials (such as books, paper, crayons) complemented by positive interactions with the adults that surround them are the building blocks for language, reading, and writing development (Zero to Three, 2003). Children "read" by decoding meanings from pictures, which give them clues about stories on printed materials presented to them (Zeiler,

1992).

Zeiler (1992) also explained that “literacy emerges as a response to the previous exposure to language experienced by the child in his environment, social context, and linguistic context.” To instill a love for literacy among children at an early age, primary caregivers shall determine subjects that interest children and something a child can easily relate to (Ravid, 1992).

Literacy practices among indigenous peoples

For thousands of years, most indigenous communities in the Philippines, including that of the Blaan, Tboli, and Tagakaolo, have rich collection of songs, lullabies, stories, and rhymes. These collections are transmitted from one generation to another through oral traditions. The elders are like the walking library of the tribes as they are the keepers of traditions and rituals related to various aspects of their family life such as birth of a child, death of a person, building a house, planting crops, hunting for animals, curing the sick, playing and having fun, among other things. There are no formal schools to attend to. The whole community is a learning place, and the elders are the teachers. Language and communication is primarily the medium of instruction among them.

In the recent years, however, colonizers have come and brought along the formal education which is defined by a 4-walled classroom. Other resources were introduced such as written texts. The indigenous peoples have no choice but to adapt. There are a few exceptions who made the transition well, but majority are lagging behind.

Reading materials may be available but majority of the books and stories available are either written in the national language (Filipino) or depict western life that are written in English. Expectedly, this posed some difficulty in comprehension among children from indigenous communities. This has a resulting effect in their interest to learn and get education. As such, they are at the bottom of most education performance indicators until now.

Availability of age-appropriate and context-specific books to households with children 0-4 years old in indigenous communities

At the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien in 1990, it has been said that minority peoples are among the disadvantaged groups who are highly in need of literacy learning materials (Asia/Pacific Cultural Centre for UNESCO (Tokyo), Ministry of Education (Bangkok), & United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Bangkok) Principal Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, 1994).

During the 1994 Second Sub-Regional Workshop held in Thailand, some challenges in the creation of literacy learning materials for minority groups identified were (1) lack of experts with sufficient knowledge about minority groups, (2) most literacy learning materials are written in the national language, but most minority groups have their own language/ script, (3) lack of teachers speaking minority languages, (4) disintegration of indigenous peoples' identity and culture in educational programmes by the government, and (5) available literacy materials are not reflective of the minority groups' culture and languages (Asia / Pacific Cultural Centre for

UNESCO (Tokyo) et al., 1994).

Recent statistics from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) shows that there are over 110 ethno-linguistic groups in the Philippines, 61% of which are in Mindanao. Existing educational systems and materials are inappropriate and not adopted to the peculiarities of the indigenous groups. (Abayao, 2014).

To be able to facilitate literacy development in the early stages of life, it is necessary that children from these indigenous groups are provided with early learning materials that are age-appropriate and context-specific.

As discussed earlier, the positive experience of a child's interaction with books is a predictor for reading and writing readiness (Zero to Three, 2013). Therefore, creating age-appropriate and context-specific books for children 0-4 years old and making these available to every household are crucial and essential in facilitating the early stimulation which leads to the development of early literacy and numeracy.

Local market context of children's books

In the Philippines, most children's books commercially available are for older readers (5 years old and up). Filipino writers who specialize in writing books for children 0-4 years old are relatively few. If there are materials available for these age group, usually they are developed and produced overseas and does not reflect the Philippines context. The National Book Development Board of the Philippines recognizes the need for capacity-building for writers, illustrators, and other key stakeholders who are involved in creating content for children 0-4.

There are also not too many resource materials available that speaks of the culture of the indigenous communities in the Philippines. Based on First Read's engagement with local publishers, publication houses also have little interest in publishing books for these groups because of limited market and limited experts who can write about the customs, culture, and traditions of these considered minority groups.

Engaging Local Communities in supporting their children's early literacy and development

It is important for parents and primary caregivers to support initiatives, such as reading, that promote holistic development during the first three years of life.

Parents and primary caregivers play crucial roles in encouraging children to read and interact with print by supporting and providing kids with venues where they can be exposed to literacy materials (Zeiler, 1992). Also, parents and primary caregivers can engage kids in reading by identifying subjects that will interest children (Ravid, 1992).

Having said these, parents and primary caregivers from the Tagakaolo, Blaan, and Tboli groups have vital roles in instilling interest and love for reading among children aged 0-4 by 1) establishing a regular story-telling time with the kids, 2) providing them with developmentally-appropriate and culturally sensitive books, and 3) utilizing these materials in the reading sessions.

In bridging the gaps in the lack of culturally appropriate materials for very young children from these indigenous communities, members of the Blaan, Tboli, and Tagakaolo groups are key actors in developing content that represent their culture, tradition, and customs. To allow external parties to assist their communities in developing literacy materials, the said indigenous groups must first grant their Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) to interested organizations. Other organizations can only proceed with their activities and research when the FPIC has been already certified by the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP).

Developing Content for Children's Books: The Inclusive Book Development Process

To ensure the availability of context-specific and age-appropriate books for the children of these groups, the First Read Project employed two strategies in developing books for the kids from the Tagakaolo, Tboli, and Blaan tribes: translating existing titles into the local languages of these tribes and developing original content for their children.

Criteria of Appropriate Books for Children 0-4

Prior to development of content, an evaluation is used to assess the appropriateness of stories and topics of books for children 0-4 years old. The rubric includes the following elements to be assessed: 1) theme/values (e.g. tolerance of cultural differences, respect for human rights and freedom), 2) concepts (e.g. vocabulary, shapes, colors), 3) plot (e.g. simple, easy to follow, interesting), 4) writing style (e.g. easy to understand, produces rhythm, elements present are familiar to children), 5) characters (i.e. serve as good role models, children can relate to characters), 6) sensitivity to culture (e.g. physical appearance, behaviors, attitudes, values and language depicted are correct), and 7) illustrations (e.g. simple, clear, colorful).

Translation of Existing Titles into mother tongue

In translating titles from local publishers, the following steps were undertaken:

1. Assessment of existing titles from local publishers appropriate for children 0-4 years old using the rubric above.
2. Presentation of the shortlisted books to the so Book Development and Review Committees (BDRCs) of the tribes. (*Please see section on BDRCs below for full description of the committee.*) From the list of existing titles, the BDRCs select books which they think are suited best for the children in their communities.
3. Securing of permission from the publishers to translate the selected titles in Blaan, Tagakaolo, and Tboli.
4. If approved, translation of the books is spearheaded by the BDRCs.
5. To ensure accuracy of the translations, the translated books undergo several field testing and validation in communities with the participation of parents, teachers, and children.
6. Final validated versions of the books are then printed by the publishers.

Original Books in mother tongue

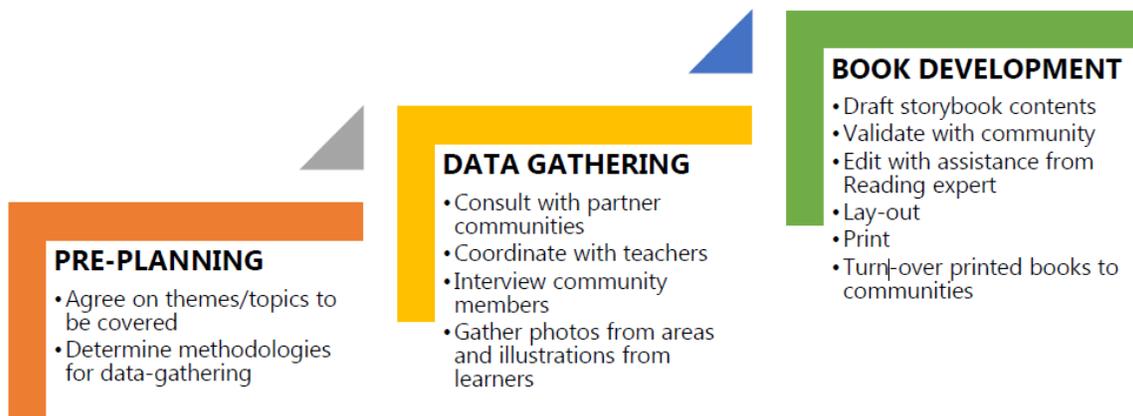
Meanwhile, another strategy, developing original materials in the mother tongue of children from

the indigenous groups is a more tedious process. The concepts/ stories are developed and written by the members of the community with the technical assistance from the First Read team. The sections below outlines the steps in the inclusive development process conducted in the communities of the Tagakaolo, Tboli, and Blaan tribes in Mindanao.

Steps to the Inclusive Book Development Process

The inclusive book development process pertains to the active participation of members of the indigenous communities in all levels of the book development process, from consultations to brainstorming to drafting of stories to field testing and validating developed materials. The community members are considered the experts of their own culture, and so it is imperative that they are consulted in the whole process.

Below is an overview of the inclusive book development process undertaken by the First Read team:



To further understand the inclusive book development process, below is a detailed description of each step:

Step 1: Organize a Book Development Review Committee (BDRC)

The BDRC consists of representatives of each indigenous community – such as the tribal chieftains, community leaders, teachers, and parents – who will participate in the translation and development of original content for children in their communities. They serve as the official guiding body regularly consulted by First Read in developing books for the community. The BDRCs are the identified experts on the ground and holds precious records of traditions and practices of the tribe, albeit in oral forms. The BDRCs role is to bring their indigenous knowledge, systems and practices to life so these can be documented and created into a book or learning material. Through the BDRCs, First Read produced books that highlight the unique culture and tradition of each tribe written by their own people.

Step 2: Community Consultations

During consultations, the First Read team pitches possible topics that can be explored. From

initial topics presented by the team, the community will approve, modify, and suggest subjects that can be covered in the books to be developed. The BDRCs then brainstorm for possible stories to be written and developed for children 0-4 years old from their groups.

Step 3: Conduct of Ethno-Arts Workshop/Writeshops

The ethno-arts workshop is when the First Read Team and editor/ writer facilitate the sharing of ideas, common values, culture, and practices among the concerned indigenous groups. These are then processed and possible storylines are agreed on. The BDRCs then draft the stories based on the agreed storylines ensuring that the content is both age-appropriate and context-specific. The illustrator also drafts the accompanying art, basing heavily on what is actually seen and observed in the communities and following as well SCP's standards.

Step 4: Field testing and validation

To ensure that the stories drafted are understandable to the children and accurately reflect the culture of tribes, field testing and community validations are conducted. The storylines, words used and even the characters are shown to the children and other community members to check for their appropriateness and representation of what is in the story. Feedback from children and other members of the communities are collected during field testing and community validations, where stories are read by the parents and teachers to the participating children. First Read does this in order to ensure that developed materials are approved by the community and correctly represent the unique culture of each tribe. The field testing and validation also help the team guarantee that the books are fun to read, interesting, enjoyable, and something that children from indigenous groups can easily relate to. The illustrator revises the drawings based on input from the community members. Colors, size, appearance, and shapes might be minor details, but these are major details that for the tribes that must always be taken into consideration.

Step 5: Publication

Once there are final validated versions of books, the materials would be printed in Manila by a commissioned printer by Save the Children. The First Read team is also currently exploring opportunities and ways to partner with the leading local publishers in the Philippines so that books for indigenous groups can also be made commercially available.

Building up the supply of books for very young indigenous children

Since 2013, First Read was able to publish a total of 8 books for the children in Mindanao. Six original titles have been produced for the Tagakaolo, Tboli and Blaan tribes: 3 books about indigenous games (*Sengwas Kem Nga*, *Dad Snagwas Nga*, and *Danga Na Mangayse*) and 3 storybooks about the culture and tradition (*Pangapog*, *Kmo Ktieg Lieg Mimet*, and *I Ktagah Abuh*). Meanwhile, one book in Hiligaynon (*Ulod-ulod*) and one book in Cebuano (*Mag Taguanay Ta*) have also been developed for the communities as these languages are the mother tongue in some communities.

The books of games (*Sengwas Kem Nga* – Tboli, *Dad Snagwas Nga* - Blaan, and *Danga Na*

Mangayse - Tagakaolo) contain the mechanics of the unique traditional games that the children from these indigenous groups have been playing from generation to generation.

Meanwhile, the book *I Ktagah Abuh* is a story of a Blaan child who joins his family in cooking abuh, or a native kind of taro, which is a staple crop of the tribe. *Kmo Ktieg Lieg Mimet* talks about the bead-making process of the Tbolis and *Pangapog* talks about what takes place during the annual thanksgiving celebration of the Tagakaolos during harvest season.

Some communities from these indigenous groups also use the Hiligaynon and Cebuano languages. For the Hiligaynon speakers, *Ulod-ulod* tells a story about one of their traditional games, where children pretend to be caterpillars by wrapping mats/ blankets around them. These caterpillars will look for food (fruits and vegetables) around the house and eat until they are full. For Cebuano speakers, *Mag Taguanay Ta* shows a story about children playing hide-and-seek inside the house of one of their friends.

Aside from the books described above, existing titles from local children's book publishers have also been translated in these languages through this inclusive book development model. Books from local publishers which have been translated in Blaan, Tagakaolo, and Tboli include *Tagu-taguan*, *Mahilig Kaming Magbasa*, *Bahay Kubo*, *Ang Mabait na Kalabaw*, *Kayo ba ang Nanay Ko*, *Digong Dilaw*, *Bilog na Itlog*, and *Kain, Kumain, Kinain*.

Tagu-taguan is a counting book, while *Mahilig Kaming Magbasa* is a reading manual for parents and primary caregivers. *Bahay Kubo* is a book derived from the folk song that talks about the nipa hut and the vegetables typically found in a Filipino backyard.

Ang Mabait na Kalabaw describes a friendly carabao, a farm animal commonly found in rural communities, and his relationship with his friends. *Kayo ba ang Nanay ko* tells about a duckling, which wandered the wilderness after it has been separated from its flock.

On the other hand, *Bilog na Itlog* tells a story of an egg who left home because he feels unaccepted by other eggs. *Digong Dilaw* is about a boy who had power to turn into yellow everything he touches. Lastly, *Kain, Kumain, Kinain* is a short story that shows the relationship of organisms in a food chain by describing producers and consumers in an ecosystem.

Moving forward:

The developed books are printed in Manila and sent to the indigenous communities in Mindanao for distribution to households with children 0-4 years old. First Read's objective is for the young learners' parents to use the books in reading aloud to their children, whether or not they are already enrolled in an education program.

Recognizing that early childhood is a crucial stage that affects human beings' cognitive, social, emotional and physical development for the rest of their lives, it is vital for societies to support initiatives that promote holistic development during the first three years of life.

First Read-developed books for children 0-4 years old from the Tagakaolo, Blaan and Tboli

groups have been very helpful in creating everyday activities that promote literacy for households and other individuals that interact with children 0-4 years old in indigenous communities. Aside from providing venues that aid in facilitating emergent literacy, the books also helped in understanding more about one's identity and immediate environment.

As validated in a focus group discussion and focus interviews conducted by the First Read team, parents and primary caregivers from the Blaan, Tagakaolo, and Tboli groups attested that their children aged 0-4 years old have become more engaged in reading because of the culturally specific books produced through the inclusive book development process.

Majority of the key informants think that their children/ grandchildren/ and/ or students below 4 years old became more interested in reading when First Read books were introduced because 1) First Read books are colorful and the illustrations reflect characters who look like them; 2) the children saw plants, utensils, attire, and settings which they either see everyday or are familiar with; 3) the books paved way for the children to know more about their immediate environment; and 4) the stories are short and can easily be comprehended by the children.

Also, adults who interact with children below 4 years old– parents, grandparents, teachers, and even church workers – also agreed that First Read books helped them in improving the quality of their reading sessions with children because 1) they can directly read the stories and children easily understand them; 2) the books opened opportunities for them to discuss and explain further to the kids their culture and immediate environment; and 3) the children are the ones who are requesting the adults to read to them the books about their groups.

Indeed, developing culturally specific books are instrumental in engaging young children and their primary caregivers in reading. Recognizing the importance of the production of age-appropriate and culturally sensitive materials in facilitating early stimulation and the overall impact of early literacy and numeracy in the development of societies, the First Read project also aims the creation of more age-appropriate and context-specific books for children 0-4 years old for from other indigenous groups. At present, the First Read team targets to partner with other civil service organizations (CSOs) working with other indigenous groups from other regions in the Philippines. By partnering with other organizations working in various indigenous communities and capacitating them to develop materials through the inclusive book development process, the First Read team can ensure that age-appropriate and context-specific books will be made available for children from other minority groups in the country.

Aside from sharing of the inclusive book development process through partnering with other CSOs, the First Read team also conducts capacity-building for the BDRCs of the indigenous communities to strengthen the technical capacity of the committees in writing and developing materials for their own groups. The First Read team is also working towards earning the National Commission on Indigenous Groups' (NCIP) recognition of the BDRCs as the official book development body of each tribe. Once the BDRCs of the Tagakaolo, Tboli, and Blaan tribes have been formally accredited by the NCIP, the BDRCs will be the official representative of the groups who can provide technical support and guidance in developing content for other organizations and external parties who would want to develop materials for their tribe.

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Authors:

Abigail C. Castillo,
Program Officer for Book Development
Save the Children Philippines' First Read Project
Mobile No. +63 936 953 13 73
abigail.castillo@savethechildren.org

Diane Renee P. Carasig
Former Program Officer for Early Childhood Care and Development
dcarasig@gmail.com