

In his first teaching assignment, as a fifth-grade English teacher, Edgar Manaran had only 20 desks for 48 students. Yet he was able to apply productive classroom strategies throughout his 25-hour teaching week. Some of his students sat on plastic chairs due to the shortage of desks, but that did not change the dynamic of Mr. Manaran's classes. He realized that the constant changing of seating arrangements increased the chance for students to interact with one another.



Edgar Manaran at his desk in Maniki Central Elementary School, waiting for students to arrive to class

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Mr. Manaran, who now teaches at Maniki Central Elementary School Special Education Center, began his career nine years ago teaching indigenous students from the tribe Ata-Manobo at Gupitan Elementary School, located deep in the mountains. There weren't enough desks, but his classroom had two chalkboards on the front wall of the classroom and two more on the back wall; those chalkboards provided a collaborative writing platform in place of desks. Mr. Manaran used the front boards for teacher writing and the back boards for student output. The lack of individual desks allowed for additional peer-tutoring opportunities, as he usually grouped high- and low-proficiency students together. Then, as now, he had a positive attitude and learned to see challenges not as problems, but as opportunities for students to interact.

Many of his Ata-Manobo students had to walk for miles just to reach the school. The students' daily commute included crossing and sometimes swimming across rivers when boats were not available. Even with challenges, the Ata-Manobo tribe embraced change and strove to educate their children. Because the Ata-Manobo students were highly motivated to learn, Mr. Manaran put extra effort into attending class himself, regardless of the circumstances. The road leading to the school covered mountainous terrain and was rocky and often muddy. However, Mr. Manaran didn't mind travelling an hour and a half by motorcycle through the mountains to reach the school.

The teachers at the school headed to the mountains together every Sunday and returned home every Friday afternoon. During the teaching week, they lived together in a teachers' cottage inside the school. Mr. Manaran said, "Leaving family behind was the most difficult part of being a teacher in the mountain but worth the

challenge because I made sure no one in society was left behind."

The hardest part of the travel, he said, came when the weather was bad. Reaching school became dangerous in the rain because the road was slippery and because of the fog. Lightning, strong winds, and falling trees were common. Mr. Manaran said, "I have travelled to school during a storm on my motorcycle because I didn't want to be absent from class and disappoint my students."

In the Philippines, English is introduced in first grade; however, with students in English class only five hours a week, Mr. Manaran found it challenging to teach English to young indigenous learners who had limited opportunities to practice outside the classroom. The need to contextualize lessons and use examples related to the students' lives required more planning time than a typical class. Mr. Manaran placed importance on the use of indigenous materials in teaching language; for example, when students were asked to draw based on descriptions they heard, they used leaves to color their drawings if they didn't own crayons. Mr. Manaran also introduced materials that were helpful in English learning such as newspapers, brochures, magazines, and high-tech devices.

Mr. Manaran provided many of his students their first encounter with a laptop and cell phone. He brought his own laptop to class and introduced computer basics to his students. He said, "They were curious about the electronics, wanting to hold them and learn how it operates." He also took a television, DVD player, and educational videos to class. The videos contained a compilation of English rhymes with core subjects such as science and English. Mr. Manaran believed it was his responsibility to give students a glimpse of the modern world. He said his students deserved



At Maniki Central, Mr. Manaran teaches a lesson on gestures and body language.

that because they are part of society, and opening the world to them also made them dream bigger for their future.

Mr. Manaran observed that many of his Ata-Manobo students had difficulty reading and pronouncing English words, but they could easily read the lyrics of English songs as karaoke, as native people love to sing. So, using DVDs containing nursery rhymes in karaoke format, he played rhymes every morning and during breaks between classes. He said, “Every moment in the classroom contains a learning opportunity.”

In order to motivate students to read, he used a technique suggested by a colleague to ease the monotony and ensure student participation during storytelling. After

grouping the class according to the number of characters in the story, each group was assigned a character and a chant related to the personality of that character. Whenever a certain character’s name was mentioned in the story, the assigned group immediately shouted out the chant. Chants could include sounds or short expressions that the teacher had made before the story was read.

He used different stories, especially fairy tales and Filipino legends originally in Tagalog, after he translated the original into English. Including local stories helped learners relate to the content, so they were more willing to share their ideas and prior knowledge about the story in English. This technique is challenging because of the tedious preparation of translating, but Mr. Manaran believes

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the time invested was worth the learning outcomes. His students cherished the stories, and that led to increased participation in class discussions.

One of the greatest challenges in Filipino public schools is the lack of books, so Mr. Manaran made sure that the available books were well distributed. For students who were neighbors, only one book was given for the students to share. In this manner, everybody who wanted to had the chance to study and read the books.

After Mr. Manaran taught in the mountains for five years, his doctor asked him to refrain from strenuous travels due to health concerns. The Department of Education assigned him to teach at Maniki Central. When teachers are hired at a special-needs school, they receive immediate training, but Mr. Manaran believes, “No matter how trained you are, if you don’t have the love for these special-needs children, then you will not be an effective teacher.”

For the past four years at this school, Mr. Manaran has been a receiving teacher. Mild to moderate special-needs students who pass an assessment showing they are behaviorally and physically ready are mainstreamed into his fifth-grade class. He has had students with autism and hearing/visual impairment, and he believes giving students with learning disabilities a chance to join mainstream classes is beneficial for both special-needs students and mainstream students. Among other things, the fifth-grade students learn to be polite and respectful to people who differ from them.

As a teacher, Mr. Manaran begins his school year by creating a mutually respectful learning environment for all his students. He believes this combined class trains his students to become more respectful because

of his expectation that they all treat one another fairly. All students take the same quizzes, oral recitations, and quarterly examinations to create a learning community. Meanwhile, modifications of assignments are not necessary because Mr. Manaran uses a buddy system, designating classroom partners for assignments and project help. In addition, students receive support, if needed, from a specially trained teacher.

English has been a passion for Mr. Manaran ever since he was in elementary school. He always told his parents he wanted to become an English teacher. His view is that if you can speak English, you can be competitive in the rest of the world. He said, “You should love teaching first before you can teach the children to love learning. Education is a lifelong process, so never stop learning.”

Obtaining a bachelor’s degree in Elementary Education and a master’s degree in Educational Management has helped him become a successful educator and teacher trainer. Still, continual professional development is a priority for Mr. Manaran, who never turns down a conference invitation. With the support of the Department of Education, he sometimes attends more than ten conferences per school year. The most meaningful teacher-training conference he attended, he said, was in Seoul, Korea, on blended learning and the flipped classroom.

Mr. Manaran values hybrid learning and has completed five Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs): Shaping the Way We Teach English 1 and 2, and three courses related to English writing. Because of his leadership skills and superior performance in MOOCs, he was chosen as team leader for one of the ten towns in the Davao del Norte region of Mindanao to facilitate teacher meet-ups to mentor colleagues taking a MOOC for the first time.

Collaboration among teachers from different schools strengthened the education system in the region.

While guiding many colleagues to complete their first MOOC, he often received phone calls in the middle of the night from teachers with urgent questions, seeking guidance before the weekly deadlines. The MOOC teacher-training series included topics such as authentic materials, alternative assessments, and management for large classes. Mr. Manaran said that the collaboration among teachers from different schools strengthened the education system in the region.

In 2015, he organized a teacher-training program on blended learning and the flipped classroom for 110 teachers. In 2016, he was the organizer of a three-day workshop for teacher trainers, with representatives from 13 universities, elementary schools, and high schools throughout Mindanao. He continues to facilitate teacher training for fifth-grade teachers through the Department of Education.

Mr. Manaran plans to continue his work toward a doctorate in Education Supervision and Administration. After starting the program in 2015, he took a break to organize the training for teachers in Mindanao. He said, “I can enroll for a PhD anytime, but the opportunity for the professional enhancement of my co-teachers may only come once, and I couldn’t miss that opportunity.” With his extensive training and love for education, he hopes to motivate more teachers, indigenous people, and persons with learning disabilities to take control of their education and never stop learning.

This article was written by **Cerise Santoro**, who has taught English in primary schools, high schools, and universities. In 2015–2016, she was an English Language Fellow and teacher trainer at the University of Saint Louis, Tuguegarao, Philippines.

Photos courtesy of Edgar Manaran



The front of Mr. Manaran's former classroom at Gupitan Elementary School