
**Bridge for Peace: The Mentorship Session as Teaching
Pedagogy for Dialogue and Friendship in the Bangsamoro**

Region

Joshua Michael C. Ascaño, MA

Faculty

Davao del Norte State College

Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Madaris Volunteer Program (MVP) developed the MVP Mentorship Session to address educational challenges faced by volunteer teachers in the Bangsamoro Region. This initiative aimed to enhance the quality of education by connecting volunteer teachers with experienced mentors from Jesuit schools and the Philippine Science High School, fostering improvements in contemporary and contextualized teaching methodologies. The mentorship sessions, conducted online due to pandemic restrictions, not only focused on educational development but also led to the

formation of meaningful relationships and cultural exchanges between mentors and teachers. This initiative exemplifies the call for a culture of dialogue, promoting peace and understanding across different faith traditions. Ultimately, the MVP Mentorship Session serves as a vital component in the peacebuilding process within the Bangsamoro Region and possibly with the Lumad communities of Mindanao, reinforcing the importance of collaboration and dialogue in achieving educational and social progress.

Keywords: Peace Education, Human Fraternity, Bangsamoro, Signs of the Time, Peacebuilding

Introduction

During the pandemic, the Madaris Volunteer Program (MVP) limited its engagements and operations due to the strict implementation of lockdowns and other health and security protocols by various Local Government Units (LGUs). Before the pandemic, the program regularly recruited individuals to serve as volunteer teachers at different schools across the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). Moreover, it conducted onsite capacity enhancement training for organic teachers and administrators. The program also carried out regular monitoring visits to strengthen the partnership between the program and partner communities. However, during the pandemic, the program paused recruiting external volunteers and began accepting organic teachers recommended by school administrators as Madaris volunteers. The program also resorted to conducting training and monitoring online. Despite the setbacks brought by COVID-19, the Madaris Volunteer Program continued its mission of advocating peacebuilding through

education and friendship in Bangsamoro by exploring different strategies for engagement.

One of the program's initiatives during the pandemic was conceptualizing the MVP Mentorship Session. The program carefully designed the mentorship session as a response to the volunteer teachers' request for intervention so that they could become more effective and efficient. It was proposed that the Madaris Volunteer Program would connect the volunteer teachers from the partner communities to the mentors that the Jesuit schools and the Philippine Science High School – Main Campus would provide. These mentors, experienced educators from reputable institutions, were tasked with providing guidance, sharing best practices, and offering support to the volunteer teachers. Given the limitations posed by the pandemic, mentorship sessions between the volunteer teachers and mentors were done online.

The program received positive feedback from the Madaris volunteers and mentors during the evaluation and interviews. It

was reported that the mentors and volunteer teachers developed friendship through personal sharing and a healthy exchange of cultural and religious perspectives. This was an unexpected outcome of the mentorship session as the program expected the engagement to be limited to educational mentorship only. Thus, the outcomes of the mentorship sessions became a living testament to the possibility of achieving peace and friendship in Mindanao.

Madaris Volunteer Program: Peacebuilding through Education and Friendship

On October 15, 2012, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Aquino administration signed the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB). The agreement aimed to create another entity to replace the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). The framework led to the signing of the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) on March 27, 2014, which included plans for establishing a new autonomous region in Muslim Mindanao. During the Duterte

administration, a new draft of the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) was legislated into law, as the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL), paving the way for the inauguration of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) on March 29, 2019, with Murad Ebrahim as the first chief minister.

Records from the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) indicate that the Bangsamoro Region has the lowest literacy rate in the Philippines, with only an average of 86.4% as of 2020. Indeed, the educational problem in Bangsamoro has a multifaceted dimension. For instance, Gamon and Tagoranao (2022) mentioned that the forced integration of the Western educational system in Muslim communities disregarded Islamic culture and values and would qualify them as "backward" due to the failure to adopt the Western educational system. Furthermore, corruption also remains one of the factors that caused the educational system in the Bangsamoro Region to lag. Additionally, the decades-long conflict in Muslim Mindanao is also a leading factor in the erosion of the educational system in the region.

On the Good Friday of 2014, Fr. Joel Tabora, SJ – then president of the Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines and Ateneo de Davao University – met with Dr. Ombra Imam of the National Association for Bangsamoro Education, Inc. (NABEi) and Chairman Ebrahim Murad of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in Camp Darapanan, Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao. There was a discussion about the declining education status in Muslim Mindanao, and the concerned parties agreed to collaborate to elevate education status in the Bangsamoro Region. The Madaris Volunteer Program (MVP) was established in the same year.

The Madaris Volunteer Program (MVP) is the creative initiative of the Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines (CEAP), a leading advocate for quality education in the country, in partnership with the National Association for Bangsamoro Education, Inc. (NABEi), and implemented by the Ateneo de Davao University (AdDU). Through this collaboration, the program envisions a peaceful Muslim Mindanao, which will

be achieved through its mission of peacebuilding through education and friendship. Moreover, the CEAP, with its extensive network of educational institutions, plays a crucial role in the program's operations and advocacy efforts. As a result of this partnership, the program engages in:

1. **Volunteer Deployment.** The Madaris Volunteer Program deploys volunteer teachers to its partner communities in the BARMM. The Madaris volunteers serve as teachers in integrated madrasahs teaching DepEd-mandated subjects. Madaris volunteers also serve as community organizers and advocacy workers, promoting peace through quality education and friendship.
2. **Capacity Enhancement Training.** As a way of empowering the partner communities, the Madaris Volunteer Program regularly conducts a series of online and onsite capacity enhancement training. The training is given to the school administration, organic teachers, and students to further capacitate them in updated teaching pedagogies and philosophy.

3. Peace Advocacy. With the mission of peacebuilding through education and friendship, the Madaris Volunteer Program aspires to contribute to achieving peace in the Bangsamoro Region.

Since its conception in 2014, the Madaris Volunteer Program has worked with 40 partner schools across the Bangsamoro Region. Nine batches of volunteer teachers were also sent to the program's partner communities. Numerous engagements were done in the community to alleviate the status of education in BARMM and, in the process, create meaningful friendships and relationships.

The Madaris Volunteer Program and Covid-19

In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the coronavirus a global pandemic, although the first case of COVID-19 was identified in the Philippines as early as January 2020. In March 2020, nationwide lockdowns and other quarantine protocols were enforced to contain the virus.

Much of the country's operations were halted during the height of the pandemic. The education sector was greatly affected as the country shifted from traditional face-to-face classes to modular and online modalities. Given the country's status then, most academic institutions struggled to keep up, particularly in the Bangsamoro Region.

Volunteer recruitment was also problematic as the lockdowns and quarantine protocols prevented the program from recruiting volunteers outside the Bangsamoro Region. Given the logistical challenges, the program shifted its recruitment process from accepting volunteers outside the Bangsamoro Region to recruiting organic teachers from the partner communities. The school administration endorsed the volunteers, and upon acceptance, they underwent a series of online training sessions to prepare them for volunteer service.

Online classes were expensive as teachers and learners had to pay additionally for internet load. The lack of gadgets such as

cell phones and laptops among Bangsamoro families also prevented the students from attending online classes. The weak internet connection, particularly in rural areas, was likewise a significant setback.

Conducting modular classes posed significant challenges, particularly in private madrasahs where learners struggled to afford the costs of modular materials. The requirement to pay for printing these materials further exacerbated the financial burden on families. Additionally, in remote areas, the accessibility of these modular resources became a pressing issue, limiting students' ability to participate fully in their education.

This was the context of the program's operations during the pandemic. In response, the MVP initiated the Volunteer Tutorial Sessions, wherein the volunteer teachers conducted tutorial classes for the academically and financially least performing students. These mentorship sessions were also specifically designed to equip volunteers with better teaching strategies and

resources, ensuring they could provide high-quality tutorial support while continuing their own professional growth.

Responding to the Signs of the Time: The MVP Mentorship Sessions

The MVP Mentorship Sessions established by the Madaris Volunteer Program created a strategic partnership between Jesuit schools and the Philippine Science High School – Main Campus to support volunteers working in the program's partner communities. Through these structured mentorship sessions, each volunteer teacher was paired with an experienced mentor who provided guidance and support to enhance the volunteer's teaching methods and classroom effectiveness. This mentoring relationship was specifically designed to strengthen pedagogical skills and improve educational outcomes in the communities being served. The following were the goals of the program:

-
1. Promote quality education. Through the MVP Mentorship Sessions, the Madaris Volunteer Program promotes quality education in the Bangsamoro Region. The collaborative effort between the mentor and volunteer teacher is hoped to benefit the learners.
 2. Professional Development. The Madaris Volunteer Program commits itself to the professional development of its volunteer teachers. Through the mentorship sessions, the volunteer teachers and mentors are expected to exchange different views on contextual learning, hoping to improve their efficiency and effectiveness as educators.
 3. Network Expansion. Through the mentorship session, the program aims to expand the network of partners by connecting the schools in the program's partner communities with Jesuit institutions and the Philippine Science High School. Through the mentorship sessions, the program expects a collaborative effort between its

stakeholders to advance quality education in the Bangsamoro Region.

The Madaris Volunteer Program crafted guidelines for mentors and volunteer teachers to ensure professional conduct. The following were the general guidelines for the mentorship session:

1. Regular Mentorship Sessions. The mentors are instructed to conduct a regular bi-monthly mentorship session with their assigned volunteer teacher. The mentor and the volunteer teacher will determine the schedule and platform for the mentorship session. Both parties may also have the option to conduct special consultations anytime within the month if both parties recognize the need for additional mentorship sessions.
2. Online Mentorship Program. Mentorship sessions will be done online through synchronous and asynchronous sessions. The mentors and volunteer teachers can identify the platform for their online engagement.

-
3. Focus on Science and Mathematics. The mentorship session will focus on mathematics and science courses, which are identified as areas of concern during the consultation period. However, volunteer teachers may also ask for assistance from their mentors if there are concerns about non-mathematics and science courses, given the mentor's expertise.

The Madaris Volunteer Program also created a set of guidelines for engagement for both the mentors and the volunteer teachers.

For the mentors:

1. The mentors will assist volunteer teachers in mapping out the lessons and activities. Mentors are encouraged to help the volunteer teachers deliver instructions or if there is a

need for clarification and consultation on the part of the volunteer teacher.

2. The mentors are responsible for the academic growth of the volunteers assigned to them. Mentors are given the task to critically evaluate the performance of the volunteer teacher and assign additional activities that will further capacitate the volunteer teacher.

For the volunteer teacher:

1. The volunteer teacher will regularly provide a copy of their daily lesson plan (DLP) or daily lesson log (DLL). The volunteer teacher should furnish other documents that the mentor will ask for. The volunteer teacher must submit the necessary documents to the mentor by the agreed deadline.
2. Volunteer teachers are required to submit a monthly progress report to the mentor. The monthly progress report will serve as a basis for the mentor's evaluation and

intervention. Volunteer teachers must also submit any activities and assessment tools deemed necessary by the mentor for evaluation and feedback.

Expected Outcomes: Improvements in Teaching Performance

The mentors were required to submit a monthly progress report indicating the performance of the volunteer during the mentorship session and the volunteer's classroom engagement. According to the reports, the volunteer teacher improved in delivering science and mathematics lessons.

1. The volunteer teachers improved in terms of crafting their daily lesson plans (DLP) and daily lesson logs (DLL) following the prescribed Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELC) Guidelines.
2. The volunteer teachers improved in terms of delivering the lessons. According to the report, the volunteer teachers were able to improve lesson contextualization, that is,

appropriating the lessons, examples, and activities based on the historico-cultural context of the community and the community's lived experience.

3. The volunteer teachers improved in terms of delivering the lessons systematically. The volunteer teachers achieved the lesson objectives and met the expected learning outcomes.
4. The volunteer teachers were able to conceptualize and implement different classroom strategies appropriate to the context and experience of the learners. The volunteer teachers and the mentors were able to conceptualize activities that suited the needs of the learners.

During the program's quarterly monitoring visit, the volunteer teachers were also able to report to the program the following outcomes of the mentorship sessions:

-
1. The mentors provided additional learning materials such as modules, activity sheets, and other materials for the volunteers. The volunteer teachers mentioned that these materials were essential in their teaching as the mentors could provide updated learning materials for the school.
 2. The mentors were able to guide the volunteer teachers in appropriating their lesson plans according to the MELC guidelines. The mentors were able to provide feedback and recommendations to improve the volunteer teachers' teaching performance.
 3. The mentors provided assessment tools for evaluating the volunteer teacher's least-performing students. The mentors assisted in determining the proper intervention given to the learner.

Based on the reports submitted by the mentors and the volunteer teachers' testimonies, there had been an improvement

in the volunteer teachers' performance. In other words, the expected outcomes of the mentorship sessions were met.

Unexpected Outcomes: Dialogue and Friendship

Ideally, the mentorship sessions should guide the volunteer teachers in their pedagogy. However, the engagement between the mentors and volunteer teachers went beyond the expected duties and responsibilities. It was reported – by both the mentors and volunteer teachers – that through the mentorship session, they could discuss their personal lives, their cultures, and their faith traditions.

A Muslim volunteer assigned in Talayan, Maguindanao reported that the mentorship sessions enabled her to express her faith and religion with confidence to her Christian mentor. It is also reported that her mentor also respectfully shared her culture in Luzon as well as the mentor's Christian faith. During the interview with the volunteer, she mentioned that, "dahan dahan nawala ang bias ko sa mga Christians at na-realize ko na kagaya

lang naming sila. Dati wala akong maituturing na kaibigan na Christian kasi umiiwas ako kahit sa paaralan kasi hindi ko sila mapagkatiwalaan.”

Another volunteer from Datu Piang, Maguindanao, also shared that her relationship with the mentor changed her perspective on religion and culture. The volunteer mentioned, “umabot kami sa punto na naipakilala naming ang isa’t isa sa mga pamilya namin” and it entailed mutual trust and respect from both parties. The volunteer mentioned that she could share her life story with her mentor, and this started their friendship.

A Christian volunteer assigned in Tawi-Tawi also mentioned that his engagements with his Muslim mentor made him realize that friendship between Muslims and Christians can be achieved through education.

One of the mentors from Ateneo de Manila University revealed that prior to her involvement with the program, she had been unaware of the diverse ethnolinguistic groups that make

up the Bangsamoro region. Through her participation, she developed a genuine admiration for their rich culture and traditions. The mentor specifically noted how meaningful conversations with volunteers provided valuable insights into Bangsamoro identity, allowing her to better understand the community's dreams and aspirations. The mentor stated, "But who cares about the religion when you can freely talk about each other's life and aspirations? Who cares about our differences when we laugh at the same jokes and show mutual respect's view in life? We share the same love for our communities and our mission in life."

Another mentor from the Philippine Science High School shared that through the mentorship session, he was able to learn the culture and tradition of the Maguindanaon people and their Islamic faith. He pointed out how they would incorporate Islamic values in science lessons. The mentor also mentioned that he learned about Ramadan while also sharing what he knows about the Holy Week for the Catholics.

It is evident then that through the mentorship session, the volunteers and mentors were able to create relationships beyond their expected duties. The mentorship program served as a bridge for connecting people from different cultures and faith traditions.

Pope Francis' Call for a Culture of Dialogue

In the papacy of Pope Francis, dialogue and human fraternity are among the major themes. Several papal documents and speeches are centered on promoting a culture of dialogue, believed to be the pathway to peace. Pope Francis believes that "sincere and respectful dialogue between Christians and Muslims is a duty for us who wish to obey God's will." (Lubov, 2024, para. 6).

In the papal message during the 55th World Day of Peace, the Pope clearly emphasized that "All honest dialogues, in addition to a correct and positive exchange of views, demands basic trust between the participants." (Pope Francis, 2022, para.

6). In the following paragraph of the same speech, Pope Francis creatively discusses the dynamics of dialogue:

Dialogue entails listening to one another, sharing different views, coming to an agreement, and walking together. Promoting such dialogue between generations involves breaking up the complex, barren soil of conflict and indifference to sow the seeds of lasting shared peace.

(Pope Francis, 2022, para. 7).

During the historic meeting between Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, all the believers are reminded that "Dialogue among believers means coming together in the vast space of spiritual, human and shared social values and, from here, transmitting the highest moral virtues that religions aim for." (Pope Francis, 2019, para. 30). Based on the testimonies, the mentorship session became an avenue for dialogue of faith and culture between Christians and Muslims. The friendship between the Muslim and Christian mentors and volunteers was formed through dialogue during the mentorship session.

Reflecting on the outcomes, I see that the mentoring program served as a bridge connecting people from diverse backgrounds. Through these sessions, participants formed bonds despite cultural and faith differences. This approach reflected Pope Francis' call for a dialogue culture between different communities. As both mentors and volunteer teachers noted, the sessions created a safe space for critical and healthy exchange of perspectives without reservation or judgment.

In an article, Lubov quoted the Pope saying, "The world, especially at this moment in history, needs believers who are consistent and strongly committed to building and maintaining social and world peace." (Lubov, 2024, para. 1). The Pope emphasizes on the necessity of dialogue as a means of achieving peace and human fraternity. Peace and social justice are only possible if and when authentic dialogue exists.

Trajectory and Recommendation:

As of the school year 2023-2024, the Madaris Volunteer Program continues to conduct mentorship sessions. Volunteer mentors from different Jesuit institutions and the Philippine Science High School continue supporting the program by mentoring its volunteer teachers. It is reported that 15 volunteer mentors enlisted for the school year 2023-2024 mentorship sessions.

The mentorship sessions also expanded in terms of participants. In previous years, the focus was on the volunteer teachers deployed, but recently, organic teachers from the program's partner communities were also included. Plans are also made to invite non-Jesuit academic institutions to the mentorship sessions. This initiative hopes to expand the network of volunteer mentors and strengthen cooperation among Catholic institutions in the peace process in Mindanao and Sulu. Through the collaborative mentorship session, one can also hope

for cooperation between Catholic and non-Catholic denominations to contribute to lasting peace and friendship in Mindanao and Sulu.

For future research and potential areas for engagement, it is highly recommended to explore the possibility of conducting mentorship sessions with the Lumad communities in Mindanao. The Lumad were considered among the poor and the oppressed in the society. Historically, the Lumad people and the Moros had a long-shared history of social exclusion, discrimination, and dislocation. The mentorship sessions could serve as another opportunity for the deepening of the relationship between the Lumad and non-Lumad inhabitants of Mindanao and even an avenue for those who are in Luzon and Visayas to critically engage with the Lumad communities in Mindanao. It is also hoped that through the mentorship session, the lived experiences and struggles of the Lumad people will be authentically acknowledged; that is, the historical injustices committed against them will be tackled and addressed.

Conclusion

The MVP Mentorship Session is a response of the Madaris Volunteer Program to the challenges posed by COVID-19. Discerning the signs of the time, the program was able to conceptualize the mentorship sessions to ensure that quality education would be given to the program's partner communities despite the irregularities during the pandemic.

The MVP Mentorship Session, conducted entirely through virtual platforms, established meaningful connections between the program's partner communities and various Jesuit institutions across the Philippines, as well as the Philippine Science High School. Through this collaborative effort between mentors and volunteer teachers, the program successfully maintained educational continuity, ensuring that Bangsamoro learners continued to receive the high-quality education they deserve despite pandemic-related challenges. This virtual approach eliminated geographical barriers while preserving the program's commitment to educational excellence.

As the mentorship sessions progressed, they naturally evolved into a forum for healthy cultural and interfaith dialogue between mentors and volunteer teachers. Both groups reported that their interactions transcended the typical mentor-mentee dynamic, developing instead into meaningful personal connections. What began as a professional relationship focused on pedagogical improvement gradually transformed into genuine and lasting friendships that bridged cultural and religious differences, creating bonds that extended well beyond the program's formal structure.

The success of the MVP Mentorship Session points to its potential as a valuable teaching pedagogy beyond the Bangsamoro Region. In the broader Mindanao context, this model could deepen dialogue with the Lumad population, ensuring continuous and constructive engagement.

Ultimately, the MVP Mentorship Sessions embody the papal call for a culture of dialogue between faiths and religions. This

initiative created an avenue for individuals from Islamic and Christian traditions to engage in healthy discussions about their differences in faith and practices. The mentorship sessions effectively demonstrated the program's core principle: peacebuilding through education and friendship.

References:

Catalano, R. (2022). Pope Francis' Culture of Dialogue as a Pathway to Interfaith Encounter: A Special Focus on Islam. *Religions* 13 (4), 279–301. <http://doi.org/10.3390/rel13040279>

Gamon, A. D., & Tagoranao, M. S. (2022). The Transformation of Muslim Education in the Philippines: A Revisit. *Al-Hikmah: International Journal of Islamic Studies and Human Sciences*, 5(4), 108-142.

Lubov, D.C. (2024, June 26). Pope: All people should be free to choose and participate in religion. *Vatican News*. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2024-06/pope-every-human-being-should-be-free-to-choose-religion.html>.

Philippine Statistics Authority. (2024). Literacy and Educational Attainment Among Persons Five Years Old and Over in the

Cordillera (Based on the 2020 Census of Population and Housing).

<https://rssocar.psa.gov.ph/education#:~:text=by%20Region%2C%20Philippines%3A%202020&text=The%20region%20ranked%2011th%20among,lowest%20literacy%20rate%20with%2086.4%25>.

Pope Francis. (2019 February 4). A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together. The Holy See.
https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html.

Pope Francis. (2022 January 1). Dialogue Between Generations, Education and Work: Tools for Building Lasting Peace. The Holy See.
<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/20211208-messaggio-55giornatamondiale-pace2022.html>.



WWW.URIOS.EDU.PH
VOLUME 17 No.1
2025