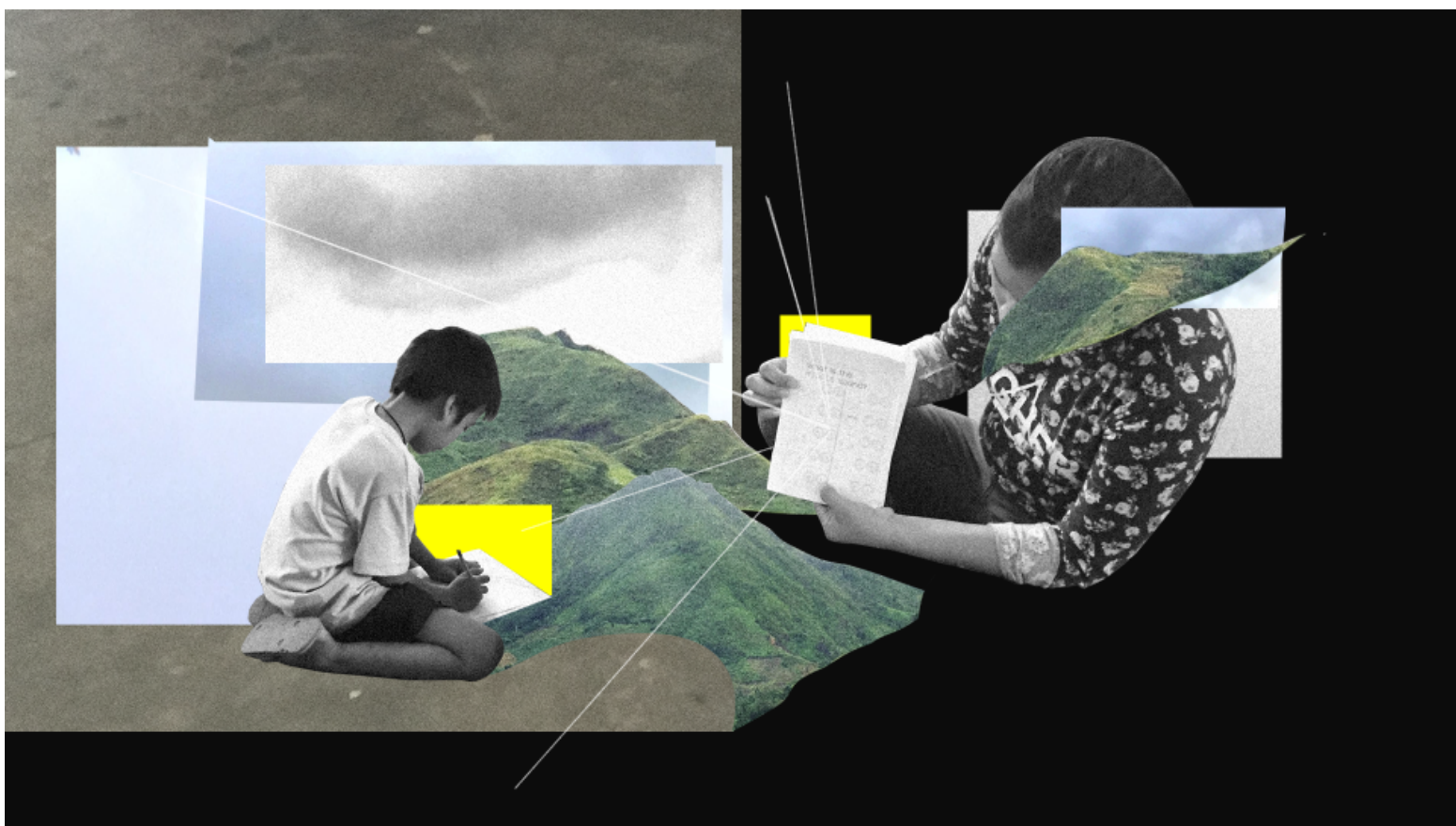


# The public school teachers' commitment to indigenous communities

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Despite difficult circumstances, teachers assigned to schools in IP communities forge on. Illustration by JL JAVIER

**Manila (CNN Philippines Life)** — On Aug. 22, 2019, Windel Zafra-Torino was having dinner with her co-teachers in Pantaron Elementary School in Davao Del Norte when they heard an explosion.

“Malayo lang sa school pero dinig na dinig na namin,” she says. “Nag-decide kami na hindi muna umalis. [Pero] may follow-up [na putok], dalawa o tatlo.”

The area where the school is located, Sitio Pantaron Banlag in Bukidnon, is prone to NPA encounters, she says. But it is also an ancestral domain, the home to the Indigenous People of the Manobo, Higaonon, and Talaandig tribes, with Pantaron Elementary School, a DepEd certified public school, catering to pupils where 95 percent are Manobos.

Even with these circumstances, teachers like Zafra-Torino continue their tasks nonetheless. “Nakakatakot pero kasi trabaho po,” she says. “Dapat gampanan namin ang trabaho naming magturo.”



(1)



Teachers of Pantaron Elementary School on a trek to go to the school. They usually travel for about an hour or two — through rough roads, rivers, and terrains — to get to the school. Photo courtesy of WINDEL ZAFRA-TORINO

## Hardship allowance

In situations like Zafra-Torino, where one is stationed in far-flung schools, the Department of Education provides a Special Hardship Allowance (SHA) in accordance to the [DepEd Special Provision No. 1 and Republic Act No. 9401](#) (<https://www.dbm.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/NBC-514.pdf>). The provision is also known as "2007 General Appropriations Act," following the stipulations under the [National Budget Circular No. 514, s. 2007](#) (<https://www.dbm.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/NBC-514.pdf>) of the Department and Management (DBM).

According to the circular, SHA "refers to the allowance granted to teachers under any of the following circumstances: (1) being assigned to a hardship post, (2) performing multi-grade teaching, (3) carrying out mobile teaching functions, and (4) performing functions of non-formal education coordinators."

A hardship post refers to public schools and community learning centers in areas where there are extraordinarily hard, uncomfortable, and extreme difficulties; while multi-grade teaching is when a teacher handles a class of two or more grade levels. Both of these definitions qualify Zafra-Torino.

The guidelines of the circular also honor the Magna Carta for Public School Teachers, which states that any teacher assigned to a hardship post will be provided an SHA that doesn't exceed 25 percent of their annual basic salary.



"In the end, kawawa 'yung teachers," he adds.



Windel Zafra-Torino teaches at Pantaron Elementary School in Bukidnon, where 95 percent of her students are Manobos. Photo courtesy of WINDEL ZAFRA-TORINO



“Yung preference ng course kasi you cannot dictate naman to the learner, ‘Oy mag teacher ka!’ Hindi naman pwede ‘yun,” DepEd Usec. Jesus Mateo explains when asked about ensuring that IPs can be teachers of their communities. “Very complex kasi ‘yung education.” Photo by JL JAVIER

## Complex budgets

Most teachers, like Zafra-Torino, assigned in remote schools start as Teacher I. According to the Salary Standardization Law of 2019, the [salary grade of Teacher I](https://www.teacherph.com/public-school-teachers-salary/) (<https://www.teacherph.com/public-school-teachers-salary/>) is at ₱20,754. Recently, Senate [alloted ₱63B](https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1195836/senate-allots-p63b-for-govt-workers-in-2020-budget) (<https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1195836/senate-allots-p63b-for-govt-workers-in-2020-budget>) for the increase of wages by 2020, making the entry-level salary jump to ₱30,000. Twenty-five percent of this is then expected to be given to the teachers who qualify for hardship allowances.

However, this isn’t always the case. “Sabi ng school head 25 percent ng sahod monthly. ‘Yun din ang sabi sa orientation namin,” she says. “Pero sabi ng accounting sa division namin, kung ano lang ang pera na dumating ‘yun lang ang paghahatian.”

Zafra-Torino clarifies that they do get their allowances, but never on time, which is monthly, as promised.

DepEd Usec. Jesus Mateo says that in DBM’s current [National Budget Circular](https://www.dbm.gov.ph/index.php/243-national-budget-circular-2019/1443-national-budget-circular-no-577) (<https://www.dbm.gov.ph/index.php/243-national-budget-circular-2019/1443-national-budget-circular-no-577>), DepEd would only know the approved budget once officially agreed by Congress, making it administratively hard to distribute allowances every month.

“Imagine the cost if you do it monthly. Posible naman but then again you have to add more staff, diba?” he explains. “Kasi calculation ‘yan eh. You have to look at the attendance sheet pa. Hindi mo naman mabibigay ‘yan. Papaano ‘pag nag-absent? Entitled ba ‘yung tao dun?”

Upon being pressed on how DepEd might possibly ensure that teachers get their hardship allowances monthly, Mateo again reiterates that it is indeed possible, but that it again depends on the budget that Congress approves.

Basilio asserts that giving allowances later than promised is not acceptable. “Halimbawa, ‘yung cases natin sa Sarangani, nagbabangka itong mga teachers natin, eh ayun ₱3,500 isang way ng bangka. Mahal ito,” he says.







The Aetas live very near their school. Like other DepEd-approved schools that cater to IP students, DepEd says that it's important that the IP's culture is respected in the lessons. Photo by JL JAVIER

## Lack of support

Besides the hardship allowances not given on time, teachers who are stationed in DepEd schools that cater to IPs have found themselves teaching multiple grade levels in one class.

Jorta Conrad, a Teacher I at Cabuling Elementary School in Bukidnon, started teaching students of the Matigsalug tribe in 2015. Since he started, the school has only had six teachers that cater to 187 students as of 2019.

"Ewan ko kung bakit hindi nakita ng division [Bukidnon] namin ng DepEd na kulang kami," he says. "Mahirap kasi turo ka dito, tapos turo ka sa kabila."

He shares how he teaches grades 4 and 5 in one classroom, 40 students in total, and would give an activity sheet for grade 4 students, for instance, while giving a lecture to grade 5 students. After finishing a topic, he switches the approach, making grade 5 students answer activity sheets while proceeding to lecture grade 4 pupils.

Jorta also noticed a high level of absenteeism among his Matigsalug students. Especially that he teaches grades 4 and 5 students, their demographic is often expected to help work on the farm.

"Yung ibang students gusto ito kasi pagdating ng hapon meron silang pera," he says. "Yung iba napipilitan lang kasi wala silang magagawa kasi wala silang makakain. Kung walang makain, 'yung iba naghahanap nalang ng prutas sa paligid."

Feeling a deep obligation to help his students, he approached their barangay in Bukidnon and requested for 10 sacks of rice every year. The barangay obliged, and since 2016, he has been distributing these to his students.

Zafra-Torino has also taken the responsibility of helping her students morally and financially, when needed. "Kulang sila ng motivation ... Aanhin nila ang school? 'Mas mabuti nalang pumunta ng bukid, makakain pa tayo,' yan 'yung mindset. Kulang sila ng push at motivation. Sinong gagawa non? Kaming mga teachers."





The Haduan Negrito Elementary School, the only school in Sitio Haduan where the Aeta students are taught. Photo by JL JAVIER



"Nagsisikap tayo para kahit man lang, kahit hanggang high school man lang ang bata, hindi masabi ng ibang tao na katutubo lang 'yan," says Roy Tanglao, the chieftain of the Aeta community in Sitio Haduan, Pampanga. Photo by JL JAVIER

## Leading with ideals

Through education, IPs do become more empowered, and chieftain Roy Tanglao of the Aeta community in Sitio Haduan, Pampanga says that education also allows them to ascertain a dignified life for every IP.

"Sinasabi ng iba 'Pabayaang mo na 'yan katutubo lang naman 'yan wala namang napagaralan 'yan,'" he shares. "So nagsisikap tayo para kahit man lang, kahit hanggang high school man lang ang bata, hindi masabi ng ibang tao na katutubo lang 'yan."

He has been the chieftain in the community for 20 years now, and his mission was to always improve the conditions of education in his community. He is not without his grievances, however. He shares that he feels as though teachers that DepEd provides for their school, the Haduan Negrito Elementary school, are only using it only as a sort of dummy school, a stepping stone to the actual institution that teachers actually want to work in.

"Parang ginawa nilang training center ba, 'yung lugar namin," he says. "Ba't mga unat [the term for straight-haired non-Aetas or outsiders] 'yung iakyat sa kabundukan na gawin nating training center 'yung kabundukan tapos 'pag natapos diyan tuturo sa baba?"

Because there are not enough teachers who willingly want to teach and serve schools that are in remote areas, DepEd has devised a policy that if a candidate accepts the post, one cannot request for any transfer for three years. "Unlike before, wala pang one year, magpaparequest na ng transfer. Ayaw natin 'yun," explains Mateo.

Mateo adds that DepEd is also working toward supporting the career progression of teachers through merit-based promotion, meaning a teacher will no longer have to wait for a vacancy to occur for the teacher to get promoted. "Kaya naman nagtatransfer 'yung mga teacher kasi wala silang pagkakataong mapromote," he says. "Mapropromote lang sila doon sa malalaking school na madaming teachers na mas mababakante."



what is best for IP students is for DepEd to train actual IPs who can then be the teachers of their own community. Maricor Torio agrees that this is the ideal scenario, but there are also other things to consider, he adds, like the standards set by DepEd's hiring requirements as well as ensuring that there are IP students who are actually interested in pursuing a degree in education.

"Yung preference ng course kasi you cannot dictate naman to the learner, 'Oy mag teacher ka!' Hindi naman pwede 'yun," he explains. "Very complex kasi 'yung education."



Aeta children in Sitio Haduan. Because there are only four teachers in the community, there are times when classes get automatically suspended because teachers are called to a seminar or are assigned other administrative work in their division's DepEd. Photo by JL JAVIER

It is often regaled that teaching is a vocation, a calling that is beyond one's self. [Data](https://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/2015/jan/27/five-top-reasons-teachers-join-and-quit) (https://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/2015/jan/27/five-top-reasons-teachers-join-and-quit) shows that seventy-five percent of people go into teaching because they want to make a difference. It is perhaps this ideal, this commitment to a sacred moral value that teachers like Zafra-Torino and Jorta aspire to.

Despite the rough roads they have to travel, the rivers they have to cross, the multi-grades they have to juggle, the late allowances they have to deal with, and the additional children that they have to feed, what is it that drives teachers to still teach?

"There's something in me that makes me want to still serve and extend a part of myself to the IPs," Zafra-Torino says. "'Di ko mawari kung ano."