

***Student Empowerment Pathways to Poverty Alleviation:
Nurturing Innovative Teachers and Education Leaders***

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Abstract

The Students Grants-in-Aid Program for Poverty Alleviation (SGP-PA), under which this study was carried out, aims at addressing chronic poverty through the expansion of educational opportunities to at least one child of every identified poor household by sending them to school to finish a college degree. Philippine Normal University, as the National Center for Teacher Education in the Philippines, was identified as one of the partners in the program implementation. Justifiably, this study focuses on the description of the students-grantees' educational experiences and personal histories of transcending boundaries toward empowerment, and future life aspirations. Data were gathered through open-ended interviews, narrative histories and focus group discussions. Transcripts from the interviews and focus group discussions were analyzed for themes related to the statements of the purpose. Findings suggest that the students-grantees have demonstrated improvement in their personal-social, career, and academic dispositions. Moreover, this study reveals that the students-grantees' aspirations include becoming educational leaders and role models who can help break the cycle of poverty and continue to become lifelong learners.

Keywords: poverty alleviation program, self-empowerment, teacher-training, lifelong learners

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Introduction

Hunger, malnutrition, disease, lack of shelter, illiteracy, and other poverty related concerns are considered as global phenomenon. Over the years, poverty rate in the Philippines continues to increase. The Poverty incidence among Filipinos in the first semester of 2014 was estimated at 25.8 percent based on the July, 2014 Annual Poverty Indicators Survey (APIS) conducted by the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA). During the same period in 2013, poverty incidence among Filipinos was recorded at 24.6 percent. In addition to the thresholds and incidences, the PSA also releases other poverty-related statistics in the report such as the income and poverty gap. Such data pose an imperative demand for policymakers to exert their efforts to institute national programs to address all poverty-related concerns in the country.

Numerous studies conducted in the Philippines and in other countries about poverty (Ariola, 2010; Asian Development Bank, 2009; Dumaguit, 2005; Mallari, 2009; Reyes & Valencia, 2002; Uriarte, 2008) point out the need to institute programs aimed at reaching the very poor to improve the quality of life. Various strategies were identified that would help propel the economic activities of the communities towards achieving sustainable socio-economic growth. In 2012, the Philippine government developed a mechanism for poverty alleviation called “Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program” (4Ps), aimed at improving the disadvantaged sectors in the Philippines. In line with this, the Students’ Grants-in-Aid Program for Poverty Alleviation (SGP-PA) was initiated, where a member of the 4Ps family was identified and was sent Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to study tertiary education. The grant covers the costs for tuition and other school fees, purchase of textbooks, board and lodging in PNU Dormitory, uniform, health assistance and other valid related educational expenses and support services to sustain and enable him/her to complete his/her degree program.

SGP-PA was implemented through the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), Commission on Higher Education (CHED), State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) and the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE). The program began in academic year 2012-2013 aimed at providing college grants to a family member of around 4,026 eligible Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) beneficiaries in the country. The program is aimed at supporting a student to be able to complete a college degree. The primary objectives of the program are to ensure that the grantees are enrolled in CHED priority courses in selected SUCs duly recognized by CHED, Such will ensure that the future graduates will have an opportunity to become productive members of society. Also, the SGP-PA aims to contribute in the increase of the number of enrolment in higher education in line with the national government's priority degree programs among poor households and support college graduates' entry to labor markets through placement assistance.

Philippine Normal University, as the National Center for Teacher Education in the Philippines, was identified by CHED as one of the partners in the program implementation. Sixty four eligible grantees were enrolled in PNU in 2012. As an HEI, it helps in the development, implementation, and management, monitoring and reporting of the grantees progress in the program. Hence, it is imperative to come up with a study which focuses on the description of the students-grantees’ educational experiences and personal histories of transcending boundaries toward empowerment.

Poverty Alleviation and Empowerment Programs

Poverty-alleviation programs on existing local management efforts to be successful are built on critical grassroots approach (Carr, 2008). In a study on the Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) program conducted by Leroya, Ruelb, & Verhofstadta (2009) found out that CCT provide a positive impact to improve child nutrition. In the same effort, the ASEAN foundation has initiated 43 projects for poverty alleviation. A big contribution was made through the Japan-ASEAN Solidarity fund (Uriarte, 2008). Similarly, Bangladesh has its Micro-credit and Poverty Alleviation program to assist in the development of the living standard of their poor and vulnerable people (Shukran & Farhana, 2011). These programs are meant for empowerment which refers to the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this capacity was previously denied to them (Kabeer, 2001).

Empowerment has become an attractive concept in the development of youth policies and services in recent years (Chiu & Wong, 1999; Foster, 2001; Lee, 1999) as cited by To (2009). Empowerment is the process of enhancing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Zimmerman (2012) made a significant contribution in his empowerment theory. The three components include individual empowerment, organizational empowerment and community empowerment. Zimmerman summarized his theory as "connecting individual well being with the larger social and political environment". Empowerment programs are aimed at providing avenues or opportunities for individuals to make better their lives, organizations, and communities. Findings on the study about Hong Kong School Social Workers' Experiences in Generating Empowering Practices suggest that empowerment can be generated through a number of activities promoting individual and collective success.

Empowerment program is the creation of physical, social, emotional, and creative spaces where the beneficiaries can explore, try-out newly acquired skills, build positive self and healthy relationships, and experience personal and collective success (Jennings, Medina, Messias & McLoughlin, 2006). The authors believe that poverty alleviation programs should focus on empowering individuals through capacity building, skills training and human resource development.

The purpose of this study is to provide a description of the students-grantees' educational experiences and personal histories of transcending boundaries toward empowerment. This is attained by considering participating student-grantees' thoughts, reactions and feelings on (a) their educational experiences in the university (b) their personal histories of being empowered, and (c) their future aspirations in life.

This study is significant to the student-grantees as it provides an avenue to describe their experiences of transcending boundaries towards empowerment. These experiences will give the program facilitators feedback on how the program and activities that were developed, implemented and managed are perceived by the beneficiaries. It can also shed light to research gaps in documenting poverty alleviation experiences and to further practice-based research to understand how a specific empowerment program may have influenced the beneficiaries differently.

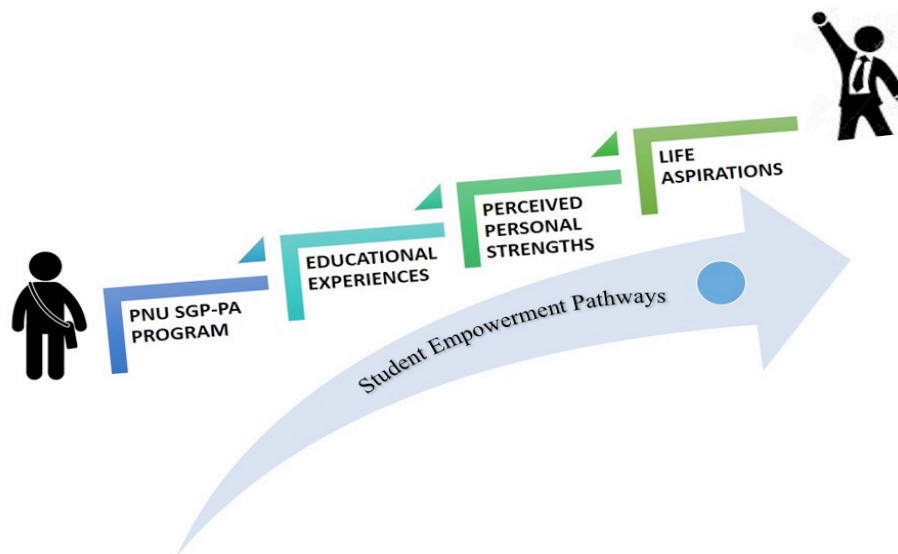


Figure 1. The Student Empowerment Pathways

The figure above describes the framework of the Student Empowerment Pathways which is aimed at providing support to the transition of student-grantees into the college by providing them services and environment that promote academic achievement, successful completion of degrees, personal-social development, and career advancement. This framework is anchored on Chinman and Linneys' Adolescent Empowerment Cycle as cited by Jennings et. al. (2006). The Adolescent Empowerment Cycle model is based on psychological theories of adolescent development and describes processes aimed at positive social bonding and enhancement of self-esteem. The model focuses on three dimensions: adolescent participation in meaningful activities, opportunities for skills development and positive reinforcement and recognition from adults throughout the process. The student empowerment pathways cover the student-grantees stories of participation in the intervention programs planned and developed for their holistic growth. Importance is given in their lived experiences as a grantee in the university, their thoughts and feelings and their journey on how the program has shaped them as a person and their aspirations in life.

The Students-Grantees' Profile

Intelligence. The student-grantees' may be described as having an average intelligence (32%) while 29% are in borderline and below average (27%) based on the results of an administered standardized intelligence to them. The grantees' intelligence profile was considered in the development of the interventions specifically, the bridging program.

Learning Style. Based on the Learning Style Inventory that they have taken, results show that majority of the student-grantees are digital learners (44 %). They listen mostly to reason and logic in what they hear, see or feel. They also tend to communicate by reasoning out logical level. Others are kinesthetic learners (28.13%) while some are auditory learners (13%). Six percent are visual learners and kinesthetic-auditory learners (6.25%) and visual-digital learners (3.13%). This information served as basis in the development of the intervention programs for the student grantees.

Personality. A Filipino-made personality test called Panukat ng Pagkataong Pilipino Test (PPP) help in identifying the grantees' personality traits. Results indicate that grantees' have the tendency to strive for excellence including neatness in work and self, regardless whether it involves routinary tasks. The result may also signify that they can easily be aroused to emotions while maintaining composure and likely to be obedient to other people's demand (*Pagkamasikap, Pagkamaramdamin, Pagkamasunurin, Pagkamatulungin, Pagkamaayos, Pagkamahinahon, Pagkamatiyaga*). In connection to this, the grantees' obtained low percentiles on considering self as an intelligent one (*Pagkamatalino*), recognition of other's privacy and beliefs, difficulty in admitting the mistake/s they have committed, and carrying out task in own's initiative (*Pagkamatalino, Pagkamagalang, Pagpapakumbaba, Pagkaresponsible*).

The identification of the student grantees' intelligence, learning style and personality helped in the development of program and specific activities which were aimed at addressing the unique needs of the grantees and to provide avenues to facilitate their holistic development.

The PNU SGP-PA Program

Effective intervention programs are based on developmental approach model (Borders & Drury, 1992). A developmental program is proactive and preventive, helping students acquire the knowledge, skills, self-awareness, and attitudes necessary for successful mastery of normal developmental tasks. There is also substantial empirical evidence that these programs promote student development and academic success (Borders, 1992). It is through this idea that the PNU SGP-PA Program was conceptualized and developed for implementation.



Figure 2. The PNU SGP-PA Program

The Office of Student Affairs and Student Services (OSASS) of the Philippine Normal University developed a four-phase program for the SGP-PA grantees from NCR and Region 4B. In managing the delivery of these services, specific university officials from different offices were designated. The program comprises the four phases discussed below:

Phase I – Selection and Application Process. Eligible applicants are high school graduates, drawn from identified and classified poor households in the 609 focus

municipalities covered under the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino (4Ps) of DSWD. The student applicants from the DSWD who intend to pursue a degree in Education were forwarded to the university

Phase II – Academic Intervention Program (AIP). The bridging program called Academic Intervention Program (AIP) includes Reading, Language, Mathematics, Values, Civics and Personality Education. The program was handled by volunteer PNU faculty members. They also helped monitor and evaluate the performance of the student scholars. Those who passed the examination after the one semester bridging program proceeded with the 1st year first semester courses. First year second semester courses were offered to the grantees in Summer of 2013. Those who were not able to pass the bridging program and the PNUAT were recommended to take other courses.

Phase III – EMPOWER Program. The assigned counselor/s and coordinators have developed a program for the SGP-PA grantees. This program is designed to prepare the grantees to meet the demands during and after college, helping them develop as an empowered person. Developmental and primary prevention activities that are information-based and providing social support are the strategies employed in developing the program for the grantees.

All scholars under the SGP-PA program were eligible for participation in all activities of the University (PNU) including but not limited to the following: a. Big Brother & Big Sister Program (Peer, Body system) b. Supplemental classes, values formation, leadership training and other learning experiences c. Student Assistantship and d. Outreach programs. A coordinator will monitor and serve as mentor and counselor to the students in this program. The program focuses on addressing the academic, career, and personal-social development of student-grantees. The following are the activities facilitated to them: (1) Guidance and Counseling Orientation for Student-Grantees; (2) Personal Inventory (3) Routine Interview (4) Counseling (5) Testing and (6) Guidance Sessions which focuses on Study Skills and Test Skills, Resource Management, Stress Management, Values Reinforcement and Social Graces Seminar, Pre-marital Sex Prevention Seminar, Problem-solving, Goal Setting and Decision-making.

Phase IV – Student Teaching and LET Performance. Upon completion of the student's third year in the PNU main campus, he/she is now ready to go back to his/her province/region to apply the knowledge and insights through practice teaching. Part of the responsibility of PNU System as the implementing party is to monitor the Licensure Examination for Teachers performance. This is the last phase of the program. Data will be made available upon the student-grantees completion of their academic program.

Methodology

A qualitative-descriptive design utilizing guided interviews, focus group discussions and oral histories (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003) of the research participants were used to gather data for this study. A total of 43 students-grantees who are currently enrolled beneficiaries of the PNU Students Grants-in-Aid Program for Poverty Alleviation Program (PNU-SGP-PA) from the National Capital Region and Mindoro (Region IVA) were drawn from identified poor households in the 609 focus municipalities covered under the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino (4Ps) of DSWD. Several focus group discussions using guided interview were undertaken to gather data from the

participants. Facilitators in the focus group discussion are professional social worker, Values Education teacher, a guidance counselor and an English teacher. The researchers reviewed the coded transcripts, identified themes and contexts in which they appear. At the end of the analysis, findings and interpretations were given back to the student-grantees to check for further interpretations and explanations. The participants expressed their agreement with the findings and interpretations and contributed some further insights to some themes. These expressions were included in the manuscript.

Results and Discussion

The PNU SGP-PA Experience

The grantees' educational experiences are characterized by series of events and changes in their life. Three themes that emerged are as follows: Personal-Social Adjustment, Academic and Non-Academic Engagement, and Career Outlook.

Personal-Social Adjustment. Being in college was a big challenge for the grantees. There were issues and concerns that they have encountered during the program implementation. They were able to express the most remarkable experiences that they've had during their stay in the university under the program.

Leilani before she entered college, vividly recalled "I was really nervous, I stopped schooling for a long time. I don't know whether I will be able to perform like my classmates who just graduated from school.

Academic and Non-Academic Engagement. The bridging program handled by volunteer PNU faculty members was one of the most memorable experiences according to the grantees. This program helped them to adjust in their college life and in gradually overcoming their fears related to schooling. Also, the opportunity for non-academic activities facilitated by faculty counselors was remarkable for the grantees. These activities include orientation and socialization for student-grantees, the counseling sessions which focuses on enhancing life skills such as, study and test skills, resource management, problem-solving, goal setting and decision-making. Added activities are educational trips, social graces seminar, and a night with the University President.

We had a great time during our special performance at the CHED Office. It was the General Assembly and the special guests were the Secretary of DSWD and Presidents of various colleges and universities. -Jen
I will never forget the time when we went to Enchanted Kingdom (amusement park) because everyone was there; it was a very enjoyable activity. -Mark

Career Outlook. Most of the student grantees experienced changes on how they see their future and what are the things that must be valued. Some of the grantees have experienced being employed in blue-collared jobs. Most have experienced difficulties of receiving very small income and unhealthy working environment. As teachers-in-training, they see a more stable and comfortable life in their future.

This program served as an eye opener about the importance of education in my life and in working towards my future work. This program also gave me hope to overcome difficulties and challenges in life. All the things that I am receiving at present are products of this poverty alleviation program. -Manuel

Journey to Empowerment

The grantees' journey to empowerment entails how the program helped them in creating positive changes in their outlook in life. Empowerment for the grantees mean being able to feel and be seen as a more confident individual and stronger person amidst all the trials in life.

SGP-PA has been a big help for me. First, I was given a chance to prove and return the trust in myself. -Jomalyn

In empowering individuals, significant opportunities where one can learn life skills, take personal responsibility, and exhibit personal abilities must be prioritized.

I was helped in building my self-confidence. Also, through the program, I felt proud of myself. -Jomalyn

My personality changed. My communication skills and my status in life improved. Most significantly, little by little, my knowledge improved and I was able to regulate it to maintain positive relationships with others - Christian,

Youth empowerment through higher education according to Okeke and Emanalo 2008 as cited by Ekpiken and Ukpadio (2015) can be realized through teaching and providing educational experiences which help promote not only the fullest individual development but also through acquisition of knowledge, attitudes, behavior and occupational skills for lifelong living in the community. If effective learning process occurs, it will cultivate positive change or impact to the whole system.

Grantees' Perceived Selves of being Empowered

When the grantees were asked to describe themselves before their university life, some of them see themselves as shy, emotional, lacking or having low self-esteem. Others have viewed their family, living away from their family and home sickness as their weaknesses. Some have expressed that they have experienced difficulties in some academic subjects specifically English and Mathematics. Few have shared that they have fears in presenting a lesson in front of class.

Rudolf is very shy, he cannot really speak in front class but not he even volunteers and he can speak in front very well. - Observations of Dan, friend and SGP-PA grantee

The grantees' perceived selves of being undernourished, sickly, and poor were turned into perceived selves of confident, motivated and excited for what the future will bring. Young people are ready to change their behaviors as long as they are provided with positive and creative personal space.

SGP-PA has been a big help for me. First, I was given a chance to prove and return the trust in myself. –Jomalyn

The grantees now view themselves as flexible, hard working and intelligent individuals. They can also accomplish their various academic tasks like an ordinary or regular college student. They now consider being faithful, jolly, industrious and good followers as their personal strengths. According to the other grantees, some of the personal attributes that they possess include being understanding and having good interpersonal skills. They persevere and always try to be active or participative in all student activities. Some mentioned that they now have skills in lesson planning and preparing instructional materials.

When given the opportunity to create positive life changes, students will take their learning to higher levels. Marks of being empowered include enhanced self-esteem, being an engaged learner, and being able to contribute personal insights. Significantly, exposure to opportunities and challenges within a safe and supportive environment is a major foundation.

Life Aspirations

When the grantees were asked about what they want to do after graduating, some of them shared that they want to immerse themselves in the profession of teaching. Others have also shared that they like to pursue higher education like taking a Master's degree or taking another degree specifically, Architecture, Accountancy, Music, and Criminology. Majority of the student-grantees have expressed that they really intend to help their family after finding a job. Some have personal intentions to help others when they are able to do so.

*My dream is for my child to have a good future.
–Jomalyn*

*My dream is to make my family happy and to better my family's status from extreme poverty. -
Christian*

Educational, career and life goals were formulated by the grantees themselves. The opportunity to study in college through the government's support was considered as a great opportunity to them. This premise has increased their motivation to finish school and what they have started. Grantees' perceptions of this expanded opportunity lead them to adjust their aspirations accordingly.

Conclusions

This study is an attempt to voice out the student-grantees' thoughts, feelings and reactions to topics related to their being a direct beneficiary of the Philippines's poverty alleviation program. There is uniqueness in the stories shared to the researchers but there is also commonalities in the educational experiences and situations in these student-grantees' lives. Empowerment means providing supportive and caring environment that can provide opportunities for individuals to develop personal capacities. An empowerment program has the capacity to create positive changes and events in the physical, social, emotional, and creative spaces of an individual's life. Being empowered means trying out newly developed skills, cultivating positive self and healthy relationships, and experiencing personal success. Moreover, this study reveals that the students-grantees' life aspirations include alleviating the status of one's family of origin, becoming educational leaders and role models who can help break the cycle of poverty and continue to become lifelong learners.

Recommendations

Youth empowerment should be considered as a necessity for the sustainable development of developing communities. There is also a call for incorporating activities that can address the other needs and/or the needs that arise during the implementation of poverty alleviation and youth empowerment programs. Giving feedback to various stakeholders as regards to the program's progress can serve as good measures of accountability and quality assurance. Stakeholders in exchange should encourage the youths on choices and pursuits of professional courses in higher education that will empower them to create positive life changes. Lastly, future studies (e.g. Program Evaluation, Tracer Study, Impact Study, etc.) on poverty alleviation and youth empowerment programs must be continuously done.

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