

Lived Experience of Student-scholars under the Expanded Students Grants-in-Aid Program for Poverty Alleviation

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Abstract

Understanding the lived world of an individual based on their unique viewpoint provides a better perspective of the human realities. Thus, this study explored the lived experiences of student-scholars under the Expanded Students Grants-in-Aid Program for Poverty Alleviation (ESGP-PA) in selected state universities and colleges (SUCs) in regions 7 and 8 in the Philippines. Considering the nature of the scholarship and the nuances that comes with it, this study aimed at contributing to the increased awareness, understanding, and sensitivity to these student-scholars. In this research, a phenomenological investigation was used to understand the universal essence of their experience. It employed Husserl's descriptive phenomenology to capture and describe their social and academic experiences. In-depth interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using Colaizzi process for phenomenological data analysis. Through meaning condensation and data saturation, these themes emerged: self-regard, perceived stigma from labelling and stereotyping; and self-motivation. The impact and complexity of the experience of stigma affect one's self-regard and motivation in school and in life. It is recommended that SUCs put premium to providing comprehensive, responsive, and proactive guidance and counselling programs designed to meet the needs of their students.

Keywords: ESGP-PA scholars, lived experience, perceived stigma, self-motivation, self-regard

1. Introduction

Education is considered as the surest route to economic mobility. Thus, to ensure sustainable economic development, countries invest more in human capital. Investment in human capital has proven to impact productivity growth of a country (Gruzina et.al., 2021; Grant, 2017; Pelinescu, 2015; Abas et.al., 2000). In the Philippines, the “No Filipino learner left behind” is one of the agenda that educational sectors have pushed forward. This encouraged for the creation of several initiatives and programs that give a Filipino learner a chance to be schooled. These initiatives mostly are in the form of scholarships with the aim of addressing the main reason why students cannot go to school – poverty. It provides opportunities for students from low-income families to have access to quality education especially in the tertiary level.

UNESCO reported that about 258 million children and youth are out of school for the school year ending in 2018. In the country, the 2017 Annual Poverty Indicators Survey by the Philippine Statistics Authority revealed that

there are 3.6 million out-of-school children and youths (OSCYs).

Nevertheless, the Philippine government has shown its political will and has been doing its best to fulfill its commitment of alleviating poverty in the country through its many educational programs to help the poor. One of these government-initiated programs is the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act (Republic Act 10931) which institutionalizes free tuition and exemption from other fees in state universities and colleges (SUCs), and local universities and colleges (LUCs). The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) stipulated the implementing rules and regulations through its Unified Financial Assistance System for Tertiary Education Act (UniFAST). This ensures that the underprivilege students are given a chance to get a diploma.

Moreover, before this law, the government has also implemented the Students Grants-in-Aid Program for Poverty Alleviation, commonly known as SGP-PA. This is instituted by the

government through CHED in partnership with the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) and Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE). The is to provide opportunity for the deserving Filipino students from the poorest-of-the-poor households to be a bachelor degree holder. This scholarship provides for the students' educational expenses including living allowance if they are willing to take on a CHED-priority course. It was first implemented in 2013 with 4, 041 beneficiaries from identified and classified poor households covered by the DSWD's Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps). The program was then later called Expanded SGP-PA (ESGP-PA) since it has funded 36,412 beneficiaries bringing the total number of beneficiaries to 40,453 with 112 participating SUCs in 2014 (Silfverberg & Orbeta Jr., 2017).

The Commission on Higher Education stipulates that only the identified top-tier SUCs are qualified to be participating institutions of the ESGP-PA. This provides students opportunity to be in schools that offer high-caliber learning experiences for free. It becomes an answer to the problem of many students who forego going to college because of its cost; and, those who gave up enrolling in top performing schools because of high admission standards. Considering the nature of the scholarship, these scholars do not go through the usual process of admission in the identified SUCs. However, this opportunity is of no secret to the non-scholars whom ESGP-PA scholars call "regular students" in the institutions where they enrolled. How these scholars are identified and how they were admitted make them "popular" among other students.

Likewise, transitioning from high school to college can be difficult for most students. These scholars, just like the rest of the students, have also encountered academic and social challenges in school. But what make their experiences tougher in many ways is that these academic, financial, and social challenges that they face are twice more compared to other students because of the preconceived notions and perceptions about them. Stereotypes are prejudices and preconceived notions about an overgeneralized attributes associated with the members of a social group (Hinton, 2017).

Transitions, academic and social stressors, language barriers, discrimination, and prejudicial treatment are among those experienced by a student who come from a different "background" (Selvitopu, 2020). The study of Gilmore & Harris (2008) defined the stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination based on socioeconomic status (SES) as Classism. Negative impact of stereotypes has also been noted in one's self-assessment, sense of competence, and even on career choices (Schuster and Martiny, 2017; Marsh & Scalas, 2011). Further, this may create a toxic environment that affect the students' beliefs and attitude in school and eventually their school performance. These vestiges of discrimination and stereotyping in schools among those who belong from low-income class may result to more serious problems when it comes to these students' mental health. Furthermore, studies have also documented negative consequences of discrimination by peers and teachers like lower academic motivation and poor self-esteem (Banerjee, et.al., 2018; Byrd, 2015; Wang and Huguley, 2012). Similarly, the study of Jury et.al., (2017) revealed the psychological barriers which includes emotional experiences, identity management, self-perception, and motivation encountered by students from low economic status in university contexts.

Considering the unique nature of admission to SUCs among these scholars, they may also experience a sense of identity management crisis. It is considered as one of the toughest challenges students from low SES experience when in college (Jury et.al., 2017). It is a feeling of disjointedness in the new environment they are in. When they got accepted in the chosen SUC, they are also expected to meet the academic standards of the school. These ESGP-PA scholars may find it difficult to meet all these expectations with the added "deficit-based assumptions" students and teachers have about their background. It is akin to migrating to another country wherein they also experience cross-cultural transition difficulties. The study of Ertl, et.al. (2017) described a person's academic self-assessment as "academic self-concept" which is developed from their experiences and interpretations of their own environment. It is also influenced by one's own attributions and other people's regard toward them. This can involve comparison of one's

achievement to that of their peers. In this case, “socially related stressors, such as a sense of conflict, cultural loneliness, and isolation, are main disadvantages in the process for adaptation and change” (Selvitopu, 2020, p. 591). Aside from these, academic-related stressors can also add up and may take a toll on students’ mental health.

Higher education institutions are considered significant incubators of future leaders and innovators in the country. However, other than the skills and competencies that they ensure students to acquire, they also have the responsibility to inculcate human values. Thus, these institutions should also teach students how to coexist with people in multicultural environments highlighting reflexivity and sensitivity to others. Although these scholars were part of the minority group, the researcher believed that they have worthwhile stories of successes and struggles to tell and teach to everyone. Hence, this study seeks to explore the lived experiences of the scholars under the ESGP-PA in selected SUCs. With this, administrators, teachers, and students will gain an understanding of the world as lived by these scholars and thus contribute to the increased awareness and sensitivity toward them. SUCs may also strengthen their student support systems and remain proactive in dealing with students’ challenges.

2. Domain of Inquiry

The purpose of this phenomenological inquiry is to explore the lived experiences of the scholars under ESGP-PA in selected SUCs in regions 7 and 8. Specifically, it asks the following questions: *What is the lived experience of these ESGP-PA scholars? What does this mean to them? Where does it come from? How is it experienced?*

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

In this research, a phenomenological investigation was used to explore the lived experience of thirteen (13) ESGP-PA scholars who have successfully graduated in the selected SUCs in regions 7 and 8 in the country. To understand the universal essence of the experience, this study employed Husserl’s descriptive phenomenology. To ensure the

validity of data collection and analysis, and to maintain the objectivity of the phenomenon, the researcher’s assumptions, personal biases, and presuppositions were declared and recorded from pre to post data collection. In-depth interview was done virtually for region 8 participants and face-to-face for region 7 participants. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using Colaizzi process for phenomenological data analysis. Direct quotes from the respondents were used to illustrate the categories and connections. Through meaning condensation and data saturation, patterns/themes emerged as bases for awareness and in-depth understanding of the experiences of these ESGP-PA scholars.

3.2 Research Participants and Sampling

A phenomenological framework requires a relatively homogenous group of participants (Creswell, 2013). Purposeful sampling is used in this study since this strategy involves the researcher selecting the participants according to certain criteria. The participants (scholars) must be an ESGP-PA grantee; have graduated successful; and were from SUCs in regions 7 and 8. To adhere to data saturation principles, the researcher added one more participant from the twelve making it a total of thirteen to ensure that no new information is generated during the analysis. Hence, a researcher looks at this as the point at which no more data need to be collected.

Moreover, the researcher also acknowledges the limitations of the study that results are generated mainly from qualitative method. Since it was also difficult to trace where these scholars are at present, the research environment is also limited to the regions accessible by the researcher.

3.3 Research Instrument

The researcher is the main data collection instrument in this phenomenological research. As the initiator of the interview, the researcher played an active role in making certain decisions about the progress of the interview. Moreover, interview guide is used in the series of semi-structured face-to-face and virtual interviews with the participants. With the interview guide, the researcher facilitated the participants’ recounting of experiences.

3.4 Data-gathering Procedure

After consent was sought, semi-structured, face-to-face and virtual interviews were conducted using an interview guide. Participants were encouraged to talk freely and to tell stories using their own words. Each interview lasted from 45 minutes to 1 hour. At the end of each interview, the researcher reminded the participants about the need for a second contact with them either via telephone calls or face-to-face to discuss the study findings and to make sure that the study findings reflect their own experiences. The researcher has also showed sensitivity to the uniqueness of each participant throughout the interview. The topic and interview could re-open the wounds of the participant's experiences, and thus were approached with an empathetic understanding (Holloway & Wheeler 2002). This means that the interviewer should have the following attributes as stated by Holloway & Wheeler (2002): good listener, non-judgmental, friendly, open and honest, and flexible. The collected data was then prepared for analysis using Colaizzi process for phenomenological data analysis and then described comprehensively.

The whole interview was recorded using an audio-recorder and the virtual interviews were recorded via Zoom. The researcher abstracted data from the material after the interview was over. In doing so, the researcher analyzed the information recorded and translated the interviewee's responses into meaningful descriptions.

3.5 Data Analysis using Colaizzi's strategy

The study uses Colaizzi process for phenomenological data analysis. After the interviews were transcribed, the transcripts were read several times and were also reviewed by another competent researcher. It is to be noted that for confidentiality, all recorded files of the interviews were destroyed a month after the completion of the research. After making sense of the whole content, any previous knowledge and preconceived notions and perceptions of the researcher were all set aside and bracketed to be able to explore the phenomenon as experienced by the participants themselves. After, significant statements and phrases were extracted from each transcript. These statements were written in separate sheets and coded based on their "transcript, session number, and line numbers. Two

hundred seventy-nine significant statements were extracted from the thirteen transcripts. The meanings were then formulated from these significant statements. Each underlying meaning was coded in one category as they reflect a comprehensive description. The formulated meanings were categorized into cluster of themes. After which, these groups of cluster themes that reflect a particular issue/idea were incorporated together to form distinctive construct of theme and then the final thematic map was developed.

At this stage of analysis, all the themes were described comprehensively. Each theme with its subthemes were elaborated and supported by the statements extracted from the interviews that are all summarized in the codebook. After the reduction of findings and deletion of ambiguous structures, the research participants were made to read the transcripts and initial research findings for verification. Eventually, all participants showed their satisfaction toward the results which entirely reflect their feelings and experiences.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The researcher acknowledged that she has a moral obligation to strictly protect and adhere to the rights of every research participant. To do this, the researcher established the researcher rigor, trustworthiness, and observed ethical principles. The ethical measures in this study include consent, confidentiality and anonymity, privacy, and the right to withdraw anytime. On the other hand, each research participant is over 18 years of age, and was provided with an informed consent form, which they were asked to sign and date once they agreed to participate in the study. This form contained information about the purpose and nature of the study. Furthermore, anonymity, confidentiality, and privacy among them were also ensured. They were not linked to the data and their identity are known only by the researcher. The informants were referred to by their coded identification (P7401 for example) in the study and audio recordings during the interviews which were also destroyed a month after the research has been completed.

4. Results

Using Colaizzi process for phenomenological data analysis, three themes were identified from the participants' lived experiences: (a) self-

regard (b) perceived stigma from labelling and stereotyping, and (c) self-motivation. These themes and subthemes presented in Table 1 reflect their realities for four/five years in the university as ESGP-PA scholars.

Table 1
Data Themes and Subthemes

Main Themes	Subthemes
Self-regard	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low self-esteem • Perception towards self and the scholarship • Self-blame • Easily get discouraged
Perceived stigma from labelling and stereotyping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regarded as very poor (patay-gutom), and academically deficient • Disappointing things are associated with ESGP-PA scholars • Experienced humiliation and discrimination • Feeling hurt and low
Self-motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having an ambition in life • Challenged to be better • Drive to study • Motivation to succeed

Theme 1. Self-regard

The first theme describes how the participants see and feel about themselves in relation to their experiences. Self-regard is also referred to as self-concept which is defined as one's belief of himself or herself and awareness of his/her attributes (Baumeister, 1999). This theme came from the subthemes of low self-esteem, perception towards self and the scholarship, self-blame, easily get discouraged.

The significant statements revealed how the participants feel about themselves and the people around them. It can be deduced from their statements that they have low self-esteem, and they believe that they are not meant to be in

the college/university primarily because of their qualifications. They say, (as translated)

I seem to feel lost. I know the students there are intelligent and I am not. P70410

I feel so low. I think we cannot compete with them. We really have different performance compared to them. P70401

I feel that my grade is not for the university. I am ashamed of other students because of this. P70403

We know that we are different from the rest. Our grade is not for this school. P70406

I only have low I.Q. I guess. I cannot keep up. P70408

These students feel that they are inferior and that they are not fitted to be in their university. They have negative perception towards their own self and towards the scholarship. They also blame themselves for feeling such emotions.

If they hear the name of our scholarship, it seems that they already know that we do not belong. Maybe it is also our fault. P70413

Sometimes I don't tell my classmates that I am an ESGP-PA scholar because I am ashamed. So I realized now that it is also my fault because I feel ashamed that I am part of the scholarship although it helped my family and me. P70410

These students feel that there is a negative connotation associated with the name of their scholarship. They have also experienced being compared with the "regular students".

We were together with the regular students and during groupings they do not want to be grouped with us. I felt that I don't have confidence anymore. P70408

I have a teacher who compares us with the regular students. And I really felt ashamed about it but what can I do. P70404

They describe the non-ESGP-PA scholars as regular students and address them as such. The term "irregular student" in most universities is only used for students who have advanced subjects or back subjects, or if they are "shiftees". However, these ESGP-PA scholars do not fit to be called as irregular students. How they compare themselves with the rest of the university students are based solely on their

own interpretation of how other students and teachers treat them and how they see themselves as part of the university.

Psychologists would point out that humans are acutely responsive to people's comments and feelings about them. Whether negative or positive reactions from others, it can affect how one sees and feels about himself/herself. According to Richman & Leary (2009), positive reactions foster psychological and well-being, while long-term exposure to negative comments can cause psychological and physical problems later on. Jury et.al. (2017) in their study revealed that low-SES students in higher education received negative views from other students. Moreover, most students as revealed in other studies suffer from negative stereotypes regarding their competence (Jury, et.al. 2017 & Hinz, 2016). In short, people get so much affected by what other people say about them that in return can affect their emotional, social, and even physical well-being. According to Carl Rogers (1959) the people surrounding a person play an important role in molding one's feeling of self-worth.

Theme 2. Perceived stigma from labelling and stereotyping

Based on the experiences as shared by these scholars, the negative regard they have for themselves is attributed to the perceived stigma from labelling and stereotyping. This is the second theme generated from the subthemes on: regarded as very poor and academically deficient, disappointing things are associated with ESGP-PA scholars, experienced humiliation and discrimination, feeling hurt and low. Stigma refers to a negative response or disapproval to people who have "different" characteristics as compared to the "normal" group of people. Oftentimes, they are given labels and along with these are the stereotypes. Giving "labels" which is often negative is based on the notion that those who do not belong to the "normal" or "conventional" group based on certain attributes is an outsider (Breen, 2011). A stereotype is an overgeneralized belief about an individual or group of people. The results of the study of Turosak, et.al. (2019) showed that low SES students who experienced stereotypes have greater test anxiety and performed worse on their academic performance. Consequently,

stigma is also linked to mental health well-being (Takeuchi et.al 2018).

For four to five years staying in their university, these scholars have been referred to as ESGP-PA scholar. Most of them think that there is a negative tone to this name based on how it made them feel while staying in these universities. They say, (as translated)

There was a time when me and my friends passed by a group of students. When they knew that we are ESGP-PA scholars, they looked at us from head to toe. We felt really low that time. P70409

We have friends from regular students who told us about other students in the campus who say that ESGP-PA scholars are dumb. They generalized it. P70402

One of my classmates asked me if it is true that I did not take the admission test in the university. She said it was unfair. I really cried after that. They also look at us as very poor. P70405

These participants believed that teachers and students in their university associate ESGP-PA scholar to words like dumb and poor.

I have encountered a teacher who really discriminated us. He said that our group do not understand fast the lesson. I really wanted to stop that time. I have co-scholars who stopped. P70409

During our research class, one group even made a research paper about why ESGP-PA scholars perform low in class. We were confused why they were able to say that. We were really ashamed. P70407

These scholars have heard that people in the university talk about them being slow in class. They have felt how some students look down on them. They were hurt by the words that come out from a teacher's mouth about their status in class. Worst, they have felt that they do not belong in the university. Previous research has shown that stereotyping and prejudices can cause discrimination that can negatively influence the classroom environment, the students' academic performance, the students' academic achievement, and the students' self-concept (Hinton, 2017; Schneider et al., 2012).

According to Fiske (2010), stereotyping is an individual's own thoughts, beliefs, and

expectations onto other individual or group without even obtaining factual information about the individual(s). Most of these people who become victims of stereotypes and prejudices succumb to depression. Others also give in to these stereotypes often believing and accepting that what people think about them are true (Rivers, et al., 2009). Kemick (2010) also cited other studies show victims of stereotypes perform poorly in varied situations. The struggles that these students, the ESPPA scholars, are facing in trying to free themselves from negative stereotypes are no joke. One scholar said,

I feel so ashamed. I even told myself that maybe what they are saying about me is true. there was a time that I feel like I don't want to go to school anymore. But I realized I can choose between believing what they are saying or trying my best to prove them wrong. P70405

Theme 3. Self-motivation

Even with the negative experiences these scholars encountered, they pushed forward because they have goals to fulfill. The third theme is on self-motivation. It is referred to as an individual's drive to accomplish something. This theme is generated from the subthemes: having an ambition in life, challenged to be better, drive to study, motivation to succeed.

One's strong desire to accomplish something gives one a push to keep going despite the hurdles in life. The things, persons, even situations in life may be considered as a "motivation" although this varies from person to person. For most students like these ESGP-PA scholars, they are motivated to study hard and finish school primarily because they wanted to improve their status in life.

I never expected to be able to go to college. After I graduated in high school, I immediately work and I already accepted that I will just work my entire life. But deep inside I really wanted to go college. P70411

I really do not want to quit school. I wanted to be a bachelor's degree holder because I envy those who graduated in college. I saw my teacher before and I really liked his shoes. I told myself that someday I will have the same shoes. When I heard about the scholarship, I really grabbed the opportunity. P70401

Moreover, the participants also mentioned that despite the difficulties they have encountered, they still have few teachers who helped them both financially and emotionally. They say, (as translated)

I have a teacher who always give me feedback of my performance. It made me strive more. One time, I was absent for how many days because I don't have allowance, we even have nothing to eat at home. My teacher called me when I came back to school. She gave me advice and gave me money. P70405

I had a teacher who always lends me money. So, I told myself that I have to study more because these people are helping me. I told myself that I will not waste their help. P70412

For all those years, these students have been trying to survive and surpass all the negative feelings and emotions that all these labeling, stereotyping and discrimination they believe they experienced have brought upon them while in their university. It still gets them teary-eyed whenever they remember these experiences. At the same time, it also makes them smile how they were able to survive and how other students and teachers in the university have also helped them.

Likewise, experts say that self-motivation is a very important factor in a person's life because this will help him or her see things in a positive way. This will also enable him or her to overcome challenges by developing an attitude that could withstand trials and failures. Teachers' actions are also seen as a contributory factor in both students' motivation and demotivation. It is important that teachers provide support to these students. Pintrich, et.al. (1993) in Steinmayr (2019) added that students' motivation is relatively situation or context specific. Moreover, Carr et.al. (2019) claimed that an individual's motivation and self-belief to learn and succeed is influential in the transition into higher education. Taken together, these ESGP-PA scholars would prefer not to have known the stigma they have experienced. Like any other scholarships in the university as well, ESGP-PA's goal is to help these scholars achieve their goals in life and eventually improve their way of life. Thus, the ESGP-PA scholars believe that they should be

treated fairly like the rest of the students in the university.

Without support, these psychological barriers caused by the perceived stigma from labelling and stereotyping may cause further problems on students' academic performance and overall mental health. It can also be noted that there are certain norms and practices in SUCs that may be contributing to creating psychological barriers. Thus, it is important these schools also provide proactive and accessible programs that can help those students who are struggling in different ways.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The lived experience of the ESGP-PA scholars provided a glimpse of the realities a person may experience and feel from stigma. Although these scholars only take a small portion of a university's population, but their stories are very loud and cut deep. Stigma can cause harm and may hinder every aspect of one's life. For most of them, they were able to successfully surpass the difficulties but there were those who also quit. The impact and complexity of the experience of stigma affect one's self-regard and motivation in school and in life. This study also acknowledged the limitations of having participants only from two regions, thus studies like this may also be conducted in other regions so that early intervention may also be provided. The more teachers become aware of the impact caused by labeling and stereotyping in school, the more sensitive they become to their students' feelings. The same goes for students who were not also aware of the impact that labeling, stereotyping and discrimination can cause in one's life. It is recommended that SUCs put premium to providing comprehensive, responsive, and proactive guidance and counselling programs designed to meet the needs of their students. Aside from providing equal access and opportunity to quality education, emotional support should also be readily available to everyone.

Conflict of Interest

The Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgements

The researcher would like to thank the research respondents for being generous with their experiences and their time.

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