Dilemmas encountered by Aeta students in a state university in Central Luzon, Philippines

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Abstract—Aeta is one of the many groups of indigenous people (IP) inhabiting the Philippines particularly the Zambales Aetas of Central Luzon. Interestingly, these IPs have given much importance in formal education until the tertiary level as shown by the increasing number of IP enrollees in colleges and universities. However, Aetas who enter in the higher education institution confront a multitude of problems and issues from personal to social aspects. This article attempts to determine the problems and issues encountered by the Aeta college students in one state university in Central Luzon, Philippines. Researcher-structured survey tool was administered to gather valuable data while focus group discussion and informal interviews were made to validate the survey results. Findings of the study revealed that the major problems and issues encountered by the students are mostly on verbal bullying, fear towards their teachers, language barrier, low self-esteem and academic pressure. A personality development and formation program, contextualized for the young IPs, is recommended for implementation in the University.

Keywords—Aeta students, indigenous people, Central Luzon, Zambales Aetas, Philippines

1. INTRODUCTION

As inscribed in most of the literatures, Zambales Aetas are described as “indigenous people who live in scattered, isolated mountainous parts of the island of Luzon.” Majority of the Aetas are dwelling in Zambales even before the Mt. Pinatubo erupted in June 1991. The existence of Aetas, colloquially known as “kabagis” (which means sibling) in Zambales is deemed to be very significant as they are believed to be the primordial ancestors of Filipinos.

The Philippine Constitution mandates the recognition and protection of the rights of indigenous cultural communities/indigenous peoples (ICCs/IPs) within the framework of national unity and development. The world’s indigenous children and youth face many problems including incarceration and lack of legal protection; illiteracy and drop-out rates; lack of culturally appropriated education and discrimination (UNPFII, 2002).

The enrollment of Aeta students in a state university in Central Luzon, Philippines has been gradually increasing. This also causes problems and issues regarding how indigenous people (IP) students cope up with the day-to-day encounter in the university. The university, being the lone state university in the province, envisions to be a progressive learner-centered research university recognized in the ASEAN Region in 2020 (BOR Resolution No. 84, 2015). This implies that the university should make sure that learners are given the best avenue for their holistic development.

Several studies have been conducted regarding the Aeta learners. These studies focused on the interplay of indigenous education and global citizenship in the Philippines (Cornelio & de Castro, 2016), indigenous knowledge systems and higher education in the country (Abejuela, 2007), non-formal education of the Aeta (Lihtenvalner, & Podgornik, 2012), attaining higher education and the effects of education on the Igorot community (Adonis & Couch, 2017). The dilemmas and pressing issues encountered by the Zambales Aeta students in higher education setting was not fully explored, hence, the researcher prompted to conduct the study.

The present study provides a glimpse on the dilemmas encountered by the Aeta College students and their perspectives on how to survive in their collegiate schooling. The study may serve as inputs for a personality development and formation program particularly contextualized for the young indigenous people of the university.

Specifically, it seeks to identify the reasons of the Aeta students in pursuing a bachelor’s degree; determine the dilemmas and issues of Aeta students in pursuing a college degree; document the practices of the young IPs in handling their dilemmas; and elicit the perspective of the
Aeta students in encouraging their fellow IPs who plan to pursue higher education.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Aetas of the Philippines

The Aeta is one of the Indigenous People (IP) of the Philippines. This IP is included in some forty ethnolinguistic communities classified as Negrito Tribes which are widely dispersed throughout Luzon, some islands in the Visayas, and some Provinces in Mindanao, the Negritos are the Ata, Aeta, Alta, Agta, Ati, Pugot, and Remontado (Abelardo, 1996).

Aetas are dark-skinned people, short (average height: 1.35-1.5 meters), small of frame, kinky haired, snub nosed, and with big black eyes (Headland, 1984). Considered by some as the direct descendants of the populations that first inhabited the archipelago during the Pleistocene Period (Headland et al., 1989; Gaillard, 2006), the Aetas’ small height, very dark complexion, and curly hair easily distinguish them from the majority of Filipinos who are taller and are characterized by brown skin and straight hair (Barrato & Benaning, 1978; Shimizu 1989; Gaillard, 2006). The Aeta belong to the oldest population of the Philippines, the Negrito. With small stature, curly hair and dark skin color, the Negrito are quite distinct from other Filipinos. The Mt. Pinatubo Aeta are variously called Aeta, Ayta, Ita, Baluga, Dumagat, Agta or Ati by neighboring Filipinos (Seitz, 1998). The approximately 50,000 Aetas counted on the slopes of Mt. Pinatubo in 1999 depend for their livelihood on cultivating root crops and other vegetables, hunting and fishing, and also on gathering plants and wild fruits that abound in their surroundings (Barrato & Benaning 1978; Shimizu, 1989; Gaillard, 2006).

Education for the Aetas

Ocampo and Ocampo (2014) mentioned that tribal people like the Aetas do not give much importance to formal education since their primary concern is on their basic needs such as food. But as years passed by, their importance to formal education has increased due to technological advancement and the challenges of the new industrial era. Indigenous communities in the Philippines, however, have been advocating for almost five decades for an education that is sensitive to, and reflective of, their cultural context, aspirations and concerns. This advocacy has intensified during the last twenty five years in light of increasing number of indigenous schools or education programs established and managed by the indigenous communities despite the existence of public schools in the area (Victor & Yano, 2015).

The country is one of the first nations in Asia to have passed a law recognizing the specific needs of its indigenous people (IP). In 1997, the Indigenous People’s Rights Act was passed into law to ensure that IPs have access to basic health and education (Cornelio & de Castro, 2016). Parkinson and Jones (2019) stressed that a culturally inclusive curriculum has increasingly been considered beneficial to all students.

The Philippine Department of Education (DepEd) responded with a national educational policy, the first comprehensive rights-based educational policy framework of the government. The implementation of the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPed) curriculum in the Philippines highlights the growing dissatisfaction of the indigenous communities with the educational system of the government, and their strong desire to provide an education that is deemed appropriate to their children and youth.

Soriano (2008) studied about a Filipino indigenous tribe called the Aetas and their experience of coping and survival in the public education system that is a product of over four hundred years of colonization of the Philippines. Amidst the loud cry by other indigenous groups in the Philippines for a culture-based education or the recognition and implementation of the indigenous education system, the Aetas in Bataan, oblivious to these efforts, have no other choice but to integrate into the mainstream system of education. In the process, they are faced with various factors that enable or disable their participation, performance and survival in the said system. These factors range from the students themselves, to the teacher, their parents, school and supporters. Culture proved to be an insignificant factor to the Aetas’ education, however, the majority of the Filipino IPs think otherwise.

III. METHODOLOGY

The research utilized a descriptive research design using mixed-methods approach. Survey tool, one-on-one interviews and focus group discussion (FGD) were utilized in the study. A total of nine (9) Aeta students purposively involved in a state university in Central Luzon, Philippines served as respondents of the study. The respondents satisfied the following selection criteria: (1) currently enrolled during the Academic Year (AY) 2015-2016; (2) enrolled under the teacher education programs, Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSEd) and Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEEd); (3) at least 18 years old; (4) belongs to Aeta ethnicity; and (5) finished at least 1 semester in the university. A researcher-made survey
questionnaire and structured interview and focus group discussion (FGD) guide served as the instruments of the study. The instruments’ validity and reliability were checked prior to the actual data gathering procedure.

The responses in the Likert scale type questionnaire were subjected to simple statistical analysis through frequency counts, mean and ranking. The responses in the interview and FGDs were subjected to thematic analysis wherein the underlying themes and ideas were identified. Interview responses were content analyzed and manually coded by the researcher. Participants’ responses in Filipino were translated to English. The resulting coded responses were then categorized into themes, and the frequency count of the responses under each category was done.

Ethical considerations were observed in the study. Proper approval from authorities were secured. The informed consent forms from the respondents were obtained prior to the data gathering procedure. The identity of the respondents were not revealed. The researcher likewise observed the emotions of the Aeta students as they share their experiences, they were informed that they can withdraw their participation from the study anytime that they want to. Informant feedback was made to validate the results obtained from the interview and FGD.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondents’ Reasons for Enrolling in a Bachelor’s Degree

As gleaned from Table 1, most of the respondents pursue collegiate degree to help their family.

| Reason                  | F* | Rank |
|-------------------------|----|------|
| To help the family      | 9  | 1    |
| To help fellow Aetas    | 8  | 2    |
| Share knowledge         | 2  | 4    |
| Serve the community     | 4  | 3    |

*multiple-response

One respondent said that “Kumuha ako ng kursong Education dahil gusto kong ibahagi kung ano ang meron ako, para matulungan ko ang mga magulang ko at upang makapagsilbi sa bayan (I took up Education course because I want to share my knowledge and skills, to help my parents from poverty, and to help my fellows).” Young teachers teach to contribute towards societal transformation, educational reform and improvement of students’ life (Rogayan, 2018). Another respondent said, “Nag-aaral po ako para sa pamilya ko. Para sa kanila ang pagtitiyaga ko (I study because of my family, my perseverance in the studies is inspired by them {family}).” The influence of the family has been found out to be very significant among Filipinos, to imply that culture largely affects decision making like the career choice (Abulon, 2010).

The Aeta students also pursue a degree to help their fellow Aetas. One notable response pertaining to this is: “Malapit ang puso ko sa mga bata. Noon na lang gusto ko na talagang magturuan. Gusto kong tulungan ang mga kapwa ko Aeta para sila rin ay maging magatumpay (My heart is for the kids. Even before, I really wanted to teach. I want to help my fellow Aetas so that they will also become successful).” Related to this is the reason of the respondents to serve the community which ranked as third. One respondent said that “Gusto kong tumulong sa komunidad namin. ‘Pag nakapagtapos na ako, gusto kong turuan ang mga Aetang gaya ko. Halos lahat kasi sa amin hindi na nagpapatuloy. Maharap po kasi... mahirap ang buhay... (I want to help our community. When I finished schooling, I want to teach the young Aetas like me because most of the time, young Aetas stop from schooling. The reason is mainly poverty... life is hard).”

The respondents also reasoned out that pursuing a degree would give them the opportunity to share their knowledge. One respondent stressed that “Gusto kong i-share sa iba ‘yung mga natutunan at matutunan ko bilang estudyante. Pipilitin kong tapusin ang course na ito [Education] (I want to share my knowledge, I will strive hard to finish the course).”

It can be inferred that the respondents have various reasons in pursuing a degree specifically a teaching course. They prefer Education as a career primarily because they want to help their fellow Aetas in the community. According to Abulon (2010), the love of sharing knowledge to others, love for children, opportunity to inspire and to mold the minds of young people are examples of altruistic behavior.

Furthermore, Rogayan (2018) emphasized that teaching may not be a profitable profession but it has been considered as the noblest mission, vocation and profession which contributes mainly to the non-material satisfaction of individuals who are engaged in it.

Dilemmas and Issues of the Aeta Students in Pursuing a College Degree

A number of dilemmas and issues confront the Aeta students in the university. Table 2 shows the problems that the young IPs are facing.

Low self-esteem (3.80) ranked first among the dilemmas and issues confronting the Aeta students. One

https://theshillonga.com/index.php/jhed
respondent said “Nahihiya po ako na makahalalibio sa iba. Kaya tahimik lang po ako sa klase (I feel ashamed of dealing with my peers so I chose to stay quiet in class).” Another respondent shared, “Mahirap makibagay. Parang ang hirap pakisamahan ang mga tao. Tingin sa Aeta, malit lang talaga. ‘Hindi makatapos ‘yan…’ sinasabi ng iba. Pinagpi-pray ko na lang sila (It’s hard to deal with others. They see us, Aetas, as weak and small. People discourage us so oftentimes I just ask God’s guidance).”

Table 2: Dilemmas and Issues Faced by Aeta Students

| Dilemma/ Issue       | Mean | QI   | Rank |
|----------------------|------|------|------|
| Verbal bullying      | 3.40 | Always | 3    |
| Low self-esteem      | 3.80 | Always | 1    |
| Academic pressure    | 3.60 | Always | 2    |
| Language barrier     | 3.10 | Sometimes | 4   |
| Fear toward teachers | 2.60 | Sometimes | 5   |
| Lack of family support | 2.50 | Seldom | 6    |

Weighted Mean 3.17 Sometimes

*QI (Qualitative Interpretation)

The university students likewise face academic pressure (3.60). The following statements from the respondents stress this problem:

1. “Minsan po hindi ko naiintindihan yung lesson... lalo na 'yung sobrang lalim na English(Sometimes, I face difficulty in understanding the lesson especially when lectured in high sounding English).”

2. “Nawawala po ako minsan sa focus... pero sinusubukan ko pong intindihan lahath... lalo sa mabihirap na subjects...(I sometimes lose my focus but I strive to understand the lessons especially the difficult ones).”

3. “Iba na yung way ng pagtuturo pag College kaya medyo nas-aadjust pa rin po ako. Kakayanin ko po...(College teaching is far different from high school that’s why I still adjust. But I know I can do it).”

Verbal bullying (3.40) came next among the dilemmas being confronted by the IP student. One respondent said “Hindi ko po alam bakit yung iba ganoon [bully], parang kapag nakikita nila kami, kalang na lang po tingnan nila kami mula ulo hanggang paa. Naisip ko minsan, may mali ba sa pagiging Aeta? (I just don’t understand why others bully IPs like us. I feel bad and discriminated). Another respondent disclosed, “Magtatawag na na lang sila agad... sabay titingin sa amin... pinapabayaan na lang po amin... Papatunayan namin na makapagpatatapos din kami (They just laugh at us from nowhere. We just ignore them. We will prove them wrong that we are capable of graduating from our degree).”

Language barrier (3.10), fear towards instructors (2.60) and lack of family support (2.50) are also some issues that the students are encountering.

Notable responses along this facet are the following:

1. “Nakakaintindi naman po ako ng English... minsan nga lang po... sobrang lalim na kaya... di ko po naiintindihan yung topic sa klase (I can understand only few English words that’s why oftentimes I can’t understand the lesson when taught in English).”

2. “Okay naman po yung mga instructor namin, may time lang po na nakakadama ako ng takot... ewan ko po ba... Feeling ko po lagi akong tatawagin sa recitation...(Our instructors are good. Sometimes, I am afraid to them because they might call me to recite in the class).”

3. “Sabi ng mga kamag-anak nam, may time lang po na nakakadama ako ng takot... ewan ko po ba... Feeling ko po lagi akong tatawagin sa recitation...(Our instructors are good. Sometimes, I am afraid to them because they might call me to recite in the class).”

The various issues and problems encountered by the respondents support the findings of UNPFFI (2002) which states that the indigenous children faces problems on the lack of culturally appropriated education and discrimination. Adonis & Couch (2017) have the same findings that language id one major difficulties that in one way or the other IP learners have to overcome when entering a higher learning institution.

Further, Tindowen (2016) found out in his study that the money received by Aeta parents from the Pantawid Pampamiya Pilipino Program (4Ps) program are used to pay for the education of their children. The 4Ps is a poverty reduction and social development strategy of the Philippine government that provides conditional cash grants to extremely poor households to improve their health, nutrition and education.
Practices of the Students in Handling Different Dilemmas in the University

When asked of the practices they do in handling dilemmas as university students, the respondents answered various ways (Table 3).

| Ways                                      | F*  | Rank |
|-------------------------------------------|-----|------|
| Praying to God                            | 6   | 1    |
| Ignoring the bullies                      | 4   | 2    |
| Asking advice from elders                 | 2   | 3.5  |
| Keeping in mind their life dreams and family | 3   | 4.5  |
| Giving more time in studying              | 2   | 3.5  |
| Starting to mingle with the non-Aeta people | 3   | 4.5  |

*multiple-response

Based from the data in Table 3, praying to God ranked first among the major ways in handling dilemmas with 6 responses. One notable answer is: “Tinuruan po kami na huwag manakit ng kapwa kaya kapag binubully nila ako, hindi ko na lang po masyadong kinikimkim sa loob ko. Mahirap pong magtanim ng galit sa puso kaya ipinagdadasal ko na lang po sa Diyos(We were taught not to inflict physical violence to others. If I’m being bullied, I just ignore them. I do not keep grudge in myself, I just pray to God for enlightenment).” Ignoring the bullies ranked second with four responses. One noteworthy response along this facet is “Pinabayaan ko na lang ang mga nambubully sa akin... hindi naman po ako nagpapaapekto sa kanila...(I just ignore those who make fun of me. I make sure it doesn’t interfere with my studies.)”

Other ways given by the respondents include asking advice from elders, giving more time in studying, keeping in mind their life dreams and family and starting to mingle with the non-Aeta people. Sample statements made by the respondents relative to these ways follow:

1. “Sinubihan kami ng mga teachers namin na kailangan mag-focus at huwag papaapekto sa mga sabi-sabi ng ibang tao. Isipin daw namin ang pangarap namin (Our teachers would encourage us to focus in our studies. They remind me to ignore and not be affected with what others say. We are always reminded of our life goals and aspirations).”

2. “Hindi kami iba, kaya walang dahilan para hindi kami makahilabilo sa mga kaklase namin na hindi Aeta na gaya namin(Mingle with people, don’t isolate yourself).”

Based from the responses, it can be inferred that the Aeta students suggested doable and feasible ways of handling dilemmas and issues in their academic journey. In a personal experience of an IP, she instilled in her mind that gaining a formal education and finishing a degree will give the confidence to survive in the mainstream society (Adonis & Couch, 2017).

Respondents’ Advice to their Fellow IPs on Pursuing College Education

The experiences, dilemmas encountered and perspectives of the Aeta students led them to share their advice to their fellow IPs who, like them, want to pursue university schooling. The themes of their advice are presented in Table 5.

Most of the respondents advice their fellow IPs to be not “swayed by what others think and say.” As individuals with dreams and aspirations, they would ignore other people who discourage them from reaching their dreams. The following statements stress this theme:

1. “Wala ng epekto yung mga sinasabi ng iba sa amin... basta wala kaming ginagawang masama... patuloy lang kami(What others tell negatively about us do not matter anymore as long as we are in the right track).”

2. “Oo iba kami sa lahat... pero sa tingin ko... kailangan din naming gawin yung mga bagay na gusto namin na hindi nakikinig sa mga pambubully ng iba(We acknowledge our difference from the rest and we are eager to do things that we yearn the most no matter how others will treat us).”

IP students are received negatively by classmates where they admit to being Indigenous, in some instances being called derogatory names (Adonis & Couch, 2017).

Table 5: Respondents’ Advice to their Fellow IPs on Pursuing Higher Education

| Theme                                                      | F*  | Rank |
|------------------------------------------------------------|-----|------|
| Don’t be swayed by what others think and say               | 6   | 1    |
| Ask guidance and peace of mind from God                    | 3   | 3    |
Have a vision and focus on your life goals 1 5
Persevere, exert extra efforts to finish the course. 2 4
Mingle with different people and don’t be ashamed of who you are. 4 2

“multiple-response

To “mingle with different people and don’t be ashamed of who you are” ranked second with four responses. The respondents are firm that mingling with others could create collaboration and synergy. The following statements from the respondents reiterated this theme:

1. “Kailangan din nating makihalubilo sa iba. Huwag tayong mahihiya kung anong tayo. Idevelop natin ang karunungan natin lalo sa teknolohiya(Mingle with other people. Be proud of who you are. Let’s harness our knowledge especially in technology.”

2. “Paano tayo unlad kung hindi tayo makikipag-usap o makihalubilo sa lahat... mas matututo tayo kung makakarinig tayo ng payo sa iba(To develop yourself holistically, communicate with others. Listen to the good advice of other people).”

Tertiary education functions as a political activity, which disconnects indigenous communities from their roots so that the communities routinely neglect their traditional practices and indigenous knowledge (Barua & Wilson, 2005). Therefore, local knowledge and ways of learning are hardly recognized and talked about in universities (Adonis & Couch, 2017).

The respondents also advice their fellows to “ask guidance and peace of mind from God, to persevere, exert extra efforts to finish the course, and to have a vision and focus on your life goals.” The following responses were made along this aspect:

1. “Andyan lagi si God. Kapit lang sa Kanya(God always listens. Just keep the faith).”

2. “Si God ay laging nakikinig. Kausapin lang natin Siya at huwag kaliminatang pasalamatan(God is good all the time. Just have time to talk and thank Him).”

3. “Doble-sipag lang. Wala na dapat tamad sa panahon ngayon. Mahirap ang buhay... sobra.(Be industrious and persevering now that life is very difficult).”

4. “Dapat alam nyo kung bakit kayo nag-aaral, kung para saan yung pagtitiyaga nyo(Know your purpose why you are studying and learn to prioritize things).”

It appears from the students’ responses their intense encouragement for their fellow Aeta who wanted to experience university schooling. This supported the conclusion of Abulon (2010) that inspiration from role models or pressures from significant others are part and parcel of Filipino culture of having interdependent selves.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study determined the dilemmas encountered by Aeta students as they are pursuing their higher education degree in a university. The study concludes that the main reason why Aeta students pursue a bachelor's degree is to help their family and fellow indigenous peoples (IPs). The major problems and issues encountered by the young Aeta students are mostly on verbal bullying, fear towards their teachers, language barrier, low self-esteem and academic pressure. Asking God’s providence and ignoring the bullies are practices that Aeta students do to handle difficult situations they encounter in the university. Aeta college students have very positive perspective for their fellows who also aspire to experience a life in the university.

The study recommends that scholarship grants and financial assistance may be extended to the young IPs for them to have sufficient money to spend for their academic requirements and other scholarly activities for them finish their baccalaureate degree. Teachers and non-teaching staff may be fully vigilant on the incidence of verbal bullying in the classrooms and university premises that may affect the mental health of the young IPs. The Office of the Guidance Counseling and the IP Education (IPED) coordinator of the University may conduct a personality development and formation program contextualized for the Zambales Aeta college students to boost their self-esteem, to strengthen their ways in managing problems, and to make them feel that they are equally-important part of the university. IPED-sensitive curriculum may also be crafted to make the teacher education program more inclusive and more relevant for the IP education students.

Since the present study only involved Zambales Aeta students, future study may also involve other IP students in the University to have a comprehensive study on the problems they encountered in the educational setting. Likewise, in-depth analysis of the different problems identified in this paper may be done to come up with more specific and sustainable solutions.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to acknowledge the President Ramon Magsaysay State University – San Marcelino for the support in the conduct of the study, the College of Education, Arts & Sciences program chairs for the assistance; and the BSEd and BEEd Aeta students of Academic Year 2015-2016 for sharing their personal experiences in the school for this research undertaking.

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