Relatedness and Competence as Positive Developmental Outcomes of College Learning

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Relatedness and Competence in College Students' Response to Perceived Facilitators and Inhibitors of Learning

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For virtually all Filipinos, a college diploma symbolizes the attainment of a major life's goal, along with the hard work that led to its attainment, and the promise of professional success, financial stability, and personal stature. Completion of a college education being a developmental milestone in actuality or from the perception of students and their families, it behooves human developmental specialists studying the transition from adolescence to adulthood to examine the Filipino college experience. In particular, it is important to characterize, in the context of school experience, how Filipino youth develop the competencies and outlook for effectively recognizing and assuming social roles and forming adult identities (c.f., Furstenberg, 2000). This paper is an attempt to characterize the Filipino college experience in this regard.

While adulthood entails maturity in decision-making, self-reliance, and the responsible assumption of social roles, these outcomes, obviously, are not automatically achieved. In noting such, Sta. Maria (2007) also notes that Filipino adolescents, in their process of maturing, recognize their need for support from adults and their desire to form meaningful relationships; still, Filipino adolescents already are adjusted, optimistic, and happy even while still working towards achievement.

Given this characterization of Filipino adolescents, it is reasonable to assume that the Filipino college experience - in particular, the process towards educational achievement - has a markedly relational slant. In fact, this relational slant is consistent with the Filipinos' interdependent or collectivist culture.

Likewise, it is reasonable to assume that Filipinos' cultural meaning or valuing of educational success or achievement incorporates the Filipinos' relational self. For example, among Filipinos, not only does the college graduate have a claim to a college diploma, but so does his/her family. Moreover, the Filipino college graduate is not only known to acknowledge the contribution of his/her family to his/her success; this graduate is also known to acknowledge an "utang na loob" (debt of gratitude) towards family, together with an earnest desire to provide the family's financial support.

COMBINING PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL PERSPECTIVES

In this attempt to characterize the Filipino college experience as a venue for the transition from adolescence to adulthood, the authors assume, within a developmental context, both psychological and social perspectives, as was proposed by Furlong, Whipple, St. Jean, Simental, Soliz and Punthuna (2003) in their framework of school engagement in multiple contexts.

A psychological perspective is used in this study in that it aimed to generate information and insights on the ways in which, and the extent to which, students value education, work towards their educational goals, and harness resources and overcome barriers presented by their learning environments.   Given that adolescents are active agents of their development, it is important to know their perceptions and values.

On the other hand, this study takes on a social perspective in that it recognizes the importance of characterizing human development in the

specific social (as well as cultural) context in which it occurs. Such context is critical given Filipinos' relational self; it also is critical because it is through one's socialization and one's social network that the individual is influenced by others (Robins & Kashima, 2008) and thereby establishes an adult identity (Bucholtz, 2002).

THE DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF
SCHOOL EXPERIENCE CONSIDERED

Students' day-to-day experiences have intrinsic worth as they serve as a backdrop not only for the task of attaining educational goals, but also for the transitioning from adolescence to adulthood. With youth spending most of their time in school, their school experience is naturally important to document and to study. Witkow and Fuligni (2007), for instance, had students document in a diary checklist their day-to-day experiences (e.g., number of daily school demands, positive or negative school feelings). Their study showed that these day-to-day experiences mediate the relationship between student goals and student achievement outcomes.

Given this study's social perspective, the youth's school social network (largely consisting of their teachers and peers) formed part of the description of the youth's school experience. College youth's experience within the school social network is important to document as this network influences the extent of the youth's school engagement or involvement (Jimerson, Campos & Greif, 2003).

Thus, in this study participants were asked to describe and evaluate their teachers and classmates as to how they facilitate or hinder learning. Aside from describing this social network, the participants also were asked to

enumerate and describe the various activities for their courses. Not only do the youth devote much time to these activities, the youth's academic success is determined largely by the quality of their performance in these activities. There is of course the possibility that the competencies that form a mature adult self are developed through these course activities. The prevalent type of learning activities in a university or of a specific group, as well as the prevalent attitude and response to these activities, may very well be founded on particular cultural beliefs about learning (Schommer-Aikins & Easter, 2008).

Together with an account of student experiences (their teachers, classmates, and activities), participants in this study also described how they study. In particular, they were asked to discuss strategies or techniques they employ when studying and the motivations that drive them to study hard or to excel. The youth's descriptions and evaluations of how and why they study may suggest how they respond or react to their activities, teachers, and classmates; these may also be indicative of the competencies they are developing. When school experience and students' actions (in way of learning strategies and motivations) are discussed in light of the value they ascribe to education, one's account of the youth's school experience will provide a clear picture of how effective school and learning are in facilitating the youth transition into adulthood.

The objective of this research, therefore, was to determine, through focus group discussions, in what ways Filipino college students perceive their course activities, teachers, and classmates as facilitators or inhibitors of their learning. In addition, the current research also aimed to describe the students' learning practices, their motivations for studying, and the value they ascribe to education.

Participants

Participants were college students from two private universities in Manila, one private university each in Pampanga and in Cavite, and one state university in Mindanao. Participants majored in various education, engineering, humanities, social science, science, and medical-related courses. They were recruited through faculty and student contacts.

Procedure

Five focus group discussions (FGDs), one from each participating university, were conducted. For each FGD, there were a total of 12 to 20 participants, with about equal numbers of males and females. All FGDs were audiotaped and an assistant took notes during the FGDs.

The questions, more often than not, were asked in the order in which these are listed in the Appendix. Some of these questions were skipped, or allotted only little time, if participants' responses to earlier questions already substantially addressed these questions. Probe or follow-up questions were asked as needed.

For each topic discussed in the FGDs, conceptually similar data strands were put together and resulting categories were labeled and described. Underlying themes that run across the categories were identified.

RESULTS

Facilitators and Inhibitors of Learning

Courses activities. Participants were involved in various course activities, namely, lectures, examinations, discussions and seminars, research papers and reports, field trips, and hands-on projects and applications.

Course activities that participants considered as promoters of learning are those that ensure their acquisition of knowledge and skills; moreover, these activities must compel them to work hard. For example, participants prefer research activities over rote memorization. They also said they learn better when teachers assign homework after a lecture and conduct recitations every session. Participants also prefer activities that prepare them for their future profession (e.g., practicum, board exam reviews, involvement in organizations) and that are applied rather than theoretical (e.g., laboratory projects and case analysis). Lastly, participants value interactions and the exchange of insights and ideas with their teachers.

Participants considered as inhibitors of learning those activities that are either irrelevant, too easy, or too hard. They did not value minor courses and lessons unrelated to their majors. They did not learn much from very simple tasks, such as rote memorization, or from very technical or unnecessarily complicated activities. Requirements that are too many, given the allotted time, also did not help participants learn.

Teachers and their pedagogy. What help participants learn are teachers who explain well and simplify difficult topics (e.g., situate abstract

concepts in an appropriate context), who are efficient (e.g., employ innovative pedagogies, are punctual, give feedback about student performance), and who provoke and inspire students to learn. Participants appreciate teachers who are knowledgeable (e.g., teachers who don't stop learning or who possess extensive knowledge) and who are personable (e.g., have a sense of humor, are fun, behave like a family member or friend).

On the other hand, participants find learning harder when teachers do not explain well or in detail, exerting little effort in helping students learn. Participants appear to be affected by the demeanor of teachers who think poorly about, or have a negative attitude towards them (e.g., those who address or describe students using foul or derogatory terms).

Classmates. Participants report receiving a lot of support from their classmates. This support comes by way of motivating them to be as good as others (e.g., through friendly competition); through their interactions in which encouragement is extended and through which friendship develops; and, through actual assistance extended (e.g., group study, classmate's willingness to answer questions, stimulating class discussions). They also are inspired by their classmates' academic achievements, and are encouraged by their classmates' academic expectations of them.

On the other hand, the lack of order, silence, and cleanliness in the classroom discourages participants from learning. Their peers' negative habits, such as cheating, absenteeism, not studying while depending to much on others' help, and not contributing to group work also pose barriers to learning. Peers who gamble or drink also have a negative influence on them.

LEARNING PRACTICES, REASONS FOR STUDYING, AND VALUE OF EDUCATION

When asked to describe their study techniques, participants emphasized the way in which they manage their study hours. They determine which courses or activities take priority over others, and they find the best time and place to study, arranging their study area so as to make it more conducive to thinking. They described techniques for acquiring, organizing, and retaining what is being studied; these include memorization techniques, note-taking and organization strategies, and strategies for reading, review, practice, and understanding (e.g., frequent use of dictionary, reading notes soon after lecture). Participants also reported setting goals, such as having a target grade and increasing one's efforts after getting a low or failing grade.

Participants pointed out some habits that they need to have: discipline (e.g. not procrastinating, consistency in one's efforts to study), focus and determination (e.g., prioritizing studies over just having fun, willingness to work hard), and critical thinking.

Participants stated many reasons or motivations for studying. An intrinsic liking for and valuing of what they do drive them to try their best. For some, the fear or possibility of failing and the shame that goes with it drive them to study harder.

More than course-related motivators, however, what drives them to study hard is the opportunity to go to college in spite of financial difficulties coupled with the thought of their parents or a sibling struggling to work to

finance their schooling. They desire to succeed to make their families proud, to provide for their families, and to work for a stable career and financial stability.

The reasons participants gave for valuing education parallel the reasons they gave for what motivate them to study. Thus, they cited the intrinsic value of education and of learning (e.g., learning and knowledge are important in themselves, are useful, and are a source of pride). Participants also said that education develops self and character and gives them worth or stature. It appears that the greater value of education for them is the financial benefit that their families can derive from their having a college degree, as well as the future career opportunities open to them.

UNDERLYING THEMES ON COLLEGE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Five underlying themes run through participants' accounts of their learning experience. Two of these five themes point towards the primacy of personal relationships in the participants' college experience. One sense in which relationships take primacy is that learning almost always happens amidst positive relationships. Participants find themselves involved in learning when there are lively classroom interactions, when teachers are amiable, when there is mutual exchange of help and support among classmates, and when parents support and inspire them. They express regret over, and are not indifferent about, teachers who dislike students as a whole and classmates who are not serious about learning.

The other sense in which relationships have primacy in the participants college experience is their intrinsic need for and satisfaction received from meaningful relationships. While participants express how respect between teacher and students, friendships among classmates, and good family relationships help or motivate them to learn, they all the more express an appreciation of these relationships beyond the learning support they receive, indicating that these are in themselves highly valued.

Whereas the previously mentioned two themes point towards the primacy of personal relationships in the participants' college experience, two other themes point towards college learning as a venue for exhibiting and developing competence. First, the understanding of knowledge and acquisition of skills by themselves are important to the participants. They thus value what contribute to these, such as competent and knowledgeable teachers, appropriate course activities, effective study techniques, and an interest in their work. Second, participants value engaging in tasks that are actual applications of knowledge or principles, specially tasks similar to what are done in their target professions or that develop the competencies needed in these professions. Third, they value hard work and a learning environment that facilitates it. Hence, they set and acquire learning or achievement goals and appreciate course activities that facilitate goal attainment. They express concern about inhibitors of learning such as the lack of silence and order among themselves, and the desire to acquire good work habits such as discipline and determination.

A fifth theme sets academic achievement at the stage of filial and familial piety and gratitude, revealing an interface between the construct of competence evident in the first three themes mentioned and the construct of relatedness in the last two themes. In many instances,

participants recognize families' financial and personal struggles in sending them to school; they articulate their dream of professional success and financial stability in order to make their parents proud and to pay back their debt-of-gratitude. While they express wanting to earn for their future families, they also express wanting to improve the economic status of their parents and siblings. They see academic achievement as a necessary preceding goal to this twin-goal of professional success and financial stability for filial and familial reasons.

DISCUSSION

There is a two-fold aspect to the way the youth construct their academic experience: on the one hand, there are their perceptions about "going to school," which speak of how they value their friends, the way they approach academic material, and how they navigate the demands of the classroom and demands from both classmates and teachers; on the other hand, there is their appreciation of "education" and the value they may or may not ascribe to it.

This study can report but not validate students' claims of what facilitate or hinder their learning. Although what they perceive to be facilitators may indeed lead to better learning outcomes, it is just as possible that their perceptions are not borne out by results. Thus the focus here is on the meanings that school experiences hold for the youth, especially the positive and negative outcomes that they believe these experiences engender.

Relatedness and the Value of Education

Relatedness is a major theme that emerges from the statements that students agree on, and it is a theme that cuts across the topics of the FGDs. It underpins interest in school activities, response to teachers, and the meaning of education for the youth.

Relatedness fosters emotional engagement (Skinner et al. 2008) and for students, school work is made enjoyable, or at least bearable, simply by virtue of being able to work and interact with their friends or classmates. Indeed, it is quite possible that for some students, friends and relationships constitute the sole reason for attending classes. Students admitted that fostering the sense of relatedness could come into conflict with academics, as when a "barkada" decides to cut classes to go do something else, or when more conscientious students feel put upon by "dependent" classmates who rely on the work and notes of others.

Much can also be learned from what is not said in FGDs, in particular, from the absence of references to family in perceptions regarding "going to school". Although participants frequently mentioned their family members' struggles in providing financial means for their education and the inspirations that their family members' struggles give to them, they did not mention their parents or other family members as motivations for or facilitators of learning. This of course does not mean that family does not affect schoolwork, but it suggests a disconnectedness between family life and school life. The social reality might be that parents are too busy, unwilling, ill-equipped, or are otherwise unavailable to involve themselves in their children's school concerns. This is coupled with the absence of any reported mentoring relationships or of any reported significant adult role-models other than the teacher.

It is really in the perceptions of the value of education where there is broad agreement on the family as an influential unit, in fact, as the major justification for completing an education, thus displacing peers as the significant entity. There is a sense that finishing their education for the sake of the family is an end in itself and that, therefore, they should persevere despite all difficulties (c.f., Tuason, 2008). This sense of and concern for family is very evident in the way participants talked about their obligation and "utang na loob" (sense of gratitude) to their family and in their earnest commitment to help the family after graduation, both as recognition of the selfless sacrifice of their parents and relatives.

Another notable lacuna is the absence of any expressed sentiment that school is useless or irrelevant, the "anti-school attitude" identified by Furnham and Rawles in their British sample (1996). Admittedly, Furnham and Rawles were studying attitudes towards school and education in the context of graduating and job opportunities, but the questions posed in our research could have certainly been answered in a way indicating a negative valuation of education. The participants were forthright in characterizing policies, teachers, and classmates that they find problematic, so it seems reasonable to suppose that they were not hesitant about expressing any contrary opinions regarding the value of education if they did have one. Here we might infer the mark of how Filipino culture has shaped the youth's positive valuing of education.

Thus, despite the way in which some might have far-from-fond associations regarding school-life, education is still social, construed by the Filipino youth as a necessity and an unqualified good. Overtly at least, the youth seem to subscribe to the received notion that, in the words of

one respondent, "kung walang education mahirap mabuhay sa mundo" (if one does not have an education, it would be hard to survive in the real world).

This kind of valuing of education becomes quite understandable if we return to the importance that the participants gave to the family in connection with their education. A strong theme in the FGDs is recognizing one's "utang-na-loob" (debt of gratitude) towards the family that supported the youth in his or her schooling. Given this moral and cultural imperative, to avow that education is unimportant is to repudiate the value of the "utang-na-loob" that the student has towards the family. It may be a grave affront to the Filipino idea of parent-child relations to voice the sentiment that education is not important and the sacrifice and support of the family are meaningless.

The picture we have so far suggests is that for the Filipino youth, relatedness to peers provides the attachment necessary for "going to school," while the family provides a major motivation for finishing an "education". The silence regarding the role of the family in study habits and academic life is also a feature of the data worth pursuing since it highlights how, despite the overarching concern about the welfare of the family, peers have taken over as primary surrogates in supporting the day-to-day demands of school. However, the issue of peers' dominant school influence relative to parents' was not specifically addressed in this study, and a thorough discussion will have to await future data.

Competence and Engagement

With regard to how the youth are motivated to engage in academic work itself, that is, in the actual act of studying, a telling point is that the their

learning strategies and motivations for studying are distinct, and even appear to be disconnected from, the things that they find positive in their academic experience.

That there is a markedly extrinsic character in the students' sources of motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2000) along with a possession of a limited repertoire of learning strategies appears to be a justified conclusion; this is because the academic tasks that participants find inherently interesting, and in which they find themselves deeply involved in, are limited to very specific activities (e.g. laboratory work, field trips, or specific subjects) that are not typical of nor intrinsic in the classroom experience. Students, for example, enjoy working in groups with their peers, or express interest in creative projects. The more typical course activities and requirements, however, such as taking on reading assignments, writing individual research and critique papers, and sitting for examinations, may not allow for the kind of enjoyment that participants described. In fact, even when participants frequently mentioned their desire to focus on their studies, they did not report applying elaborated learning strategies that go beyond memorization, review, and practice (despite follow-up probes), indicating a lack of engagement in the more traditional thinking-and-writing activities. Thus, students' expressed enjoyment in extrinsic aspects of learning, and the lack of articulation of its intrinsic aspects, suggest that when asked to speak about motivations for studying, what was in their minds was "what makes you study in spite of yourself?"

Of the extrinsic motivators for studying, relatedness with peers again figures in a large way, but students also make much out of their relationships with professors. The way the teachers are described gives the impression that the perceptions about them as persons greatly affect

the perceptions of the subject matter itself. Crucially, students are able to make distinctions between the emotional attachment fostered by the teacher and whether the teacher is able to elicit competence and understanding from the class. A "friendly" teacher can also be an "effective" teacher, but students recognize that the two aspects are independent of each other.

Another contextual feature affecting engagement with academic tasks is the public nature of academic performance. Successes and failures in class have the potential of being broadcast far and wide, or so students believe. This is reflected in their reports of finding competition among classmates motivating, or the shame of others knowing that "Nine years ka na sa school" (You've been studying for nine years already). Reputations, good and bad, count a lot, and the demand for competence is felt keenly by students. From the FGDs, such demands are seen as leading either to greater motivation or the beginnings of disaffection if the demands are seen as unfair or unreasonable.

Although this discussion has so far made much of the difference between "going to school" and valuing "education", there is a thread that consistently runs throughout statements pertaining to these two issues; this is the consensus on the necessarily applied value of learning, that is, studying is no good if it is not useful. But what do students mean by terms such as "applied" or "relevant" when they use these to talk about subjects and lessons that they perceive positively? Looking at the subjects and lessons that they do find meaningful, we can begin to infer that there is a strong sense of pragmatism in the youth's attitude towards education. The expectation is that education is a means to achieve desired personal goals. Although fulfilling family obligations is one of these goals, a more

individual and agentic theme is more apparent in their narratives. It seems that for the college undergraduate, the evaluation of any given academic material is a matter of answering certain questions: Will the things being taught help me pass and graduate? Will they enhance my personal life? Will they guarantee my future success?

Education and Adulthood

The youth's predominantly pragmatic outlook of the purpose of education may be construed as symptomatic of the values of a developing economy like the Philippines, but data are mixed on whether youth's socio-economic status influences their educational aspirations (Massey, Gebhardt, & Garnefski, 2008). An alternative explanation, however, might be found by taking into account the wider circumstances of the youth transitioning into adulthood. Although participants' expectations about their post-university life was not addressed in the FGDs, their statements about the value of education reveal their ideas about what education can do for them as adults.

A positive valuation of family life is believed to be related to thinking in terms of future life-goals (Pulkkinen 1990). Thus, requiring students to talk about the value of education activates not just cultural mores regarding the family but also a future-orientedness that one would not find in their statements about "going to school." It is clear that the youth expect much of what they will be able to do after completing their studies. In a way, students do not see themselves projecting their school life onto their future vocational life; that is, the attitudes with which they will "go to work" would be different, more serious and mature, perhaps, than their attitudes when they were just somehow "going to school". Thus, the

youth expect a sense of passage or of transformation from schooling to worklife and adulthood, which is initiated and facilitated by schooling and comes close to completion when schooling is completed. We might go as far as saying that for the youth, the value of education is in the way it will confirm their status as adults.

Positive Developmental Outcomes of College Learning

Relatedness to peers, teachers, and family is the lifeline that students believe enables them to cope with the demands of college life and leads them to aspire for worthy goals. It is a shared kind of success and relevance. They also feel a sense of competence in a school setting that fosters an attitude of sustained interest and engagement, serving as the germ for future vocations. This latter is an insight into the youth's idea of personal achievement and mastery. Lastly, education is seen as the final proving ground for their eventual adult identities. Implicitly, there is the belief in the perfectibility not just of skills and knowledge but also of personalities, and that education will somehow deliver this development. Far from being indifferent, the youth project their ideal selves to that place just beyond the threshold of graduation, a world of work and new roles, a place both distant and close.

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Guide Questions for the Focus Group Discussions

1. What are the typical activities and requirements in your subjects? Which activities and requirements help you learn and why? Which activities and requirements do not help you learn and why?

2. What are your favorite subjects? What make you like these subjects? What subjects don't you like? What make you dislike these subjects?

3. How do your teachers teach? What is it that you like in the way they teach? What is it that you don't like in the way they teach?

4. In what ways are your classmates of help in your studies? In what ways are your classmates a hindrance in your studies?

5. How do you study? Please share with us your study techniques.

6. What motivates you to study? What discourages you from studying?

7. When you achieve something, who or what do you regard to be responsible for that achievement?

8. What can be derived from one's education? How important is education to you? Why is it important?

9. What three things can be improved in your schooling? How can these be improved?

NOTES ON THE PAPER

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