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THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS ON ACCESSIBILITY OF EDUCATION FOR MARGINALIZED SECTORS

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the implementation of programs by the Local Government of Paniqui aimed at improving access to education among marginalized sectors, with an emphasis on local implementation and administrative practices. Using qualitative data gathered from both program implementers and beneficiaries, the research highlights how educational assistance has contributed to increased school participation and helped break the cycle of poverty. The findings show that while these programs have successfully supported many students in completing their education and improving their quality of life, gaps remain in implementation, specifically in the areas of funding, assessments, and communication. Respondents identified the absence of a structured evaluation mechanism and the risks of favoritism, which undermine the credibility and effectiveness of the initiatives. Additionally, the study emphasizes the importance of inter-agency collaboration, adequate funding, and strong communication strategies in delivering equitable and efficient support. The implications for public administration are significant, calling for more inclusive, transparent, and evidence-based approaches in designing and managing educational programs. Ultimately, the study underscores that educational assistance is not merely a form of aid, but a strategic investment in human capital, community development, and nation-building.

INTRODUCTION

The late revolutionary and political leader Nelson Mandela once said, “Education is the only thing you need to change the world.” Education fosters a person’s critical thinking and social and moral development, providing them with access to better job opportunities. Consequently, education serves as a powerful tool to improve an individual's economic status and nurture their civic and social responsibilities to the community. However, even if education is a basic human right, a lot of people struggle to enjoy educational opportunities because of poverty.

In the international arena, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) found in a recent study that 30% of the approximately 200 million students who are enrolled in tertiary education came from marginalized sectors. In the Philippines, the Commission on Higher Education states that out of 42.8 million youth aged five (5) to twenty-four (24) years old, 25% are out-of-school youth because of a lack of financial capabilities and the high cost of education, among others. (Commission on Higher Education, 2023) Moreover, among the approximately 3.5 million students enrolled in higher educational institutions during the 2021-2022 school year, 20% to 30% belong to low-income families, making it difficult for them to sustain their education.

In the case of Samahan ng mga Progresibong Kabataan, et. al. vs Quezon City, et al (G.R. No. 225442, August 08, 2017), the Supreme Court held that even if the parents have the primary responsibility of rearing a child, the state has the constitutional duty to act as parens patriae to support the parents in promoting the legitimate interests and welfare of their children. Moreover, no less than the 1987 Philippine Constitution states that the State shall give priority to education, to wit: “The state shall protect and promote the right of all citizens to quality education at all levels and shall take appropriate steps to make such education accessible to all.” As a response, the Philippine government provides education policies and programs, such as “free education for all,” a flagship program, to ensure that all children, regardless of their social and economic status, can have access to education. Most of the beneficiaries of these programs are marginalized people, including but not limited to low-income families, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and underrepresented first-generation college students (Thiem & Dasgupta, 2022).

A marginalized group is defined as a group that faces international rejection from multiple other groups (Betts & Hinsz, 2023). Groups that are experiencing rejection also experience deprivation of their basic rights, namely, social, political, and economic rights, but the worst of it is limiting their access to resources and opportunities that the government offers. Marginalized groups have suffered enough discrimination, and government intervention is badly needed to give them at least a chance to be successful and break the cycle.

Inclusive education is a process and practice that transforms mainstream schools and early childhood settings to ensure that every learner is supported in reaching their full academic and social potential (Kalenga et al. 2019). Further, inclusive education gives all students equal access to education regardless of their financial and social status, which promotes fairness, empowers disadvantaged

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students, and supports the development of a diverse and well-rounded society. A program that the marginalized group's best shot on improving their way of living.

Local Governments are at the forefront of managing public resources and services at the community level. They are mandated to address and resolve issues directly affecting the daily lives of the community. Thus, the local government, by its mandate, has the moral responsibility to help marginalized college students go to higher education and eventually achieve their dreams of breaking the cycle of poverty, which will improve their way of life.

Educational Institutions also play a big role in achieving "Inclusive Education" as they are the prime mover for fostering an environment where all students, regardless of their background or abilities, have the opportunity to learn and succeed. Educational institutions are the primary observers and assessors of students' progress and individual needs. Consequently, educational institutions shall adopt strategies to ensure that every student has the opportunity to receive a quality education.

Acknowledging this, the Philippine Government enacted into law the RA 10931, also known as the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act, which mandates all public higher education institutions (HEIs) and government-run technical vocational institutions (TVIs) to provide free quality tertiary education among eligible Filipino students (Ortiz et. al, 2019)

However, the educational system of the Philippines faces different problems, including overcrowded classrooms, lack of resources and infrastructure, and disparities in access to quality education between urban and rural areas. These problems are some of the effects of the lack of government funds specifically allocated for education, even if the educational sector is considered as the top priority of the government, considering that the budget allocated for education in the 2025 General Appropriations Act Educational Sector is PHP P1.055 trillion. Despite the educational reforms implemented by the government, through the Department of Education, the country remains behind its neighboring countries in terms of quality education. (Ignacio et. al 2022)

The National Government and Local Government shared responsibility for combating this long-standing problem that the country faces. Collaboration between these two entities will gradually increase the success rate of projects aimed at improving access to education, especially to the marginalized population. (Mutuma et. al, 2017)

The call for collaboration between the government and different stakeholders, like the local government of Paniqui, Tarlac, and educational institutions, to properly address issues in the educational system in the Philippines that succumb to the community's dream of breaking the chain of poverty seems to be urgent and essential in the present. By working together, these entities can ensure that their resources, funds, knowledge, and policies will effectively align to help and support the vulnerable population in having sustainable opportunities in education, among others, for their economic and social growth.

To further strengthen the collaborative ties between the government and the partner associations, a resolution has been passed in Congress urging the national government to collaborate with the University of the Philippines National College of Public Administration and Governance and its partner associations for Public administration. This is a step forward in attaining effective public governance, enhancing policy development, and improving the delivery of services to citizens through strategic partnerships between the government and an educational institution.

A partnership between private entities and a government equipped with effective public administration, which knows how to adapt to the country's continually changing landscape and evolving problems, can foster a dynamic and resilient framework for addressing complex societal issues. By combining the innovation and efficiency of the private sector with the public sector's responsibility for equitable policy implementation, such a partnership can ensure sustainable development, social welfare, and economic growth. This collaborative approach would enable more responsive solutions, greater accountability, and a more inclusive environment that meets the diverse needs of all citizens, especially in education. (Favretto et. al 2021)

As an educator and a Master of Arts in Public Administration student, the researcher has a good grasp on the interconnectedness between the financial issues and access to education of college students who are part of the marginalized sector of the community. Moreover, the researcher's knowledge of governance and academic institutional systems provides him with a strong foundation to understand and analyze the policies and programs of both the government and educational institutions that can efficiently and effectively help college students who came from the marginalized sectors of the community.

The main goal of the researcher in writing this paper is to be the voice of the college students, who are part of the marginalized sector of the community, to relay all their struggles, hardships, and clamors about the current higher education system, and to convey it to the proper authorities who can help them with tangible solutions (i.e the local government, higher educational institution, and other departments involved) to properly address these problems.

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Statement of the Objectives

This study aims to identify programs of the local government of Paniqui, Tarlac, to ensure accessibility of education among marginalized sectors. The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. To determine the different programs of the Local Government of Paniqui to help marginalized groups access education.
2. To Narrate the experiences of project Implementers and beneficiaries of the local Government initiatives and Programs.
3. To determine the problems encountered during the implementation of the programs.
4. To formulate measures to address the problems.
5. To identify the implications of the study for Public Administration.

MATERIALS AND METHODS OF THE RESEARCH

This study will adopt a qualitative case study research design. The researcher will examine and interpret the gathered document data, including municipal ordinances and program descriptions, to gain a thorough understanding of the specific context of the Local Government of Paniqui. On the other hand, the thematic method will be employed to analyze the participants' formal interviews, conducted in a semi-structured format, along with supporting documents.

RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

1. **Educational Initiatives by the local government**.

The educational assistance program is the flagship initiative of the local government of Paniqui to increase the educational access of marginalized students. This program gives financial assistance for tuition fees and other academic needs to deserving individuals who cannot afford to pursue higher education.

Likewise, the local government of Paniqui implemented a Free School supplies program to ensure that the students, regardless of their status in life, are equipped with the essential learning materials for school. This program also minimizes the financial burden of the parents, allowing them to allocate the resources supposedly for school supplies of their children to other basic needs like food and clothing.

Moreover, the Mayor's Educational Scholarship is a personal initiative that supports deserving and underprivileged students in pursuing their college education. Commendably, the budget for this program comes directly from the Mayor's own pocket, reflecting his deep commitment to uplifting the lives of the underprivileged youth through education.

Lastly, the Technical Vocational Scholarship aims to provide underprivileged, out-of-school youth and unemployed individuals with practical skills and training, such as welding, automotive servicing, and electrical installation. This scholarship makes the beneficiaries more competitive for employment in the labor market.

2. **Have these programs and initiatives by the local government improved the educational access among the marginalized sector?**

The participants uniformly agree that the programs and initiatives of the local government improved the accessibility of education for all, even to the marginalized sector. The participants had the occasion to emphasize that through the collaborative efforts of the different offices in the local government unit, plenty of dreamers and students from low-income families were able to continue their studies despite financial difficulties.

The testimonies of the beneficiaries confirmed that the educational programs of the local government of Paniqui, Tarlac and educational institutions in the Province of Tarlac produced a lot of scholars and graduates. The beneficiaries said that they are also very much willing to commit a return of service in their towns to give thanks and to help their town to produce more scholars and graduates in the future.

On the other hand, based on the testimonies of other participants, the educational assistance produces products that the implementors are very proud of. There are countless of beneficiaries coming back to their office to personally thank and share to them their testimonies on how the educational programs changed their life and their economic status. Many of the beneficiaries secured stable jobs and are now able to support their families and send their siblings to school.

Accordingly, an agreement between the government and the student regarding educational assistance and scholarships and return of service agreement create mutual benefits to them. The success stories of the beneficiaries of the educational programs do not only motivate the public administrators and the government to continue and improve their efforts regarding educational initiatives, but also convince others to value education even amidst poverty because these stories are truly an eye opener that these initatives are not merely programs but an investment in the people's future, in poverty reduction, and in sustainable community development.

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4. Problems encountered during the implementation.

PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED	F	R
Insufficient funds	16	1
Weak Information Dissemination	3	4
Limited Educational Support	7	2
Lack of Assessment Mechanism	4	3

Table 1
Problems Encountered

The table shows the common problems encountered by the participants during the implementation of the educational programs of the local government of Paniqui, Tarlac. Said problems include insufficient funds, weak information dissemination, limited educational support, and a lack of an assessment mechanism.

It is important to note that most of the participants mentioned that the educational initiatives will improve and help more deserving beneficiaries, especially those in the marginalized sector, if there will be more funds are allocated for these kinds of programs. If there will be more funds allocated for these educational programs, the Php2,000.00 that a college beneficiary receives every semester will increase and/ or more deserving students will become beneficiaries. The lack of funding results in limited program reaches and exclusion of many deserving students who met the criteria but cannot be accommodated due to budget constraints.

Practically speaking, while the educational support of Php2,000.00 is a huge help to students, it is not enough for a college student, especially those who came from a low-income family, to cover educational expenses and to further survive a higher education considering the continuous inflation of prices of goods and supplies in the country.

Another common problem encountered by the participants during the implementation of the educational programs is the lack of information dissemination regarding these programs. Some participants narrated that there are still people who are unaware that the local government offers educational assistance to qualified individuals. As a result of the said communication gap, many eligible students miss the opportunity to apply for educational assistance to pursue higher education.

Lastly, some participants shared their observation that the lack of a validation mechanism to properly assess the applications of deserving students for educational assistance may result in unfair and biased selection of beneficiaries to the educational programs through the practice of nepotism and the palakasan system.

3. Proposed solutions to the problems.

Insufficient funds emerge as the most pressing concern because the current budget allocation is not enough to accommodate all the deserving applicants in the municipality's educational programs. The proposed solution is to increase the local government budget allocation, which will be spearheaded by the Sangguniang Bayan member. Another possible solution is to establish a partnership with private institutions or non-governmental organizations for additional financial and educational support for the beneficiaries and other deserving students who are yet to become beneficiaries.

Proper and strong information dissemination is important during the implementation of an educational program; without this, the initiative is destined to fail, as it bridges the gap between the implementers and the beneficiaries. A well-coordinated information dissemination promotes transparency and accountability and avoids miscommunication. It ensures that the target beneficiaries are aware of the existing educational programs of the government and the criteria and procedure involved in the section process to become a beneficiary. The proposed solution to the problem of weak information dissemination is to enhance outreach efforts through the help of barangay officials and school administrators. Considering that most of the people are now using social media, there can also be quick, wide and cost-efficient information dissemination through social media platform.

The amount of the current educational assistance is not enough to help students from low-income families to pursue their education because the ever-changing market and the buying power of consumers are making it increasingly difficult for students to cope with the rising cost of education. Therefore, Php2,000.00 per semester is no longer enough, even for the basic needs of the student. Consequently, an increase in the amount of educational assistance will definitely ease the financial burden of the students from the marginalized sector.

Lastly, the participants identify the lack of an established assessment mechanism to determine the deserving beneficiaries and to avoid nepotism and favoritism in the selection of beneficiaries. Nepotism and favoritism will not only create an unfair, unjust, and biased selection of beneficiaries but also lead to a loss of the public's confidence in the integrity of the program and its public administrators. The proposed solution to this problem is to develop a standardized, transparent assessment and monitoring system

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that will be handled by the Municipal Social Welfare and Development Office (MSWDO). This solution will not only avoid nepotism and favoritism in the selection of beneficiaries but will also assess the program's performance, allowing for timely adjustments that can increase its effectiveness and success.

5. Implications of the study to Public Administration.

A fruitful study about the programs of the Local Government of Paniqui, Tarlac that pave the way to increase educational access of the marginalized sector holds significant implications in the field of Public Administration.

First, the findings of the study provide valuable insights for policymakers and public administrators about the importance of strategic planning, resource allocation, and continuous monitoring to ensure that the expected outcomes of the educational assistance programs and other initiatives are met. Moreover, budget allocation and resource utilization must be aligned with the program's priorities to ensure maximum positive impact. Effective financial and resource management ensures that resources are directed to critical and crucial areas, enhancing the overall efficiency and sustainability of educational assistance and other initiatives.

Moreover, it is important for every program or initiative it maybe from the local government or the national government, to have a mechanism to evaluate the performance or effectiveness of the programs. So that we will have a good grasp on the status of the project, allowing us to identify key challenges and allocate resources more effectively. With accurate data due to this mechanism, we can adjust in a timely manner to productively solve the existing problem.

Likewise, it is highly encouraged for local governments to study the feasibility of entering into an inter-agency collaboration and partnership with private institutions and NGOs to solve complex problems in education. External help may fill the gaps that the implementors overlook and cannot fill. These partnerships may also result in innovations and a whole new perspective on how to deal with the existing and future problems in education.

Lastly, this study highlights the importance of good communication. Lack of good communication can lead to confusion, misinformation, and missed opportunities, especially for those in remote or marginalized communities. However, good and strong communication can lead to a better relationship and partnership between the government and its beneficiaries and the stakeholders to further strengthen the possibility of attaining the end goal of inclusive education for all. It is worth emphasizing that when people feel heard, informed, and included in the process, they are more likely to support and engage with government programs.

Summary of Findings

1. All participants confirmed that the local government of Paniqui, Tarlac, has existing programs and initiatives to increase educational access for marginalized students.
2. The participants said that the existing educational programs of the local government of Paniqui, Tarlac have good and positive impacts on the education of the students, especially those who came from the marginalized sector.
3. Most of the participants are knowledgeable about the status and performance of the existing educational programs of the local government of Paniqui, Tarlac, because they are involved in their implementation.
4. Some of the beneficiaries of the existing educational programs of the local government of Paniqui, Tarlac, have already finished college.
5. Graduate Beneficiaries are living testimonies that the existing educational programs of the local government of Paniqui, Tarlac, are effective and efficient in producing successful professionals.
6. Most of the target beneficiaries of the existing educational programs of the local government of Paniqui, Tarlac, are those who came from low-income families. This shows the government’s intent to prioritize those who are most in need.
7. The participants acknowledge the fact that there is still room to improve the existing educational programs of the local government of Paniqui, Tarlac.
8. The current mechanism of the local government of Paniqui is a well-established system that does not tolerate any form of Nepotism.

CONCLUSIONS

The following conclusions were drawn from the data gathered through interviews with the participants.

1. The main problem in implementing educational programs is the insufficiency of funds.
2. A contributing factor to the slow progress of educational initiatives is the lack of information dissemination.
3. The existing educational programs of the local government of Paniqui, Tarlac, are helpful to students, especially to the marginalized students.
4. The local government seeks alternative solutions to offer more help in the education of the marginalized students. (i.e., engaging to mutual agreement with different universities that may offer scholarships to the local population.)

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5. Parents shall not abuse the help given by the government., Instead, they must also make an effort to send their children to school.
6. Scholarships for technical vocational courses are also helpful to the community.
7. A well-educated population is a striving economy; it is a great investment for the government to increase its efforts to improve educational access.
8. It indeed takes a village to raise a child; different sectors of the community play a vital role in shaping a child's development.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following premises are hereby recommended to increase the access of the marginalized sector to education, to wit:

1. The local government may increase budget allocation for educational programs to provide additional support to its beneficiaries and to accommodate more less fortunate students to avail the said programs.
2. Offer additional support to beneficiaries, such as transportation allowance, uniform allowance, and school supplies.
3. The local government may establish a committee that will focus on the selection of the beneficiaries to guarantee its fairness and to ensure that the educational programs reach the most deserving applicants.
4. The local government units may entertain the idea of widening its partnership with local colleges and universities to jointly implement a scholarship program that will enhance the opportunity of the students to access higher education.
5. Establish a cost-efficient and reliable system, such as social media platforms, that will properly disseminate credible and truthful information about the programs offered by the government.
6. Involve the parents, students, teachers, and barangay leaders in the regular discussion of the educational programs and initiatives to better understand their needs and to gain valuable insights and ideas to improve the said programs.
7. An educational scholarship program, regarding technical vocational courses, shall be a substantial help to enhance the practical skills and talents of the students and to later on secure more employment opportunities for them, especially those who cannot pursue a traditional college degree.
8. Encourage the beneficiaries, who have already graduated from college, to give back to the community through mentorship, seminars, and testimonial gatherings to inspire current beneficiaries and to share their expertise with the community.