

## Article

# From orphanage to college: Examining factors that promote educational persistence and attainment among the four Filipino college students.

Ei Mitani and Toshiko Kimura

### Abstract

As economy demands a more educated and highly trained work force, it has become essential for every youth to continue their education beyond high school. Earning a bachelor's degree becomes a prerequisite for all Filipino students if they want to find a better employment and enrich their lives: they may have limited opportunities for economic advancement unless they continue their education beyond high school. However, less well known and less often studied are the factors that influence educational persistence and attainment among Filipino college students. In this qualitative study, the voices of four Filipino college students from orphanage- those who graduated from high school and tracking their progress through the college pipeline was presented to show the significant roles

family, friends, and non-parental figures play in their educational persistence and attainment. Limitations of the study are reviewed and suggestions for future research are discussed.

**Keywords:** Filipino, higher education, social capital, academic achievement, orphanage

### Background

The Philippines has a total population of 92.3 million that is young (median age: 23) and growing at 1.9% annually. The college enrollment in all disciplines increased by 3.27% from 2,937,847 in 2010-2011 to 3,033,967 in 2011-2012 and its number is steadily increasing (Commission on Higher Education, 2012). Of these approximately 3 million students, 28% are enrolled in Business Administration and related, 15% in Education and

Teacher Training, 13% each are in Information Technology, Engineering and Technology, and 9% in Medicine and allied programs (Commission on Higher Education, 2012). Over the past decades, earning a bachelor's degree is critical for economic and social mobility and Filipinos place a high premium on higher education. The lifetime economic benefits afforded by college graduation are well documented and growing (Sokatch, 2006). Urdan and Maehr (1995) and Dowson and McInerney (2003) have examined various social goals of education. They found that many Philippino students get an education in order to be a productive member of society, to meet roles and obligations, to give honor to one's family, to be of help to others, to attain social position or status, to gain the approvals of others, and to gain belongingness in a group. A college diploma symbolizes the attainment of a life goal, along with the hard work that led to its attainment, and the promise of professional success, financial stability, and personal stature (Puyat, 2005). Educational achievement is a powerful determinant of future life success. Indeed, such results suggest the critical roles of the social and cultural environment in how students frame and develop their educational goals (cf. Salonen, Vauras, & Efklides, 2005; Tharp, 1989). Students in an environment with personal and environmental protective

factors (e.g. supportive parents, friends and participation in school activities, etc.), have exhibited increased levels of academic success due to personal and environmental resources (Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2009).

While numerous studies focused on Filipino students in general (Reyes & Galang, 2009; Watkins & Gerong, 1997; Witkow & Fulingni, 2007), researchers have not advanced similar perspectives about the role of factors in shaping persistence and attainment among Filipino college students. A fine-grained analysis of Filipino college students' view of the college experience is needed to understand how they navigate a four-year postsecondary education. The present study used qualitative approach to examine factors that contributed to college persistence and attainment among Filipino students from orphanage. Students from orphanage was analyzed for this study because the local educational agency has served young children and youth from orphanage and supported them gaining access to a college education and completing a bachelor's program. All the students in this study progressed through the college pipeline and enrolled in a four-year college, a demographic that has been relatively unexplored in the literature, are studied. The study addressed the

following research questions:

**Research question 1:** What factors Philippino college students from orphanage possess to college persistence and attainment?

**Research question 2:** To what extent has the factors played a role in the lives of the students from orphanage?

### Theoretical Framework

For identifying factors that contribute to educational persistence and attainment among Filipino college students, an ecological approach was used as the theoretical foundation. Specifically, the bioecological theory developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner stresses seeing the relationship and connection between the individual, family, friends, social group, and/or community and the physical, social, and cultural environments and how each influence and shape one another in continuous manner (Gitterman, 2009). With reference to college students, academic success is a function of both individual characteristics such as mental ability, academic skills, motivation, and goals, and the characteristics of the environment, which can be conceptualized as a system of nested interdependent structures (Muuss, 1996). Although the environment includes many systems of influence,

Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1989) has focused on proximal process. In his theory, proximal processes were considered the major and greatest influence on a person's development. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) defined them as “processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate environment” (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p.797). Bronfenbrenner stated that children's development need (a) to relate to one or more people who are committed to their well-being and with whom they develop a strong and mutual attachment; (b) to internalize the activities and affective feelings so as to be motivated and interested in engaging in new activities in their settings; and (c) to have a family environment in which there are persons other than the parents or caregivers who reinforce, encourage, and support the dyadic interactions within the setting (Rosa & Henry Tudge, 2016). Face-to-face interaction with, and support from, family members and peers are among the most common and important proximal processes for developing adolescents and young adults and play an important role in academic outcomes (Muuss, 1996). In sum, we relied on a theoretical perspective grounded in Bronfenbrenner's bioecological approach to help guide our

research. It assists us in exploring and understanding the sources of support (e.g., parents, teachers, and peer group) and explaining how they may vary in the lives of Filipino college students.

## Method

The study used qualitative methodology, using in-depth interview methods to gain vivid and detailed descriptions from participants that help discover meanings from their own life experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) and understand their academic and social experiences within a particular context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Qualitative research designs provide an ideal mechanism to investigate topics about which relatively little information is known, because “instead of specifying at the outset the variables whose main effects and interactions will be tracked, qualitative workers begin with a period of exploration and immersion” (Marecek, Fine, & Kidder, 1997, p.663). Maton, Hrabowski, and Greif (1998) also maintain that qualitative methods are particularly appropriate for research focusing on cultural issues and racial minority populations because qualitative methodology “allows [for] a rich, multifaceted, in-depth exploration of a phenomenon, grounded in the world view, vocabulary, and context-specific experiences of those studied.”

## Participants

In the summer of 2017, four participants were recruited through the local educational agency in Cebu, Philippines. All of participants came from non-profit orphanage and are students of one private university in Cebu City, Philippines. They were recipients and grantee of the local educational agency's scholarship program. The four participants were females and their average age was 20 years (range 19 to 21). One of the participants was a junior student and majored in Psychology. The others were all seniors in college, two studied social work, and one studied special education, respectively. All participants received the information about purpose of the research, voluntary nature of participation, and informed consent was sent to each. Names and identifiable features (e.g., hometown, school name, or information of parents and family members) were changed to protect the confidentiality of the participants. The pseudonyms of all participants are used here to protect their identity. To build a rapport relationship with the participants and to deepen the understandings of them, researchers took part in the interview as participant observers.

## Procedure

The approximately an hour and a half semi-structured interview was carried out in the office of the local educational agency in the evening. There were two participant observers and one participant moderator from the agency. The participant moderator organized the date and time of the interview. Snacks and drink were prepared and provided by the moderator and researchers. The interview was audiotaped and the extensive notes were taken during the interview by both interviewers. Some pictures were taken during and at the end of the interview by the moderator. After researchers as participant observers introduced themselves to all participants, each participant was first asked to share a few things of themselves including name, nickname, colors, animals, and things she likes so that everyone in the room can get to know each other and relax. A semi-structured, open-ended questions were then used for the rest of the interview. A series of predetermined open-ended questions was carefully developed by the researchers, edited with the moderator. The prepared questions did not include questions related to family and parents because the moderator was strict about protecting participants' privacy and safety. The questions were given to the participants ahead of the

interview in order to allow them to think their thoughts and perspectives about the questions. This factor was especially important to minimize variation in questioning and to reduce the possibility of bias when interviewing different people (Patton, 2008). The researchers developed the interview questions around topic areas such as external assets and involvement (e.g., non-parental support) in participants' school persistence and attainment. Examples of questions included the following: (a) How do you study? (b) Does anyone influence your choice of your major? (c) What motivates you to study? and (d) How important is education to you? The whole interview questions used for this interview can be found in Appendix. The interview data was later transcribed verbatim and analyzed by the researchers. The notes being taken during the interview were also reviewed to assist in the understanding of the interview in detail. All data were carefully examined line by line in order to identify the participants' descriptions of thoughts and perspectives related to the questions asked in the interview. The principal researchers used open coding and then assigned these codes to emerging themes or "clusters of meaning" (Watson et al., 2002, p. 41) within each category. The most prominent, unequivocal themes about the students' responses were identified and

reported as findings (Watson et al., 2002). For credibility and trustworthiness of the study, we asked the participants to comment on their transcribed interview and used their feedback to keep with the authenticity of their voices.

## Results

In response to the interview questions about the factors in the academic persistence and attainment of Filipino students from orphanage, three common themes emerged as leading factors. It was evident that non-parental figures, friends, and parents were the important factors in order for students to persevere and succeed.

Financial support given from their sponsors was the biggest factor that encouraged the students to work toward their goals and to have strong aspiration to be successful in the future. For most of the participants, relatives, social workers, friends, and parents were also identified as factors that promote their school success. They were described in close detail in the following sections. Interview excerpts are used to illustrate the common themes throughout the next section. Although not every student answered each interview question and some of them were more talkative than others, the researchers present excerpts

from each student's interview at least once.

### Non-parental figures

Since all participants were the recipients of the financial support from their sponsors and they all knew that they could not pursue higher education without the sponsors, sponsors were identified as the leading factor that foster their school persistence and attainment. Beside the sponsors, however, other non-parental adults were also identified as promotive factors. They were social workers, children, and relatives that participants have a close relationship and known for a long time. Participant A, a senior and social work major student, has lived in the orphanage since she was 8 years old and worked with her social worker for a long time. She shared the following,

(A) Yes, since I was a child, my social worker always told me "if you do not study hard, you have to go back to your community." My father, my stepfather is so bad. I have desire to study.

For her, the social worker was a mentor and model figure. The hardships she experienced in her childhood and experiences working with a social worker motivated participant A to work hard in school and informed her decision

to pursue a career in the social work. Participant B, a junior and psychology major, identified her sponsor as a factor that helps her school persistence and attainment. Her response was...

(B) My sponsor. No one except ones in orphanage helps me study. People in the orphanage let me go to college. They fund me, let me study. If I cannot finish college, they let me work.

Participant C, a senior and special education major, on the other hand, reported that her motivation was kids she works with.

(C) I motivate myself by seeing special kids. I want to share my learnings with them. I want to use what I learned in class. I learn language that I can communicate and speak to well.

Compared to others, participant D, a senior and social work major, elaborated in her statement that her aunt helped her school work and motivated her to be successful in school.

(D) My aunt helps my studies. I talk to her lot. Also my parents. I am motivated to study because I want to help my siblings. I have two siblings and one niece.

For her, her aunt was the main source

of support to her education besides her parents. Her aunt's support included helping homework, listening to niece's concerns and needs, and encouraging school success. She also viewed education as a means to provide for her family members.

## Friends

Findings of this study demonstrated that participants had friends who are motivated to pursue his or her education and who share their thoughts and views on career choice. They played an influential role in their pursuit of their academic excellence. All participants except participant A reported that they have friends to study together in school. Although most of them preferred to study alone either in the library or at home so they are not distracted by friends and noises, they still had friends to study together, to spend some time together both in school and outside of school. Participant A, however, reported that she did not have much friends in school. She said,

(A) I study alone. (silent... ) Because.. because... I don't have a lot of friends in school. Many are different. I feel awkward and different from them. I am an orphanage kid. I feel different to be with them.

For participant A, school was the place she goes to pursue her dream but not the place she finds friendship.

## Parents

In this study, participants credited their parents with encouraging and supporting them in their educational pursuits. Like most of the students, participant C recognized and appreciated that it was her mother's words and actions that motivated her to do well academically. The following was shared by one student,

(C) I study at home because my mom helps me and support me. She's my mentor. She helps my homework. ... I study in the silence so I can focus and memorize more. If I study in school, I always study in the library. I also study in forest. It was a high school. We had a forest in high school's backyard. It's refreshing and so nice. My mother will help me understand words.

According to C, her mother was a driving force behind her education. Her mother monitored her school work to make sure it was complete. When she feels not good, her mother always encouraged and inspired her to work hard and succeed.

## Discussion

To respond the paucity of research focused on successful Filipino students in higher education, the present study was aimed at examining the factors associated with college persistence and attainment among Filipino students from the orphanage. Through interviewing four Filipino college students, several important factors and features were identified as facilitating students' college persistence and attainment.

First, the importance of sponsors was supported in all students. Without the sponsor's financial support, it is possible that the students in this study may have given up and forgone higher education. Second, as reported in the previous research by Nadal (2009), who concluded that Filipinos and Filipino-Americans expect the extended family to have a consultant role in any major decisions, which may include support for academic success, the findings of this study also revealed that extended family members were understood to be an important part of the lives of the participants. While one of students reported that her parents supervised and monitored her homework, she first mentioned her extended family member as a key person. According to her, she goes to her aunt not only when she needs academic support but also

when she wants to talk to her and get some advice about school and friends. Her extended family member contributed to both her academic and personal development. In addition, consistent with the previous studies by Urda and Maehr (1995) and Dowson and McInerney (2003), our study also indicated that education is for supporting other family members. For participant D, obtaining a bachelor's degree is a way not only to overcome the challenges of poverty and to be self-supported but also to help other family members to be educationally and socially successful. The motives that students have for attending college are influenced by their cultural values (Phinney, Dennis, & Osorio, in press). Markus and Kitayama (1991) have suggested that individuals with collectivistic orientations are motivated to achieve in order to meet the demands and expectations of others, particularly family members. Third, existing evidence from researchers in higher education suggested, peer support may be extremely important for the academic adjustment of college students (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993). Besides the peer influence on academic adjustment, many other studies have also documented the functional role of peers in providing emotional support, academic guidance, companionship, and motivation (Berndt & Keefe, 1995; Eccles, 1999; Hymel, Comfort, Schnoert- Reichil,

& McDougall, 1996; Stanton- Salazar & Spina, 2005). Consistent with the previous research, our findings indicated that peer support predicted college persistence and attainment among the Filipino students. Peers can provide support that is more directly instrumental to college outcomes by forming study groups, sharing notes and experiences, and giving advice about classes to take and strategies to use (Richardson & Skinner, 1992). All except one student had friends on campus who study together, socialize, and motivated each other to pursue their goals. One of the students did not establish relationship with peers on campus because she felt awkward and different from others. For her, peer networks she has established outside of campus served as a vital source of protective factors. Lastly, the importance of having supportive parents are reported. For the most of participants in this study, familial capital was necessary to persist and be successful in college. Although not all participants' parents were able to contribute to their children's educational endeavors, some of them provided constant support in other ways, including through providing words of encouragement and emotional support, monitoring school work, and discussing school-related matters. Overall, students in this study did sincerely embraced the opportunities they have to learn and pursue their dreams. Furthermore,

two of the students were determined to be social workers, and one to be a special education teacher. They were excited to use their knowledge and skills they gained through a four-year college education for helping others who are in great need. Interestingly, all of the students had one shared goal: a strong desire to serve others. Although they did not delve deeper into the desire, the early negative experience with their family members and instrumental support they have got from people such as sponsors, social workers, and relatives prompted them to give back to others in their community. Their commitment to serving others reveals how college persistence and attainment is dependent strongly on people around them.

## Limitations

Limitations of this study must be noted. As is true with any research, the findings of this research must be interpreted while keeping in mind the specific population was sampled and studied. One of the limitations of the present study is its small sample size. The challenge to locate an adequate number of participants who was able to come to the interview during the weekday was difficult. Filipino college students in this study have classes from early in the morning to the evening time from Monday to Friday and they also

have a few classes on Saturday, too. In short, because of the small sample size and the nature of qualitative research, the findings cannot be generalized to the entire student population of the university studied or student population from other universities in the Philippines.

Another limitation to be considered in this study had to do with the students themselves. Because they were not the representative sample of Filipino college students, the factors they identified in this article, like sponsors and social workers, may be unique to them. Therefore, researchers cannot clearly demarcate the factors discussed as specific to either Filipino college students from the orphanage or Filipino college students in general.

The driving motivation behind this study was that by increasing our understanding of high achieving college students from underrepresented and underserved background, more resilient individuals can be facilitated on the way to the achievement of their academic goals (Condly, 2006; Gardynik & McDonald, 2005). Given these limitations, however, understanding factors that encourage college persistence and resulting in the granting of a degree was worth studying.

## Implications

### Implications for Practice

Based on the findings from this research, several important implications should be suggested. The findings may be useful for high schools and educational professionals in higher education in developing and implementing programs and strategies that promote the understanding and sensitivity toward the examined groups and meet their needs.

For example, high school teachers should invite parents and/or non-parental adults to have a more active role in the education of their children, but not limited to, high school achievements and activities, academic support, college visits, college planning events, and counseling scheduling (Segovia, Parker, & Bennett, 2015). Filipino parents, across all social class levels, typically regard education as essential to their children's success, and are willing to go to great lengths to help their children through school (LaRocque, 2004). Filipino culture also promotes the inclusion of extended kin in childrearing, and family members such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and older cousins will instruct a child that her/his behavior to reflect upon the reputation of the entire family (Paguio, Robinson, Skeen, & Deal, 1987).

Similarly, high school counselors play a crucial role in disseminating knowledge and information to students about the college. Positive relationships with institutional agents afford low-status students the opportunity to access resources, privileges, and support systems needed for advancement in higher education (Tovar, 2015). Stanton-Salazar (2001) goes as far as stating that institutional agents have a “determining role in either reproducing or interfering with the reproduction of class, racial, and gendered inequality” (p. 161, emphasis in original).

College personnel could provide informal training to parents and non-parent adults on select aspects of academic life, including the availability of support services for students; familiarize them with the likely issues students may experience during key points in the enrollment term (Tovar, 2015). Considering that the emphasis all students placed on serving others could be strengthened by instituting service-learning requirements into the curriculum. Service-related experiences have been linked to increased engagement and academic achievement among racial/ethnic minority students (Scales, Roehlkepartain, Neal, Kielsmeier, & Benson, 2006).

College and universities can also use the results of this study to strengthen a campus climate that supports and validate the minority students such as the those at-risk and from the orphanage. The support includes increasing in numbers of faculty and staff who have knowledge of positive youth development and experience working with youth at risk, and recognizing the role of cultural centers, student organizations and clubs for all students, but especially for those of minority. At the same time, it is crucial that all entities in the university acknowledge that negative and culturally insensitive attitudes and behaviors affect all incumbents in the university and affect the students' academic performance, satisfaction, and retention (Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002). Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2010) reported that students' campus engagement is a major factor associated with students' college persistence and degree completion. Sarason, Sarason, and Pierce (1990) have suggested that social support is important because it provides one with a "safety net" to explore and experiment in the world. The more students perceive support, the better they adjust and thrive.

### **Implications for Research**

Because the students who participated in the current study attended the same university, their experiences and

personal attributes may differ from those students who attend other universities. Future studies have to include more representative samples of Filipino college students and also should be conducted in different regions of the Philippines and at different institutions of postsecondary education for more widespread evidence.

In addition, future studies should include male college students. In the Philippines, there is a higher chance for male students to drop out more than female ones (Maligalig, Caoli-Rodriguez, Martinez, Cuevas, 2010). It was indicated in Maligalig, et al. (2010)'s study that "lack of personal interest, high cost of education, and employment" are the major reasons behind secondary school students' non-attendance in school. Males have been cited to lack that personal interest in pursuing education, while their female counterparts have to quit due to the high cost of college education (Maligalig, et al., 2010).

Lastly, this study identified the protective factors associated with college persistence and attainment among the Filipino students, and did not explore the relationships of those factors and how these processes result in academic persistence and success for the students. Because little has been done in this area, there is a clear need to explore

understandings of which protective factors work well in combination with each other and how these combinations prove the most effective. Quantitative method may help statistically group particular combinations of protective factors.

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## Appendix A

1. What do you study in school? Why do you study the subjects?
2. What are the requirements in your subjects? How much homework do you have?
3. What are your favorite subjects? And why?
4. How and where do you study in college? Do you study alone or with someone? Please share your study techniques if any.
5. What motivates you to study? How important is education to you?
6. Is there anyone influence your choice of your major and/or career? How?