



THE SUCCESS STORY OF CYRIL DESERVA- DELA TORRE, LPT, J.D: FIRST GENERATION GRADUATE IN A SELECTED BICOLANO FAMILY

Nanette O. Candelaria

*Department of Education Graduate Studies, University of Nueva Caceres, Naga City,
Camarines Sur, Philippines*

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ABSTRACT

This intrinsic case study presented the success story of Cyril Deserva-Dela Torre, LPT, J.D., as a first-generation graduate of a chosen Bicolano family from the community of Cabusao, Camarines Sur. With the conceptual framework of Social Constructivism and analysis through Duckworth's Grit, Bandura's Self-Efficacy, Resilience, Gestalt, and Psychosocial theory of Erikson, the study looked at the role of Bicolano cultural values and institutions as integrated support structures. The findings show four themes, namely, structural obstacles counter-balanced with mentoring by a teacher; pagpupugay (community respect, honoring and obligation to repay a debt) as a culture-specific mechanism of informal management that turned familial expectations into purposive motivation; psychological resources collectively developed by family, teachers and the community; and success as collective accomplishment, assessed not in terms of individual accomplishments but contributions to the community. Based on the findings, pagpupugay is seen as a culturally-appropriate management tool for educational leaders. This study recommends a mentoring program, Balik-Serbisyo Program, resilience workshop and Pagpupugay sa Paaralan Framework, which is a management model for first-generation students in a rural coastal community.

Keywords: *First-generation graduate, Pagpupugay, Bicolano cultural values, Informal Management Mechanism, Intrinsic Case Study, Educational Leadership, Rural Coastal Community, Success story, Resilience, Self-efficacy*

INTRODUCTION

First-generation graduates, who come from families wherein parents do not hold a college degree, have become central in discussions about equity in educational opportunities around the world (Engle & Tinto, 2008). In the Philippines, however, the experiences of first-generation learners are compounded by socioeconomic problems that exacerbate the already-existing difficulties that first-generation students face. Based on statistics provided by the Philippine Statistics Authority, in 2021, it can be noted that children and farmers recorded the highest poverty incidences among basic sectors at 39.9 percent and 34.6 percent respectively, while the poverty incidence for individuals living in the countryside stood at 32.3 percent.

For individuals who experience poverty daily, attending college becomes an unlikely possibility. In other words, poverty is one of the many factors that create barriers in accessing higher education for those who live in the countryside and have to deal with limited educational facilities (Gonzales et al., 2020). Specifically, the fishing and farming communities located in the rural areas of Camarines Sur struggle with issues such as geographic isolation, poorly maintained school infrastructures, and lack of transportation to reach learning institutions. Given this situation, it is possible to identify the area within which the current research project will take place.

While the experiences of first-generation college students in Philippine higher education have been gradually gaining attention in the scholarly literature, an important gap in knowledge regarding the interplay of culture-based values and educational institution-based management systems that help ensure educational access is yet to be explored. Most of the current studies on first-generation college students consider resilience and/or the role of family support and/or institutional interventions independently as factors that contribute to educational achievement (Stephens et al., 2012). Yet, it is the informal management of student persistence that is carried out by means of certain culturally rooted value orientations and associated behaviors that needs exploration.

The Bicol region and the particular communities there are characterized by specific cultural traditions, which are associated with their traditional economic activities (fishing and agriculture). One of the cultural values characteristic of the Bicol region is pagpupugay, a system of mutual respect and honor-giving. In the communities of Cabusao, which are highly dependent on nature and collectivization of work, student persistence is likely supported by certain cultural practices that have yet to be discovered and utilized by local educational managers. Since all the existing educational management theories were elaborated based on the experiences of urban societies or Western countries, they do not incorporate culturally based informal mechanisms (Hallinger, 2011).

Hence, this paper attempts to move the investigation from being a success story to an evaluation of the institutional and cultural management systems responsible for such success. The study intends to explore the success story of a first-generation graduate from among a chosen Bicolano family; however, there is an important shift in focus of the analysis wherein the subject of the analysis is no longer the individual but

rather the dynamic interactions of the individual learner, family culture and the institution that facilitated or hindered his success. Through the examination of the way by which the values embedded in Bicolano culture – particularly pagpupugay – become a form of informal management practice that shapes the way resources are distributed, decisions are made, and social networks are formed, this paper will give insights on what constitutes culturally sensitive education management practices (Rosario, 2016).

This is important for educational managers whose work requires that their intervention programs be culturally appropriate with respect to the communities they work with. Instead of viewing cultural values as something external to educational management, this paper argues that it should be incorporated in the understanding of how first-generation graduates succeed in their academic pursuits (Banks, 2015).

Research Objective

This study aimed to describe the success story of Cyril Deserva-Dela Torre, LPT, J.D., as a first-generation graduate within a selected Bicolano family.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for conducting this study was strategically designed in three phases, as shown in the illustration below: Study Planning Phase, Data Analysis Phase, and Integration of Qualitative Findings resulting to Interpretation and Discussion of Results. The Study Planning Phase started out with a comprehensive literature review, as this is essential since the research sought to provide insights towards filling up the knowledge gap concerning the manner through which Bicolano cultural values act as informal management practices in the educational sector.

At this stage, research tools such as the interview guide and guidelines for documentation were developed, taking into consideration six areas including the participant's family support system, his/her life goals and ambitions, his/her motivations in pursuing higher education, the way he/she manages to surmount any barrier/challenges that come his/her way, professional accomplishments and recognition, and his/her advocacy participation in community initiatives. The interview guide was researcher-made and underwent validation by three licensed psychometricians — two from the university and one external expert. After validation, a pilot test was conducted to ensure clarity, reliability, and appropriateness of the items before the actual data gathering. This process strengthened the credibility of the instrument and ensured that the questions were aligned with the objectives of the study.

The interview consisted of 1hr and 45 mins single session with the participant as this allowed for exploration across all six thematic areas. It is worth noting at this juncture that the observation and documentation stage is of particular significance in an intrinsic case study because the story of the participant will be told in relation to a specific cultural and geographical setting such as Cabusao, Camarines Sur wherein the people living there are characterized as an agricultural population with poverty incidence of 36.0 percent.

In the Data Analysis Phase, techniques and tools suitable for the type of intrinsic case study were used to analyze the information gathered during the fieldwork period from August to December 2025. Since intrinsic case studies are done to examine a unique case that is of personal interest to the researcher, an intrinsic case study design can provide a detailed investigation of that case in order to better understand it rather than generalize about it. Qualitative findings were integrated through thematic analysis in order to get a deeper appreciation of the unique aspects of the life history of the participant's educational and career journey.

In order to integrate the different kinds of data collected through in-depth interviews, documents, and observations, all the data gathered must be authentic, which means that they are the true reflections and memories of the participants. This thematic analysis was based on the variable-oriented map of the theoretical framework, which shows the causal flow of independent variables (Bicolano Cultural Values such as pagpupugay, family solidarity, bayanihan; and Institutional Support Structures such as teacher mentoring, school guidance programs, and responsive school policies) to the intervening variables (such as self-efficacy, grit, resilience, holistic meaning-making, and psychosocial development) up to the dependent variable of Educational Success.

In its final step, the research process culminated in the Interpretation and Discussion of Results as a means by which the consolidated qualitative findings would be subjected to analysis relative to the five anchoring theories. In turn, these analyses were expected to yield significant management insights from the standpoint of the educational leader in relation to the overall purpose of describing the success story of Cyril Deserva-Dela Torre, LPT, J.D., as a first-generation graduate belonging to a selected Bicolano family.

It is in this context that the interpretation and discussion of the results become crucial toward fulfilling the objective of examining the success story through the perspective of interaction among cultural values, institutional supports, and psychological resources of the family member under investigation, as opposed to simply narrating the success story as a biographic account. Indeed, the discussion will shed light on how pagpupugay operates as an informal management framework for the allocation of resources, decision making, and networking of supportive communities, all of which represent gaps in previous literature that tend to focus either on individual resilience, familial support, or institutional intervention as distinct elements. Going beyond just the individual success story, the discussion of the results is expected to provide evidence-based recommendations for improving the strategies used by schools to increase persistence, school management strategies, and community involvement frameworks within the Philippine educational sector.

Overall, such discussion would be consistent with the significance of the study, whether theoretically (as contributions to the body of literature on Filipino first generation students), practically (as a source of information for schools, teachers, and policy makers), or personally/community-based (as motivation for Bicolano students).

Scope and Delimitation

This particular study highlighted the success story of Cyril Deserva-Dela Torre, LPT, J.D., who is considered a first-generation graduate of a carefully chosen Bicolano family, with the intent of highlighting the interaction between the role of the person, the culture of the family and institutions that led to her educational and career success. Using the intrinsic case study design, the researcher was able to document the inspirations, motivation, and aspirations of the participant as expressed through her experiences. The study was done at Cabusao, Camarines Sur, a municipality known for being a haven for fisherfolks and farmers where the participant experienced all of her life events leading up to becoming the successful professional she is today.

The initial interview was done last November 2, 2025 and a series of follow-up interview around August to December 2025, when the researcher collected qualitative data regarding the participant's family background, personal aspirations in life, motivations to pursue higher learning, strategies to overcome barriers and challenges, professional successes, and participation in advocacy activities. The scope of the study was intended to be an examination of the Bicolano cultural values, specifically pagpupugay, which served as informal management tools used by the participant in her educational endeavors.

Qualitative data gathered through the narratives of the participant was the main basis for the analysis done in this study, thereby providing an in-depth look into her experience as a first generation graduate. The research did not make use of any quantitative data about socioeconomic characteristics, which include income and the level of education achieved by both parents, aside from providing information on the context of her experiences. In addition, other people from the participant's family, community, and institution were not included in this study. This is because the main subject of this research is the participant and her experiences in relation to the cultural system and institutions she encountered during her academic and professional journey. Comparison between the participant's experiences and that of other first-generation graduates was not made, since the case study approach utilized by this research is focused more on the depth of the investigation than breadth.

RESULTS

The story of Cyril Deserva-Dela Torre, LPT, J.D., in this chapter is an example of a successful case of a first-generation graduate from a select Bicolano family based on the analysis of four major themes from her life story. These include the theme of Structural Barriers and Institutional Support Systems which describes her experience with geographic remoteness and financial constraints due to her family's reliance on their farm work and lack of educational influence from her parents. In spite of these constraints, mentoring from her teachers and guidance services at school acted as compensatory measures that allowed her to continue in school. Another theme identified is Pagpupugay as an Informal Management Mechanism wherein the cultural belief of Bicolanos about respect, giving of honor and reciprocity served as a cultural management system for her resource allocation and decision-making processes during her education process.

The third theme, Psychological Resources Mediating Success, illustrated how self-efficacy, grit, and resilience operated as mediating variables between structural barriers, cultural values, and success. Instead of viewing such psychological resources as personal attributes, they were viewed as constructed in interaction with one's family members, teachers, and community, where pagpupugay gave her direction and meaning in terms of perseverance in pursuing success. Finally, the fourth theme, Success as Collective Triumph, showed that in the context of this first-generation college graduate, success was not seen as an end in itself, rather it was viewed as a collective and continuous process of uplifting one's family and contributing to one's community. She was proud of her academic accomplishments, licensure as a teacher, and pursuing her Juris Doctor studies because she felt obliged to repay her family sacrifice and give back to her community of Cabusao. Through the four emerging themes, this biographical study evolved into an analytic investigation of the ways cultural values and institutional structures operate as systems of support for a first-generation college graduate in the Bicolano countryside.

Table 1

Summary of Findings of Success Story of Cyril Deserva- Dela Torre, Lpt, J.D: First Generation Graduate in a Selected Bicolano Family

Themes	Lived Experiences	Coping Mechanisms	Corresponding Theory	Application to the Participant's Case
Structural Barriers and Institutional Support Systems	Geographical separation which entails either a lengthy walk or commute from her house to school; financial difficulty brought about by the fact that she belongs to a farming family; lack of parental academic advice being her first generation learner; inadequacy of facilities in Cabusao, Camarines Sur	Relying on her teachers' guidance as a means to overcome difficulties; availing herself of the educational assistance provided by school guidance programs; taking advantage of educational resources; combining work and study in order to pursue her education	Tinto's Academic and Social Integration Theory (2024)	Institutional support, namely guidance and mentoring provided by her teachers, enabled the participant to be persistent amid her geographical and financial constraints

Pagpupugay as Informal Management Mechanism	Family cohesion was expressed in the sacrifice that parents made despite being poor; the value of success in education being a cause for pride within the community; reciprocity in repaying the family back for their hard work; and strong desire to serve the people of Cabusao.	Reciprocal Obligation Activated as Motivation Rather Than Burden; Family Expectations Converted to Goal-oriented Endeavor; Advocacy Work Done in Recognition of Family Sacrifices; Volunteer Activities Undertaken for Community Programs; Professional Success Leveraged to Lift Family and Community (Teacher, Future Lawyer)	Gestalt Theory (1912)	This notion of success for the participant is defined as a complete entity where family unity, reciprocity, and community respect blend into one story.
Psychological Resources Mediating Success	Self-confidence in abilities in the absence of family precedence regarding education; persistence in pursuit of educational objectives (degree, license, Juris Doctor); adaptability in converting hardships to motivations; holistic view of educational experience as one meaningful narrative.	Fostering self-efficacy via mastery experiences and social encouragement; utilizing grit to surmount recurring academic, economic, and social hurdles; developing resilience through synergy between individual talents and environmental support networks; constructing meaning by synthesizing the	Duckworth's Grit (2007); Bandura's Self-Efficacy (1977); Resilience Theory (2001)	Grit provided prolonged perseverance; self-efficacy instilled confidence in abilities despite adversity; resilience turned struggles into motivation

different phases of life, its difficulties, and successes into one cohesive whole

Success as Collective Triumph	Degree completion as an essential educational accomplishment; professional success as licensed professional teacher (LPT); advanced degree aspirations (Juris Doctor); social mobility from rural fishing and agricultural background to professional status; community involvement and learners' advocate	Progression of the individual to competence and generativity stages depicts successful resolution of psychosocial crises, with success being gauged by his/her contribution to the community.	Erikson's Psycho social Theory (1950)	Progression of the individual to competence and generativity stages depicts successful resolution of psychosocial crises, with success being gauged by his/her contribution to the community.
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DISCUSSION

Structural Barriers and Institutional Support Systems

However, the participant faced many structural barriers such as being geographically isolated requiring both walk and commuting at times, economic difficulties resulting from the farming done by her family, lack of academic guidance from parents being a first-time learner, inadequate facilities and means of transport in the school and Cabusao, Camarines Sur. She managed to overcome the barriers using mentorship from teachers and encouragement as key points, used guidance in schools regarding academic concerns, obtained resources for education via institutional efforts, managed both work and education to afford fees for her studies.

"Madami pagsubok along my way, pero sabi ng tatay ko, 'mag-aaral ka sa malayo, o mananatili ka magsasaka?' ang hirap ng buhay may mga times na isa o dalawang beses lang kami kumakain sa isang araw at madalas naglalakad lang kami papunta school." I never imagine dropping from school just because of scarcity. Yes, we were financially struggled but then never ko inisip na tumigil sa pag-aaral." "They did not just give me money and time-they gave me the belief that I could actually change things. Every child that I taught is a tribute to their love and sacrifices to me." "I have to

work from 7:30-4:30 and travel from Sipocot to Naga for an hour and most of the time came late at UNC as the class would start from 5:30 to 8:30 in the evening." – Ma'am Cyril

The analysis of data shows that there are various structural barriers, including geographic, economic, and institutional barriers. The experiences of the participant with respect to her traveling and walking to get to school show the distinct geographic barriers that learners have to face in municipalities such as Cabusao, whose poverty rate among farmers is at 36.0 percent. Moreover, her dependence on her teachers to help guide her academically shows that the formal structure provided her an alternative solution to the lack of guidance from her family. Overall, the success of the participant in balancing school and work life while persisting in learning shows that structural barriers can be overcome through institutional solutions.

Consequently, the conclusions can be drawn that support systems operate as crucial intermediaries between structural constraints and learning continuity for first generation students from rural Bicolano areas. Teachers' mentoring proved to be a very important step since this implies that educators have a potential to change the situation and overcome the negative effect of both geographic and economic factors. Resilience of the participant who continued studying despite his everyday walks and commuting and his difficult financial situations is evidence that first-generation students from rural fishing communities are characterized by high levels of determination, but their determination should be responded to by institutions. Lack of academic mentoring from parents is not seen as a disadvantage that cannot be overcome by any means.

The results confirm the views of Torres (2025) that complex family issues and extreme independence are problems facing first-generation graduate students, as well as those of Orbeta (2025) and Albert et al. (2024) that impoverished conditions, lack of transportation, and low institutional backing are consistent problems among rural and fishing communities. These results also validate the claim of Tinto (2024) that institutions can positively or negatively impact students' success based on how they design their policies, programs, and environments. Nonetheless, this study advances existing literature by providing empirical evidence that institutional support mechanisms, specifically teachers' mentoring, can help offset obstacles related to geography and economics, aspects that have not been fully considered in global research studies focusing on psychological factors.

For the educators of rural areas, it is important to create mentoring programs for the benefit of first-generation learners because the teachers themselves become the key moments in the educational journey of students. It is necessary to create guidance programs for students who belong to farmers and others; it includes learning about personal finances, educational and career counseling. The government should provide budgeting for transportation services and other delivery services for learners in isolated barangays, as suggested by the DepEd Project 6Bs. Finally, the organization should create work-study programs for the benefit of the first-generation learners to study and work at the same time.

Pagpupugay as Informal Management Mechanism

According to the participant, pagpupugay is seen in her family's solidarity through the sacrifices made by the parents in spite of their financial struggles, acknowledgment of educational accomplishments as a means of honoring the community, sense of obligation to "return the favor" because of the family's hard work, commitment to serve the learners and the community of Cabusao, and involvement in community projects out of gratitude. The coping strategies used by the participant include harnessing the sense of obligation as motivation instead of pressure, turning the expectations of the family into a mission-oriented drive, advocating for the sacrifices made by the family, participating in community projects, and taking pride in her success as a teacher and a lawyer-in-training in order to elevate her family and the community.

*"My family is my only source of strength; I could never imagine my life without them. Kung wala ang mama ko, mga kapatid ko at ang mga taong itinatuturing ko pangalawang pamilya, wala ako ngayon sa kinatatayuan ko."
"To my one and only Nanay Carmen, I thank God for having you as my mother... thank you for not giving up despite setbacks and staying strong all throughout." "Si Ma'am Cy ang tumayong breadwinner sa aming pamilya. Mahigos asin matinabang na aki si Ma'am. Mabuot saka maasahan sa laog saka luwas kang harong." "Noon ako ang nangangailangan ng tulong, and now na kaya ko na, binabalik ko na sa iba ang tulong na nakuha ko noon. Masaya ako na natutupad ko na lahat na gusto ko ngayon, lalong lalo na ang makatulong sa iba." – Ma'am Cyril*

The findings indicate that the practice of pagpupugay is an intentional culture-based mechanism that shapes resource distribution, decision-making procedures, and social support systems in the course of the participant's academic journey. While most literature outside the Philippines defines the obligation to one's family as a stressor or "achievement guilt," the participant's narrative shows that in the case of Bicolanos, the reciprocation of obligation serves as a motivational tool that promotes perseverance. The initiation of the practice of pagpupugay turned the possible stressors into meaningful responsibilities that led to the participant's choice of careers related to education and the law, which are two vocations with the aim of serving the community. The recognition of the participant's academic success by the community as a matter of community pride signifies that success is not only an individual accomplishment but also a communal success.

The implications from the data suggest that pagpupugay acts as a form of management process that has structure, processes, and outcomes akin to institutionalized management systems. These processes include: the first being the realization of the sacrifices made by the family and community which creates a sense of mutual obligation; secondly, this obligation becomes the driver for persisting and succeeding in educational efforts; finally, success is achieved by not only attaining success but by "paying back" through helping the family and community. This analysis refutes the notion that culture is simply a contextual framework to educational management, but that in fact, pagpupugay shapes decisions (such as deciding what

profession to enter into) as well as resource distribution (such as ensuring professional success is distributed among family members and the community) and responsibility (as reflected through community acknowledgement of success). The example set by the participant of the desire to serve the people of Cabusao highlights how pagpupugay fosters perseverance and community-focused leadership.

These results directly respond to the research gap identified in Chapter 2, where the importance of culture was recognized, yet there was no analysis of how cultural behaviors acted as an informal management system with structures, processes, and outcomes. While Covarrubias et al. (2021) viewed the concept of family obligations as "achievement guilt" and associated it with psychological distress, this paper shows how pagpupugay can be used to harness the power of reciprocal obligations. These results are consistent with those found by Arguelles and Sarsale (2025), who have identified stakeholder engagement activities in Philippine rural schools, and the Department of Education Region 5's Project 6Bs that was based on the principles of bayanihan. However, the current study adds to this literature by specifically analyzing the pagpupugay practice that has been overlooked by the international literature on first-generation students.

School administrators must capitalize on the use of pagpupugay as the cultural infrastructure already present in society to encourage student retention by implementing culturally sensitive initiatives within schools. Schools located in Bicolano communities must establish a model of community engagement that respects reciprocity, including projects such as service learning, which will allow students to "pay back" their communities by participating in volunteer work and advocating for them. School teachers must be provided training on how to recognize and utilize the cultural values prevalent in the community, including both pagpupugay and bayanihan, instead of seeing the concept of familial obligation as a drawback. School administrators must facilitate the inclusion of cultural values in educational management paradigms, noting that the cultural framework complements the formal support structure in place within educational institutions.

Psychological Resources Mediating Success

The subject revealed self-confidence in her abilities without any family academic tradition, perseverance towards her future education, which consisted of earning a college diploma, acquiring a teacher's license, and obtaining a law doctor degree. The student showed adaptability in turning difficulties into an impetus, and had a holistic view on her learning experience as a meaningful narrative. The student's coping strategies were the development of self-efficacy through mastery experiences and social persuasion, applying grit in conquering numerous academic, monetary, and social obstacles, creating resilience through the dynamic interaction between one's strength and the environmental system, as well as making sense of her life experiences.

"I always tell my mother na magtatapos ako ng pag-aaral." "When I completed my college studies, I worked as a Secondary School teacher, I took my Master's Degree... After completing 27 units, I decided to take a LAW School at University of Nueva Caceres. In the year 2021, I graduated

from LAW school, and I am still chasing my dream to pass the BAR exam." "All barriers I encountered taught me to assist other people, they taught me how terrible life can be and that's why I need to assist other people overcome those problems." "Education is not only for achieving degrees but it is my weapon to make my passion of helping into reality. All the struggles I encounter during my educational years were worth it to see families receive the attention they deserve." – Ma'am Cyril

In the present case, psychological resources – self-efficacy, grit, and resilience – were functioning as intervening variables that mediated the relationship between structural barriers, cultural values, and educational success. For instance, the participant's self-efficacy was built up via mastery experiences (i.e., successfully completing academic tasks despite difficulties) and social persuasion (teachers' encouragement and community members' positive remarks). As for the participant's grit, it manifested itself through a continuous effort to pursue long-term goals, like obtaining a Juris Doctor degree despite being a licensed and successful teacher. Resilience was viewed as a dynamic process during which the participant managed to adapt to difficulties through the synergy between her personal qualities and support systems available to her in the environment rather than a static quality. What is more important, none of the mentioned psychological resources functioned in isolation since the cultural value of pagpupugay allowed for giving the participant some sense and direction.

The above findings suggest that the psychological resources that contribute to the first-generation success emerge in interaction with family members, teachers, and community members rather than in individualistic settings. Thus, the participant's self-efficacy was acquired due to mastery experiences, which became possible because of institutional and social support, including teachers' encouragement. In turn, the participant's grit was fueled by the feeling of obligation associated with pagpupugay that transformed her educational goals into collective family and community aspirations. Finally, the dynamic character of the resilience process was enhanced by environmental support, such as teachers' encouragement and community recognition. In contrast to individualistic approaches to grit and resilience that dominate the international literature on the topic, the findings indicate that in the Bicolano community, these concepts are culturally informed and relationally supported. The participant's perception of her journey as an integral part of her life and coherent narrative demonstrates how Gestalt applies to this case in that the whole (the participant's narrative) is greater than the sum of its parts (isolated challenges and accomplishments).

The findings of the present research corroborate the following theories: Duckworth's (2007) Theory of Grit, which states that success stems from passion and perseverance and not necessarily from talent; Bandura's (1977) Self-Efficacy Theory, according to which the belief in one's competence is crucial to achieving high motivational and persevering level; and Resilience Theory (Garmezy & Masten, 2001), which explains resilience in terms of a dynamic process. At the same time, while agreeing with these theories, the present research differs significantly from international studies in the area in terms of the mechanisms through which the concepts under consideration are activated. In particular, in contrast to Covarrubias et al. (2021), who perceive family obligation as a

source of psychological stress, in the context of Bicolano culture, this expectation becomes a source of purpose, encouraging self-efficacy and grit. The findings also correspond to Salazar (2025) in that first-generation graduates develop a positive perspective on their lives because of their ability to support the community they come from.

As for the recommendations regarding future research, it seems appropriate for educational leaders to develop interventions that allow for cultivating psychological resources, including self-efficacy, grit, and resilience, within the framework of the discussed cultural value system. Thus, educational institutions are expected to create opportunities for mastery experiences for first-generation learners with the use of incremental academic achievements. At the same time, schools should ensure that there is sufficient social support in the form of teachers' and other mentors' encouragement. Furthermore, guidance services can help students develop a coherent narrative about their educational journeys, applying the concept of the Gestalt. Besides, teachers need to undergo professional development that focuses on promoting self-efficacy and resilience among students by valuing their family obligation as a source of motivation. Finally, there should be peer mentoring programs that involve successful first-generation graduates.

Success as Collective Triumph

The participant's success comprised the fulfillment of her basic educational qualifications by completing her degree program, professional success as a professional teaching license holder (LPT), higher-level education (Juris Doctor), social advancement from the rural agricultural village setting to the professional level, and involvement in community projects. Her coping strategies were redefining success from personal success to lifting her entire family, converting her professional success to community service, advocating on behalf of oppressed sections through law school education, being an inspiration to the youth in Cabusao, and converting personal success into collective success for the Bicolano students.

"Nakapag trabaho as Secondary School teacher... Year 2021, I graduated from LAW school and now still pursuing my dream to pass the BAR exam and become a full pledge attorney." "Si Maam Cy ang tumayong breadwinner sa aming pamilya... dawa may pamilya na si Ma'am Cy dae po yan nakakalingaw samo permi po na ang pag kumusta yaon." – Brother of Ma'am Cyril "Since 2012, I started tutoring kids and young learners in our barangay, every Christmas I am also sharing blessing thru gift giving and participating social initiatives every time there is calamities, we usually distribute food packs." "My personal needs and my clientele are my yearnings to finish my education so I can provide better for my family's needs and competently serve my community, as well." – Ma'am Cyril

The information obtained shows that for the first-generation learner in question, success does not mean reaching certain milestones in one's career path. Instead, success is defined in terms of a continuous family improvement and the ability to

contribute positively to the community. Contrary to the traditional definition of success, where personal financial standing or achievements play a significant role, the participant's understanding of success implies the ability to fulfill one's responsibility to provide something back for the family members and people within the community. The pursuit of a Juris Doctor degree, for instance, implies the need to use education as the tool for providing legal assistance to various disadvantaged groups of the population, among which are the communities in Cabusao. Hence, being a teacher and a lawyer is seen by the participant as an opportunity to make a contribution to the development of people and serve those who have faced many difficulties.

The data suggests that within the Bicolano culture, success is not perceived as a personal accomplishment but rather as something collective and related to the community's needs. Indeed, educational and professional achievements of the participant can be viewed as a manifestation of *pagpupugay*, the idea of mutual gratitude for what the family members have done for each other. Therefore, the Western concept of success based on such outcomes as college graduation rate, employment, and earning income becomes irrelevant in this case. Thus, success as collective triumph includes four components that build upon each other: degree completion (the foundation of success), achievement of professional skills (the demonstration of capabilities), social mobility (the transformation of the situation in someone's life), and community contributions (reciprocal obligations). As a result, success is ongoing because one can contribute to the community after achieving his/her goals and helping other learners to follow in one's footsteps and succeed.

The current results are in line with findings of the study conducted by Orbeta and Potestad (2025), who mentioned that in the case of fishing communities, only four out of ten graduates felt successful when assessed against the criteria provided by family expectations and cultural values. Also, these findings are consistent with findings by Salazar (2025), according to which the positive perception of life among first-generation graduates was connected with their potential ability to return to assist their communities and provide better conditions for family members. However, unlike the findings of previous studies, the present investigation has managed to identify *pagpupugay* as a cultural element facilitating the perception of success. Thus, while in international research, Covarrubias et al. (2021) viewed family obligations as the reason for experiencing "achievement guilt," in the Bicolano community, the reciprocal obligations turned individual aspirations into collective goals that help people persist and achieve success. The current findings are also consistent with Erikson's Psychosocial Theory (1950) and the generativity vs. stagnation stage.

School administrators should reconsider the definition of student success used in the educational context, taking into account community contribution and family upliftment as important aspects of achieving success. Schools should incorporate elements of service-learning in their programs to allow graduates to contribute to the community in exchange for the benefits they receive during the period of study. In particular, school leaders could implement programs allowing graduates to come back and provide mentoring to younger students. Also, educational policy-makers could try integrating community contribution as an indicator of success in addition to traditional indicators such

as graduation rate and average academic performance. Administrators of schools within the Bicolano culture should recognize the value of community contribution and acknowledge first-generation graduates not only for what they have achieved individually but also for their dedication to the concept of "paying back."

Conclusions

1. The mediation role played by institutional support mechanisms, especially teacher-mentoring, is an important way to help compensate for the effects of geographical and economic constraints on first-generation learners.

2. Pagpupugay can be seen as an informal management system wherein resource utilization and community support become aligned within the principles of reciprocal obligation as a source of power and direction for first-generation graduates.

3. Psychological resources for first-generation success can be socially constructed through pagpupugay as a means of developing self-efficacy, grit, and purpose.

4. For Bicolanos, success is relational and collectivist in nature, involving more than personal achievements and status in society. Rather, it involves the honoring of sacrifices made by the family while serving the community through pagpupugay.

Recommendations

1. An effective teacher-mentorship program should be set up by the Department of Education in Camarines Sur which would involve a mentor teacher assigned to first-generation learners (1 for every 15 students) in Cabusao and other coastal barangays. A monthly report of the progress of the learners should then be provided to the schools division office.

2. The principal of each school in Bicolano communities should incorporate the culture of pagpupugay in school policy, specifically through the creation of the "Balik-Serbisyo" program in schools where there are first-generation graduates. Under this program, first-generation learners will be celebrated during school assemblies once a month and be required to render 20 hours of tutoring services before graduation.

3. The guidance counseling offices of public secondary schools in Camarines Sur should conduct a "Kaya Mo, Bicolano!" program, a series of workshops on resilience and self-efficacy building involving six 90-minute sessions per week with pre- and post-assessment of self-efficacy using the GSES scale.

4. The Mayor of Cabusao Municipality should issue an executive order for the "Gawad Pagpupugay" program recognizing the contributions of first-generation graduates by giving a letter of commendation, cash prize for the community, and automatic placement in the municipal youth mentorship program.

Framework for Pagpupugay sa Paaralan, which is presented in the appendix of this paper, is an instrument designed for school-based management that translates the

Bicolano value of pagpupugay into systematic and accountable forms of leadership practices. This framework is advantageous to educational leaders because it offers them an operational model where they do not need to invest money, do not have to change their systems, and do not have to create new frameworks or instruments to achieve their goals. They can utilize this tool to ensure that their work is culturally responsive and that their students persist through the schooling process.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethics were maintained throughout the process of the study conducted under the guidance of the researcher so that the same was conducted. An authorization letter authorizing the conduct of the study was obtained prior to conducting observations and interviews as part of the data gathering process for this study. The respondents participated voluntarily in the study as well as used of unacceptable terms such as offensive, discriminatory language were avoided while doing interview as mentioned by Bryman and Bell (2007).

Data will be retained only when necessary and then securely disposed of Personal information such as a participant's name will not be revealed without their explicit permission. Apart from this, no personal information that can lead to the identification of participants will be disclosed without their consent in any presentation, reports or publications.

The participant was also informed about the right to refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without suffering penalties. In case the participant decides to withdraw, his/her data will be withdrawn from the study as far as possible. In addition, the participant can also ask to remove their interview/dissemination comments. Confidentiality was maintained with respect to the collected information in order to prevent the revealing of any identifying information from the respondents. Proper handling of the data was ensured through proper storage and control of the access to the files. Withdrawal rights were stressed to protect voluntariness and assure participants about their rights of withdrawal from the research at any time without penalty.

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candelariananette27@gmail.com