



Higher education in the heart of armed conflict: The pivotal role of student affairs

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ABSTRACT

The issue of conflict confronts many developing countries, hence encouraging a growth of scholarship aimed at determining the effective delivery of education in a conflict situation. This paper suggests that units within higher education, such as student affairs has the potential to contribute to the promotion of peace, by addressing student needs through a paradigm that straddles between compliance and avoidance. The compliance–avoidance paradigm presents student affairs responding to the effects of war in the teaching and learning processes through programmatic and non-programmatic means. Formal programs are interventions adhering to established rules and accepted ethos of practice, provided to address students' developmental needs and foster harmony, while non-programmatic ways refer to strategic actions beyond the formal lines of authority and policy to calibrate the university to the peculiarities of the conflict situation. Ultimately, the study proposes the shift of focus of higher education in context of war from peace education to the needs of the learners and to the unique challenges of educational service providers. Findings were derived from a case study on student affairs practice conducted in a public university in Mindanao, Philippines, using interviews, public documents, and on-site observations as primary data.

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1. Introduction

Many developing countries are struggling with various forms of war. This then invariably connects the issue of conflict with the condition of poverty (UNDP, 2002). Traditionally, among the fundamental approaches to reconstitute fragmented societies is through education (Paulson and Rappleye, 2007). However, recent studies cite that educational initiatives and policies have made minimal impact in conflict-resolution (Barron, 2011; Milligan, 2005). Nonetheless, by dint of education's established role in human development, the pursuit of the missing gap between theory and practice in education and conflict remains an important agenda to most scholars, educationalists, and international agencies (Davies, 2004).

1.1. Education and conflict – looking for the way forward

Novelli and Lopes Cardozo (2008) exposed that armed-conflict in the global context has been shifting from violent conflict among superpowers to armed-conflict among local and regional sectors of developing countries, and such wars are characterised by cultural difference. They proposed that a guiding framework for critical

research is to begin by problematising the complex interests of key players within the contemporary global education and conflict contexts. On the other hand, Paulson and Rappleye (2007) cited the need for theoretical and epistemological approaches that can actually be used in practice. They also mentioned the overuse of “peace education” as the default intervention and the need to explore alternative models; thereby suggested that the education and conflict conundrum can be investigated beyond the theoretical lens of peace.

A book by Davies (2004) often referred by other scholars points to directions of change that can occur incrementally from the fringes through small, interconnected subsystems. This particular allusion to the complexity theory hints at looking more closely into the details of the lives of individuals (learners and teachers) in a vulnerable learning environment affected by war. In effect, what is needed is to establish an educational system equipped to build peace. Simply put, as Nordveit (2010) would assert, any approach to achieve development must emanate from the way the people define and make sense of their needs.

The gap between theory and practice in the scholarship of education and conflict remains a conundrum. The answer cannot merely be conjured vicariously as one assuming that by dint of higher education's role in the formation of citizenship equates to producing students with a more “peaceful” perspective. The study proposes to address the theory and practice gap is to ground theory from actual practice. This encourages ensuing studies not just to answer the question of how higher education contributes to the

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promotion of peace but also to explore other questions that can support the understanding of the link between higher education and conflict. Hence, this study poses the question – how does higher education operate within the context of war? This question aims to generate an understanding of the dynamics of higher education in a situation of war, which can be integral in its relationship in the promotion of peace.

The investigation used the interpretive meanings attached by students, staff, and lecturers through the qualitative methodology of case study. The study used a single unit within higher education, in this case student affairs, to provide a probable microcosm of the entire university-system.

1.2. Armed conflict in the Philippines – the Mindanao story

Developing countries like the Philippines are confronted by localised wars instigated by different interest groups. The popular ones, which have attracted international media attention, such as the kidnapping of foreign nationals and massacres of civilians, were those that happened in the island of Mindanao. Mindanao is one of the three major geographical areas and second biggest island of the Philippines. It is the bastion of the Islamic faith, where 90 per cent of the estimated four million Filipino Muslims reside (www.muslimmindanao.ph). In 2008, the national government reported 600,000 displaced families in the entire of Mindanao due to war (Rasul, 2009).

The main root of the conflict has been attributed to the struggle of maintaining cultural and religious identity of Muslim-Filipinos against the dominance of a highly Christianised Philippines. This began when Catholic Spain invaded the Philippines in the mid 15th century, which abated the proliferation of Islam in the Philippine archipelago. Islam came earlier than Christianity to the Philippines in the 14th century through Muslim traders from the neighbouring islands in the Southeast Asian region (Milligan, 2003). The Muslims were able to secure a substantial part of Mindanao from Spanish rule until the end of its reign in the 19th century. The colonisation efforts, however, succeeded in devastating the economies of Muslim communities and creating a social divide among Christians and Filipinos. At present, Muslim Filipinos still feel compelled to adopt a widely dissimilar ethos from the mainstream Christianised Filipino society. In fact, education was an instrument in the past to deepen the gap between Christians and Muslims, among which is the imposition of a Christian-oriented and Manila-generated national curriculum, which at some point presented the Muslims in an unfavourable light (Milligan, 2005). This was exacerbated by the Philippine government's diplomatic-military relationship with the United States (Khatami, 1998; Milligan, 2005; Rasul, 2009).

There are three main separatist groups that have prominently figured in the armed conflict, namely the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and the radical terrorist group Abu Sayaff. The government was able to enjoin the MILF in the formation of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), but this has been criticised to have only expanded the control of the Philippine government in Mindanao (Milligan, 2005). Aside from the Islamic separatist movement, the current unrest is also caused by clan wars called *rido* among Muslims themselves (Barron, 2011).

There have been considerable efforts in terms of educational policies implemented by the national government, and financial assistance provided by international agencies for the social integration and economic development of Mindanao. Prominent government initiatives are the expansion of public education, the establishment of *madrashas*, and the adoption of a curriculum that complies with Muslim laws. International agency such as the World Bank has invested substantially in community-based projects to spur economic development. Evidently, these efforts

barely made a dent in addressing the conflict situation or alleviating the socio-political and economic conditions of Mindanao. The Mindanao issue remains to be in a state of flux; the Philippine government, civil society, and international agencies have yet to come up with a viable solution to the Mindanao debacle (Barron, 2011; Milligan, 2003, 2005). The reason being, as Milligan (2003) posited, is that attempts to foster unity and order without due consideration to the inherent, historical, social, and political biases at play, fails to address conflict in a diverse ethno-religious context.

1.3. Student affairs in higher education

Student affairs is claimed to be an American creation dating back to the 18th century with its evolution predominantly shaped by its European colonial history, socio-political revolution of the country, and a concomitant reaction from changes in the general educational system (Hamrick et al., 2002; Rhatigan, 2000). The Philippines' current educational system is largely shaped by its colonial past (Bago, 2001) and its own socio-political transitions (Wong-Fernandez, 2003).

In 2002, in a UNESCO commissioned study on student affairs, the International Association of Student Affairs and Services Professionals (IASASP, 2002), defined the outcomes of student affairs as virtually the same as that of higher education, to wit: (1) high quality, well rounded higher learning experience; (2) better access to higher education for students with varying abilities and backgrounds; (3) better retention and progress toward graduation; (4) higher graduation rate; (5) improved career and employment prospects; (6) a sustainable interest in lifelong learning; and (7) a life as a responsible member and citizen of his community.

A cursory view of literature shows student affairs, as informed by various disciplines, to be primarily composed of management, leadership, and human development (Barr et al., 2000; Hamrick et al., 2002; Miller et al., 1991). Experts asserted that educational functions address student learning in both the formal classroom setting and the informal or outside-the-classroom setting. In fact, the definition of the curriculum itself includes student experiences within the learning environment that are not exclusively gained in the classroom (Bago, 2001). Therefore, the connection of human development, or what was commonly referred to in student affairs language as “student development” to management, is the same as that of theory and action. Student development is the theoretical foundation, and management is the action element (Miller et al., 1991). Most authorities in the field of student affairs admit that both the managerial and human developmental components are essential in the practice of student affairs. Hence, student affairs professionals are indeed educators with a unique role in the educational process (Miller et al., 1991).

Very few existing studies describe student affairs practice in the Philippine setting. Among these studies are three published articles relating to student affairs in the Philippines, which are sourceable online. Bernardo (2008) highlighted the effect of internal and external environments in shaping student affairs' interventions to encourage student development. Similarly in another published article, Bernardo (2011) presented different practices of student affairs in seven selected public universities all over the country. Guimba et al. (2011) showed the connected to the role of student affairs in developing leaders among its students. Another study on the management of student affairs as perceived by different heads of student affairs was done by Wong-Fernandez (2003). Other related studies are from conferences of the Asia Pacific Student Services Association (www.apssa.info) and its local affiliate, the Philippine Association of Administrators of Student Affairs (www.dlsu.edu.ph), dissertations of Bernardo (2006) and Bonnet (2007) on student affairs practices of Philippine

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