School Violence in the Philippines: A Study on Programs and Policies

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Abstract. Local and international studies have affirmed the alarming situation of bullying and school violence involving Filipino children. The intensity of violence has reached a disturbing rate that has pushed policy-makers to formulate bullying prevention schemes. Despite organized attempts to make schools a safe environment, this dilemma poses critical risks that call for aggressive and determined actions to fight violence in schools. As the new academic year started in June, 2012, the Philippines' Department of Education (DepEd) has issued a policy to combat school violence prevention and management, advocating zero tolerance policy on school violence. This paper scrutinizes the department's policy on promoting safe schools. It also attempts to provide views on issues encountered by the education system while analyzing the crucial role of policy-making in assuring safety in schools.

Keywords: school violence, policies, bullying, Philippine education

1 Introduction

As the school year started in June 2012, the Philippines' Education department has once again stressed the promotion of violence-free schools, urging students, parents, school teachers and the entire community to fight and end all forms of violence committed against school children. Children will better learn and will be more productive under a school environment free from threats to their young lives [1]. Henrich, et al. [2], emphasized effects of feeling secured at school because students consider school to be a "safe haven" from violence.

   A survey conducted revealed that bullying or abuse is experienced by one in two Filipino school children. [3]. This statistics is backed up by a report in an Australian newspaper involving 117,000 nine-year olds from 25 different countries, stating that 50% of Filipino students are being bullied in school [4]. Also, Lai, et al. [5] have affirmed that students in the Philippines had led the record of different types of bullying, which include being "made fun of or being called names," "left out of activities by others," and "made to do things the student did not want to." A study conducted by Barbero et al. [6] that sought to evaluate the effectiveness of the

intervention and violence prevention programs revealed that there is an existence of a phenomenon that has probably always been present in school, although it has become the subject of increasing attention and a social alarm in recent years. School violence and bullying issues continue to be an alarming subject of national discussion for years. The government has consistently set up campaigns in forming schemes that would make bullies liable and hamper school violence.

2 Evaluating Child Protection Policy: Towards Safe, Protective, and Caring Schools

Last May 14, 2012, the Philippines' Department of Education has issued Order No. 40, s. 2012, entitled DepEd Child Protection Policy. The order mandates concerned individuals the policy and guidelines on the protection of school-children against abuse, violence, exploitation, discrimination, bullying and other forms of abuse. The issuance of this policy aims to safeguard the welfare of school children from all forms of violence.

The 30-page document contains 26 sections, which particularly presented detailed discussion of the policy, with initial reference to the 1987 Constitution; "The State shall defend the right of children to assistance, including proper care and nutrition, and special protection from all forms of neglect, abuse, cruelty, exploitation, and other conditions prejudicial to their development." With this comes one of the main thrusts of the Philippines' Education Department in partnership with all involved stakeholders: an assurance that schools be conducive for the learning of children.

One argumentative subject cited in the memorandum was the advocacy for zero tolerance policy for child abuse, bullying, etc. With the reiteration of the department's stand on bullying and acts of violence, student protection is considered to be a vital element for the students' well-being.

Cyber-bullying has also been included as an aggressive behavior with the use of electronic materials inflicting harm, intimidation, or humiliation, Vacca and Kramer-Vida [7] stated that there is a need for professionals to be aware of the role of technology in providing new and different avenues for children to bully and be bullied. Kwan and Skorik [8] in their study on cyber-bullying through Facebook affirmed that the existence of online and offline networks has also opened the idea of offline and online problems.

The policy deliberately outlines the specific duties and responsibilities of each concerned party in the entire community when dealing with school violence issues. The 2012 DepEd Child Protection Policy also explicitly noted the Article 218 of the Family Code of the Philippines to refer to the obligation of school administrators, teachers, academic and non academic and other personnel. "School staff members play a central role in this coalition, from working directly with children who have been exposed to violence, to reaching out to parents and intersecting with law enforcement personnel"[9].

With the course of action to be taken when handling cases of bullying and others to be complicated, the Department of Education has also thoroughly outlined step-by-step methods to be followed, naming definite individual to pursue specific actions.

The due process as stated in the policy paper appears to be very comprehensive since it provides definite actions to be taken even upon the complaint is filed.

Lastly, it taps concerned government agencies when it comes to handling cases involving school personnel. The Civil Service Commission has its own standard operating procedures when handling cases committed by public servants. Also, the Revised Rules of Procedure of the Department of Education in Administrative Cases covers practices and investigation of school authorities connected to cases of abuse or violence.

The policy's Section 12 (Procedures in Handling Bullying Incidents in Schools) indicates that individuals involved in cases of school violence may be required to attend seminars and counseling during the period of suspension. However, it fails to further elaborate this part since it has not provided subsequent information as to how the counseling program would be implemented. The suspension stage could be considered a critical phase on the individual, thus, making these supposed seminar and counseling to be very central to the individual's recovery aspect.

The DepEd policy ended with notes intended for private schools, directing them to exercise their own practices on rules of procedures on handling administrative cases. This distinguishes that public and private schools have their definite penalties as set in the rules of the school, with public schools being under the authority of the DepEd.

On a greater analysis, the DepEd policy could be viewed on a perspective that majority of the provisions listed pertain to handling of cases of violence and abuse in schools more than preventive measures to strengthen the stakeholders' capacity to be vigilant against these cases. Managing issues on school violence has taken up the greater part of the policy, leaving only a few and limited measures to combat abuse, violence, exploitation, discrimination, bullying and other forms of abuse.

Lastly, the policy paper has not identified schemes on how schools could sustain special financial spending in executing programs and campaigns related to the following: institution of effective child protection policies, conducting the capacity building activities for the members of the CPC, among others. Even the authorized seminars and counseling sessions which would need the service of professional counselors seem challenging to be carried out with foggy declarations on funding.

3   Conclusions and Recommendations: Stakeholders' Sincerest Commitment

Conducting lectures on nonviolence and human rights education as a compulsory part of the curriculum serves as a strategic move in instilling values among students. It also works for teachers and school personnel since it would help them work with the theories and principles of peace and interpersonal relationship. The Philippine education system could also incorporate classes in values education, social studies, physical education, and language education, among others with discussion on peer relation, respect and nonviolence. Lee [10] suggested that schools adopt a policy that highlights the character-building virtues such as respect, caring tolerance, and responsibility for others. The most effective (school) interventions appear to be those aimed at improving social and interpersonal skills and modifying attitudes and beliefs

[11]. Altun and Baker [12] also support conducting seminal workshops on anger-management along with lessons on puberty stage. A recent study also notes that schools who enjoy non-violence observe a variety of activities participated in by students, as opposed to those institutions who stress control and punishment [13].

The Philippines could also draw ideas from South Korea's anti-bullying 117 hotline to facilitate quick reporting of incidence of violence [14]. Short messaging system (SMS) could also be enhanced. Comprehensive measures regarding reporting of incidents should be established, as students who do not report school action are vulnerable to impairment of their mental and physical well-being [15]. Along with it, the images of young people promoted by mass media also create diverse after-effects on public policies when it comes to violence and disaffection in schools [16]. Oh [17] has also reported the initiatives of South Korea's Education Ministry to deploy antiviolence counselors in schools.

Lastly, in order for anti-school violence measures to be strictly implemented, the Philippine government should appropriate substantial budget allocation. Providing sufficient funds for programs and projects would equate to successful policy implementation as it generates favorable results.

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