

The Journey Towards Empowerment of Former Youth Scholars of Gems Heart Outreach Development Inc: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

This phenomenological study explored the journey toward empowerment of former youth scholars of Gems Heart Outreach Development, Inc. (GHODI). It aimed to describe and reflectively analyze the lived experiences of former youth scholars, identify the significant meanings and insights derived from their experiences, and determine the implications of these insights in the field of Social Work. The study was anchored on phenomenological inquiry and related perspectives on empowerment, poverty, and community development. A qualitative phenomenological research design was employed to provide an in-depth understanding of the participants lived experiences. The study involved four (4) former youth scholars of GHODI who shared their narratives through the research process. The findings revealed that the participants experienced challenges related to economic limitations, educational struggles, and difficult life situations that affected their pursuit of education. Despite these challenges, the support provided through the scholarship program, together with encouragement from family and other support systems, contributed to the development of motivation, confidence, leadership skills, and personal transformation. The experiences of the participants demonstrated that educational assistance and community-based interventions can help individuals overcome barriers and become self-sustaining and empowered individuals. The study highlighted the significant roles of parents, social support networks, and organizations in fostering growth, engagement, and empowerment among youth scholars. The study is aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), which promotes inclusive and equitable education and lifelong learning opportunities, as the research emphasizes the role of educational assistance in improving opportunities for underprivileged youth. The sustainability impact of the study lies in strengthening community-based educational support initiatives that contribute to individual development, social empowerment, and the reduction of barriers associated with poverty and limited access to education. The study recommends sustaining programs that provide educational opportunities, encouragement, and support mechanisms for disadvantaged youth and communities.

Keywords: Community Development, Educational Assistance, Empowerment, Former Youth Scholars, GHODI, Phenomenology, Scholarship Program, Social Work, Youth Development

1. Introduction

Educational attainment is widely recognized as an important factor in improving life opportunities and breaking cycles of poverty. The researcher's personal experience as a former youth scholar illustrates how financial hardship can limit educational access while also demonstrating how scholarships and community support can create opportunities for transformation. Growing up in a financially challenged family, the researcher experienced difficulties in acquiring basic school materials and sustaining education. The assistance received through Pangarap Foundation, Inc. provided educational resources and opportunities that strengthened motivation, confidence, leadership, and commitment to helping others. This personal journey influenced the exploration of the experiences of former youth scholars of Gems Heart Outreach Development, Inc. (GHODI), focusing on their lives before joining the program, their experiences during participation, and the changes brought about by educational assistance and community involvement.

Globally, education remains a major development concern. Around the world, millions of children and adolescents remain outside the formal education system due to poverty, gender inequality, disability, conflict, and socioeconomic barriers (UNICEF, 2019). The Global Partnership for Education (GPE, 2014) emphasized that access to secondary education can significantly reduce poverty, with millions of individuals potentially lifted from poverty through educational opportunities. Education is also recognized as a fundamental human right. According to the United Nations (1948), Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms that everyone has the right to education. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) further highlights that education should develop children's abilities, dignity, cultural respect, and participation in society (United Nations, 1989).

Related literature highlights education as a transformative mechanism that develops individual capacities, strengthens communities, and addresses social inequalities. Scholarship programs serve not only as financial assistance mechanisms

but also as systems of encouragement, mentorship, and empowerment. Research and development reports emphasize that educational interventions contribute to poverty reduction, improved employment opportunities, and enhanced social participation. UNESCO's Education for All (EFA) movement established the importance of collective efforts among governments, development organizations, civil society, and private institutions in achieving inclusive education (UNESCO, 2000). In Asian contexts, education is viewed as a pathway toward economic mobility and advancement, particularly among communities experiencing socioeconomic limitations (Schnabel, 2010). Youth empowerment initiatives further recognize young people as active participants and contributors to social solutions rather than merely beneficiaries of assistance. Scholarship programs therefore represent broader community development strategies by providing opportunities for education, capacity building, and personal transformation.

At the global level, educational inequality remains a persistent challenge. UNICEF reported significant numbers of children and adolescents who remain excluded from schooling due to poverty and vulnerability (UNICEF, 2019). These realities demonstrate the continuing need for inclusive educational programs that address structural barriers. Within Asia and the Pacific, despite improvements in school participation rates, many young people continue to encounter challenges related to education, employment, and healthcare access (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific [UNESCAP], n.d.). Education continues to be perceived as an important avenue for economic advancement and improved quality of life (Schnabel, 2010).

In the Philippines, the Philippine Statistics Authority (2015) reported that 17.5% of Filipino youth aged 15–24 was out of school. The major reasons identified included insufficient family income, lack of interest, domestic responsibilities, marriage or union, and the need to work to support family needs. These realities highlight the importance of scholarship programs and community-based educational assistance. GHODI responds to these challenges through community development strategies involving education, health, livelihood, youth development, and community organizing (Gems Heart Outreach Development, Inc., 2017). The organization focuses on empowering children, families, and communities through sustainable programs rather than temporary assistance.

The study is anchored on the understanding that empowerment emerges through experiences, relationships, opportunities, and systems of support. The study is anchored on the understanding that poverty may be reinforced by limited education and employment opportunities. Educational assistance programs such as GHODI's scholarship initiatives provide mechanisms for interrupting these cycles by increasing access to education, developing capabilities, and strengthening motivation among disadvantaged youth. The conceptual foundation of the study views the journey of former youth scholars as a process involving challenges, support systems, transformation, and empowerment. Their experiences demonstrate how educational opportunities combined with social support contribute to personal growth and community participation.

Although scholarship programs have been widely recognized for improving educational access, limited attention has been given to the lived experiences of beneficiaries after receiving educational support. Existing discussions often emphasize program outcomes, enrollment rates, and educational access but provide less understanding of how scholars personally experience transformation, develop resilience, and interpret empowerment. This study addresses this gap by examining the lived experiences of former youth scholars of GHODI. It seeks to understand how educational assistance influenced their knowledge, attitudes, skills, participation, and perspectives toward personal and community development.

This study directly aligns with SDG 4 – Quality Education, which promotes inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. The study contributes to this goal by examining how scholarship programs create educational opportunities for disadvantaged youth and support their continued development. The study also relates to SDG 1 – No Poverty, as education serves as a pathway for reducing poverty by improving capabilities, opportunities, and future socioeconomic participation. Furthermore, the study supports SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals by recognizing the importance of collaboration among non-government organizations, communities, families, and institutions in sustaining educational and social development initiatives.

The study contributes to multidisciplinary sustainability by demonstrating how education, community development, and social support systems interact in addressing poverty and inequality. From an educational sustainability perspective, the study highlights the importance of maintaining programs that expand access to learning opportunities for vulnerable youth. From a social sustainability perspective, it emphasizes empowerment, participation, leadership development, and stronger community relationships developed through educational interventions. From a socio-economic sustainability perspective, the study illustrates how education can improve individual capabilities and contribute to breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty. From an institutional sustainability perspective, the findings provide insights into how community organizations such as GHODI create sustainable change through capacity building, partnerships, and participatory approaches.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

The study utilized a phenomenological research design (Ramirez, 2017) to provide an in-depth understanding and description of the lived experiences of former youth scholars of GHODI. The approach focused on examining personal experiences and uncovering significant meanings derived from the participants' narratives (Ramirez, 2017). Phenomenology considers human experience as the basis for understanding reality, emphasizing consciousness, interpretation, and the meaning individuals attach to their experiences (Luijpen, 1966). The study was guided by the phenomenological perspective of understanding experiences from the first-person point of view (Ramirez, 1984, 2017). Phenomenology examines the structures of consciousness and the meanings formed through human experiences (Macann, 1993). Husserl defined phenomenology as the reflective study of the essence of consciousness as experienced from the first-person perspective (Smith, 2007). The study followed the phenomenological processes of gathering lived experiences, reflective narratives, thematic reflections, identification of essential insights, and creative synthesis.

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted among former youth scholars of GHODI, a non-stock, non-sectarian, and non-government organization registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission and licensed by the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD-SB-RL-00137-2014). GHODI focuses on empowering children, families, and communities through programs involving education, health and nutrition, livelihood, youth development, community organizing, and sponsorship initiatives. The organization operates in selected communities in Cavite, Iloilo, and Metro Manila, particularly areas experiencing poverty-related challenges. The study focused on former scholars involved in GHODI's Bukas Kamay, Abot Kamay, and Molino Mission Projects.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The respondents, referred to as co-researchers in the study, were former youth scholars of GHODI. Four co-researchers were selected based on their experiences as beneficiaries of GHODI's educational assistance and development programs. They were former scholars who participated in the organization's activities, completed college degrees or vocational-technical courses, and were willing to share their lived experiences. The participants were former youth scholars from the years 2007 to 2018 who had been involved in GHODI programs and had experiences related to the organization's empowerment initiatives.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study employed purposive sampling in selecting the co-researchers. Participants were chosen based on predetermined criteria relevant to the objectives of the phenomenological inquiry. The criteria included being a former youth scholar of GHODI, being a graduate of a college degree or vocational-technical course, having involvement in GHODI program activities, and being available and willing to share personal experiences. A total of four former youth scholars participated in the study. Their experiences served as the primary source of narratives for understanding the process of empowerment through educational assistance and community involvement.

2.5 Research Instrument

The primary research instrument was an interview guide prepared by the researcher and used during the storytelling and in-depth interview sessions with the co-researchers. The instrument was designed to gather narratives regarding participants' experiences before, during, and after their involvement in GHODI programs. The study utilized storytelling and in-depth interviews as methods of collecting lived experiences (Ramirez, 2017). Storytelling was considered a meaning-making process where individuals select and communicate significant experiences from their consciousness. In-depth interviews allowed the researcher to understand participants' perspectives, experiences, and situations through their own words (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

Before data collection, the researcher secured approval from the GHODI Board of Trustees and prepared the necessary research materials, including the interview guide. An initial meeting was conducted with the co-researchers to explain the purpose of the study, the reason for their selection, and the process of gathering narratives. Permission was obtained for recording, photography, note-taking, and documentation during storytelling sessions. The researcher gathered participants' stories through storytelling encounters and in-depth interviews (Ramirez, 2017). The collected narratives were transcribed verbatim and returned to the participants for validation and clarification. The researcher then organized the narratives, identified significant statements, developed textual themes, clustered themes into structural themes, and derived essential insights through reflective analysis (Ramirez, 1984, 2017).

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis followed the phenomenological process of reflection and thematic interpretation. The researcher conducted textual reflection by identifying significant ideas and information from the narratives that were relevant to the focus of the study (Ramirez, 1984, 2017). These textual themes were further analyzed through structural reflection to determine deeper meanings and relationships among experiences (Ramirez, 1984, 2017). The analysis proceeded through the identification of essential insights or the nucleus of truth derived from reflective examination of the participants' experiences (Ramirez, 1984, 2017). The final stage involved creative synthesis, where the researcher integrated the findings, implications, and possibilities emerging from the lived experiences of the former youth scholars (Ramirez, 1984, 2017). The phenomenological analysis followed the process described by Ramirez (1984, 2017), which emphasizes lived experiences, reflection, interpretation, and the emergence of insights from human and social realities. The phenomenological process included gathering lived experiences, reflective narratives, thematic reflections, development of essential insights, and creative synthesis.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Lived Experiences Toward Empowerment of Former Youth Scholars

3.1.1 Poverty, Educational Struggles, and the Pursuit of Dreams

The narratives revealed that the former youth scholars experienced financial difficulties that affected their educational journey. The participants described situations where their families struggled to provide school materials and other educational needs. Despite these limitations, they maintained their determination to continue schooling and pursue their dreams. Their experiences showed that poverty became a significant challenge, but it also strengthened their perseverance and commitment to education. The findings demonstrate that education became a pathway for overcoming poverty and improving life conditions. The participants' experiences reflected that access to educational support provided opportunities that would have otherwise been difficult to achieve. Their journey showed that empowerment begins when individuals are given opportunities, encouragement, and resources that allow them to develop their capabilities and participate actively in improving their lives.

3.1.2 Family Support, Values, and Motivation

The participants identified family as one of the strongest sources of motivation throughout their educational journey. Their narratives showed that parents encouraged them to continue studying despite financial limitations. Family values shaped their attitudes toward education, responsibility, and their desire to improve their family's situation. One participant shared that their parents encouraged them not to become out-of-school youth and inspired them to finish their education. The findings emphasize the importance of family support in youth development. Family serves as an environment where values, aspirations, and determination are developed. As Ruiz (2000) explained, the family provides an important setting where children develop their potential for social involvement. The participants' experiences demonstrate that encouragement and family values contributed significantly to their motivation to overcome challenges and achieve educational goals.

3.1.3 Challenges, Learning Experiences, and Personal Transformation

The participants experienced various challenges related to balancing academic responsibilities, personal situations, and involvement in GHODI activities. Some encountered difficulties in managing time between schooling and youth activities, while others faced personal struggles that affected their responsibilities. Despite these challenges, the participants viewed these experiences as opportunities for learning, growth, and transformation. The findings indicate that challenges became important elements in developing resilience, responsibility, and commitment. GHODI's learning and skills programs served as opportunities for the youth to discover their abilities, improve their attitudes, and strengthen their personal development. The experiences suggest that empowerment is not only achieved through assistance but also through meaningful participation and learning opportunities provided by community-based programs.

3.1.4 Role of GHODI in Building Confidence and Empowerment

The participants' narratives revealed that GHODI played a significant role in their transformation by providing educational assistance, activities, and support systems. The participants experienced changes in their confidence, interpersonal relationships, and participation in community activities. One participant shared that GHODI helped create opportunities for privileged youth, while another described how the organization's activities improved self-confidence and self-esteem. The findings show that GHODI's approach extended beyond material assistance by developing the participants' knowledge, skills, and social involvement. The organization's programs provided spaces where youth could develop leadership, communication skills, and a sense of responsibility toward others. These experiences contributed to the participants becoming empowered individuals who were able to share their knowledge and support other young people.

3.2 Support Systems as Sources of Empowerment

The results showed that empowerment among former youth scholars was influenced by multiple support systems, including family members, relatives, social workers, development workers, and GHODI as an organization. These support systems

provided encouragement, assistance, and opportunities that helped participants continue their education and overcome difficulties. The findings indicate that empowerment is developed through collective efforts rather than individual achievement alone. The participants' experiences demonstrate that supportive relationships create conditions where young people can develop confidence, pursue their goals, and contribute to their communities. The involvement of social workers and development workers was particularly significant in facilitating educational support and personal growth.

3.3 Essential Insights on the Journey Toward Empowerment

The phenomenological reflection revealed that the participants' journey toward empowerment involved overcoming difficulties, developing resilience, and transforming their experiences into sources of strength. The findings showed that challenges in managing school responsibilities and personal commitments became experiences that shaped their commitment, perseverance, and ability to help others. The essential insight derived from the study was that empowerment emerges through the interaction of personal motivation, family encouragement, and institutional support. The participants' stories revealed that while poverty limited their opportunities, educational assistance from GHODI and the encouragement of significant people enabled them to achieve their goals (Ramirez, 2007). Their experiences demonstrated that sustained support and motivation can help young people overcome barriers and become empowered individuals who contribute to their families and communities (Ramirez, 2007).

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

This phenomenological study explored the journey toward empowerment of former youth scholars of GHODI. The findings revealed that the participants experienced economic limitations, educational challenges, and personal struggles that tested their perseverance. However, through motivation, family support, and assistance from GHODI, they developed resilience, confidence, leadership skills, and a stronger commitment to improving their lives and helping others. The study further revealed that empowerment was shaped by the significant roles of parents, relatives, social workers, development workers, and community-based organizations in providing encouragement, engagement, and opportunities for growth. The experiences of the former scholars demonstrated that education and sustained support can become pathways toward personal transformation, self-sufficiency, and overcoming poverty.

Based on the findings, the study recommends the continuous strengthening of educational assistance and community-based programs that support underprivileged youth in achieving their educational goals. Families should continue providing encouragement and support, while organizations such as GHODI should sustain programs that develop youth capabilities through education, engagement, and empowerment activities. Future programs may continue recognizing the importance of motivation, family involvement, and support systems in helping young people overcome challenges and become empowered individuals.

Compliance with ethical standards

The author declares no conflict of interest. This study complied with recognized ethical standards for human-participant research by ensuring voluntary participation with informed consent, the right to withdraw without penalty, and strict confidentiality through anonymous, secure, and aggregated data handling. Given the focus on psychological well-being, procedures were non-invasive, and safeguards were observed to minimize discomfort, with guidance to appropriate support services when needed, and required institutional permissions were secured for instrument use and access to academic records.

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