

## Treasure and Pressure of Becoming Honor Students

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper focuses on the different facets of honor students including their motives, joys, and struggles in maintaining a good set of grades. The purpose of this study is to discover the stories of students who excel academically through examining their personal accounts. With the bulk of study directed towards struggling learners, this paper, through phenomenological approach contends that students who excel in their class have their own struggles in vying for academic excellence and recognition. More than simply gearing towards Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as personal motivations, there is a deeper story behind aspiring for grade of 90 percent and above. Apparently, society plays major impact on harnessing students with academic excellence. This paper uses qualitative approach basically through interviews and focus group discussions with the purposively chosen sample. Honor students deem academic excellence important because it symbolizes the prize of their exerted efforts in complying with the demanding academic requirements of the K-12 program. By and large, the main motives of students to excel academically are their family, financial standing, and ambitions. Academically excellent students take pride in having academic recognitions because it gives them sense of self-satisfaction, pride of their parents, and sometimes, tangible rewards. However, becoming honor students means living by the expectations of the society including their family and teachers. Having a sudden decrease of grades gives honor students pressure that causes them stress. The grade of 90 for honor students may mean both excellence and standard yet, it does not signify nor measure intelligence. Also, students need understanding when they face failure especially when they are pulled out from classes for academic competitions representing the school. Being honor students does not also mean being safe from bullying from their classmates.*

**Keywords:** Honors, Academic Excellence.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The ultimate goal of education is to produce graduates who would be productive members of society and thus contribute to the country and global development. Though in the realm of education, much has been researched about the academically struggling learners, the causes and the ways to deal with them, yet there remains a bias on the treatment of learners who excel academically. They bear with them pressing weights on their shoulder.

Filipinos have high valuing of education indeed. Demonstrated by the display of framed diplomas and medals in the common Filipino living rooms, the parents could not contain the pride of raising academically excellent students. It is undeniable that parents toil and sacrifice to provide their children quality education thus; it is a reward for them if their children reciprocate their efforts with high grades and top academic posts. In casual conversations of parents with their comrades, they would insert how their children fare very well in their attended schools.

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The term honor student is generic and relative or relational to other students within a single institution (Stoller, 2004). They are usually exceptional, perform far better than the rest of the class and prioritize grades more than anything else. By asking students the reasons the grade is important to them, instructors can discern whether they are focused on learning the material correctly or strictly focused on performance (Dumke *et al.* 2018).

Being an honor student entails not just the innate ability but more so with the hard work, effort, sense of responsibility and dedication to beat the deadlines, meet the requirements, exceed and uphold the expectations and balance the time between and among friends, family and the rest of the community. The pressure is real. In some respects, it is both the best of times and worst of times in honors education (Badenhausen, 2012).

In most cases, top performing students are the same set of students who are engaged in different extra and co-curricular activities such as but not limited to being active officers and members of various school organizations, carrying on and participating in academic and non-academic programs, projects and activities. Accordingly, student engagement has long been recognized as a critical factor in student learning and achievement (Fredricks, Filsecker, & Lawson, 2016; Lawson & Masyn, 2015; Wang & Eccles, 2013). High engagement is consistently related to academic outcomes such as course grades and achievement test scores (Fredricks *et al.*, 2016). Good performance and achievement often give them the sense of pride and satisfaction.

Some Filipino children are often motivated to do well in their schools for various reasons. And in the Department of Education (DepEd), identifying students with academic honors has transformed with the fly of time. Yesteryears, honor students would be identified if they belong to the top 3 of the class, it became top 5, top 10 and so forth. Then came the inclusion of the performance of extra-curricular activities that encourages the learners to join competitions between and beyond the prescribed curriculum. Academic standing comprises 70% of the final average while the remaining 30% includes their co-curricular and/or extra-curricular activities. But with the existence of the K-12 program of the Enhanced Basic Education Curriculum, DepEd Order No. 36, s. 2016 stipulates that "At the end of the school year, the Academic Excellence Award is given to learners from grades 1 to 12 who have attained a General Average of at least 90 and passing Final Grade in all learning areas. The General Average is reported as a whole number following DepEd Order No. 8, s. 2015. The class advisers will give to the AC the list of qualified learners to be awarded during a school ceremony." Made consonant with the college level's Latin honors, academic excellence awards of the learners in both public and private educational institutions are 1. With Highest Honors/May Pinakamataas na Karangalan 98-100 2. With High Honors/May Mataas na Karangalan 95-97, and 3. With Honors/May Karangalan 90-94.

However, even the academically performing students face challenging environment as they are gauged based on their performance. The study of Danielsonin (2002) states that if more students are earning higher grades, and if high grades represent high levels of achievement, then everyone should be cheering. Yet the pain and the gain of this level of achievement are both inevitable. This necessitates the honor students to maintain academic mind-sets to show a strong link to student performance and persistence in times of struggle (Dweck, 1999; Dweck & Master, 2009). Students with growth mind-sets believe that intelligence can grow with effort, approach challenges as opportunities for growth, persist in time of challenge, and demonstrate resilience when faced with failure (Dweck & Master, 2009) while students with fixed mind-sets believe individuals are born with a certain amount of intelligence that additional effort cannot change (Perkins-Gough, 2013)

Consequently, in the light of relevant interview and focused group discussion, this paper aims to determine the treasure and the pressure of becoming honor student amidst the expectation of the peers, classmates, parents, teachers, school and the community in general.

## 2. PROFILE OF THE RESPONDENTS

The major gathering tool used in gathering the necessary data for this study was through focus group discussion (FGD). It is a good way to gather together people from similar backgrounds or experiences to discuss a specific topic of interest. For this topic, respondents were students who belonged to the top 10 of the tenth graders' class but due to shared posts in the honor roll, 13 honor students were used and subjected to two FGDs. The groupings made were random and not purely based on their rankings. The group of participants is guided by a moderator (in this case, two teachers acted as the facilitators) who introduces topics for discussion and helps the group to participate in a lively and natural discussion amongst themselves. The teachers explained the agenda of the activity and asked for students' voluntary involvement in the discussion with the written permit which was then duly signed by their parents. The group was dominated by female students who made up 76.9 per cent of the total respondents and only three male students were involved in the study. The general average of the select learners range from 91-93 which all belong to "with honors" classification as per DepEd manuals show. The monthly family income of the respondents ranges from Php 5,0000.00 to Php 20,0000.00. Their daily allowance is between Php 24.00- Php 80.00. More than half of the students (69.2 per cent) referred Mathematics as their favorite subject. Majority of the learners are affiliated with their chosen extra-curricular affiliations such as student council, school publication, scouting, and athletics association. These students have high ambitions such as to be engineer, accountant, and lawyer someday.

## 3. PERCEPTION OF "HONORS"

Honor students have different views of academic excellence or being in top of the class. Learners agree with Danielsonin (2002) that being honor students means an achievement that can help them become more successful or reach their ambition in life someday. For others, this serves as a reward after exerting efforts and toil that they have pulled off for the school year which gives them pride of ownership. Some said that as children to their parents, it is their responsibility to study hard to give back to the hardships of their parents.

With the new standards of the Department of Education in identifying honor students, 90 per cent becomes the target that needs to be attained by the learners. This two-digit figure means differently for our respondents. Others find 90 as their achieved goal that may grant them a post in the roster of excellent students in terms of their academics. They want this mark to be their lowest grade in their report cards and this guarantees them that they do "good" in subject areas with this grade. However, for the learners who belong to the top 3, grade of 90 means that they have to double their efforts the next quarter for this is but a "satisfying" grade. As Anna said, "90 is 90 lang?" Meanwhile, one student said that it is a mere number that cannot be equated to intelligence.

Also, millennial students believe that not only gifted bright students can get at least a general average of 90 and be labeled "with honors." Hardwork, diligence, and perseverance can be the key elements in achieving that "honor" grade. "*Hindi porke't honor ay matalino, 'yung iba ay sipag at tiyaga lang,*" Mickey quotes. This resonates with the statement formulated from the study of Dweck and Master (2009).

#### 4. THE TREASURE OF BECOMING HONOR STUDENTS

For our learners, studying is taxing and challenging and being on top of the class is both joyous and rewarding. In able to become honor students, they need motivation to drive them towards academic excellence. Most students view their family as their primary inspiration to do well in their studies. Due to their economic status, learners want to give back to their parents who toil very much just to provide them with education. Learners want to land in a financially rewarding profession someday which can be gleaned from their ambitions in life. With parents who are considered laborers like drivers, farmers and overseas workers, they want to extend help to their parents not that they are obliged but they think that it is their responsibility. The socioeconomic status of a child parent impacts on the educational development and achievement of the child. (Machebe, *et al.* 2017) Other honor students just know the value of education and they think that having good grades can help them realize their ambitions in life similar with the finding made by Clark (2009) in his study. Other students want to challenge their own capacities to prove others that they can do well in their schooling. They want to be recognized by the people around them or the society. "*May mga ibang tao pong nangda-down sa amin dahil po sa aming financial status,*" Rose said. One respondent said that she is motivated to study hard because her mother didn't even finish schooling.

Being honor students give learners joy and sense of pride. The personal joys pay off after they have accomplished piles of paperworks, mind-boggling projects, group presentations, overlapping researchers and others. Ace said, "*Fulfilling sa sarili,*" when you achieve you're you perspired for. They value the worth of their grades because they exerted hard work. Also, known among Filipinos, parents could not contain their sense of achievement for their children. Rose recalls her father's remark, "*Ang galing galing ng anak ko.*" Typically, parents just interject their student's ranking in a casual comrade's conversation. Despite not being financially well-off, some parents try to provide extrinsic motivations in terms of material rewards like bicycle, cellphone, and laptop.

#### 5. THE PRESSURE OF BECOMING HONOR STUDENTS

While eyes are set on struggling learners and students-at-risk, honor students have personal dilemma within them that needs attention. The pressure on them is nothing to be neglected because the way they treat their studies might be beyond what our senses do perceive. Our honor students are not safe from bullying by their classmates. While they are making nights day, bullies talk behind their backs and give them names like limelight stealer (*pabida*), teacher's pet (*sipsip*) and sarcasms like "*Eh 'di ikaw na ang matalino.*" When they try to answer in an oral recitation and satisfied the expectation of the teacher, the class would eventually murmur.

Other people also still entangled with the idea of competition to become honor students though the DepEd changed the concept that anyone without limited number in the class can be given the "with honors" tag. These honor students who tried to get their "good" grades are still pressured knowingly and unknowingly when they are expected to climb higher in the class standing. At times, they could barely handle stress and become tired of living to the expectations of the people around them. With the teachers' bar set higher for them, committing simple mistakes seem like a crime for them. "We are expected to perform more than what we can give," says Nica. At times, with a point-drop from the previous quarter, parents look for something to blame be it their boyfriend or their addiction to gadgets.

When students feel unsatisfied with the rating, they get, they find some teachers unfair but they set aside questioning for the fear that their teachers may take it against them. Sometimes this leads to their demotivation to do harder the next time.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Honor students are known as the cream of the crop, top students, smart set, upper crust and more. Literature some agrees that honor students are learners who aspired and achieved academic excellence (Bortolus, 2017) set forth by the institution they are enrolled in which can be manifested by having high grades and superior performance across disciplines (California State University, 2018). With the mandate of the Department of Education, honor students in public basic education providers are learners who achieved a general average of 90 after four quarters with at least a passing rate across all learning areas. Learners are motivated to perform very well in school because they see it an avenue to make meaningful contribution in the society throughout their life, receive academic scholarships (Phi Kappa Phi, 2018), and improve their way of life. However, being in top of the class does not guarantee exemption from the case of bullying, suffering stress, and belittling by the society.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

With motivated learners who are eager to excel academically, they should be given considerations. With the socio-economic status presented above, financial assistance could help them perform better to become productive learners. Though education is made free and accessible, students still face expenses in meeting the requirements of the enhanced curriculum such as but not limited to school materials, transportation expenses, computer rentals and alike. Learners hope that teachers do not set bar too high that they would not be able to bear the pressure atop them. During contest representation, they should be given understanding and considerations because they compete for the school and not for themselves alone. With the municipal ordinance, giving financial rewards to students who excel in athletic meet, this could be also made across to learners who compete in academic competitions. Elective subjects could also help them hone their potentials in their field of interests. A well-edified standard of selecting honor students could also be made understandable to students, teachers, parents and stakeholders through student handbook or any other medium. Guidance and counseling office should open their doors to help the learners keep their motivation in aiming for their big dreams.

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