



GUILD OF EDUCATORS IN TESOL INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE
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MAGAZINE

*Empowering
Futures through
Education,
Hospitality,
Business, and
Tourism*

*Empowering Futures through
Hospitality and Tourism*

*Empowering Futures through
Educational Excellence in
Tourism and Hospitality*

*A Journey of Dreams,
Sacrifice, and Gratitude*

*Beyond Differences:
The Transformative Power of
Special Needs Education in
Building Inclusive
Communities*

DR. DULCE B. AURELIO

DR. CYNTHIA A. MANALAD

MATHEW N. GAMBOA

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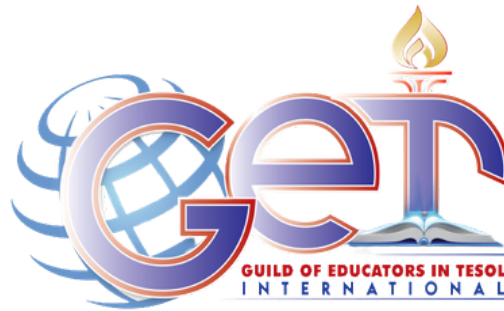
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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF / EDITOR'S NOTE

Welcome to the June 2026 issue of the Guild of Educators in TESOL International Institute magazine, where we explore the transformative theme of "**Empowering Futures through Education, Hospitality, Business, and Tourism**". In this edition, we celebrate the educators, professionals, and institutions who are redefining service and leadership to shape a more inclusive, sustainable, and globally competitive landscape. Through the inspiring journeys of individuals like Dr. Dulce B. Aurelio and the innovative strides of the Polytechnic College of La Union, we see how hospitality is not merely an industry, but a powerful language of empathy and opportunity.

Our featured stories and research abstracts delve into crucial topics ranging from sustainable operations in Philippine industries to the development of inclusive tourism destinations that welcome everyone. We also highlight the resilience of community entrepreneurs and the transformative role of special needs education, proving that genuine empowerment reaches far beyond the four walls of a classroom. Furthermore, we examine the profound impact of personalized learning with artificial intelligence and the vital necessity of academic-industry partnerships in preparing the next generation of visionary professionals.

It is our deepest hope that the articles, short stories, and best practices shared in these pages will inspire you to view education and hospitality as catalysts for meaningful societal change. As you read about these remarkable academic and grassroots initiatives, remember that every learner inspired to serve with competence and integrity becomes part of a legacy far greater than themselves. Thank you for joining us on this continuing journey of discovery, and may we all remain committed to building resilient communities and empowering futures together.

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FEATURED STORY

Dr. Dulce B. Aurelio



Empowering Futures through Hospitality and Tourism

Dr. Dulce B. Aurelio

The first lesson in hospitality is rarely learned inside a classroom.

Sometimes it begins with a smile offered to a stranger. Sometimes it begins with a table carefully prepared before the first guest arrives. And sometimes, it begins thousands of miles away from home, when a traveler realizes that every destination has a story waiting to be told.

Years before she would become an educator, administrator, national expert, and international traveler, Dr. Dulce B. Aurelio understood something that many professionals spend an entire career trying to discover: hospitality is not merely an industry. It is a language. Tourism is not simply movement across borders. It is the movement of ideas, cultures, empathy, and opportunity.

Today, those beliefs have become the foundation of a career that spans education, government, industry, assessment, research, international engagement, and public service—one that has inspired countless students to see tourism not as a profession of serving others, but as a profession of transforming lives.

Her office walls display certificates, awards, and photographs collected over decades, but none of them fully captures the remarkable journey behind them. There are images of students proudly wearing medals. Pictures of international conferences. Memorabilia from overseas travels. Plaques recognizing excellence in education and technical-vocational training.

Yet perhaps the most meaningful photograph is one taken years ago in Singapore.

It was not merely a vacation.

It represented a dream realized.

A Journey That Began with Curiosity

Long before international recognition arrived, Dr. Aurelio was already fascinated by people.

She watched how cultures expressed kindness differently, how food became a bridge between strangers, how every destination carried traditions that deserved to be preserved rather than merely consumed.

That fascination eventually evolved into an enduring commitment to hospitality and tourism education—a discipline often misunderstood as simply preparing hotels, restaurants, and travel agencies.

She saw something much larger.

Hospitality creates economic opportunity.

Tourism safeguards heritage.

Education ensures both survive.

Those convictions would later define every stage of her professional life.

As an educator, she refused to confine learning within classroom walls.

Students were encouraged to observe communities before studying destinations.

To appreciate culture before promoting attractions.

To understand that genuine hospitality begins not with polished service standards but with respect for human dignity.

It was an educational philosophy grounded in experience rather than memorization—a philosophy that would eventually shape hundreds of future tourism professionals.

The Journey That Captured an International Audience

Some journeys change the traveler.

Others inspire an entire nation.

One of the defining moments in Dr. Aurelio's life came when she entered the international competition "**Invite Ian Wright to Your Country**," organized by TLC.

The competition challenged participants to showcase the beauty, culture, and uniqueness of their homeland in a way compelling enough to convince internationally renowned travel presenter Ian Wright that their country deserved to be his next destination.

Thousands dreamed. Few prevailed.

Dr. Aurelio emerged as the **Grand Prize Winner**.

The victory was extraordinary not simply because it was international, but because it celebrated something deeply personal—her ability to tell the story of the Philippines through the eyes of someone who genuinely loved exploring it.

The grand prize was nothing short of remarkable.

An all-expense-paid journey for two to Singapore.

Three nights in a deluxe suite at the iconic Marina Bay Sands.

A generous **US\$600 daily allowance**, exclusive merchandise from TLC and its international sponsors, premium travel experiences, and unforgettable encounters that transformed a competition prize into a once-in-a-lifetime adventure.

For many, it would have been the pinnacle of achievement.

For Dr. Aurelio, it became another classroom.

She observed airport operations.

Studied destination management.

Experienced world-class hospitality standards firsthand.

Every interaction became a lesson she would later bring home to her students.

Travel, she often tells them, should never end when the plane lands.

Its greatest destination is wisdom.

More Than a Professor

Education has changed dramatically over the past two decades.

Students entering hospitality classrooms today belong to a generation shaped by artificial intelligence, digital platforms, global mobility, and rapidly evolving guest expectations.

Preparing graduates for such a landscape requires more than lectures.

It requires educators who continue learning themselves.

At the Eulogio, where she serves as an Associate Professor and Chief of Training and Assessment, Dr. Aurelio has become known not merely for teaching competencies but for cultivating professional character.

Her classrooms emphasize precision without perfectionism.

Confidence without arrogance.

Leadership without entitlement.

Students quickly learn that excellence in hospitality cannot be simulated.

Guests recognize authenticity instantly.

That philosophy resonates because it reflects her own career.

She has worked in administration.

She has coordinated training programs.

She has mentored faculty members.

She has represented institutions.

She has collaborated with industry leaders.

She has continued researching, writing, and speaking while remaining deeply connected to students—the very people whose futures she considers her greatest responsibility.

For Dr. Aurelio, academic titles are milestones.

Student success is the destination.

Raising the Standards of an Entire Industry

Hospitality excellence cannot exist without credible standards.

Behind every competent hotel receptionist, skilled bartender, tour guide, front office professional, or restaurant supervisor lies a rigorous process of competency assessment.

For years, Dr. Aurelio has stood at the forefront of that process.

As a TESDA National Lead Assessor, she has evaluated professionals across multiple tourism and hospitality qualifications, helping ensure that competency standards remain meaningful, relevant, and globally competitive. Her work extends beyond assessment.

She also serves as a TESDA Industry Lead Inspection Expert, contributing her expertise in evaluating training institutions, assessment centers, facilities, learning resources, and program implementation across various tourism-sector qualifications.

These responsibilities rarely receive public attention.

There are no standing ovations for reviewing assessment systems.

No headlines celebrating competency audits.

Yet they represent some of the most consequential work in Philippine hospitality development.

Every improved assessment strengthens workforce quality.

Every quality-assured training center produces more competent professionals.

Every competent graduate enhances the reputation of Philippine tourism itself.

This is the quiet architecture of excellence—built not through spectacle, but through consistency.

And Dr. Aurelio has devoted much of her career to building it.

Leading by Example

On competition day, the dining hall looked less like a classroom and more like a stage.

Polished glassware caught the light. Silverware gleamed with meticulous precision. Judges moved silently between stations, their eyes trained on every movement. There would be no second chances. In hospitality competitions, excellence is measured not only by speed but by grace under pressure. Every gesture carries meaning; every detail tells a story.

Among the competitors stood a young educator who understood that leadership was never meant to be demonstrated from the sidelines.

Dr. Dulce B. Aurelio stepped into the arena not merely to compete, but to embody the standards she expected from her students.

When the final scores were announced, her team emerged as the **Grand Champion** in the **2nd Grand Culinary Challenge** for the **Waiters Relay** category. It was a victory earned through discipline, precision, teamwork, and composure—qualities that define exceptional hospitality professionals far beyond the confines of any competition.

Yet she has rarely spoken about the medal itself.

Instead, she recalls the preparation: the countless rehearsals, the insistence that every participant master the fundamentals before pursuing speed, and the understanding that confidence is built through repetition rather than talent alone.

For her students, the championship became more than an institutional achievement. It demonstrated a simple but powerful truth: credibility is earned when teachers are willing to stand where they ask their students to stand.

Leadership, she believes, is most persuasive when it is lived.

That philosophy continues to shape every classroom she enters and every young professional she mentors.

Guarding the Standards That Build an Industry

Hospitality is often celebrated through beautiful hotels, memorable destinations, and extraordinary culinary experiences. Less visible are the professionals who safeguard the standards behind those experiences.

For years, Dr. Aurelio has been one of them.

As a **TESDA National Lead Assessor**, she has evaluated competency across numerous qualifications in the Philippine tourism and hospitality sector, helping ensure that graduates and industry practitioners meet rigorous professional standards. Her expertise spans a broad range of specializations—from food and beverage services and front office operations to travel services, housekeeping, events management, bartending, local guiding, tourism promotion, and commercial cooking.

Assessment, however, is only one part of the equation.

As a **TESDA Industry Lead Inspection Expert**, she has also helped evaluate training institutions and assessment centers, examining whether learning environments, facilities, instructional resources, and assessment practices truly prepare learners for the realities of the workplace.

It is work that rarely attracts public recognition. There are no applause-filled ceremonies for reviewing competency frameworks or inspecting laboratories. Yet these quiet responsibilities influence thousands of careers.

Every recommendation improves a training institution. Every strengthened assessment process raises workforce quality. Every competent graduate contributes to the credibility of Philippine hospitality on the global stage.

"The guest may never know who trained the employee," one industry executive once remarked during a professional forum, "but they will always remember how that employee made them feel."

It is precisely that unseen connection that has guided Dr. Aurelio's professional life.

She understands that excellence in hospitality begins long before the guest checks into a hotel or sits down at a restaurant table. It begins in classrooms, training centers, simulation laboratories, and assessment rooms where competence is carefully cultivated.

The Scholar Who Never Stopped Learning

The best educators often remain students themselves. Despite decades of professional experience, Dr. Aurelio has continued to pursue scholarship with the same curiosity that first inspired her career.

Her research explores the evolving relationship between tourism, sustainability, education, workforce development, and community empowerment. Rather than treating research as a requirement for academic promotion, she approaches it as a practical tool for solving real-world challenges faced by educators, industry practitioners, and policymakers.

Whether examining sustainable tourism practices, green initiatives in hospitality establishments, graduate employability, heritage preservation, or innovative teaching strategies, her work reflects a consistent belief: meaningful research should improve lives beyond the pages of academic journals.

That perspective has taken her beyond Philippine borders.

As an international presenter, she has shared research findings before diverse audiences, engaging in conversations with scholars, tourism experts, and educators from different countries. These gatherings are more than opportunities to present papers; they are spaces where ideas travel freely across cultures, where local experiences contribute to global conversations, and where collaborative solutions begin to emerge.

She often returns from these conferences with more questions than answers. How can hospitality education better prepare graduates for an increasingly interconnected world? How can tourism preserve cultural identity while embracing innovation? How can educational institutions balance global competitiveness with local relevance? Such questions continue to shape her work.

For Dr. Aurelio, research is not an academic destination. It is an ongoing journey of discovery.

Teaching the World Without Leaving Home

Long before "global citizenship" became a familiar phrase in educational policy, Dr. Aurelio was already introducing her students to the world.

Not through expensive study tours or elaborate simulations alone, but through conversations.

A lesson about Japanese omotenashi becomes an opportunity to discuss humility in service.

A discussion of European heritage tourism leads naturally to conversations about preserving Philippine cultural landscapes.

An analysis of Southeast Asian destinations reminds students that neighboring countries are not competitors to defeat but partners in strengthening regional tourism.

Her advocacy for multicultural understanding has become one of the defining themes of her career.

She encourages students to view diversity not as a challenge to overcome but as an invitation to grow.

Every language learned broadens perspective.

Every culture encountered deepens empathy.

Every journey reshapes assumptions.

Hospitality, after all, welcomes people precisely because they are different.

This philosophy has also informed her public speaking engagements, where she frequently discusses adaptability in multicultural societies. Speaking before educators, students, professionals, and community organizations, she emphasizes that technical competence alone is no longer sufficient.

The hospitality professionals of tomorrow must also be culturally intelligent, emotionally resilient, ethically grounded, and capable of building meaningful human connections across differences.

In an age defined by global mobility, migration, and digital communication, such qualities have become indispensable.



A Classroom Without Walls

Ask her former students what they remember most, and surprisingly few begin with examinations or lectures. Instead, they recall field experiences. Industry immersion. Professional competitions. Unexpected conversations after class. Encouragement offered when confidence faltered. Constructive criticism delivered with kindness.

Many now manage hotels, operate restaurants, coordinate events, teach in universities, or serve travelers across the world. Some remain in regular contact, sharing milestones that range from career promotions to opening their own businesses.

Their messages often follow a familiar pattern. "You believed in me before I believed in myself." For Dr. Aurelio, these messages represent the true measure of educational success.

Degrees may hang on office walls. Awards may gather dust inside display cabinets. Research papers may accumulate citations. But the lasting influence of an educator is written in the lives of people who carry forward the values they once learned inside the classroom.

That understanding has shaped her educational philosophy from the very beginning.

Education should not produce graduates who simply know how to perform tasks. It should cultivate professionals who understand why those tasks matter. Hospitality is not merely about serving food. It is about nourishing human connection. Tourism is not merely about visiting places. It is about creating understanding between people.

Leadership is not about titles. It is about empowering others to become leaders themselves. These ideas have become the quiet foundation beneath every role she has embraced—as professor, administrator, assessor, researcher, mentor, speaker, and lifelong learner.

For Dr. Dulce B. Aurelio, every classroom is an airport of possibilities. Students arrive carrying different dreams, different fears, and different destinations in mind. Education simply gives them wings.

Legacy Beyond the Classroom

The final boarding call echoes through an airport terminal.

Travelers gather their belongings. Some are returning home, while others are setting foot on unfamiliar soil for the very first time. Languages mingle in the air. A family embraces before departure. A flight attendant offers a reassuring smile. A porter carefully lifts a suitcase. Somewhere beyond the glass walls, another aircraft rises into the sky.

It is an ordinary scene—repeated countless times each day across the world. Yet within those quiet moments lies the true spirit of hospitality.

It is not found in grand hotel lobbies or Michelin-starred dining rooms alone. It lives in every act of courtesy that eases uncertainty, every gesture of professionalism that builds trust, and every encounter that reminds a traveler they are welcome.

For Dr. Dulce B. Aurelio, these everyday moments have always represented something much larger than service. They represent the character of a nation.

Throughout a career that has crossed classrooms, assessment centers, conference halls, research forums, and international destinations, she has remained guided by a remarkably consistent conviction: every well-prepared hospitality professional becomes an ambassador of the Philippines long before carrying a diplomatic passport.

A front office associate who welcomes a weary guest with genuine warmth. A tour guide who transforms historical facts into living stories. A bartender whose craftsmanship reflects creativity and discipline. A culinary professional who introduces local flavors with pride.

Each carries the country's reputation in ways statistics can never fully measure.

This understanding explains why Dr. Aurelio has never separated education from nation-building.

To teach hospitality is to shape the people who will shape how the world experiences the Philippines.

The Ripple Effect of One Educator

There is an old saying among teachers that the greatest lessons are often invisible.

Years after graduation, few students remember every lecture or examination. Yet they remember how a mentor made them believe that excellence was possible.

That quiet influence has become one of Dr. Aurelio's defining legacies.

Across hotels, restaurants, resorts, cruise ships, airlines, tourism offices, educational institutions, and training organizations, former students now carry forward principles they first encountered under her guidance—professional discipline, cultural sensitivity, ethical leadership, and an unwavering commitment to quality.

Many have become supervisors, managers, entrepreneurs, trainers, and educators in their own right. Some mentor new generations of hospitality professionals.

Others return to share their journeys with current students, completing a circle that reflects the very essence of education: knowledge multiplied through people.

The achievements displayed on office shelves—certificates, plaques, medals, research publications, and professional recognitions—tell only part of the story.

The more enduring record exists elsewhere.

It lives in graduates who remain calm during moments of crisis because they learned that professionalism begins with composure. It lives in communities strengthened by responsible tourism initiatives. It lives in institutions whose training standards have improved through rigorous assessment and quality assurance. It lives in research that informs better educational practices and encourages more sustainable tourism development.

It lives wherever service is offered with dignity.

Awards recognize moments.

Legacy transforms generations.

A Passport Filled with Purpose

Travel has always occupied a special place in Dr. Aurelio's story.

Her international experiences—from the unforgettable journey that followed her **Grand Prize victory in TLC's "Invite Ian Wright to Your Country"** competition to academic conferences and professional engagements abroad—have never been measured by the number of destinations visited.

Instead, each journey has reinforced a deeper understanding of why people travel in the first place.

Travel broadens perspective.

It humbles assumptions. It reveals that while languages, cuisines, customs, and landscapes may differ, the desire to be treated with kindness is universal. This realization has profoundly shaped her approach to education.

She encourages students to travel not merely to collect photographs but to cultivate perspective.

To observe before judging.

To listen before speaking. To appreciate local traditions before comparing them with their own. These lessons are increasingly vital in a century defined by mobility, migration, digital connectivity, and cultural exchange.

In today's hospitality industry, technical competence opens doors.

Cultural intelligence builds lasting relationships.

For Dr. Aurelio, preparing globally competitive graduates therefore requires more than teaching operational procedures. It demands nurturing professionals who understand that genuine hospitality begins with empathy.

That conviction has become one of the hallmarks of her work as an educator, researcher, speaker, and advocate for multicultural understanding.

Redefining Success

Modern society often measures achievement through visible accomplishments—titles earned, awards received, papers published, positions held.

By any conventional standard, Dr. Aurelio's career is distinguished.

She has served as an Associate Professor, Chief of Training and Assessment, TESDA National Lead Assessor, TESDA Industry Lead Inspection Expert, administrator, researcher, mentor, consultant, speaker, and international award recipient. She has represented institutions, contributed to competency development, advanced research, and inspired learners within and beyond the Philippines.

Yet when asked about success, she rarely begins with any of these.

She speaks instead about students who discovered confidence after believing they had little to offer.

About faculty members who grew into academic leaders.

About communities that recognized tourism not only as an economic driver but also as a means of preserving identity and creating opportunity.

About colleagues whose collaboration proved that meaningful progress is never achieved alone.

Perhaps this perspective explains why her leadership has resonated so deeply.

It has never been centered on personal recognition.

It has always been directed toward collective growth.

Leadership, in her view, is measured not by how many people follow, but by how many eventually become capable of leading themselves.

The Future Begins with Those We Prepare Today

Hospitality and tourism stand at a defining moment.

The industry is being reshaped by technological innovation, environmental responsibility, demographic change, evolving traveler expectations, and an increasingly interconnected world.

Artificial intelligence is transforming guest experiences.

Sustainability has become an operational necessity rather than an aspiration.

Cultural authenticity is emerging as one of the world's most valuable tourism assets.

In such an environment, educational institutions carry an extraordinary responsibility.

They must prepare graduates who are technically proficient, digitally adaptive, ethically grounded, environmentally responsible, and culturally aware.

Dr. Aurelio has long championed precisely this vision.

For her, hospitality education is never static.

It evolves alongside society while remaining rooted in timeless values—respect, integrity, excellence, compassion, and service.

These principles transcend technological change.

They remind us that no innovation can replace the warmth of genuine human connection.

No algorithm can fully replicate empathy.

No machine can substitute for kindness freely offered.

In an industry built upon people serving people, humanity remains the greatest competitive advantage.

The Journey Continues

As evening settles outside her office, the day's work quietly comes to an end.

Research manuscripts wait for revision.

Training documents remain neatly organized on her desk.

Student consultations have concluded.

Tomorrow's lecture has already been outlined.

The building gradually empties, but the purpose that fills it remains.

Somewhere, a former student welcomes an international guest with quiet confidence.

Another manages a hotel team through an unexpected challenge.

Another mentors young trainees beginning their own professional journeys.

Each carries forward lessons that cannot be found in textbooks alone.

This is the invisible architecture of education.

One educator shapes one student.

One student influences hundreds of guests.

One meaningful encounter changes how a traveler remembers an entire country.
The ripple continues.

Perhaps that is the true meaning of empowerment.

It is not the accumulation of accomplishments but the multiplication of opportunity.

Not the pursuit of applause, but the willingness to prepare others to succeed.

Not simply traveling across the world, but helping the world discover the best of humanity through hospitality.

The story of Dr. Dulce B. Aurelio is, ultimately, not only about one remarkable career.

It is about a larger belief—that education remains one of the most enduring investments a nation can make; that hospitality possesses the extraordinary power to bridge cultures, foster understanding, and create shared prosperity; and that every learner who is inspired to serve with competence, compassion, and integrity becomes part of a legacy far greater than themselves.

Long after awards have found their place in display cabinets, after conferences have concluded, after classrooms have welcomed new generations of students, that legacy will continue to travel.

It will arrive quietly in airports, hotels, restaurants, cruise terminals, classrooms, heritage sites, convention centers, and communities across the Philippines and beyond.

There, in every thoughtful gesture of welcome, every act of professional excellence, and every traveler who leaves with a deeper appreciation of the Filipino spirit, the work of an educator will continue—unseen, yet unmistakably present.

And perhaps that is the finest destination any life devoted to hospitality and education could ever reach.





FEATURED STORY

Polytechnic College of La Union



Empowering Futures Through Educational Excellence in Tourism and Hospitality

**A Conversation with the Dean of the College of Hospitality and Tourism Management,
Polytechnic College of La Union**

Every Great Destination Begins with a Journey

It is an honor to share the story of the Polytechnic College of La Union's College of Hospitality and Tourism Management—a journey defined by resilience, innovation, and a steadfast commitment to preparing globally competent hospitality and tourism professionals.

Whenever people ask me about the success of the College of Hospitality and Tourism Management at the Polytechnic College of La Union, I often smile before answering. Success is a beautiful word, but it rarely tells the whole story. Behind every achievement are countless ordinary days filled with hard work, difficult decisions, unwavering faith, and people who refused to give up on a dream.

Our college was never built overnight. It was built one student at a time, one classroom at a time, one partnership at a time, and one shared vision at a time.

From the very beginning, we believed that education has the power to transform not only individual lives but also families, communities, and industries. That belief became our compass, guiding every decision we made as we nurtured a college dedicated to producing professionals who embody competence, compassion, integrity, and the genuine warmth of Filipino hospitality.

Today, when I see our graduates managing world-class hotels, welcoming guests aboard international cruise ships, leading tourism enterprises, serving in airlines, organizing global events, or representing the Philippines across continents, I see more than successful careers. I see dreams fulfilled, sacrifices rewarded, and lives forever changed. Those stories remind us why we continue doing what we do.

Building More Than a College—Building a Culture of Excellence

Our journey began with modest resources but limitless aspirations. Like many growing institutions, we faced the realities of limited facilities, evolving educational demands, and the challenge of proving that excellence is not exclusive to large or long-established universities.

Rather than seeing these as barriers, we treated them as invitations to innovate.

We understood early on that students deserve more than lectures. They deserve experiences that prepare them for the realities of an industry built on service, leadership, adaptability, and human connection. This realization shaped our philosophy of education.

Every improvement we introduced was guided by one question: Will this make our graduates more prepared to succeed anywhere in the world?

That question inspired us to strengthen our laboratories, cultivate meaningful partnerships with hotels, resorts, restaurants, travel agencies, airlines, government tourism offices, and industry leaders. It encouraged us to expand experiential learning through educational tours, internships, community immersion, research, and international exposure.

Our classrooms became places where students learned not only how to manage hotels or organize events but also how to solve problems, embrace diversity, communicate across cultures, and lead with empathy.

For us, excellence is never accidental. It is intentional.

Leadership Rooted in Collaboration

I have always believed that leadership is not about standing at the front. It is about creating opportunities for others to succeed.

The achievements of our college belong to every faculty member who continued learning long after earning their degrees, every administrator who believed in continuous improvement, every industry partner who opened their doors to our students, every alumnus who carried our values into the workplace, and every student who dared to dream beyond what seemed possible.

One of our greatest investments has always been our faculty.

We encourage our educators to pursue graduate studies, professional certifications, industry immersion, research, international conferences, and lifelong learning because an educator who continues to grow inspires students to do the same.

We have also embraced outcomes-based education, technology-enhanced instruction, research-driven innovation, and community engagement. These are not simply institutional initiatives; they are part of our commitment to preparing graduates who are globally competitive while remaining deeply connected to their communities and cultural heritage.

Hospitality is ultimately about people. Education should be no different.

Finding Strength in Every Challenge

No meaningful journey is without obstacles.

Like many educational institutions, we encountered financial limitations during our early years. Resources were carefully managed, priorities had to be balanced, and every improvement demanded creativity and teamwork.

Then the world changed.

The COVID-19 pandemic challenged every educator to rethink how learning could continue. Hospitality and tourism, disciplines built on human interaction and experiential learning, faced one of their greatest tests.

Yet our response reflected the very values we teach.

Our faculty adapted with remarkable resilience. Virtual simulations, flexible learning strategies, online industry engagements, digital instructional materials, and innovative teaching methods became bridges that kept education moving forward.

More importantly, we never lost sight of our students' well-being.

The pandemic reminded us that hospitality is not confined to hotels or restaurants. Hospitality is compassion. It is adaptability. It is caring for people even when circumstances are uncertain.

Those lessons continue to shape our institution today.



Preparing Graduates for a Global Industry

Hospitality and tourism are among the world's most dynamic professions. Trends evolve rapidly, technologies reshape guest experiences, sustainability becomes increasingly essential, and global mobility demands professionals who can thrive in multicultural environments.

At the Polytechnic College of La Union, curriculum development is an ongoing conversation with industry leaders, alumni, government agencies, and educational partners. We continuously integrate emerging competencies such as sustainable tourism, digital transformation, entrepreneurship, cultural heritage preservation, destination resilience, customer experience management, and ethical leadership.

Our students engage in research that addresses real industry concerns. They participate in community extension initiatives that demonstrate tourism's power to improve lives. They learn that tourism is not merely an economic activity but also a responsibility to preserve culture, protect the environment, and create inclusive opportunities for communities.

Most importantly, we prepare students to become adaptable professionals capable of working confidently across cultures while proudly carrying the values of Filipino hospitality wherever they go. In today's interconnected world, technical competence opens doors, but character creates lasting impact.

Where Passion meets Recognition

At the Polytechnic College of La Union's College of Hospitality and Tourism Management, excellence has never been measured solely by awards—it is reflected in the lives transformed through education. From its humble beginnings, the college has steadily evolved into a respected institution committed to developing globally competitive hospitality and tourism professionals grounded in the values of Filipino service, innovation, and leadership.

This commitment to excellence was nationally recognized in 2025, when the college was honored by the Department of Tourism as an Institutional Awardee for the Filipino Brand of Service Excellence (FBSE). More than a prestigious recognition, the award affirmed the college's unwavering dedication to cultivating a culture of genuine Filipino hospitality, where technical competence is matched by empathy, professionalism, and a heart for service.

The same year marked another milestone as the college excelled at Kusina Ilocandia 2025, one of Northern Luzon's premier hospitality and culinary competitions. Guided by passionate faculty mentors, PCLU students earned multiple championship titles and top honors in various categories, including cake decoration, bar flaring, cocktail mixing, table napkin folding, and other hospitality and culinary skills events. These victories showcased not only the students' exceptional talents but also the institution's commitment to experiential learning and industry-standard training.

Beyond competitions, the college continues to foster a strong culture of research and innovation. Faculty members and students have successfully presented and published their scholarly work in international conferences and peer-reviewed journals, contributing valuable insights on hospitality, tourism, sustainability, and service excellence. Their research reflects the institution's belief that education should not only respond to industry needs but also help shape the future of the profession.

These achievements are more than milestones—they are reflections of a shared vision, dedicated leadership, and a community that believes in the transformative power of education. As the Polytechnic College of La Union continues to empower future hospitality and tourism professionals, it remains steadfast in its mission to produce graduates who proudly carry the warmth, excellence, and world-class standards of Filipino hospitality wherever their careers may lead.

A Message to Fellow Educational Leaders

If I could offer one piece of advice to fellow educators and institutional leaders around the world, it would be this:

Never build an academic program simply to meet industry demands. Build it to shape responsible, compassionate, and visionary human beings.

Invest in your faculty because inspired educators inspire extraordinary students.

Listen to your industry partners because education must remain responsive to the world beyond the campus.

Value research, innovation, and international collaboration, but never lose sight of the communities you serve.

Above all, remember that every student who enters your institution carries a dream entrusted to your care.

Treat that responsibility with excellence, humility, and purpose.

Looking Beyond Tomorrow

As Dean of the College of Hospitality and Tourism Management, I believe our greatest achievements are still ahead of us.

We envision stronger international partnerships, expanded opportunities for student mobility, globally recognized research, deeper community engagement, and graduates who will continue elevating the reputation of Philippine hospitality and tourism around the world.

Our mission is not merely to prepare students for employment.

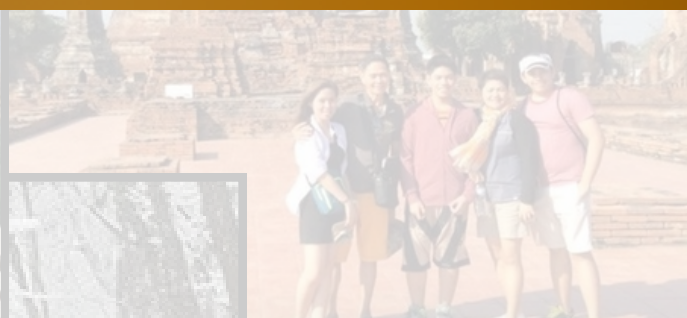
It is to prepare leaders who will redefine service through compassion, inspire innovation through excellence, and transform destinations through responsible tourism.

At the Polytechnic College of La Union, we believe that education is the most meaningful journey we can offer.

Because when knowledge is guided by purpose, and learning is inspired by service, we do not simply build careers—we empower futures.

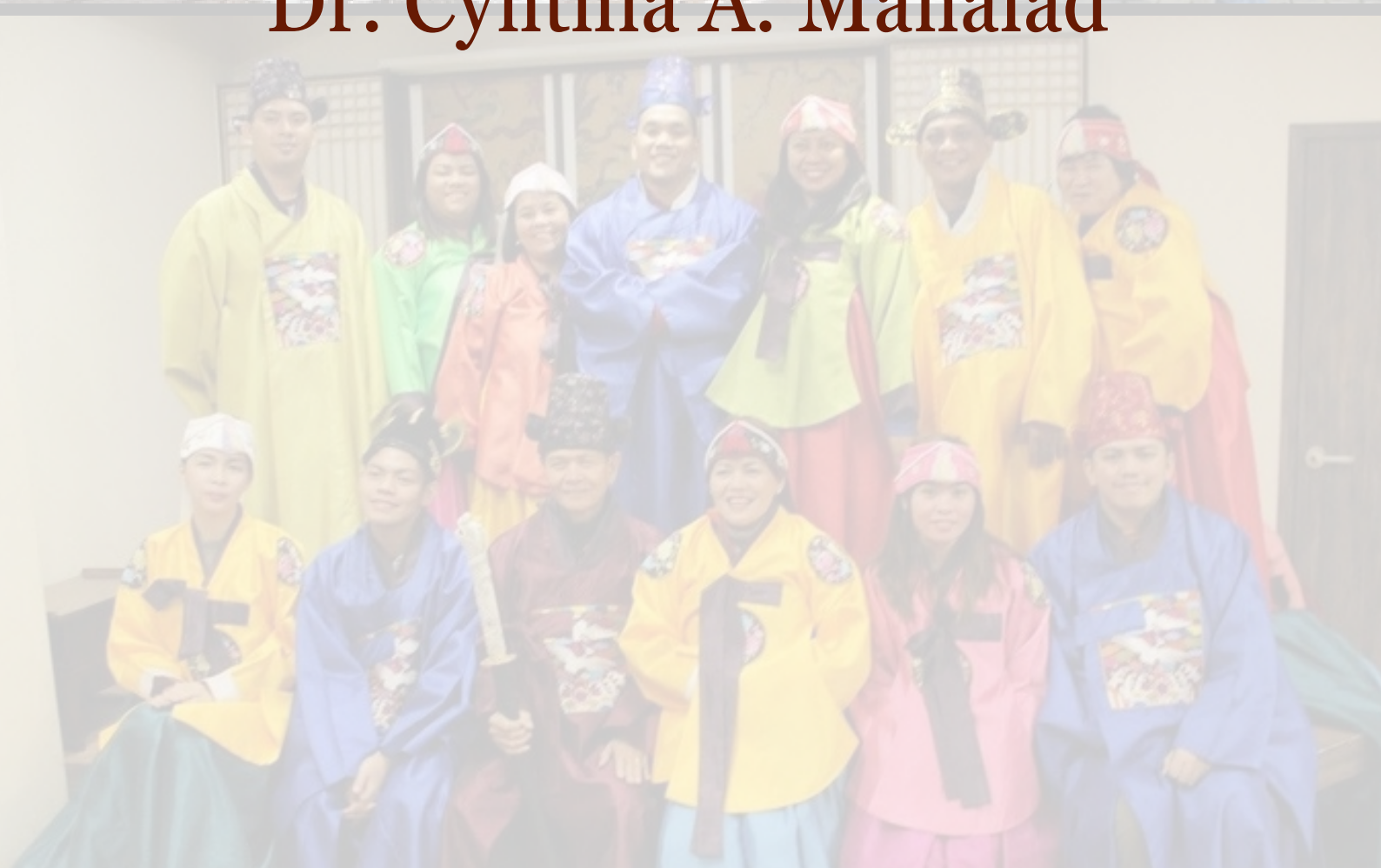
And that, above all, is the legacy we strive to leave for every learner who walks through our doors.





FEATURED STORY

Dr. Cynthia A. Manalad



A Journey of Dreams, Sacrifice, and Gratitude

Dr. Cynthia A. Manalad

Humble Beginnings

I was born into a family with humble beginnings, where survival depended on hard work, determination, and faith.

Every day began with one simple goal—to sell anything that could earn enough profit to provide for our family's daily needs.

Whether it was food, household items, or other merchandise, every sale mattered. Every customer meant another chance to buy rice, pay the electricity bill, purchase school supplies, or save a little for tuition.

My parents worked tirelessly as small business owners. My father reached only Grade 2, while my mother finished only Grade 3. Poverty forced them to leave school at a very young age, yet they never allowed their limited education to define their future or ours.

From sunrise until late in the evening, they welcomed customers with warm smiles, carefully managed their merchandise, and counted every peso they earned. Their business was not built on abundance but on perseverance, honesty, and determination.

There were no vacations. There were no expensive gifts. There were no luxuries. Yet our home was rich in values. Although my parents had little formal education, they always reminded us, *"Study hard because education is the only treasure that no one can ever take away from you."* Those simple words became the foundation of my life.

Looking back, I realize that while my parents never had the opportunity to travel or experience the world beyond their community, they gave me something far greater—they taught me to dream and to be strong.

Becoming a Teacher and an Entrepreneur

Because of my parents' sacrifices, I promised myself that education would always be part of my life's journey. After completing my studies, I spent **fifteen years working in the private industry**, gaining valuable experience in business operations, marketing, entrepreneurship, leadership, and management. Those years taught me practical lessons that no textbook alone could provide. I learned how businesses grow, how entrepreneurs overcome challenges, and how innovation creates opportunities for people and communities.

While I enjoyed my career in the corporate world, I realized that my greatest passion was not simply building businesses—it was helping others build their future. **After fifteen years of industry experience, I decided to shift my career and become a teacher of Business, Marketing, and Entrepreneurship.** It became one of the best decisions I have ever made.

Every day, I stood before my students encouraging them to dream beyond their circumstances, become ethical entrepreneurs, build sustainable businesses, create employment, and contribute positively to society.

I constantly reminded them that entrepreneurship is not simply about earning profit.

It is about creating opportunities, solving problems, improving lives, and making a positive difference in the community. Outside the classroom, I continued practicing what I taught. I became an entrepreneur.

After classes, I managed my own business, attended seminars, developed learning materials, and continuously searched for new ideas that I could bring back to my students.

Balancing teaching, entrepreneurship, marriage, and motherhood was never easy. There were sleepless nights, deadlines, financial challenges, and moments of exhaustion.

Whenever I felt tired, I remembered my parents.

If they could work from sunrise to sunset with only a Grade 2 and Grade 3 education, then I had no reason to give up.

Their sacrifices became my motivation.

Marrying an Educator

Life blessed me with a husband who shared my passion for education.

He was older than I was, but our dreams were remarkably similar.

He dedicated decades of his life as a **professor at the Polytechnic University of the Philippines (PUP)**, inspiring thousands of students through education and public service. Today, at the age of **seventy**, he enjoys a well-deserved retirement after a lifetime of teaching.

Although people often noticed the difference in our ages, they never saw how perfectly our hearts understood one another.

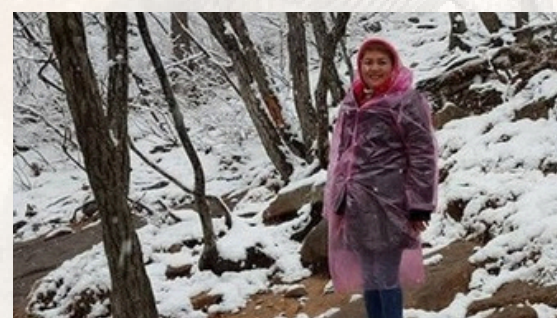
We both believed that education changes families.

Education changes communities.

Education changes nations.

Together, we built a home founded on faith, discipline, respect, kindness, and unconditional love.

As teachers, we shared one mission—to inspire young people and help them believe that their dreams were possible.



Raising Responsible and Loving Children

Our greatest accomplishment was never our professions.

It was raising our children.

In our family, we believed that every member had a responsibility. No one was too young to contribute, because every helping hand made a difference in helping our family survive and move forward.

From an early age, each of our children was given responsibilities appropriate to their age—not as a burden, but as preparation for life. They learned to clean their own rooms, organize their school materials, wash dishes, prepare simple meals, care for younger siblings, assist with household chores, and help in our family business whenever needed.

We wanted them to understand that a family grows stronger when everyone works together. Every task, no matter how small, was an act of love and responsibility. By sharing the work, they learned that success is never achieved by one person alone but through the collective effort, sacrifice, and support of the entire family. More importantly, we taught them values that cannot be measured by grades, titles, or salaries.

Respect.

Humility.

Honesty.

Kindness.

Gratitude.

Compassion.

Hard work.

Faith.

As they grew older, those values became part of who they were.

They studied diligently.

They finished college.

They established meaningful careers.

They became responsible and independent adults.

But what fills my heart with the greatest pride is not their professions.

It is their character.

They remain loving sons and daughters.

They continue to care for us.

They never forgot where they came from.

They never forgot the sacrifices that built the foundation of their lives.

We had raised grateful children.

Children who understood love.

Children who remembered sacrifice.

Children who wanted to create memories with us while we were still healthy and strong.

Sometimes they traveled with us, and those moments became even more meaningful.

Watching my husband walk beside our children in another country, hearing their laughter while exploring unfamiliar places, and seeing them appreciate different cultures made me realize that we were experiencing something my own parents never had the opportunity to enjoy.

Our family was creating memories together that would be treasured for generations.

A Dream Delayed, But Never Forgotten

For many years, every salary, every business income, every bonus, and every extra earning was carefully managed to provide our family with a comfortable life and, most importantly, to ensure that our children received the best education we could give them.

As a teacher of Business, Marketing, and Entrepreneurship, I often discussed international business, global marketing, tourism, and cultural diversity in my classes. My students would ask,

"Ma'am, have you ever been there?"

I would smile and tell them that every country offers more than beautiful scenery—it offers lessons about culture, innovation, entrepreneurship, leadership, and humanity.

My husband and I also believed that traveling was one of the greatest gifts we could give our children.

Travel was never simply about visiting famous tourist attractions. It was an opportunity for our family to stay together away from the routines of work and school, appreciate the beauty of nature, experience different cultures, and create memories that would last a lifetime. Every journey became another classroom where learning happened naturally through observation, curiosity, and shared experiences.

Our family's first international adventure was to **Hong Kong** and **China**.

For our children, the highlight was visiting **Hong Kong Disneyland**. Watching their faces light up as they met their favorite Disney characters, enjoyed exciting rides, watched colorful parades, and ended the day with a spectacular fireworks display became one of the happiest memories of our family life.

Beyond Disneyland, our visit to China introduced us to a civilization rich in history, architecture, and cultural heritage. Walking through historical sites and witnessing the country's remarkable growth allowed our children to appreciate how history, tradition, and modernization can exist side by side.

As our children grew older, our family continued exploring different parts of Asia together.

In **Singapore**, we admired a nation that transformed itself into one of the world's leading financial and technological centers through education, discipline, innovation, and visionary leadership. Visiting Marina Bay, Gardens by the Bay, Sentosa Island, Chinatown, Little India, and Kampong Glam showed us how different cultures could live harmoniously while building a progressive and sustainable nation.

In **Malaysia**, we experienced the beauty of multiculturalism. Standing beneath the Petronas Twin Towers, climbing the colorful steps of Batu Caves, visiting historic mosques and temples, and tasting authentic Malaysian cuisine allowed us to appreciate how diversity strengthens a nation. Every destination reminded us that understanding different cultures begins with respect and openness.

Our adventure continued to **Thailand**, where magnificent golden temples, floating markets, vibrant night bazaars, and warm hospitality welcomed us. We admired the entrepreneurial spirit of countless small business owners, whose determination reminded me of my own parents' hardworking example. Thailand became a lesson in creativity, resilience, and hospitality.

Our visit to **Vietnam** offered another unforgettable experience. Cruising through the emerald waters of Ha Long Bay, walking beneath the colorful lanterns of Hoi An, exploring the lively streets of Hanoi, and enjoying authentic Vietnamese coffee allowed us to witness a nation that has transformed challenges into remarkable progress. Vietnam taught us the importance of perseverance, resilience, and hope.

One of the most magical experiences for our family came during our visit to **South Korea**.

For the very first time, we experienced snow.

Tiny snowflakes gently covered the mountains, rooftops, pine trees, and streets until everything resembled a beautiful winter painting. Like children, we built snowmen, made snow angels, and laughed while throwing snowballs at one another.

Wearing traditional **hanbok** while exploring magnificent royal palaces and centuries-old villages gave us a deeper appreciation of Korean history and culture. At the same time, we admired how South Korea became a global leader in education, technology, innovation, and business while preserving its cultural identity.

Our journey continued to **Japan**, where tradition and modernity coexist beautifully.

Standing before the majestic Mount Fuji, walking through peaceful shrines and bamboo forests, wearing elegant **kimono**, participating in a traditional tea ceremony, riding the famous Shinkansen bullet train, and witnessing both winter snow and delicate cherry blossoms became experiences that our family will cherish forever. Japan taught us that excellence is achieved through discipline, respect, humility, and continuous improvement.

As our children eventually graduated from college, established successful careers, and built lives of their own, another season of our family's journey unfolded. By then, I was already in my fifties, and my husband had reached seventy.

We remained healthy, active, and grateful that we could still walk for hours, climb mountains, carry our own luggage, and continue discovering the world together.

This new chapter allowed us to fulfill another dream—exploring **Europe**. Standing beneath the Eiffel Tower in **France**, walking through the ancient streets of **Italy**, breathing the fresh mountain air of the Swiss Alps in **Switzerland**, exploring magnificent castles in **Germany**, and admiring the elegant palaces and classical music of **Austria** reminded us that the world itself is an extraordinary classroom.

Every country deepened our appreciation of history, culture, architecture, entrepreneurship, and human creativity. Most importantly, every journey strengthened the bond within our family.

Looking back, I realize that the true value of travel is not measured by the number of countries we have visited. It is measured by the moments we shared, the conversations we had, the lessons we learned, and the memories we created together. Those experiences have enriched not only our lives as a family but also my life as an educator.

Today, I no longer teach only from textbooks.

I teach from places I have walked, cultures I have experienced, businesses I have observed, and people I have met.

And perhaps the greatest lesson of all is this:

Family is life's greatest destination, and every journey becomes more meaningful when it is shared with the people you love.

FEATURED STORY

Prof. Mathew N. Gamboa

Beyond Differences: The Transformative Power of Special Needs Education in Building Inclusive Communities

Prof. Mathew N. Gamboa

An Inclusive Education Advocate

In every classroom, there are stories waiting to unfold. Some stories begin with extraordinary challenges, while others emerge through remarkable acts of perseverance, patience, and hope. Among these narratives are the journeys of learners with special needs—children, adolescents, and adults whose unique abilities, perspectives, and strengths enrich the fabric of society in profound ways. Their experiences remind us that education is not merely about academic achievement; it is about recognizing human dignity, nurturing potential, and ensuring that every individual has the opportunity to belong and thrive.

Special Needs Education (SPED) stands as one of the most powerful expressions of humanity's commitment to equity and inclusion. It reflects the belief that every learner, regardless of ability, deserves access to meaningful education, supportive environments, and opportunities for growth. More importantly, it challenges society to move beyond stereotypes and misconceptions, replacing barriers with bridges of understanding, acceptance, and empowerment.

Seeing Ability Beyond Disability

For generations, disability was often viewed through a lens of limitation. Individuals with disabilities were frequently defined by what they could not do rather than by the strengths they possessed. Such perspectives created barriers that restricted participation, learning, and social inclusion.

Today, a growing movement toward inclusive education is transforming this narrative. Modern educational philosophies recognize that diversity is a natural and valuable part of the human experience. Learners with special needs bring unique talents, perspectives, creativity, resilience, and problem-solving abilities that contribute significantly to classrooms and communities.

The shift from a deficit-based perspective to a strengths-based approach has become a cornerstone of inclusive education. Rather than asking how learners should adapt to rigid systems, educators increasingly ask how educational environments can adapt to meet diverse needs. This change in mindset is not merely educational—it is deeply human. It reflects respect for the dignity and worth of every individual.

Every learner possesses potential. Some may communicate differently, learn through alternative methods, require additional support, or progress at a different pace. Yet these differences do not diminish their value. Instead, they remind us that learning is not a single path but a journey with many routes toward success.

The Transformative Role of Special Needs Education

At its heart, Special Needs Education is about unlocking possibilities. It provides individualized support, specialized instruction, adaptive technologies, therapeutic interventions, and inclusive learning opportunities that enable learners to achieve their fullest potential.

SPED educators play a crucial role in this transformation. Their work extends beyond teaching academic content. They serve as advocates, mentors, facilitators, and champions of possibility. They celebrate milestones that others may overlook—a first spoken word, successful social interaction, improved independence, or a newfound confidence in learning.

These achievements may appear small to outsiders, but for learners and families, they represent extraordinary triumphs. They are evidence that growth is occurring, barriers are being overcome, and opportunities are expanding.

Research consistently demonstrates that early intervention, individualized instruction, and inclusive educational practices can significantly improve academic outcomes, social development, communication skills, and overall quality of life for learners with special needs. More importantly, such approaches foster self-esteem and self-determination, empowering individuals to become active participants in their own lives and communities.

Education, therefore, becomes more than a service—it becomes a pathway to independence, participation, and meaningful contribution.

The Power of Inclusive Classrooms

Inclusive education is built upon a simple yet transformative principle: every learner belongs.

When students with and without disabilities learn together, classrooms become communities where diversity is experienced rather than merely discussed. Inclusion provides opportunities for learners to interact, collaborate, and develop mutual understanding.

For learners with special needs, inclusive environments offer access to rich educational experiences, peer relationships, and social participation. For their peers, inclusion cultivates empathy, respect, patience, and appreciation for diversity. These are qualities that extend far beyond the classroom and contribute to the development of compassionate citizens.

Inclusive classrooms challenge misconceptions and reduce stigma. They demonstrate that differences are not obstacles to belonging but opportunities for learning. Students discover that everyone possesses strengths and faces challenges. In this shared understanding, barriers begin to dissolve.

Educators who embrace inclusive practices create learning environments where flexibility, accessibility, and equity guide instruction. Through differentiated teaching strategies, collaborative learning, assistive technologies, and supportive relationships, they ensure that every learner has opportunities to participate and succeed.

Such classrooms do more than educate—they model the kind of society we aspire to build.

The Strength of Families and Communities

Behind every learner with special needs stands a network of support that often includes parents, caregivers, siblings, educators, therapists, and community advocates. Their collective efforts contribute significantly to educational success and personal growth.

Families are often among the earliest and strongest advocates for inclusion. They navigate challenges, celebrate progress, and continually champion opportunities for their children. Their resilience and dedication exemplify the transformative power of love and hope.

Communities also play an essential role. Inclusive schools cannot exist in isolation. They thrive when supported by policies, resources, partnerships, and public awareness initiatives that promote accessibility and equity.

When communities invest in inclusion, they create environments where individuals with disabilities can participate fully in education, employment, recreation, and civic life. Such participation strengthens social cohesion and reflects a commitment to justice and human rights.

The journey toward inclusion requires collaboration. It calls upon educators, policymakers, healthcare professionals, families, and citizens to work together in creating opportunities that recognize and celebrate human diversity.

Resilience: The Unseen Lesson

One of the most profound lessons emerging from Special Needs Education is resilience.

Learners with special needs often demonstrate remarkable determination as they navigate challenges that others may never encounter. Their perseverance teaches valuable lessons about courage, adaptability, and hope.

Resilience is not the absence of difficulty. Rather, it is the capacity to continue moving forward despite obstacles. It grows through supportive relationships, meaningful opportunities, and environments that nurture confidence and self-belief.

Educators and families witness this resilience daily. They see it in students who persist through frustration, develop new skills, advocate for themselves, and achieve goals once considered unreachable. These moments reveal not only individual strength but also the transformative impact of inclusive educational practices.

By recognizing and celebrating resilience, we shift our focus from limitations to possibilities. We acknowledge the extraordinary potential that exists within every learner.

The Strength of Families and Communities

The future of education depends upon our willingness to embrace inclusion as both a philosophy and a practice. Inclusive education is not simply about placement within classrooms; it is about creating cultures of belonging where every individual is respected, valued, and supported.

Advances in educational research, assistive technology, universal design for learning, and inclusive pedagogy continue to expand opportunities for learners with diverse needs. Yet meaningful progress requires more than innovation. It requires commitment.

Schools must continue developing inclusive policies and practices. Communities must promote awareness and challenge discrimination. Governments must invest in accessible and equitable educational systems. Most importantly, society must recognize that inclusion benefits everyone.

When learners with special needs are empowered to participate fully, communities become richer, stronger, and more compassionate. Diversity fosters creativity. Inclusion strengthens social relationships. Equity promotes justice.

The vision of an inclusive society begins with a simple yet powerful belief: every person matters.



A Shared Responsibility

The story of Special Needs Education is ultimately a story about humanity. It is about recognizing worth beyond labels, embracing diversity as strength, and creating opportunities for every learner to flourish.

Inclusion is not an act of charity; it is an expression of justice. It is a commitment to ensuring that all individuals have access to the resources, support, and opportunities necessary to achieve their potential.

As educators, families, advocates, and community members, we each hold a responsibility to foster environments where differences are welcomed and dignity is upheld. Every inclusive classroom, every accessible program, every act of understanding contributes to a future where no one is excluded because of ability.

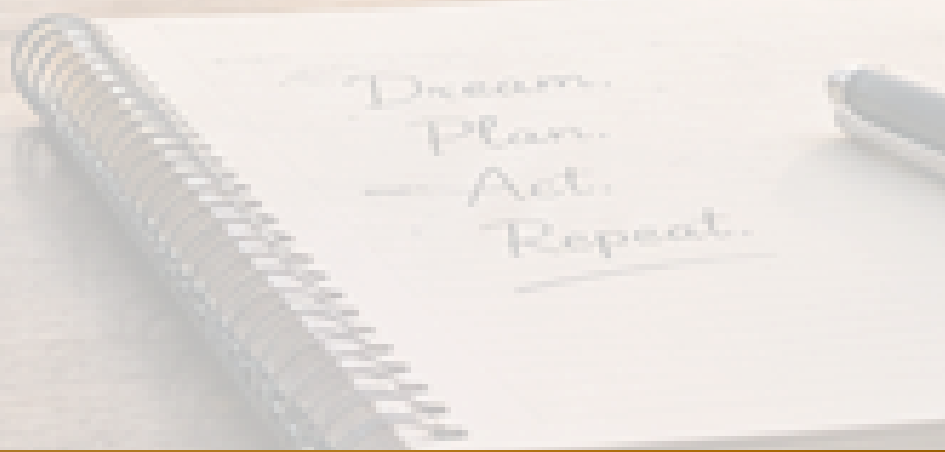
The transformative power of Special Needs Education lies not only in what it teaches learners but also in what it teaches society. It reminds us that human potential is limitless when nurtured with compassion, respect, and opportunity.

When we choose inclusion, we choose a future where every learner can thrive, every voice can be heard, and every individual can belong.

And in that future, we discover that the true measure of education is not how many people fit into the system, but how effectively the system embraces the richness of human diversity



ARTICLES



The Flowers that Never Wilt

Dr. Elisa Arpilleda

At first glance, they resemble freshly gathered blossoms—delicate petals unfolding in perfect symmetry, stems gracefully curved, bouquets wrapped with the elegance of a florist's careful touch. Guests lean closer, tempted to breathe in a fragrance that is not there. Only then do they realize the surprise: every bloom has been meticulously shaped from fuzzy wire.

In an age where speed often triumphs over craftsmanship and mass production overshadows artistry, these flowers offer something increasingly rare—time made visible.

Behind every bouquet is a woman who understands that meaningful enterprises are seldom born in boardrooms alone. Sometimes, they begin at a quiet table, with patient hands, colorful wires, and an imagination determined to transform ordinary materials into extraordinary expressions of joy.

For Dr. Elisa Arpilleda, Dean of the Business Administration Department at the Polytechnic College of La Union (PCLU), entrepreneurship has never been confined to textbooks, lectures, or business models. It is something deeply lived—a discipline where creativity meets resilience, where innovation is nurtured through persistence, and where passion becomes an economic opportunity.

Her journey into fuzzy wire flower crafting began not as a calculated business venture but as a personal refuge. Between academic responsibilities, administrative leadership, and mentoring future entrepreneurs, crafting became a way to slow down. Twisting colorful fuzzy wires into petals and leaves required a different kind of concentration—one that quieted the mind while awakening the imagination.

Each finished flower became more than a decorative piece. It became evidence that beauty could emerge from patience.

Friends and colleagues soon noticed.

A bouquet was requested for a celebration. Another followed for a birthday. Soon came orders for graduations, anniversaries, weddings, and corporate events. What had once occupied quiet evenings gradually found its way into homes, offices, and milestone celebrations across communities.

Without grand announcements or elaborate marketing campaigns, a small creative pursuit quietly evolved into a thriving enterprise.

It is, in many ways, the kind of entrepreneurial story often overlooked in conversations dominated by technology start-ups and billion-dollar valuations. Yet across the world, the creative economy continues to demonstrate that sustainable businesses are frequently built not from disruptive inventions alone but from craftsmanship, authenticity, and emotional connection.

Dr. Arpilleda's business reflects precisely this transformation.

Unlike fresh flowers that inevitably fade, fuzzy wire bouquets become lasting keepsakes. They celebrate life's important moments while resisting the passage of time. In an increasingly sustainability-conscious market, reusable handcrafted floral arrangements also answer a growing demand for gifts that generate less waste while carrying deeper sentimental value.

The appeal extends beyond durability.

Every handcrafted bouquet carries subtle differences impossible to replicate through machines. The slight curve of a petal, the careful layering of colors, the intentional imperfections—these become signatures of human craftsmanship rather than manufacturing defects.

Customers are not merely purchasing flowers.

They are purchasing stories.

They are buying hours of careful attention transformed into something tangible.

As an educator specializing in business administration, Dr. Arpilleda occupies a uniquely powerful intersection between theory and practice. Inside the classroom, she teaches concepts such as entrepreneurship, innovation, strategic management, and value creation. Outside the classroom, she embodies them. Students observe more than lectures.

They witness an educator who demonstrates that entrepreneurship begins with recognizing opportunities hidden inside personal passions.

This authenticity carries profound educational value.

Business education has increasingly shifted toward experiential learning, emphasizing that entrepreneurial competencies develop through experimentation, creativity, resilience, and continuous adaptation rather than memorization alone. Dr. Arpilleda's journey illustrates these principles with remarkable clarity. Her handcrafted bouquets become living case studies on product differentiation, branding, customer relationships, pricing strategy, and value creation.

The lesson is both practical and deeply human.

A successful business does not always require revolutionary technology or vast capital.

Sometimes it begins with mastering a craft so thoroughly that people recognize the care embedded within every finished product.

Equally remarkable is how crafting reshaped the creator herself.

The repetitive motion of bending wire into petals cultivates mindfulness. Each bouquet requires sustained attention, precision, and patience—qualities equally valuable in educational leadership. Rather than existing in separate worlds, creativity and administration became mutually reinforcing disciplines.

The careful observation required to design harmonious floral arrangements mirrors the thoughtful leadership needed to cultivate academic communities.

Both demand vision.

Both require patience.

Both flourish through consistent care.

Across many communities, particularly in the Philippines, creative microenterprises have become increasingly significant contributors to local economic resilience. Home-based businesses, artisan products, and handcrafted goods have allowed countless individuals—particularly women—to transform hobbies into meaningful sources of supplemental or even primary income.

Stories like Dr. Arpilleda's remind us that entrepreneurship is not reserved for a select few. It belongs equally to artists, educators, parents, professionals, and dreamers willing to see possibility where others see ordinary materials.

A simple bundle of fuzzy wire.

A pair of patient hands.

An idea.

That combination can become a livelihood.

More importantly, it can become an inspiration.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of her enterprise cannot be measured by the number of bouquets sold or the growth of the business itself. Its true success lies in the conversations it sparks among students who begin asking different questions about their own futures.

What talent have I overlooked?

What passion could become my profession?

What small beginning might someday bloom into something larger than I ever imagined?

These are the questions every educator hopes to awaken.

As dean, Dr. Elisa Arpilleda prepares students for the realities of business. As an entrepreneur, she reminds them why business exists in the first place—not merely to generate profit, but to solve problems, create beauty, enrich communities, and improve lives.

In every carefully twisted stem and every handcrafted blossom is an enduring lesson: success does not always arrive in dramatic leaps. More often, it grows quietly, one careful creation at a time, until the work of our hands becomes a reflection of the dreams we were brave enough to nurture.

Long after fresh flowers have faded, these handcrafted blooms remain.

So does the story behind them.

And perhaps that is the most beautiful creation of all—not a bouquet that never wilts, but a life that proves passion, when cultivated with purpose, can blossom into lasting success.

The Transformative Power of Personalized Learning with Artificial Intelligence

Prof. Daisy Mae R. Bongtiwon

Education has continuously evolved to meet the changing needs of society. From traditional classroom instruction to digital learning platforms, every advancement has sought to make learning more effective, engaging, and accessible. Today, artificial intelligence (AI) has become one of the most influential innovations in education. Personalized learning with AI shifts education away from the traditional one-size-fits-all approach by adapting learning experiences to the needs, abilities, interests, and pace of every student. Instead of delivering the same instruction to everyone, AI creates learning experiences that recognize that every learner is different and deserves opportunities that match their individual potential.

One of the greatest advantages of AI-powered personalized learning is its ability to provide instruction that fits each learner's unique needs. Every student possesses different strengths, learning styles, and areas for improvement. AI systems analyze these differences and recommend appropriate learning materials, practice exercises, assessments, and feedback that help students progress at their own pace. Learners who struggle with certain topics receive additional guidance, while those who master concepts quickly are challenged with more advanced activities. This personalized approach allows students to experience success without feeling left behind or limited by the pace of the entire class.

Artificial intelligence also promotes inquiry-based learning by encouraging students to become active participants in their own education. Rather than simply memorizing facts, learners are motivated to ask meaningful questions, investigate ideas, compare different viewpoints, and search for reliable information. AI serves as an intelligent learning companion that helps clarify difficult concepts while encouraging curiosity and exploration. This process develops critical thinking skills because students learn to analyze information carefully instead of accepting every answer without reflection. Another important contribution of AI is the improvement of writing and communication skills. AI-assisted tools help students organize their ideas, revise essays, strengthen grammar, and create clearer academic papers. Brainstorming becomes more productive as learners explore different perspectives and generate creative ideas before developing their own written work.

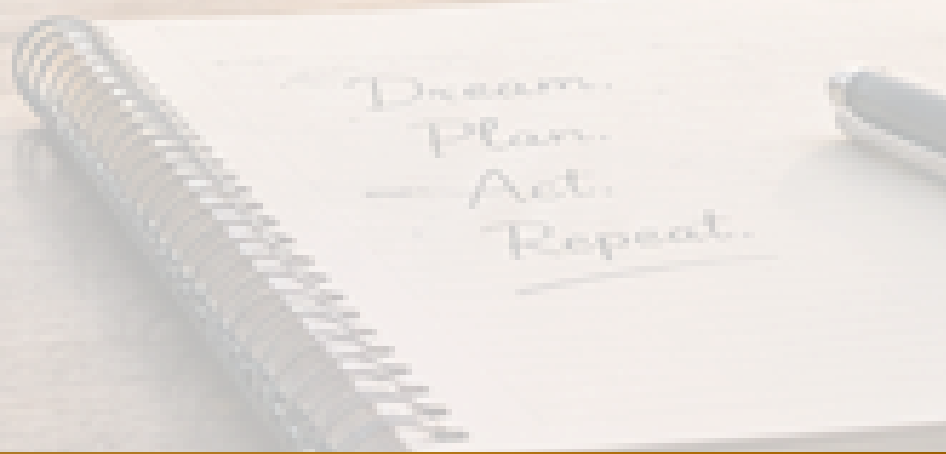
Through continuous feedback and revision, students become more confident writers and communicators who are capable of expressing their ideas effectively in both written and oral forms. The impact of AI is particularly evident in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education. Complex concepts in mathematics and physics become easier to understand through interactive explanations, simulations, visual demonstrations, and step-by-step problem-solving guidance. Students can explore multiple solution methods while strengthening their analytical and logical reasoning skills.

More importantly, they learn to evaluate AI-generated responses critically by comparing information with reliable sources and verifying evidence before accepting conclusions. This habit develops responsible thinking and sound decision-making. Artificial intelligence also creates exciting opportunities for creativity and innovation. Students can design presentations, develop digital learning materials, create visual content, organize research findings, and transform ideas into meaningful projects. AI stimulates imagination by offering new perspectives while allowing learners to focus on creativity, originality, and innovation. As students combine technology with their own ideas, they become better prepared for careers that require adaptability, collaboration, and creative problem-solving in an increasingly digital world. Despite these remarkable advantages, AI should always be used responsibly and ethically.

Technology should never replace human thinking or academic integrity. Instead, it should support deeper understanding, encourage independent reasoning, and enhance learning without encouraging overdependence. Students must continue to verify information, think critically, and make informed decisions based on evidence. At the same time, teachers remain essential in guiding discussions, validating information, designing authentic learning experiences, and helping students become responsible users of emerging technologies.

Ultimately, personalized learning with AI represents a major step toward the future of education. By adapting instruction to individual learners, encouraging inquiry, strengthening communication, improving problem-solving abilities, and fostering creativity, AI creates a more engaging, inclusive, and learner-centered educational environment. When used thoughtfully and responsibly, it empowers students to become lifelong learners, critical thinkers, innovative problem-solvers, and ethical digital citizens. The true value of artificial intelligence lies not in replacing human intelligence but in enhancing it, enabling learners to reach their fullest potential while preparing them to meet the challenges and opportunities of the twenty-first century.

ABSTRACTS



Competency-Based Instructional Module in Bartending and Mixology

Dr. Dulce B. Aurelio

This study aimed to develop and evaluate a Competency-Based Instructional Module in Bartending and Mixology for second-year Bachelor of Science in Hospitality Management students at the Eulogio “Amang” Rodriguez Institute of Science and Technology (EARIST). Recognizing the growing importance of bartending and mixology in the hospitality industry and the limited use of competency-based modules in instruction, the researcher designed a learning module intended to enhance students’ knowledge, skills, and appreciation of the profession while supporting effective teaching and learning practices.

The study employed a descriptive research design using survey questionnaires to assess the extent of utilization of existing instructional materials and the acceptability of the developed module. Respondents included ten (10) hospitality management administrators and forty (40) faculty members from EARIST, Arellano University–Pasay, and Metropolitan Medical Center College of Arts, Science and Technology. Additionally, fifty (50) second-year Hospitality Management students participated in the pre-test and post-test evaluation of the module. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and t-test analysis to determine differences in student performance before and after the implementation of the module.

Findings revealed that while books, magazines, journals, CDs/DVDs, and internet resources were widely utilized, instructional modules, manuals, and workbooks were rarely used in Bartending and Mixology instruction. Based on the recommendations of administrators and faculty members, a competency-based instructional module was developed consisting of objectives, content, introduction, learning activities, and evaluation activities. The developed module was rated highly acceptable in terms of objectives (4.46), content (4.47), usefulness (4.43), language and style (4.27), clarity (4.32), application (4.45), and evaluation (4.46). Furthermore, student performance significantly improved after using the module, with mean scores increasing from 11.46 in the pre-test to 39.10 in the post-test. Statistical analysis revealed a computed t-value of 46.08, which exceeded the critical value of 1.645 at the 0.05 level of significance, indicating a significant improvement in student achievement.

The study concluded that the competency-based instructional module is a highly acceptable and effective instructional material that enhances student learning and performance in Bartending and Mixology. The findings support the integration of competency-based modules into hospitality management education and encourage the development of similar instructional materials across other disciplines to improve teaching effectiveness and learner outcomes.

Keywords: competency-based instruction, bartending, mixology, instructional module, hospitality management, learning outcomes, educational materials.

School Principals' Leadership Styles and Special Education Teachers' Work-Based Performance: Basis for an Intervention Program

Mathew Nejana Gamboa, LPT, MAED-SPED

This study assessed the leadership styles of school principals and their relationship with the work-based performance of Special Education (SPED) teachers in selected public elementary schools in the Division of Manila City through a mixed-method research design. The quantitative phase employed a descriptive–correlational approach using survey questionnaires distributed to 121 respondents (8 principals and 113 SPED teachers). The qualitative phase complemented the findings through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to capture contextual insights on leadership practices and challenges. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and thematic analysis. Results revealed that democratic and transformational leadership styles were the most dominant among principals and were positively correlated with SPED teachers' performance in areas such as instructional competence, professional engagement, and community linkage. Qualitative data supported these findings, emphasizing that principals who encourage collaboration, feedback, and shared decision-making foster teacher motivation and innovation. However, challenges such as limited training opportunities and excessive administrative tasks were identified. The study concludes that effective school leadership contributes significantly to teachers' professional growth and student learning outcomes. The proposed Intervention Program for Leadership Enhancement and Teacher Empowerment (ILETE) seeks to strengthen leadership practices, improve school climate, and enhance overall teaching performance.

Keywords: Leadership Styles, SPED Teachers, Work-Based Performance, Mixed-Method Research, Educational Leadership, Transformational Leadership

Development and Evaluation of Teacher Training Policies: Basis for Strengthening the Science Education Program

Prof. Daisy Mae Bongtiwon & Mr. John Kent Casao

Strengthening science education requires not only curriculum enhancement but also effective teacher preparation and well-designed policies that support continuous professional development. Science teachers are expected to demonstrate strong content knowledge, employ inquiry-based teaching strategies, integrate STEM and technology-assisted instruction, utilize effective assessment practices, and foster scientific inquiry and critical thinking among learners. However, teacher training initiatives often face challenges that limit their effectiveness and sustainability. This study aimed to develop and evaluate teacher training policies for strengthening the science education program. Using a quantitative developmental research design, data were gathered from 30 science teachers through a validated survey questionnaire. The findings revealed that science teachers expressed strong professional development needs in content mastery, inquiry-based teaching strategies, STEM integration, technology-assisted instruction, classroom assessment, research skills, innovative instructional approaches, learner engagement, scientific inquiry, and continuous competency development. The study also identified several challenges affecting teacher training implementation, including limited training opportunities, insufficient funding support, lack of follow-up monitoring, schedule conflicts, inadequate training resources, inconsistent implementation practices, training programs lacking contextual relevance, and misalignment with teachers' actual instructional needs. Based on these findings, teacher training policies were developed focusing on continuous professional development planning, needs-based teacher training programs, integration of innovative and technology-assisted instructional strategies, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, research and instructional innovation support, collaborative learning communities, sustainable funding and institutional support, and regular policy review and improvement. The developed policies were evaluated and found to be highly acceptable. The results indicate that the policies are practical, responsive to teachers' needs, supportive of instructional improvement, and suitable for implementation in science education programs. The study concludes that the enhanced teacher training policies can serve as a model for strengthening science education. Their implementation may contribute to improved instructional quality, enhanced teacher competencies, and more effective science teaching and learning outcomes.

Keywords: science education, teacher training policies, professional development, STEM integration, instructional improvement, policy development and evaluation.

Bridging the Gap: MSME Program Awareness and Support Needs in Barangays 627–636, Sta. Mesa, Manila

Dr. Cynthia A. Manalad, DBA

Sta. Mesa, Manila is home to a vibrant mix of micro and small enterprises—from sari-sari stores and carinderias to salons, tailoring shops, food stalls, and a rising cohort of online sellers. These ventures are more than income sources; they are the economic lifelines that anchor families and neighborhoods, supplying daily necessities, affordable services, and a sense of community identity. Yet, beneath this entrepreneurial energy lies a pressing challenge: most operators still run their businesses informally and remain disconnected from government programs designed to help them register, expand, and thrive. By examining the types of businesses that flourish in Barangays 627–636 and the obstacles their owners face, this study sets out to understand why the gap between available support and actual utilization persists—and how it can be bridged to foster more inclusive, resilient local growth.

The study reveals that a significant percentage of residents—especially in Barangays 629, 631, and 635—are unaware of key MSME support services such as the Department of Trade and Industry's (DTI) Negosyo Centers, Kapatid Mentor ME (KMME) Program, and the Shared Service Facilities (SSF) initiative. The low levels of awareness, coupled with barriers such as fear of bureaucracy, limited digital literacy, lack of local guidance, and fear of online scams, have prevented many from formalizing their businesses and taking advantage of existing programs. These findings echo national and international studies on the challenges of grassroots entrepreneurship, particularly in underserved and digitally excluded communities.

In response to these gaps, the study recommends localized interventions such as the establishment of Barangay Negosyo Desks, monthly entrepreneurship fairs, community-based digital literacy training, mobile SSF caravans, and the promotion of local entrepreneurial champions.

These proposed solutions aim to increase awareness, reduce fear and hesitation, and strengthen Sta. Mesa's entrepreneurial ecosystem from the ground up. By addressing both structural and psychological barriers, the study contributes actionable insights for policymakers, local government units, and development organizations seeking to empower MSMEs in urban barangay settings.

Keywords: MSMEs, entrepreneurship, Sta. Mesa Manila, Negosyo Center, program awareness, digital literacy, KMME, local economic development, barangay initiatives, inclusive growth.

Developing Inclusive Tourism Destinations: Assessing the Accessibility of Tourism Facilities for Older Adults and Persons with Disabilities in Agoo, La Union

Leoncio Torres, Marie Ann Gali, Venus T. Marzan, Katrina Ann B. Dosono, & Tritchell Anne D. Torres

By ensuring that tourism destinations are accessible, equitable, and welcoming to all individuals regardless of age or physical ability. Despite increasing recognition of accessible tourism worldwide, many emerging destinations in developing countries continue to face infrastructural and service-related barriers that limit participation among older adults and persons with disabilities (PWDs). This study aims to assess the accessibility of tourism attractions, accommodation establishments, restaurants, transportation services, and public tourism facilities in Agoo, La Union. Employing a mixed-methods research design, the study will utilize accessibility audits based on universal design principles, structured surveys, key informant interviews, and policy document analysis to evaluate the current level of accessibility and identify existing gaps in infrastructure, customer service, and destination management. The findings are expected to provide evidence-based recommendations for improving accessibility standards while promoting inclusive tourism practices that benefit both visitors and local communities. Ultimately, the study will develop an Inclusive Tourism Destination Framework that may serve as a strategic guide for local government units, tourism enterprises, and community stakeholders in creating barrier-free tourism experiences. By fostering social inclusion, enhancing destination competitiveness, and expanding tourism opportunities for diverse market segments, the research contributes to sustainable destination development and supports the realization of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals on reducing inequalities, promoting inclusive communities, and advancing sustainable economic growth.

Keywords: Inclusive Tourism, Accessible Tourism, Universal Design, Persons with Disabilities, Older Adults, Sustainable Tourism, Destination Accessibility, Agoo La Union

Improving Independent Reading Habits of Grade 3-St. Raphael using Reading Logs and Self-Monitoring Tools

Melody B. Rayos

Reading proficiency is a critical determinant of academic achievement and lifelong learning. Despite its importance, the results of the Oral Reading Test and Classroom Reading Level Assessment (CRLA) administered at the beginning of the school year revealed that a majority of Grade 3 St. Raphael of Kapitbahayan Elementary School learners were performing below the expected reading level in both English and Filipino. Learners exhibited challenges in word recognition, reading fluency, and comprehension, indicating the need for an intervention that not only strengthens reading skills but also cultivates sustainable independent reading habits. This action research investigated the effectiveness of reading logs and self-monitoring tools in improving the independent reading habits, consistency, and engagement of Grade 3 learners.

Grounded in the principles of self-regulated learning and reading engagement, the study employed a classroom-based action research design involving 30 Grade 3 pupils identified as struggling readers through the Oral Reading Test and CRLA. The intervention utilized reading logs to document learners' daily reading activities and self-monitoring checklists to encourage reflection, accountability, and self-assessment. Data were collected through pre- and post-reading assessments, weekly reading logs, self-monitoring records, and teacher observations conducted over an eight-week implementation period. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis to identify patterns in learners' reading behaviors and engagement.

Findings demonstrated notable improvements in learners' reading consistency, participation, and self-directed reading behaviors. The use of reading logs promoted regular reading practice, while self-monitoring tools enhanced learners' awareness of their reading progress and encouraged greater responsibility for their learning. Teacher observations further revealed increased motivation, confidence, and engagement in reading-related activities. These outcomes suggest that structured monitoring and reflective practices can positively influence the development of independent reading habits among elementary learners.

The study concludes that reading logs and self-monitoring tools are effective, low-cost, and scalable interventions for fostering reading engagement and self-regulation among struggling readers. The findings contribute to the growing body of literature on literacy development and provide practical implications for teachers, school leaders, and policymakers seeking sustainable approaches to improving reading outcomes in elementary education. Future studies may explore the long-term impact of these interventions across diverse educational contexts and larger learner populations.

Keywords: independent reading habits, literacy intervention, reading engagement, self-regulated learning, reading logs, self-monitoring tools, elementary education, action research

Sustainable Operations in Philippine Industries: Research-Based Inputs for Business Curriculum Innovation

Ma. Lourdes H. Gomez , MBA

In response to increasing climate risks, regulatory demands, and consumer expectations, Philippine enterprises are under growing pressure to integrate environmental sustainability into their operational strategies while maintaining productivity. This study explores how businesses, particularly micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), navigate the intersection of operational efficiency and environmental responsibility. Using a mixed-methods research design, the study draws on quantitative survey data from 50 industry professionals and qualitative interviews with six key informants across manufacturing, logistics, agriculture, and services sectors.

The findings reveal that most enterprises prioritize efficiency measures such as energy monitoring, cost management, and employee training. However, environmental practices—such as using eco-friendly materials, tracking carbon emissions, and consistent environmental reporting—are less consistently implemented, particularly among MSMEs. Financial limitations, lack of technical knowledge, and weak institutional support are major barriers. Despite these challenges, 70% of firms report leadership support for sustainability-focused innovation, and 66% show efforts to align efficiency goals with environmental strategies. Nevertheless, investment in green technologies remains limited, with only 54% willing to absorb higher upfront costs.

The research underscores the importance of embedding sustainability into strategic planning and operational decision-making. It also highlights the vital role of leadership and knowledge management in promoting sustainable practices. These insights offer valuable implications for both industry and education. For businesses, the study recommends stronger policy support, access to green technology, and capacity-building for MSMEs. For academic institutions, the findings advocate for curriculum innovations that emphasize real-world sustainability challenges, equipping future entrepreneurs and managers with the skills to lead green transformations.

Overall, the study contributes to understanding how Philippine industries are evolving toward sustainable operations and identifies actionable strategies to support this transition. It aims to inform both business practices and educational reforms aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals and the growing need for climate-resilient economic development.

Keywords: Environmental sustainability, Operational efficiency, Micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), Sustainable practices, Green technology, Climate risks, Strategic planning, Leadership support, Philippine industries, Curriculum innovation, Carbon emission tracking

Social Media Marketing Practices of Local Brand Coffee Shops in the 2nd District of La Union

Elisa D. Arpilleda

Social media marketing (SMM) leverages social media platforms to connect with audiences, build brands, increase sales, and drive website traffic through content creation, engagement, and analysis. This research evaluated the Social Media Marketing Practices of Local Brand Coffee Shops in the 2nd District Of La Union. There were 110 local brand coffee shop owners/managers who took part in this study identified by the application of census method. The census method type of descriptive quantitative research design was utilized, and adapted interview questionnaire was used. Based on the findings where conclusions were drawn, among the respondents, majority have small capitalization, operating under sole proprietorship, employing micro number of employees, has been on business within less than a year, and fall under small business category. The local brand coffee shops in the 2nd District of La Union extent use Facebook, the Instagram were use low extent and the use of other social media websites has no extent. On advertising strategy, they extent use organic or unpaid advertising and the use of advertising-based or paid advertising were low extent. The local brand coffee shops were extent post images/infographics but moderately extent post on other types of contents due to their lack of skills in posting other contents. There is a significant relationship between the profile of local brand coffee shops and the extent of their social media practices. The null hypothesis was rejected. The local brand coffee shops have serious problems along audience. They also have serious problem along the four problems under content, while their problem on creating a social media marketing strategy across different channels have moderately serious problem. Along resources, the owner/managers/employees need of social media marketing skills seriously, while moderately serious problem only on funding increase in Ad Cost, need of high technology equipment, and seeking manpower.

Keywords : Social Media Marketing, Local Brand Coffee Shops, La Union, Resources, Content

Academic-Industry Partnership in Selected Higher Education Institutions: Basis for a Sustainable Strategic Plan

Dr. Dulce B. Aurelio

This study assessed the academic-industry partnership among selected higher education institutions (HEIs) as the basis for developing a sustainable strategic plan. Recognizing the vital role of higher education institutions in preparing competent graduates through collaboration with industry, the study examined the extent of partnership implementation and identified the factors that facilitate or constrain effective academic-industry engagement. Specifically, it evaluated the partnership in terms of mutual trust, shared vision, autonomy policy, financial management, institutional interest, and leadership and managerial capacity. It also determined whether significant differences existed among the assessments of school managers, OJT/faculty coordinators, and industry partners, examined the facilitating and constraining factors encountered by participating institutions, and validated the suitability, acceptability, and feasibility of the proposed sustainable strategic plan.

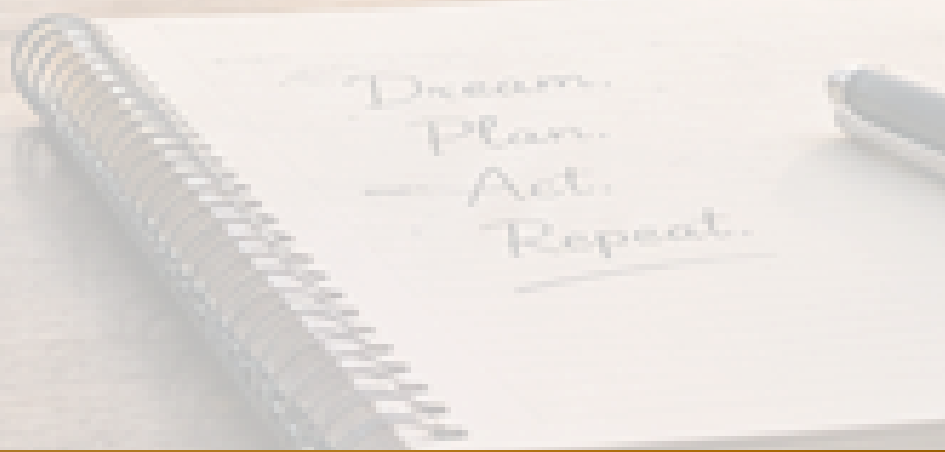
The study employed a descriptive research design using a researcher-made questionnaire validated by experts. The respondents consisted of school managers, OJT/faculty coordinators, and industry partners from selected higher education institutions, namely Eulogio "Amang" Rodriguez Institute of Science and Technology (EARIST), Pamantasan ng Lungsod ng Taguig, Polytechnic University of the Philippines (PUP), University of Makati (UMak), and the University of Rizal System (URS). Statistical tools such as percentage, weighted mean, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), and Scheffé Test were utilized to analyze the collected data.

The findings revealed that the academic-industry partnership was implemented to a great extent, with shared vision, financial management, and mutual trust receiving the highest assessments. The assessments of the three respondent groups showed no significant differences, indicating a common perception regarding the effectiveness of the partnership. Facilitating and constraining factors were generally encountered by all institutions, with no significant differences observed among the participating HEIs. Based on these findings, a sustainable strategic plan focusing on stakeholder collaboration, resource sharing, partnership management, monitoring, and continuous improvement was developed. The plan was evaluated by experts and found to be highly suitable, highly acceptable, and highly feasible for implementation.

The study concludes that sustainable academic-industry partnerships are strengthened through mutual trust, shared vision, institutional commitment, effective leadership, and continuous collaboration among stakeholders. It recommends the adoption and implementation of the proposed strategic plan to enhance institutional competitiveness, strengthen industry engagement, improve graduate employability, and sustain long-term partnerships between higher education institutions and industry.

Keywords: academic-industry partnership, higher education institutions, sustainable strategic plan, industry collaboration, stakeholder engagement, institutional partnership

SHORT STORIES



Where the Reef Remembers

Dr. Dulce B. Aurelio

At four in the morning, the sea had no color.

It was only a vastness beside the shore, breathing in the dark.

Cindy stood at the edge of the banca with one hand wrapped around the wooden rail, listening to the engine tremble beneath her feet. The boat had not yet left Sablayan, but already the town was becoming a softer thing behind them: a few yellow lights, the low bark of a dog somewhere near the market, the fading smell of fried fish from a roadside stall that had stayed open late for travelers.

Ahead, nothing.

Only the horizon, hidden in the black.

“First time?” asked Alvin.

Cindy turned. He was a narrow-faced man with sun-browned skin and a red cap pulled low over his forehead. His name, she had learned, was Alvin. He had introduced himself with the polite brevity of someone accustomed to tourists asking questions they would later forget.

“Yes,” she said.

“To Apo?”

“To Mindoro.”

Alvin looked at her for a moment, as if deciding whether that answer was clever or foolish.

Then he smiled.

“Same thing,” he said. “You will see.”

The engine roared, and the banca began to move.

Cindy had come from Manila with one backpack, a notebook, and a camera she had not used in months. She had once believed that travel was a kind of proof: proof that a person had lived widely, chosen boldly, stepped outside the small boundaries of ordinary life. She had filled her social media pages with airports, restaurant tables, hotel windows, sunsets framed by expensive drinks.

But lately, the photographs had begun to embarrass her.

They showed places. They did not show understanding.

The sea opened around them.

The first light appeared slowly, not as sunrise but as a thinning of darkness. The water turned from black to blue-grey. Above them, clouds stretched across the sky like torn fabric. Far ahead, something rose from the horizon—low, green, and quiet.

Apo Reef.

Cindy had read about it before coming. A marine sanctuary. A coral system. A destination for divers and travelers who wanted to glimpse another world below the surface. But the words had seemed flat on a screen. They had not prepared her for the strange feeling of approaching a place that looked almost unreal. The reef did not announce itself.

There were no signs, no buildings, no grand entrance.

Only sea.

Only sky.

Only the knowledge that beneath the boat, an entire living city was waiting.

“Some places do not ask to be admired. They ask to be understood.”

By midmorning, the sun had burned away the clouds.

Cindy sat at the edge of the boat, her mask pressed against her face, her fins heavy in her hands. Alvin gave instructions in a calm voice: do not step on coral, do not touch anything, do not take anything, do not feed the fish, do not leave plastic behind.

“Even small things matter,” he said.

He said it without drama. Without scolding.

As if everyone should already know.

Then Cindy slipped into the water.

For a second, she panicked.

The sea was colder than she expected. Her body tilted awkwardly beneath the surface. Her breath sounded enormous inside the mask. She kicked once, twice, and then the world opened.

Coral spread beneath her in shapes she could not name.

Some looked like antlers. Some resembled stone flowers. Some were pale and fragile, while others seemed to glow beneath the water. Fish flickered through the blue in quick flashes of yellow, silver, and black. A school moved as one body, turning suddenly, catching the light, disappearing into distance.

Cindy forgot the camera strapped to her wrist.

She forgot Manila.

She forgot the message waiting on her phone from the company offering her a new job—higher salary, better title, longer hours.

For a few minutes, she was simply suspended.

A visitor in a world that had not been made for her.

Then she saw it.

A piece of coral, no bigger than her palm, broken and resting on the sand. She reached toward it without thinking. A hand touched her shoulder. Alvin floated beside her, shaking his head. Cindy pulled back. The coral was beautiful. White at the edges. Delicate. Perfectly shaped for a souvenir. But Alvin pointed toward the reef.

Then he pointed toward the broken coral.

Then he pressed his open palm against his chest.

The gesture said everything.

It belongs here.

When Cindy surfaced, she removed her mask and looked toward the horizon. The sea glittered around them like polished glass.

"I almost took it," she said.

Alvin nodded.

"Many people do."

"I thought it was already broken."

"It is still part of the reef."

His words followed her for the rest of the day. It is still part of the reef.

Two days later, Cindy found herself on Inasakan Beach. The sand was pearl white under the afternoon sun. Coconut trees leaned over the shoreline, their leaves trembling in the wind. The water was clear enough that she could see small fish moving near her ankles. A group of children played farther down the shore, chasing one another through the shallows. Their laughter rose above the sound of the waves. Cindy sat beneath a tree and watched the sky change.

She had expected the beach to feel empty.

Instead, it felt full.

Not crowded. Not noisy.

Full of small, living things.

A woman carrying a basket of shells. A boy pulling a small boat above the tide. An elderly man repairing a fishing net. A dog sleeping in the shade. A row of sandals outside a modest house near the shore.

Cindy lifted her camera. Then she lowered it.

The scene was beautiful, yes. But it was not hers. Not every beautiful thing needed to become an image.

A young girl approached her. She wore a faded yellow shirt and held a small plastic pail in both hands.

"Are you alone?" the girl asked.

"For now," Cindy said.

"My name is Gie."

"Cindy."

Gie looked at the camera hanging from Cindy's neck.

"Are you a photographer?"

"I used to think I was."

"I used to think I was."

The girl frowned, as if this answer made no sense.

"Then why don't you take pictures?"

Cindy looked toward the sea.

"I'm trying to see first."

Gie considered this.

Then she nodded solemnly.

"That is good," she said. "Some people only look through phones."

Cindy laughed.

"Your mother taught you that?"

"No," Gie said. "My brother."

They sat together in silence for a while.

The sun lowered behind the water. The beach turned gold, then orange, then rose-colored. Across the shore, someone called Gie's name.

She stood up and brushed the sand from her knees.

"Tomorrow," she said, "you should go to the river. It is cold there."

"Is that a recommendation?"

"It is an instruction."

Then she ran away.

"A traveler can cross an ocean and still remain unchanged. The real distance is measured by what one learns to notice."

Magtangkob River was colder than Cindy expected.

The water flowed between rock formations and green banks, clear enough to reveal smooth stones beneath the surface. She arrived early, before the midday visitors, and found a guide named Lando preparing bamboo rafts near the shore.

"Gie sent me," Cindy said.

Lando laughed.

"Ah," he said. "Then you have no choice."

The raft moved slowly across the river.

Cindy sat near the front, dipping her fingers into the water. The current curled around her hand, cool and insistent. Birds moved between trees. Somewhere upstream, she heard a rooster crow.

“This river,” Lando said, “is not only for visitors.”

Cindy looked at him.

“For farming. For washing. For fishing. For families. For children learning to swim. For people who need water every day.”

He spoke gently, but there was something firm beneath the words.

“Sometimes tourists say, ‘What a beautiful place.’ That is true. But they do not always ask what happens here when the tourists go home.”

Cindy looked down at the river.

The current moved beneath the raft.

She thought of the coral Alvin had stopped her from taking. She thought of the beach that was not empty, though it had looked untouched from a distance.

She thought of how often she had mistaken silence for absence.

“Do people protect this place?” she asked.

Lando smiled.

“We try.”

It was not a grand answer.

It did not promise that everything was safe.

But it was honest.

That evening, Cindy climbed toward Mount Zion with a small group of local hikers.

The path was steep in places. Her shoes filled with dust. Sweat ran down her back.

Twice, she considered turning around. But the guide walking ahead of her only said, “Slowly. The mountain will still be here.”

At the top, the sky widened.

Below them, the province stretched in layers: fields, rivers, trees, distant roads, the faint shimmer of water. The sun moved lower, turning the landscape bronze.

Cindy stood at the edge of the viewpoint and felt an unfamiliar pressure behind her eyes.

For months, she had believed she needed to leave her life.

Leave the work that exhausted her. Leave the city that had made everything fast. Leave the version of herself who measured success in promotions, photographs, and constant movement.

But standing there, she understood something else.

Perhaps she did not need to leave.

Perhaps she needed to return.

Not to a place.

To a way of seeing.

She opened her notebook.

On the first page, she wrote:

The sea does not need me.

Then, beneath it:

The beach does not need me.

Then:

The river does not need me.

She paused.

The wind moved across the mountain.

Finally, she wrote:

But I need to learn how to deserve the places that welcome me.

On her last morning in Occidental Mindoro, Cindy returned to the shore before sunrise.

The sea was dark again. The same color it had been when she arrived.

Alvin's banca stood near the water, tied to a wooden post. The boatman was there, checking the ropes.

"You are leaving?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You will come back?"

Cindy looked toward the horizon.

She thought of Apo Reef beneath the water, alive and fragile. She thought of Inasakan Beach, where Gie had told her to look without a phone. She thought of Magtangkob River, moving through lives she would never fully know. She thought of the mountain, patient beneath the sky.

“I hope so,” she said.

Alvin nodded.

“Good.”

He tightened one final knot.

Then he looked at her.

“When you tell people about this place,” he said, “tell them it is not only beautiful.”
Cindy waited.

“What should I tell them?”

Alvin glanced toward the sea.

“Tell them it is alive.”

The sun rose slowly behind the clouds.

Light touched the water.

For the first time in a long while, Cindy did not reach for her camera.

She simply stood there, watching the world become visible.

Where the Passport Learns to Breathe

Dr. Dulce B. Aurelio

Before dawn, airports belong to those who carry quiet dreams.

The departure hall shimmered beneath soft amber lights while the world beyond the glass remained suspended between darkness and morning. Travelers drifted through the terminal with rolling suitcases, whispered farewells, and coffee cups warming their hands. Somewhere, a boarding announcement echoed in three languages before dissolving into silence.

Heide watched the runway instead of the departure screen.

Aircraft lights blinked like patient constellations waiting for permission to rise. She rested her thumb on the worn edges of her passport—a small blue book that had become less a travel document than a diary written without ink. Every immigration stamp had once seemed like proof of arrival. Over time, she had discovered they were records of becoming.

The first journey had begun years earlier with an opportunity so improbable it felt borrowed from fiction. She had not yet realized that travel rarely changes geography first. It changes the traveler.

She smiled.

Some people collected souvenirs. She collected conversations.

Singapore greeted her with the fragrance of rain on polished stone.

Nothing seemed accidental. Trees arched gracefully over immaculate boulevards. Trains arrived with mathematical precision. Gardens bloomed beside towers of steel as though nature and innovation had negotiated a lasting peace.

Inside a hawker centre, steam curled above bowls of laksa while conversations unfolded in Mandarin, Malay, Tamil, and English—languages weaving through the air without competing for space.

An elderly noodle vendor noticed her fascination.

"You are visiting?" he asked.

"I'm learning," Dulce answered.

The old man laughed.

"Good. Tourists see buildings. Learners notice people."

She carried that sentence long after the meal ended.

Later that evening, the illuminated trees of Gardens by the Bay glowed against the indigo sky. Standing beneath their branches of light, she understood that a nation could preserve tradition while embracing tomorrow. Hospitality, she realized, was not measured by grand hotels alone but by how comfortably strangers were invited into everyday life.

Malaysia unfolded more gently.

Morning sunlight slipped across the heritage streets of Melaka where weathered shutters overlooked narrow lanes scented with coffee and pandan cakes.

A young guide named Aisyah paused beside an aging Peranakan house.

"My grandmother says old buildings are like grandparents," she said softly. "If you stop listening to them, you forget who you are."

At the towering limestone steps of Batu Caves, pilgrims climbed beside curious visitors, each carrying different questions toward the same summit.

Heide watched a Hindu family offer flowers while tourists respectfully lowered their cameras.

Travel, she thought, should never become consumption.

It should become conversation.

Hong Kong spoke in contrasts.

Victoria Harbour glittered beneath a forest of skyscrapers while wooden fishing boats drifted quietly across the same waters that had welcomed merchants centuries earlier.

In the crowded lanes of Mong Kok, an elderly tea merchant poured fragrant oolong into porcelain cups scarcely larger than seashells.

"You Filipina?"

"Yes."

"My daughter works in Manila."

He smiled before adding, "The sea separates countries. Kindness connects them."
Outside, neon signs flickered awake.

The city seemed to exist comfortably between East and West, old and new, speed and stillness.

She wondered whether people, too, could learn to live without choosing only one identity.

Macau whispered instead of shouted.

Cobblestone streets wound through pastel churches and Portuguese balconies where bougainvillea spilled over ancient walls. The aroma of fresh egg tarts drifted from neighborhood bakeries while church bells echoed across Senado Square.

A local historian running a tiny bookstore closed an old volume and looked toward the ruins of St. Paul's.

"Empires come," he said.

"They leave."

"But stories..."

He gently tapped the book.

"...stay."

She bought nothing except the memory.

Thailand welcomed her with incense.

Monks in saffron robes moved silently beside canals where floating markets awakened with laughter and sizzling pans of fragrant basil, chili, and lemongrass.

An elderly flower vendor carefully arranged jasmine garlands.

"You travel alone?"

"Sometimes."

"Good."

The woman tied another blossom into place.

"When we walk alone, we hear our own heart speaking."

The temple bells answered before Dulce could.

Vietnam carried history without bitterness.

In Hanoi, bicycles shared narrow streets with motorbikes and children chasing each other beneath yellow colonial balconies.

A former schoolteacher served fragrant pho from a modest family restaurant.

"We rebuilt," he said, stirring broth that had simmered since dawn.

"Not because forgetting is easy."

He smiled gently.

"Because hope feeds children better than anger."

The soup tasted of cinnamon, star anise, resilience, and home.

Indonesia offered mornings scented with frangipani.

On Bali, women balanced woven baskets of flowers upon their heads as offerings rested quietly before family doorways.

A young artisan invited her into a workshop where generations had carved wood by hand.

"We don't rush beauty," he explained.

"Our ancestors are watching."

Outside, gamelan music floated across rice terraces shimmering beneath afternoon light.

She thought about craftsmanship—not merely creating excellence but honoring those who came before.

Taiwan surprised her with uncomplicated kindness.

When she hesitated before a railway map, a university student abandoned his own schedule to escort her across the station.

"No problem," he insisted when she apologized.

"My grandmother says helping travelers brings the world closer."

Later, beneath glowing lanterns in a bustling night market, she tasted soup dumplings while children laughed around family tables.

Hospitality, she realized, was often invisible until someone needed it.

China challenged every expectation.

Ancient temples stood quietly beneath skylines where glass towers reflected centuries of civilization.

In Hangzhou, beside the tranquil waters of West Lake, an elderly calligrapher dipped his brush into ink.

He wrote a single Chinese character before handing it to her.

"What does it mean?"

He smiled.

"Learning."

Then he shook his head.

"No."

He crossed out the translation.

"Continuing to learn."

The correction stayed with her longer than the paper itself.

Hospitality dissolved borders long before governments did.

The greatest prize was never the suite overlooking the city.

It was discovering that tourism could become diplomacy without speeches.

The greatest prize was never the suite overlooking the city.

It was discovering that tourism could become diplomacy without speeches.

One sincere welcome could reshape an entire country's image.

One respectful visitor could return home carrying understanding instead of stereotypes.

The competition had rewarded a destination.

The journey transformed an ambassador.

Back in the Philippines, her classroom slowly became another border crossing. As a Professor, and lifelong student herself, she rarely began lessons with textbooks.

Instead, she began with stories.

About the Singaporean vendor who defined learning.

About the Malaysian grandmother who preserved memory through architecture

About the Vietnamese cook who seasoned broth with forgiveness.

About Taiwanese kindness.

Japanese discipline she later admired during professional exchanges.

Korean innovation that revealed resilience through creativity.

Chinese wisdom that insisted education never truly ended.

Her students learned table service and hotel operations.

They also learned that genuine hospitality begins long before guests reach reception.

It begins with curiosity.

It grows through humility.

It flourishes through respect.

Whenever future tourism professionals asked how to become globally competitive, she answered with the same quiet certainty.

"Travel if you can."

"But wherever you go..."

"...learn someone's story before taking their photograph."

The room always fell silent.

Because they understood she was speaking about life as much as tourism.

Years later, another sunrise welcomed another orientation for a new generation of hospitality students.

They arrived carrying notebooks, ambitions, and uncertainties.

Dr. Aurelio welcomed them with the warmth she had encountered across countless borders.

Behind her classroom hung no map marked by destinations.

Instead, there was a simple photograph of clasped hands from different cultures.

"You will study hotels, restaurants, airlines, destinations, and events," she told them.

"But remember this."

"The finest itinerary is the one that teaches you to become more human."

Outside, morning light spilled across the campus.

Somewhere beyond the horizon, aircraft continued tracing invisible paths between nations.

She knew many of her students would one day follow those same skies.

Not merely to collect passport stamps.

Not merely to admire famous landmarks.

But to become thoughtful travelers, compassionate professionals, and quiet ambassadors of the Philippines.

For in the end, the truest journey is never measured by the distance between countries, but by the widening of the heart that returns home carrying the world—and leaves a little of its own kindness wherever it lands.

Plant Trees, Plant Love, Save Lives

Dr. Arnel S. Miraflores

Bzzzzzzzzzz Bzzzzzzzzzz! It is the sound of the buzzer of Ramon Magsaysay Elementary School, or REMS, located in Barangay Sto Niño, where Peter Bonipacio is studying. It signals that their subject period is up for their last subject in the afternoon, science for grade 5, and their teacher is Ms. Erich Montes.

As Peter was on his way home, he noticed many trucks loaded with logs. So, when he reached home, he immediately asked his mother while cooking fried fish, "Mother, what are those trucks for? And why are those trucks loaded with so many logs?"

Mrs. Bonipacio replied with sadness in her eyes and said that "the trucks he saw came from the construction company in their town. Their business is logging. That is why you hear those trucks carrying plenty of logs from the forest."

From that, Peter became more curious and asked more like where they'd put the logs after cutting them and transporting them to their warehouse. Peter did not notice that his father was listening.

Mr. Bonipacio said, "I heard those trucks belong to Alpha Builders Construction Company. They will use the logs for construction work. Also, logging is legal because our local governments allow it."

Peter asked if those companies replaced the trees they cut.

Mr. Bonipacio replied that "he didn't know, and he had no idea. But if not, it will result in disaster when the trees in the mountains and forests are gone."

Peter was amazed by how his father answered his questions knowledgeably. It seems that Mr. Bonipacio has a lot of knowledge about trees and mountains. Thus, Peter asked if maybe he could help Peter in answering assignments?

Mr. Bonipacio replied, "Of course, I studied well while still studying, especially when I took carpentry. That is why I make beautiful furniture."

Peter then read the first question, which defines soil erosion.

Mr. Bonipacio answered that soil erosion is a process that removes soil particles from the soil, which is then carried away by water and wind, causing the ground to deteriorate. It is primarily driven by a lack of soil structure or a lack of vegetative growth.

Peter was surprised and said, "You know very well, father."

Peter then asked the second question, which is, "What are the causes of soil erosion?"

Peter is waiting again for the answer from Mr. Bonipacio. But to his surprise, his father asked him to answer the question by himself based on the definition he had given him.

Peter said confidently that "soil erosion removes soil particles from the soil and is carried away by water. Also, soil erosion could be caused by a lack of soil structure or vegetation. Therefore, soil erosion may happen if plants are removed from the soil, since I learned that plant roots hold the ground and prevent soil erosion."

Mr. Bonipacio was also surprised and praised Peter and said, "Excellent, you are right."

Peter thanked his father. Peter asked the third and last question, "What will happen if there are no plants in the mountains and forests?"

Mr. Bonipacio said, "You can answer that by analyzing the answers in questions number one and two."

Peter asked his father first if his father had noticed some incorrect answers, and he may correct them.

Mr. Bonipacio replied that "he shouldn't worry because there's nothing to be ashamed of if his answer is incorrect; as long as he tried his hardest, there's nothing to be ashamed of. Everybody makes mistakes, after all."

Peter first thanks to his father, and he answered that if all the trees in the forest or mountains are cut down, and rain falls, there will be no trees to absorb water and hold the soil in place, resulting in soil erosion and, in the worst-case scenario, a landslide. Houses will be toppled over and covered with rocks and dirt. Maybe lives will be lost.

Mr. Bonipacio was surprised again by the answer of his son. He thought that his son was a smart kid. Mrs. Bonipacio called the two for dinner. She also notices that it is getting dark and the possibility of rain is imminent. And the family took their dinner with a smile on their lips. They are not expecting the coming disaster.

In the middle of the night, the family woke up due to the siren. Mr. Bonipacio went out to see what was happening. Then he was shocked because the water outside was nearly reaching their elevated house, or above the waist, in a flood. Most families are already sitting on their roofs.

Peter was awakened and asked his parents what was happening. Mrs. Bonipacio said that there was a flood outside in the whole community. After a while, they heard people shouting outside their house. Begging for help.

And when they looked at those shouting for help, they found out that their neighbors did not participate in the tree planting program because they believed it was a waste of time and effort. They thought that they did not gain any profit from doing so.

The neighbors are shouting for help because they don't have any place to run. The flood is rising.

Despite the bad attitudes of their neighbors, Mr. Bonipacio still asked their neighbors needing help to come into their two-story house.

Because of Mr. Bonipacio's kindness, the neighbors were sorry for rejecting his request to participate in the tree-planting program.

Mr. and Mrs. Bonipacio said to them, "Don't worry, we are neighbors. We should love and help one another."

After the flood, people in the barges helped in the tree planting program.

Peter thanks his parents for teaching him and showing him how to love and take care of Mother Nature.

And they happily plant seedlings, which will be inherited by the next generation.

Ken and the Water Cycle

Dr. Arnel S. Mirafior

In a remote village on the Island of Aquamarine, there were three friends, Eon, Ken, and Aya.

One day, while they are taking their snack in the park near the forest.

Eon, Ken, and Aya are enjoying the delicious taste of the bread they bought.

Aya said that the pieces of bread were just simple bread that they purchased from the store, and the cheapest. (laughing).

While laughing, one older woman approaches them.

The old woman, who looks beggar, asked for food and water because, according to her, she is weak and hungry. After all, she hasn't eaten for two days now.

Eon is a kind boy; he offered his bread.

Aya also offered half of her bread.

The old woman thanked the two.

But Ken has a different attitude, and he refuses to share his food.

Ken said that "he will not share his too because he is also hungry, and after all, he doesn't know her."

The old woman said that "it was alright. But she is thirsty. Maybe Ken could spare a bottle of water for her."

But Ken shouted no and said that the old woman could not have his water.

The old woman begged for the bottle of water.

Eon and Aya ask Ken to give his water to the old woman because he needs it more than Ken needs it.

Ken poured the water into the head of the older woman. Everyone is shocked.

The old woman removed her facemask and head covering, revealing her true identity, the Chieftess of the Island. She disguised as an old woman to check the attitudes of the community.

The Chieftess called her police escorts instantly and ordered them to put Ken into police custody and tell his parents that they should see the Chieftess in the Municipal Hall.

Eon begged for the Chieftess to forgive their friend.

Chieftess said that they could help their friend and be released from prison if they answered the puzzle.

Eon and Aya were shocked and asked the puzzle question

Chieftess said "I am not a square, nor triangle. I could be anything. I may have a beginning but no end and essential to living things. What am I?"

Chieftess said “I am not a square, nor triangle. I could be anything. I may have a beginning but no end and essential to living things. What am I?”

Aya and Eon asked if what that was supposed to mean?

Chieftess said that “their friendship, love, and knowledge about the environment will set their friend free.

Aya and Eon went to the house of their teacher in grade 4 to seek help.

Ms. Martha was surprised when she heard the terrible news.

Eon and Aya asked for the help of their teacher, and they analyzed the puzzle. And after two hours, Eon figured out the answer to the dilemma.

After a few minutes, Aya and Eon left the house of Ms. Martha and immediately went to the place where they could find the Chieftess.

They saw the group of guards, and the Chieftess appeared.

Chieftess asked if they had already figured out the answer to her puzzle

Yes. We already got the answer. Eon and Aya answered

The Chieftess asked the answer.

Aya said that “when water molecules evaporate in the air, it is called evaporation. When these molecules become clouds, this process is called condensation. Third, when these clouds become so heavy enough, they fall to the surface, reach precipitation and repeat the cycle.”

After Aya finished the discussion, Eon said that “the answer to the puzzle was the water cycle.”

Chieftess was glad that they got it. The answer is the Water cycle. She will keep her promise and will release their friend from prison.

Till then, Ken and his parents met and his parents returned to their home. Then Ken ran to the Chieftess, apologized to her, and thanked her for releasing him from prison.

She said that he would be a good boy from now on.

When the Chieftess is gone. Ken, Aya, and Eon embraced each other and happily went back to their respective family.

Curiosity Leads to Innovation: Science Without Borders

Dr. Eleonor T. Salvador

It was a bright Monday morning at Riverside National High School. The Grade 10 students were chatting excitedly while waiting for their Science teacher. A few minutes later, Ms. Yessie entered the classroom carrying her laptop and a small box containing science materials. As the students greeted her, she smiled warmly and prepared her presentation.

"Good morning, class!"

"Good morning, Ma'am!" the students answered cheerfully.

After checking attendance, Ms. Yessie displayed the title of her lesson: Science Education: Building Curiosity, Critical Thinking, and Innovation.

She began by asking, "When you hear the word science, what comes to your mind?"

Some students answered, "Experiments," "Laboratory," "Chemistry," and "Physics."

Ms. Yessie smiled. "Those are correct, but science is much bigger than that. Science teaches us how to think, how to ask questions, and how to solve problems. It is not only about getting the right answer—it is about discovering better solutions for people and the planet."

She explained that Science Education develops scientific literacy, inquiry skills, creativity, and responsible decision-making. She also reminded the students that scientific knowledge helps people address real-world issues such as climate change, disease prevention, food security, disaster preparedness, renewable energy, and environmental conservation.

Looking around the classroom, she asked another question. "How many of you have ever wondered why earthquakes happen, why diseases spread, or how satellites communicate with people around the world?" Almost every student raised a hand. "That curiosity," Ms. Yessie said, "is where every scientific discovery begins. Every scientist, engineer, inventor, and researcher once started as a curious student."

The students listened attentively as she continued. "Today, countries work together to solve global challenges. Scientists from different nations share research to develop vaccines, study climate change, protect biodiversity, and even explore outer space. Science has no borders.

Whether you are in the Philippines, Japan, the United States, Singapore, Australia, or Europe, scientific knowledge connects people around the world." The class became even more interested.

To make the lesson more meaningful, Ms. Yessie divided the class into groups. "I want each group to identify one problem in your community and think of a scientific solution. Then imagine how your idea could also help other countries facing similar problems."

The classroom became lively as students exchanged ideas. One group discussed improper waste disposal and proposed installing smart recycling stations with sensors that separate biodegradable and recyclable materials automatically. Another group suggested designing an affordable rainwater harvesting system for communities experiencing water shortages.

A third group proposed developing a mobile application that could warn residents about floods and typhoons using real-time weather information. When the presentations began, Ms. Yessie was impressed. "Excellent ideas," she said. "Remember, many successful inventions started as classroom projects." She then showed photographs of young innovators from different countries who developed robots for disaster response, solar-powered water purification systems, biodegradable plastics, and artificial intelligence applications for healthcare. "Many of them were students just like you," she explained. "They believed that their ideas could make a difference."

The students looked inspired. After class, Anna, Miguel, John, and Sofia continued discussing the lesson while walking home. Anna: "I didn't know science could connect people from different countries." Miguel: "I also didn't realize that students can create inventions that solve global problems." As they walked past a polluted creek near their barangay, they noticed plastic bottles, food wrappers, and other waste floating in the water. Sofia stopped and looked at the creek. "Ms. Yessie said science should improve our community. Maybe we can start here." The others agreed. Instead of simply complaining about the pollution, they decided to organize a community clean-up campaign.

They also planned to create educational posters explaining proper waste segregation and environmental protection. Inspired by examples from other countries, they researched how schools in Japan encourage students to clean their own classrooms, how Singapore promotes environmental responsibility through strict waste management programs, and how Scandinavian countries emphasize recycling and renewable energy. They believed that these good practices could be adapted to their own community. During the following weeks, the students worked hard. They collaborated with their classmates, teachers, barangay

Finding Stillness among the Mountains: A Journey through Bukidnon

Prof. Mary Grace Santos

Part I Where the Mountains Begin

Some journeys begin with an itinerary carefully planned months in advance. Others begin with a quiet longing that grows unnoticed until it can no longer be ignored.

For Sam, the journey to Bukidnon was born not from a desire to escape, but from a need to remember.

For nearly two years, her life had revolved around schedules, meetings, deadlines, and endless notifications. As a travel writer, she spent countless hours describing destinations she had never truly experienced. She could write about waterfalls after reading articles, describe festivals after watching videos, and recommend places she had never walked through herself. Somewhere along the way, travel had become less about discovery and more about producing stories before deadlines.

One evening, after closing her laptop, she stared blankly at the reflection on her screen. She missed the feeling of being surprised by a place, of listening to unfamiliar voices, of breathing air that carried the scent of forests instead of concrete.

A week later, she found herself on a bus traveling north from Cagayan de Oro, watching the landscape slowly transform. The roads began to climb. Coconut trees gave way to rolling hills. The air grew cooler with every kilometer, and the mountains stretched farther than she could imagine, their peaks disappearing beneath drifting clouds. Farmers tended vegetable gardens on gentle slopes, while children waved cheerfully at passing vehicles. The farther the bus traveled, the more the city seemed to dissolve behind her.

When the conductor finally announced, "Welcome to Impasugong," Sam smiled quietly. She had arrived.

Her home for the next several days was Roy's Tulogan, a modest transient inn near the center of Impasugong. It was not a luxurious resort or an exclusive mountain retreat, nor did it pretend to be. The rooms were simple, clean, and comfortable, offering exactly what weary travelers needed after a full day of exploration. As she placed her backpack beside the bed, she opened the window. Instead of towering buildings, she saw quiet streets where neighbors greeted one another by name. Motorcycles occasionally passed by, while the cool mountain breeze slipped gently through the curtains. Somewhere nearby, a rooster crowed even though the afternoon was already fading into evening. The simplicity of the place immediately comforted her.

Sometimes, she thought, the best accommodations are not the ones with the finest views, but the ones that allow you to rest before another day of discovering something new. That evening, the owner of the inn handed her a cup of locally brewed coffee.

"First time in Bukidnon?" he asked with a warm smile.

Sam nodded. "I've written about this province before," she admitted, "but I've never actually been here."

The owner chuckled softly. "Then prepare yourself." "For what?" "For a place that refuses to be rushed."

His words lingered in her thoughts long after the conversation ended. The following morning began before sunrise.

A gentle mist floated above the roads as Sam walked toward the Impasugong Tourism Center, eager to learn about the municipality before exploring its attractions. Inside the center, colorful displays introduced visitors to Impasugong's mountains, waterfalls, farms, and communities. Photographs captured breathtaking landscapes, while maps traced scenic routes through forests and highlands. A tourism officer noticed Sam carefully reading one of the exhibits.

"Most visitors ask where to take the best photographs," the officer said.

"And what do you tell them?" Sam asked.

The woman smiled. "I tell them to meet the people first. The photographs become more meaningful after that."

The answer surprised Sam. She had expected recommendations for viewpoints or hiking trails. Instead, she was reminded that every destination begins with its community. Before leaving, the officer handed her a brochure.

"Enjoy the scenery," she said. "But listen to the stories as well."

Her first stop was Lover's Lane, one of Impasugong's most photographed roads. Rows of stately pine trees stood quietly on either side, their tall trunks reaching toward a pale blue sky. Sunlight filtered gently through the branches, creating dancing patterns upon the pavement. A cool breeze carried the crisp scent of pine needles, while birds flitted from tree to tree, filling the silence with cheerful songs. There was something timeless about the place. Young couples walked hand in hand beneath the trees. Families paused to capture photographs. Cyclists glided leisurely along the shaded road, occasionally stopping to admire the scenery. Sam chose not to take out her camera immediately. Instead, she walked slowly. She listened to the rustling leaves above her. She watched tiny beams of sunlight drift across the road. She allowed herself to experience the place before attempting to preserve it. For the first time in months, she felt no urgency. No schedule. No deadline. Only the quiet rhythm of the mountains.

Later that morning, her guide, Miguel, drove her toward Mt. Millionaire, a scenic viewpoint overlooking the vast highlands of Bukidnon. The winding road climbed steadily until the mountains opened before them like waves frozen in time. Layer upon layer of emerald hills stretched endlessly across the horizon. White clouds drifted lazily between distant peaks, casting soft shadows upon forests and valleys below. Sam stood speechless. Miguel noticed her expression.

"So," he smiled, "do you know why they call this place Mt. Millionaire?"

She laughed. "I've been wondering."

"People always think the name has something to do with money."

"It doesn't?" He shook his head.

"You leave here feeling richer than when you arrived."

Sam looked once more at the endless landscape. Perhaps, she thought, some kinds of wealth could never be counted.

By midday, hunger led them to Cowboy Grill, a favorite dining spot among locals and travelers alike. The aroma of grilled meat greeted them before they even stepped inside. Large wooden tables filled the dining area, where families shared hearty meals while conversations flowed as naturally as the cool mountain breeze. Sam ordered grilled beef sourced from Bukidnon's cattle ranches, accompanied by freshly harvested vegetables and steaming rice. Every ingredient tasted remarkably fresh. Miguel smiled as she sampled the meal.

"One thing you'll learn," he said, "is that Bukidnon doesn't only grow food." "What do you mean?" "It grows stories. Every farm, every ranch, every harvest has people behind it."

Later that evening, they dined at Quadra, where local ingredients were transformed into beautifully presented dishes that blended tradition with contemporary Filipino cuisine.

The young chef personally greeted the guests. "We cook with what our farmers grow," he explained. "Our goal is simple. We want every visitor to remember Bukidnon not only for its scenery, but also for its flavors."

Sam carefully wrote those words inside her notebook. Travel, she realized, could be understood one meal at a time. As dusk settled over Impasugong, she returned to Roy's Tulogan. The streets had grown quiet once again. Somewhere in the distance, dogs barked softly while crickets welcomed the coming night. The cool mountain air drifted through the open window as she sat on the small wooden chair beside her bed. She opened her notebook. The page remained blank for several moments. Then she began to write.

"Bukidnon does not introduce itself loudly. It speaks through quiet roads lined with pine trees, through conversations shared over simple meals, and through mountain views that ask nothing from their visitors except to pause and look."

She closed the notebook and smiled. Tomorrow, the waterfalls, ranches, and forests awaited. But already, Bukidnon had begun teaching her its first lesson. The most meaningful journeys do not begin when we reach a destination. They begin when we finally learn how to slow down.

Part II The Stories the Land Remembers

The following morning arrived wrapped in a soft blanket of mist. When Sam stepped outside Roy's Tulogan, the cool mountain air greeted her like an old friend. The streets of Impasugong were only beginning to stir. A small bakery had just opened its doors, filling the air with the comforting aroma of freshly baked bread, while vendors arranged baskets of locally grown vegetables harvested before sunrise.

Miguel was already waiting beside the vehicle. "Ready?" he asked. Sam smiled as she climbed in. "I think Bukidnon is beginning to spoil me." Miguel laughed. "You've only seen a small part of it." The road gradually climbed toward the highlands, where the mountains seemed to grow taller with every turn. Thick curtains of fog drifted lazily across the slopes before slowly surrendering to the warmth of the morning sun. Along the roadside, wildflowers swayed gently in the breeze, adding small bursts of color to the endless sea of green.

Their destination was Roy's Peak, one of Impasugong's newest scenic destinations. When they reached the summit, Sam stood speechless. The mountains stretched endlessly in every direction, layered in shades of emerald, jade, and deep forest green. Wisps of clouds floated below the viewing deck, creating the illusion that the peaks were islands rising above a white ocean. The breeze carried the earthy scent of grass still wet with dew. Visitors quietly admired the scenery, instinctively lowering their voices as though afraid to disturb the peacefulness surrounding them.

Sam rested both hands on the wooden railing. "I've never seen mountains like these," she whispered. Miguel nodded. "Every season paints them differently." He pointed toward the horizon. "In the rainy months, they become darker and more mysterious. During summer, they're brighter. But no matter the season, they always remind us how small we are."

Sam remained silent. For someone accustomed to measuring success by productivity and deadlines, the mountains offered an entirely different perspective. They had stood there long before she arrived and would remain long after she left. The realization was strangely comforting. Not far from Roy's Peak lay one of Bukidnon's most iconic landscapes, the Communal Ranch. Rolling hills unfolded before them like an enormous green quilt stitched together by nature itself. Herds of cattle grazed peacefully across the vast grasslands, their slow movements adding life to an already breathtaking panorama. Many visitors compared the ranch to the countryside of New Zealand, but Miguel gently shook his head.

"I've heard that comparison many times," he said. "But this place doesn't need to resemble somewhere else."

Sam looked around once more. He was right. The ranch possessed a quiet identity of its own. Near one of the grazing fields, they met an elderly ranch caretaker named Mang Ernesto. His weathered hands spoke of decades spent working under the sun, while the warmth in his smile reflected the hospitality for which Bukidnon is known.

"This ranch has fed families for generations," he said as they watched the cattle. "My father worked here. So did my grandfather." He bent down and picked up a handful of grass. "People often admire the hills, but for us, these fields represent hard work. Every sunrise means another day of caring for the animals, repairing fences, and protecting the land."

Sam listened carefully. The rolling hills suddenly became more than a beautiful landscape. They became a living workplace sustained by generations of dedication. Before leaving, Mang Ernesto offered one final piece of advice.

"When you write about Bukidnon, don't only write about what visitors can see." He smiled gently. "Write about the people who wake up every morning to keep these places alive."

Those words settled deeply within her. By late morning, the scenery changed once again. Towering trees lined the narrow road leading toward Cedar-Gantungan Falls. The forest seemed almost untouched, its towering trunks filtering sunlight into soft green beams that danced across the trail. Every step carried the scent of damp earth, wild ferns, and moss-covered rocks. The only sounds were birds calling from hidden branches and the gentle rush of water somewhere ahead. Miguel slowed his pace. "When I was a boy," he began, "my grandfather often brought me into forests like this." "What did he teach you?" "He said forests remember how people treat them."

Sam quietly watched. Responsible tourism, she realized, begins with simple habits taught at home. By the next morning, they had reached the Municipality of Manolo Fortich, often called one of the country's pineapple capitals. Even before entering the town, the enormous Giant Pineapple Statue welcomed travelers with cheerful pride. Sam laughed as visitors eagerly posed for photographs beneath the towering fruit.

"It certainly makes quite an entrance," she remarked. Miguel grinned. "It reminds everyone what helped shape this community."

Their next stop was Camp Phillips, where rows upon rows of pineapple plants stretched toward the horizon in astonishing precision. The landscape resembled an endless green tapestry woven across gently rolling hills. Inside the visitor center, a farm supervisor welcomed their group.

"Every pineapple you enjoy begins with patience," she explained. She described how each fruit takes many months of careful cultivation before it reaches dining tables around the world.

Walking through the plantation, Sam noticed workers moving steadily beneath the morning sun. Some inspected the crops while others prepared fields for future harvests. One worker paused long enough to smile.

"Our work may seem ordinary," he said. "But every harvest feeds families."

Those words echoed what Mang Ernesto had shared at the ranch. Behind every beautiful landscape stood people whose dedication often went unnoticed. After the tour, Miguel handed Sam a cup of the plantation's famous pineapple ice cream.

Its sweet, refreshing flavor captured the freshness of the fruit itself. Moments later, she sampled the equally delicious melon ice cream.

She laughed. "I don't know which one I like more."

Miguel smiled. "Most visitors have the same problem."

am looked around curiously. "What do you mean?" "He believed that if we respected the forest, never taking more than we needed, never leaving our trash behind, it would continue providing clean water, fresh air, and life for future generations."

Soon the trees opened to reveal the waterfall. Water cascaded gracefully over dark volcanic rocks before plunging into a crystal-clear basin below. Tiny droplets drifted through the air, creating a cool mist that settled gently upon their faces. Sam removed her shoes and dipped her feet into the icy water. She closed her eyes. For several peaceful minutes, she listened only to the waterfall. No traffic. No ringing phones. No notifications. Only nature speaking in its own language.

Their journey continued toward Natigbasan Falls, hidden deeper within the forest. Unlike the powerful cascade they had just visited, Natigbasan possessed a quieter elegance. Delicate streams of water slipped gently over smooth rock formations before gathering into a calm emerald pool. Butterflies fluttered lazily among flowering shrubs while dragonflies skimmed across the water's surface. Miguel smiled. "Not every beautiful place has to be dramatic." Sam nodded. "Some simply ask us to be still."

The afternoon led them to Dila Falls, another natural treasure tucked within Bukidnon's lush landscape. Reaching the waterfall required crossing small streams and walking beneath towering trees whose roots twisted across the forest floor like ancient sculptures. When they finally arrived, Sam could only smile.

The waterfall descended in graceful ribbons over moss-covered cliffs, disappearing into a pool so clear that smooth river stones could be seen beneath the surface. A young local family was enjoying a picnic nearby. Children laughed as they carefully collected fallen leaves floating on the water, pretending they were tiny boats. Their parents smiled warmly when Sam greeted them.

One of the mothers said softly, "We always remind our children to leave every place cleaner than we found it." She handed her daughter a small bag. "Pick up any wrappers you see." Without hesitation, the little girl eagerly began collecting litter left behind by careless visitors.

Their journey continued to the beautifully maintained Del Monte Golf Course, where emerald fairways blended seamlessly into the surrounding mountains. Although Sam had never played golf, she admired the peaceful scenery. Neatly trimmed greens contrasted with distant forests, while cool mountain breezes drifted across the open landscape.

"It feels less like a golf course," she observed. "And more like a park."

By afternoon, laughter echoed through the mountains as they entered Dahilayan Adventure Park. Families filled the grounds with excitement, children raced from one attraction to another, and groups of friends challenged one another to outdoor adventures.

Sam hesitated before trying one of the park's famous rides. "I've never been very brave," she admitted.

The instructor smiled reassuringly. "Bravery isn't about never being afraid." "It's choosing to move forward anyway."

She took a deep breath. Then she stepped forward. Moments later, her laughter blended with the cool mountain wind. For the first time in many months, she wasn't thinking about work. She wasn't thinking about deadlines. She was simply living in the moment.

As the sun slowly dipped toward the horizon, they visited the charming Dahilayan Alpine Village, whose European-inspired architecture nestled comfortably among towering pine trees. Nearby, Dahilayan Forest Park offered peaceful walking trails where colorful flowers bloomed beneath tall evergreens.

The day's excitement gradually gave way to quiet reflection. As they walked beneath the trees, Miguel looked toward the fading sunlight.

"Tomorrow," he said softly, "you'll discover another side of Bukidnon."

"What side is that?"

"The heart."

Sam smiled. She had come searching for beautiful places. Instead, she was beginning to find something far more meaningful. And somehow, without realizing it, Bukidnon was quietly changing her.

Part III Where the Heart of Bukidnon Lives

The morning sun cast a warm golden glow across the highway as Sam and Miguel made their way toward Malaybalay City, the provincial capital of Bukidnon. The journey was unhurried, allowing the landscape to unfold like the pages of a well-loved book. Rice fields shimmered beneath the early light, vegetable farms climbed the hillsides, and clusters of modest homes stood surrounded by flowering gardens. Every village they passed seemed to move to its own gentle rhythm, untouched by the hurried pace of city life.

Miguel glanced toward Sam, who had spent much of the drive quietly observing the scenery. "You've become quieter these past few days," he said with a smile.

Sam laughed softly. "I've realized that the more I listen, the more Bukidnon has to say."

Miguel nodded. "That's how this place works."

Their first stop was the Transfiguration Church, one of the province's most recognizable landmarks. Rising gracefully on a hill overlooking Malaybalay, the church welcomed visitors with its distinctive architecture that seemed to blend harmoniously with the surrounding mountains.

Inside, sunlight streamed through stained-glass windows, filling the sanctuary with gentle colors that danced across the polished floor. The atmosphere invited silence, not out of obligation, but out of reverence. Sam sat in one of the wooden pews. For several minutes, she simply listened. The quiet inside the church felt remarkably similar to the silence she had experienced beside the waterfalls and beneath the pine trees. Different places, she thought, but the same sense of peace.

She took out her notebook and wrote: "Sometimes, silence is not the absence of sound. It is the presence of peace."

As they continued their journey, the towering silhouette of Mount Kitanglad dominated the western horizon. Standing at more than 2,800 meters above sea level, it is the fourth-highest mountain in the Philippines and one of the country's most important protected landscapes. Its forests shelter a remarkable diversity of plants and animals, including the critically endangered Philippine eagle, while its peaks remain sacred to many Indigenous communities.

Miguel noticed Sam admiring the mountain. "Many people come because they want to climb it," he said. "But for the people who have lived here for generations, Mount Kitanglad is much more than a mountain."

He explained that for many Indigenous communities, the mountain is a sacred ancestral domain, a place where nature, spirituality, and tradition have long been intertwined. Respecting the mountain means respecting the people whose history is deeply connected to it.

Sam realized that some places are beautiful not only because of what they look like, but because of what they mean.

That afternoon, they traveled to Lake Apo, one of Bukidnon's most serene natural attractions. Surrounded by forested hills, the lake reflected the clouds so clearly that it seemed to mirror the sky itself.

There were no loud crowds. No hurried tourists. Only the rhythmic splash of paddles as small boats glided quietly across the calm waters. An elderly boatman named Lolo Isko welcomed Sam aboard his wooden canoe.

As they drifted across the lake, he smiled and asked, "What have you been searching for in Bukidnon?"

Sam thought for a moment before answering. "I believed I was searching for beautiful places."

"And what have you found?"

She looked at the still water surrounding them. "I've found beautiful people."

The old man smiled knowingly. "My grandfather always told me that a lake reflects whatever stands before it. If we care for nature, it reflects life back to us. If we neglect it, we lose more than scenery, we lose part of ourselves."

The canoe moved gently across the water as dragonflies skimmed the lake's surface and birds called from the surrounding trees.

Sam knew she would remember this conversation long after the journey ended.

On another warm afternoon, Miguel brought her to Nasuli Cold Spring, where crystal-clear water flowed continuously from underground sources. Families gathered beneath towering trees, sharing homemade meals while children laughed as they splashed in the refreshing pools. Elderly couples rested in shaded cottages, enjoying conversations that seemed to have no need for haste.

There was something beautifully ordinary about the place. No elaborate attractions. No expensive facilities. Just people enjoying nature together. A mother noticed her young son reaching for an empty plastic bottle left behind by another visitor.

"Remember what we talked about," she gently reminded him. The boy nodded, picked up the bottle, and placed it in the proper trash bin.

"We take care of places that make us happy," he said proudly.

Sam smiled. Sometimes, the greatest lessons came from children.

As her journey neared its end, Miguel invited Sam to visit a cultural center where preparations for the Kaamulan Festival were underway. The air was filled with the rhythmic beat of traditional drums. Colorful woven textiles hung from wooden displays, while artisans carefully carved intricate patterns into pieces of wood. Women demonstrated traditional weaving techniques passed down through generations, and young performers practiced dances that celebrated the history of their ancestors.

A cultural guide named Aling Rosa welcomed the visitors. "Many people think Kaamulan is simply a festival," she began. "It is much more than that."

She explained that the celebration honors the seven Indigenous ethnolinguistic groups of Bukidnon—the Bukidnon, Higaonon, Talaandig, Manobo, Matigsalug, Tigwahanon, and Umayamnon peoples. Each community possesses its own language, traditions, music, dances, craftsmanship, and ancestral knowledge, all of which continue to shape the province's identity.

As they walked through the exhibits, Sam met a Talaandig elder carefully weaving colorful patterns into a traditional mat.

The elder smiled warmly. "Many visitors admire our crafts," she said. "But the designs are more than decoration." She gently traced one of the woven patterns with her fingers. "Each line tells a story. Some represent rivers that sustained our ancestors. Others remind us of the mountains that protect our communities. When we weave, we remember."

Sam listened with quiet admiration. Nearby, a young Higaonon musician played a bamboo flute. Its gentle melody echoed through the hall, carrying a sense of calm that words could not fully describe.

Another elder joined the conversation. "Our traditions survive because our children continue learning them," he explained. "Visitors are always welcome, but we ask them to come with respect. Take photographs, enjoy our dances, taste our food, but remember that these traditions are part of our lives, not performances created only for tourists."

Those words deeply resonated with Sam. She had spent years writing about destinations, yet she now understood that cultural heritage is not something to be consumed. It is something to be appreciated, protected, and passed on with dignity.

On her final evening, Sam returned to Roy's Tulogan. The modest room that had welcomed her days earlier now felt strangely familiar. Her backpack rested in the same corner, yet she felt like a different person from the one who had first unpacked it. She opened her notebook. The pages were no longer blank. They were filled with conversations, sketches of mountain landscapes, descriptions of waterfalls, recipes shared by local cooks, reflections beside quiet lakes, and stories generously entrusted to her by people she had met along the way.

She realized that the most valuable souvenirs she would bring home could not be purchased in a gift shop.

They were moments. Voices.

Lessons.

Friendships.

Before going to sleep, she wrote one final entry. "Bukidnon never asked me to conquer its mountains or race from one destination to another. Instead, it invited me to slow my steps, open my heart, and listen to the wind moving through the trees, to the laughter of children in cold springs, to the wisdom of elders, and to the stories carried by every river, mountain, and field."

The next morning arrived too soon. As the bus slowly descended from the highlands, Sam looked out the window one last time. Morning mist drifted gently across the valleys. Farmers were already tending their fields. Pine trees stood quietly along the roadside, while distant mountains gradually disappeared behind soft clouds. She thought about the countless visitors who would arrive in Bukidnon in the years to come. She hoped they would admire its waterfalls, hike its mountains, taste its sweet pineapples, and enjoy the excitement of its adventure parks.

But more importantly, she hoped they would greet local communities with kindness, support family-owned businesses, respect Indigenous traditions, dispose of waste responsibly, and remember that every destination is someone's home. Responsible tourism, she realized, is not measured by how many places we visit. It is measured by how gently we leave our footprints behind.

As the last mountain faded from view, Sam closed her notebook. She had come to Bukidnon searching for inspiration. Instead, she discovered something far more meaningful. She found a province where majestic landscapes are matched only by the generosity of its people; where ancient traditions continue to shape the present; where forests, farms, rivers, and mountains are treasured not merely as attractions but as living parts of a shared heritage.

Bukidnon had reminded her that the finest journeys are not those that fill our cameras, but those that quietly transform our hearts. Long after the road disappeared behind her, she knew that whenever she thought of Bukidnon, she would remember not only the cool mountain air or the breathtaking scenery, but also the voices of the people who had welcomed her with stories, smiles, and simple acts of kindness. For in the end, the true beauty of Bukidnon is not found only in its landscapes. It lives in the enduring harmony between nature, heritage, community, and every traveler who chooses to protect them.

Beyond the Foothills: A Dialogue Story of Hope, Education, and Transformation

(Inspired by the journeys of Ayta graduates from Zambales)

Dr. Rene B. Regaspi

The journey from the ash-covered foothills of Mount Pinatubo to the graduation stage of President Ramon Magsaysay State University (PRMSU) is not measured by distance alone. For many Ayta students in Zambales, it is a journey defined by resilience, sacrifice, determination, and hope.

For generations, higher education seemed like a distant dream for many members of the Ayta community. Following the devastating eruption of Mount Pinatubo in 1991, many families struggled to rebuild their lives. Livelihood opportunities became scarce, access to education remained limited, and poverty often forced young people to prioritize survival over schooling. For many Ayta children growing up in the upland communities of Cabangan and Botolan, earning a college degree appeared nearly impossible.

Yet, despite these challenges, a small group of Ayta students dared to dream beyond the mountains.

Among them was Ontoy, who dreamed of becoming a nurse after witnessing the health challenges faced by members of her community. However, financial difficulties made pursuing a medical degree impossible. Forced to adjust her aspirations, she shifted from Nursing to Agricultural Engineering and eventually completed a Bachelor of Elementary Education. Like many Indigenous students, her educational journey was shaped not by personal preference alone but by the realities of affordability and accessibility.

Pedro faced a similar situation. As the eldest child in his family, he dreamed of becoming an architect. Unfortunately, the cost of studying at a distant university campus was beyond what his family could afford. Instead, he enrolled in a teaching program at the nearby Botolan campus, where transportation and educational expenses were more manageable. Although it was not the path he originally envisioned, he embraced the opportunity and continued his studies.

Maria also experienced the painful reality of altering her dreams. Her ambition to become a nurse was set aside because her family could not afford the tuition fees. Seeking a more practical option, she enrolled in a two-year Associate Degree in Computer Science. Although it was not her preferred course, she recognized that earning a diploma would provide her with opportunities to improve her future and support her family.

Their stories reveal a common reality among many Indigenous learners. Educational choices are often determined by financial limitations rather than personal aspirations. For these students, education becomes more than a means of self-fulfillment—it becomes a pathway toward family stability, community development, and social mobility.

Entering college, however, was only the beginning of their struggle.

The financial burden of higher education forced many of the students to find creative ways to support themselves. Pedro balanced his studies with part-time work, taking on weekend jobs while actively seeking scholarships. Maria became involved in youth leadership through the Sangguniang Kabataan, enabling her to access educational assistance and reduce her tuition expenses.

Despite the hardships, none of them faced the journey alone.

Within the Ayta community, education is viewed as a collective responsibility. Families, relatives, neighbors, and community leaders provided emotional support and encouragement to ensure that students could continue pursuing their education. Community members celebrated every academic achievement and shared in the sacrifices necessary to support their scholars.

This strong sense of communal responsibility became one of the graduates' greatest sources of strength. When challenges arose, they carried not only their personal ambitions but also the hopes and dreams of their families and communities.

Another significant factor in their success was the supportive environment of the PRMSU-Botolan campus.

Historically, many Indigenous students in the Philippines have experienced discrimination, social exclusion, and cultural isolation in educational institutions. However, the Botolan campus offered a different experience. Situated within a community with a strong Ayta presence, the campus fostered a culture of inclusivity and respect.

For many students, college became a place where they could focus on learning without fear of discrimination. They felt accepted by their peers and teachers, allowing them to develop confidence and fully participate in academic life. This welcoming environment proved essential in helping them adjust to university expectations and overcome feelings of self-doubt.

Nevertheless, college life remained challenging.

Students faced long commutes, financial uncertainty, academic pressure, and personal insecurities. Some struggled with classroom presentations, while others worried about meeting deadlines and completing projects. Yet they persevered.

Institutional support also played an important role. Scholarships, educational assistance programs, student organizations, and tuition discounts provided crucial financial relief. These opportunities enabled students to remain enrolled during times when continuing their education seemed uncertain.

Their persistence eventually paid off.

Years later, these former students emerged as successful professionals serving various sectors of society. Ontoy became a Teacher III and completed a master's degree. Nenita entered public service and became a regular employee of the Department of Social Welfare and Development. Pedro established a career as a professional agriculturist. Roda returned to her alma mater as a university instructor, helping educate future generations of students. Maria found success as an Administrative Aid Officer in a public high school.

Their achievements transformed not only their own lives but also the lives of those around them.

Within their communities, they became role models and symbols of possibility. Parents began encouraging their children to pursue higher education. Young people who once viewed college as unattainable started believing that they too could earn degrees and build successful careers.

Community members sought their advice, respected their opinions, and looked to them for guidance. Their families, once struggling to support their educational journeys, became sources of pride and inspiration for others.

The success of these graduates also challenged long-standing perceptions about what Indigenous students could achieve. Their accomplishments demonstrated that when opportunities are made accessible and supportive environments are created, Indigenous learners can excel in higher education and contribute meaningfully to society.

Their stories carry an important message for educators, policymakers, and institutions across the country. Indigenous students do not need lowered expectations. They need access, inclusion, mentorship, financial support, and culturally responsive educational environments that recognize their strengths and potential.

The experiences of these Ayta graduates illustrate that higher education is not merely an individual achievement. It is a transformative force that uplifts families, empowers communities, and creates new possibilities for future generations.

Today, a young Ayta child looking toward a university campus no longer sees an impossible dream. Instead, they see a path that others have already traveled. They see teachers, public servants, agriculturists, and professionals who once walked the same mountain trails and faced the same challenges.

Because of the courage and perseverance of these pioneering graduates, the horizon has been redefined. What once seemed distant and unreachable now appears possible.

Their journeys prove that education can do more than change a person's life—it can change the landscape of an entire community, opening doors of opportunity for generations to come.

The Women Who Carry The Mountains

(Inside the Quiet Revolution of Ayta Indigenous Women in Zambales)

Dr. Rene B. Regaspi

At sunrise in the upland communities of Cabangan and Botolan, Zambales, the mountains awaken before the rest of the province.

Smoke rises from cooking fires. Children prepare for school. Roosters announce the beginning of another day. In modest homes scattered across Indigenous Cultural Communities, Ayta women begin a routine that has remained largely unchanged for generations. They prepare meals, fetch water, care for children, tend small gardens, and manage households long before the first rays of sunlight touch the slopes of the Zambales mountain range.

To an outsider, these daily tasks may appear ordinary. Yet hidden within them is a story of resilience, sacrifice, and untapped potential.

For decades, Ayta women have served as the backbone of their families and communities. They are caretakers, culture-bearers, educators, and silent builders of community life. Yet despite their indispensable contributions, many remain on the margins of economic development, leadership opportunities, and access to resources that could improve their lives.

A recent study involving 110 Ayta women from Indigenous communities in the province of Zambales reveals a striking reality: while these women carry much of the responsibility for sustaining their families and preserving their culture, they continue to face significant barriers to economic participation, leadership, and empowerment.

The findings tell a story not only of hardship but also of possibility—a story that inspired the creation of Honing Empowered Ayta Women of Zambales Towards a Responsive and Sustainable Indigenous Cultural Community (HEARS ICC), a framework designed to help Ayta women become active architects of their own futures.

The Hidden Faces of Poverty

The statistics are difficult to ignore.

More than half of the women surveyed were unemployed. Four out of five reported earning less than Php 5,000 per month. Nearly three-quarters identified themselves primarily as housewives.

Behind every number is a human story.

Imagine a mother rising before dawn to prepare food for her family. After ensuring that her children are cared for, she spends the day performing countless unpaid tasks that keep the household functioning. She may weave traditional crafts, help cultivate crops, or assist with small-scale family enterprises. Yet at the end of the month, she has little control over financial resources and few opportunities to generate independent income.

This is not an isolated experience.

Across many Ayta communities, women contribute significantly to family survival, but their labor often remains invisible within traditional economic systems. Their work sustains households but rarely translates into financial independence or decision-making power.

The study found that women's participation in economic activities remains extremely limited. Although some livelihood programs exist, respondents reported little involvement in economic opportunities aligned with their traditions and cultural practices.

For many women, economic participation remains less a matter of choice and more a reflection of deeply rooted social realities.

The Weight of Tradition

The Ayta people possess a rich cultural heritage that has endured centuries of displacement, discrimination, and social change.

Traditions have helped communities survive.

Yet traditions can also shape expectations.

Historically, Ayta men were hunters, farmers, and providers. Women cared for children, managed homes, and served as guardians of cultural knowledge. These roles were essential to community survival and reflected a balanced division of labor.

However, the eruption of Mount Pinatubo in 1991 transformed nearly every aspect of Ayta life.

Entire communities were displaced from ancestral lands. Livelihood systems were disrupted. Families were forced to adapt to new environments and economic realities.

While many changes occurred, traditional expectations surrounding women often remained.

The research found that cultural norms continue to influence women's access to economic opportunities. Many respondents felt they had limited freedom to pursue livelihoods outside traditional expectations. Even when women contribute economically, their efforts are frequently viewed as supplemental rather than central to household income.

Perhaps most revealing was the finding that women reported almost no access to cultural mechanisms that actively support their economic empowerment.

In other words, culture remains a source of identity and strength, but it has not always evolved in ways that create new opportunities for women.

This challenge is not unique to the Ayta community. Around the world, Indigenous women often face a double burden: preserving cultural traditions while simultaneously seeking greater participation in modern economic systems.

Leadership Beyond the Household

One of the most surprising findings of the study concerns leadership.

While Ayta women play critical roles within families and communities, relatively few occupy formal leadership positions.

Among the respondents, the overwhelming majority identified simply as community members. Only a small number served as tribal officers or chieftains.

The data revealed that access to community and gender-focused resources ranked lowest among all categories measured.

Women reported limited access to mentorship opportunities, leadership training, community programs, and decision-making networks.

This lack of access matters because leadership shapes the future of communities.

When women participate in governance, community planning, and development initiatives, their perspectives influence decisions about education, healthcare, livelihood, and cultural preservation.

Without those voices at the table, important needs may remain unheard.

Yet the study also suggests that the issue is not a lack of capability.

Rather, it is a lack of pathways.

The findings indicate that women across different ages, educational backgrounds, income levels, and household sizes experience similar barriers. Access to leadership opportunities remains consistently limited regardless of demographic differences.

This suggests that the challenge is systemic rather than individual.

The problem is not whether women are capable of leading.

The problem is whether structures exist that allow them to lead.

The Digital Divide in the Mountains

In today's world, technology can open doors to education, entrepreneurship, healthcare, and information.

But for many Ayta women, those doors remain only partially open.

The study found low access to technological resources across nearly every indicator.

Few respondents reported using technology to improve livelihoods. Access to digital platforms, online training, and technology-based support systems remained limited.

For many urban residents, a smartphone represents convenience.

For an Indigenous woman living in a remote community, it can represent opportunity.

A single internet connection can provide access to market information, government programs, educational resources, and potential customers for locally produced goods.

Without digital access, communities risk being left behind in an increasingly connected world.

Yet despite these challenges, there are signs of progress.

Some respondents reported limited use of digital platforms to promote products and services. This small opening suggests that with proper training and infrastructure, technology could become a powerful tool for empowerment.

The challenge is ensuring that access is not limited to a fortunate few.

A Story Larger Than Statistics

Perhaps the most striking finding of the research lies not in what differed among respondents but in what remained the same.

Analysis revealed that demographic factors such as education, income, household size, and ethnic subgroup generally did not significantly affect access to resources.

Whether a woman was younger or older, employed or unemployed, from a larger household or a smaller one, her level of access remained remarkably similar.

This uniformity tells an important story.

The barriers facing Ayta women are not isolated experiences.

They are shared realities.

The data paints a picture of entire communities navigating similar challenges. Poverty, limited resource access, restricted leadership opportunities, and insufficient support systems are not individual problems. They are collective conditions.

Yet there was one notable exception.

Age and employment status influenced how women perceived cultural barriers to empowerment.

Younger women and those with employment experience appeared more sensitive to restrictive cultural expectations.

This finding hints at an emerging transformation.

As younger generations gain exposure to education, employment, and new ideas, they may begin questioning traditional limitations while still valuing cultural identity.

Change, it seems, may already be quietly unfolding.

Listening to What the Data Is Saying

Research often measures realities that communities already understand through lived experience.

The women who participated in this study did not need statistics to tell them that opportunities are scarce.

They live that reality every day.

What the research accomplishes is something equally important: it provides evidence.

Evidence can influence policies.

Evidence can attract support.

Evidence can transform invisible struggles into recognized priorities.

And the evidence from this study is clear.

Ayta women need greater access to livelihood opportunities, leadership pathways, technological resources, and community support systems.

More importantly, they need programs designed with cultural understanding rather than imposed solutions.

Empowerment cannot succeed when it asks Indigenous communities to abandon their identity.

It succeeds when it builds upon existing strengths.

The Birth of HEARS ICC

Out of these findings emerged a framework known as HEARS ICC—Honing Empowered Ayta Women of Zambales Towards a Responsive and Sustainable Indigenous Cultural Community.

Rather than focusing solely on problems, the framework focuses on possibilities. Its vision rests on five strategic pillars.

The first is livelihood and skills development. By providing culturally sensitive training in areas such as entrepreneurship, food processing, traditional crafts, and sustainable agriculture, women can gain pathways toward economic independence.

The second is leadership and advocacy. Through workshops and capacity-building programs, women can develop the confidence and skills needed to participate in community decision-making.

The third is the establishment of an Ayta women's cooperative. Such a cooperative would provide access to savings programs, microfinance opportunities, and collective enterprise development.

The fourth pillar focuses on mobile outreach services. Many Indigenous communities remain geographically isolated, making access to healthcare, education, and legal assistance difficult. Mobile services can bring essential support directly to women and their families.

Finally, the framework emphasizes digital literacy and technology access. By equipping women with digital skills, communities can connect to broader markets, educational opportunities, and government services.

Taken together, these initiatives represent more than development programs. They represent pathways to agency.

Carrying the Future

The story of Ayta women is often told through the lens of vulnerability.

But vulnerability alone does not capture the full picture.

These are women who have sustained families through displacement, poverty, and social change. They have preserved cultural traditions despite immense pressures. They have raised children, protected communities, and maintained social cohesion through some of the most difficult chapters in their people's history.

They are not passive recipients of assistance.

They are active contributors whose potential has yet to be fully recognized.

The mountains of Zambales have witnessed generations of Ayta women carrying burdens that few outsiders ever see.

Now, there is an opportunity to ensure they no longer carry those burdens alone.

The findings of this study offer more than a snapshot of present conditions. They offer a roadmap toward a future where Ayta women have access not only to resources but also to choices.

A future where leadership is shared.

Where economic participation is valued.

Where technology becomes a bridge rather than a barrier.

Where culture remains a source of pride while expanding opportunities for women.

And where the daughters growing up in the Indigenous communities of Cabangan and Botolan inherit something even more powerful than resilience.

They inherit possibility.

For when Ayta women are empowered, entire communities rise with them.

And when communities rise, the mountains themselves seem a little closer to the horizon.

From Waste to Worth: A Barangay's Journey Through Community Action

Dr. Cynthia A. Manalad

For many years, Barangay San Isidro struggled with poor waste management. Plastic bags littered the streets, empty bottles floated along the creek, and food waste attracted stray animals. During heavy rains, clogged drainage canals caused flooding that damaged homes and disrupted daily life.

Although garbage trucks visited the barangay regularly, the waste problem continued to worsen. Many residents mixed all their waste into one bag, while others burned their garbage or dumped it in vacant lots.

Concerned about the growing problem, Barangay Captain Elena Santos called for a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) involving different sectors of the community. Invitations were sent to homeowners, youth leaders, teachers, senior citizens, health workers, business owners, waste collectors, environmental officers, and representatives from the Municipal Environment and Natural Resources Office.

On the day of the discussion, the barangay hall was filled with people eager to share their experiences. Captain Elena opened the meeting by saying, "Today, we are not here to blame one another. We are here to identify our problems and create solutions that everyone can implement."

The facilitator wrote one important question on the whiteboard:

"What are the major waste management problems in our barangay?"

One by one, the participants shared their observations. A teacher explained that many children learned waste segregation in school but returned to homes where garbage was still mixed together. A waste collector shared that most households failed to separate biodegradable, recyclable, and residual waste, making waste collection more difficult.

A health worker reported that improper waste disposal had created mosquito breeding areas, resulting in an increase in dengue cases during the rainy season. A business owner admitted that many stores continued providing single-use plastic bags because customers expected them.

Youth representatives pointed out that many residents simply lacked awareness about proper waste management. After identifying the problems, the facilitator asked another question:

"What practical solutions can we implement together?"

Everyone actively contributed ideas. The first recommendation was to practice proper household waste segregation. Every family agreed to separate waste into three categories:

- Biodegradable waste – food scraps, fruit peels, vegetables, and leaves.
- Recyclable waste – paper, plastic bottles, glass, and metal.
- Residual waste – materials that cannot be recycled or composted.

The barangay also committed to distributing color-coded labels to every household to make segregation easier.

An agricultural technician suggested establishing household compost bins so families could convert kitchen scraps into organic fertilizer for backyard gardens. Residents already practicing composting volunteered to conduct demonstrations during community workshops.

The youth proposed establishing a Materials Recovery Facility (MRF), where recyclable materials could be collected, sorted, and sold to recycling companies. Income from recyclable materials would fund environmental projects, purchase additional garbage bins, and provide school supplies for children participating in environmental activities.

Teachers recommended integrating environmental education into classroom lessons. Students would learn proper waste segregation, recycling, composting, and the principles of the 5Rs:

- Refuse
- Reduce
- Reuse
- Recycle
- Rot

Students would also serve as Environmental Ambassadors who would encourage their families to practice proper waste management at home.

Business owners agreed to gradually reduce the use of single-use plastics by encouraging customers to bring reusable shopping bags, tumblers, and food containers. Some stores even offered small discounts to customers who brought reusable containers instead of requesting plastic bags.

Senior citizens suggested organizing monthly community clean-up drives involving every sector of the barangay. Each zone would be assigned responsibility for cleaning streets, drainage canals, parks, and vacant lots.

The municipal environmental officer recommended strengthening the implementation of Republic Act 9003, also known as the Ecological Solid Waste Management Act.

The barangay council agreed to establish a Waste Management Committee responsible for:

- Monitoring waste segregation.
- Supervising the Materials Recovery Facility.
- Conducting household inspections.
- Organizing environmental seminars.
- Coordinating waste collection schedules.
- Implementing barangay ordinances against illegal dumping and open burning.

Instead of immediately imposing penalties, the committee proposed recognizing households that consistently practiced proper waste management through a quarterly Cleanest Household Award. Positive recognition, they believed, would encourage greater community participation.

The Focus Group Discussion also emphasized the importance of continuous communication. Participants agreed to use social media, school bulletin boards, barangay assemblies, posters, and public announcements to educate residents about proper waste management.

At the end of the discussion, the facilitator summarized the community action plan:

- Practice household waste segregation.
- Establish backyard composting.
- Strengthen the Materials Recovery Facility (MRF).
- Conduct regular recycling programs.
- Reduce single-use plastics.
- Organize monthly community clean-up drives.
- Integrate environmental education into schools.
- Enforce Republic Act 9003 through barangay ordinances.
- Create a Barangay Waste Management Committee.
- Conduct continuous information and education campaigns.
- Recognize model households and community volunteers.
- Monitor and evaluate the program regularly through quarterly meetings and follow-up Focus Group .

Before leaving the barangay hall, everyone signed the Community Waste Management Commitment as a symbol of their shared responsibility.

Over the following months, the agreed solutions were gradually implemented. Waste segregation became a daily habit. Backyard compost gardens flourished. The Materials Recovery Facility generated funds for environmental projects. Plastic waste in public areas decreased significantly, and monthly clean-up drives strengthened relationships among residents.

When the rainy season arrived, flooding was greatly reduced because drainage canals were no longer clogged with garbage. The creek became cleaner, dengue cases declined, and visitors noticed the improved appearance of the barangay.

During the next barangay assembly, Captain Elena smiled as she looked around the clean surroundings.

"Our success did not come from one person or one project," she said. "It came from listening to one another during our Focus Group Discussion, agreeing on practical solutions, and working together to turn those ideas into action."

The residents applauded, proud that they had transformed their barangay into a cleaner, healthier, and more sustainable community through cooperation, education, and shared responsibility.

Effective waste management begins with listening to the community. Through Focus Group Discussions, collaborative planning, and active participation, barangay residents can identify practical solutions, implement sustainable practices, and build a cleaner, healthier, and more environmentally responsible community for present and future generations.

The Sound Between Them

Dr. Raymund B. Bolalin

Every Tuesday morning, before the first bell, Antonio Reyes unlocked the physics laboratory and stood still for exactly one minute.

It was a routine no one knew about.

The room always sounded different before the students arrived.

The lamps buzzed softly aloft. A loose windowpane rattled whenever the wind came from the east. The ceiling fan clicked once every revolution, a rhythm he had stopped noticing until one day, years ago, it stopped. Outside, tricycles climbed the hill toward the school gate, their engines rising and dropping like faraway waves.

Antonio listened because physics had taught him that nothing was ever completely silent.

After twenty-four years of teaching, he trusted sounds more than schedules.
The first bell rang.

The hallway burst into voices.

His minute was over.

“Good morning, Sir.”

The students drifted into the laboratory carrying backpacks that looked heavier than they were. Someone was laughing in the corridor. Someone else was finishing breakfast from a paper bag. The space filled with the ordinary noise of adolescence.

Antonio wrote only two words on the board.

Sound. Silence.

Joshua frowned.

“Sir, that’s it?”

“For now.”

“No lesson objectives?”

“They’ll find us.”

Joshua looked unconvinced.

“They usually do.”

The class laughed. Antonio smiled without turning around. The laboratory had three working tuning forks.

Officially, the inventory still listed twelve.

One had disappeared during the renovation five years earlier. Several had corroded beyond repair. One had somehow become part of the music department's collection. No one knew where the others had gone. Antonio struck one gently against a rubber stopper. A clear note hovered through the room.

"What happened?"

"It jiggled."

"We heard a sound."

"It moved the air."

He nodded. The note slowly disappeared.

"What happened now?"

"It stopped."

"Did it?"

The room grew quiet.

"No," Antonio said. "It became too small for us to hear."

He observed their faces. Physics often failed because students believed the world ended where their senses ended. During recess, Ben from Chemistry found himself washing beakers at the laboratory sink.

"You heard?"

Antonio looked up. "Heard what?"

"The division office."

Antonio waited.

"They're sending observers on Thursday."

He continued rinsing glassware. "They always do."

"They're evaluating STEM instruction."

"They always are."

Ben leaned against the doorway. "You don't seem worried."

Antonio laughed. "I've learned not to waste anxiety before it's necessary."

Ben shook his head. "I wish I could do that."

Antonio looked around the laboratory.

Half the stools wobbled.

The oscilloscope hadn't worked since before the pandemic.

The speaker system disconnected whenever someone walked too close to it.

He wasn't worried about teaching.

He was worried about electricity.

There was a difference.

Miguel occupied the last seat nearest the window.

Transferred from another province.

Soft-spoken.

Always attentive.

Always a phase behind discussions conducted in English.

Antonio had noticed that Miguel understood experiments long before he found the words to explain them.

That happened more often than teachers admitted.

The next week, the students built string telephones.

Paper cups.

Cotton string.

Masking tape.

Nothing required a purchase request.

Groups stretched strings across the laboratory until the room looked as though an enormous spider had claimed it overnight.

"It won't work."

"It worked when I was little."

"That was pretend."

Antonio said nothing.

He preferred allowing misconceptions to introduce themselves.

Across the room, Miguel and Liza pulled their string tight.

Liza whispered into her cup.

Miguel's face changed.

"You heard me?"

"I heard everything."

"What did I say?"

Miguel smiled.

"You asked if this was really science."

The class laughed.

Liza shrugged.

"I was asking."

Antonio walked closer.

"What traveled from one cup to the other?"

"The sound."

"The vibration."

"The string."

"The air."

Every answer contained part of the truth.

He resisted the urge to complete it for them.

Rain arrived just before lunch.

Heavy rain.

The kind that erased conversations beneath the roar of galvanized roofs.

Antonio stopped speaking.

There was no point in competing with the weather.

Instead, he pointed toward the windows.

"What changed?"

"The rain is loud."

“How loud?”

“Very.”

He shook his head.

“In physics, ‘very’ isn’t a measurement.”

Joshua groaned.

“Even the rain has homework.”

Antonio laughed.

“Everything does.”

The students worked in small groups, bending nearer to hear one another.
Without realizing it, they adjusted their own voices.

They listened more carefully.

Sometimes the rain became part of the lesson.

Thursday morning arrived with the observers.

A woman from the division office entered carrying a tablet and a courteous smile.
Antonio welcomed her before returning to class.

Today’s activity involved echoes.

He reached for the portable Bluetooth speaker.

Nothing.

He pressed the power button again.

Still nothing.

Joshua whispered loudly enough for everyone to hear.

“Timing is amazing.”

Antonio checked the battery.

Dead. Of course.

For a brief moment, he considered abandoning the demonstration.

Instead, he looked toward the corridor outside the laboratory.

“Everyone.”

The students stood.

“We’re moving.”

The corridor overlooked the gymnasium.

Concrete walls stretched nearly fifty meters before ending at the covered court.
Antonio clapped once.

The light echo returned.

“There.”

Students immediately began experimenting.

One clap.

Two claps.

Different locations. Different directions.

Joshua started counting seconds between echoes.

Liza compared louder and softer claps.

Miguel walked farther down the corridor and discovered the reflection had changed near the stairwell.

Within minutes, the hallway had become their laboratory. Antonio folded his arms. Nobody was waiting for instructions anymore. The observer stood quietly behind him.

“You planned this?” she asked.

He smiled.

“No.”

“It worked.”

He looked at the students arguing over whose echo lasted longer.

“They’re doing the work.”

After class, the observer approached him.

“You adapted well.”

Antonio shrugged.

“The speaker failed.”

“So you changed the lesson.”

"I changed the location."

She closed her tablet.

"They were investigating instead of following directions."

"I noticed."

"You didn't correct them very often."

"They weren't wrong very often."

The observer smiled before leaving.

Antonio returned to the laboratory feeling unexpectedly lighter.

Friday afternoon, as he was preparing to lock the room, someone knocked lightly on the open door.

Miguel stood there beside an older man carrying an old plastic toolbox.

"Good afternoon, Sir."

"Good afternoon."

The older man removed something wrapped in newspaper.

"I believe this belongs to the school."

Inside was an old brass tuning fork.

Antonio turned it over.

The faded property number was still visible.

"I borrowed this."

"When?"

The man scratched his head.

"Nineteen years ago."

Antonio looked up.

"You studied here?"

"Yes."

"My physics teacher said I could use it for a project."

“And...”

“I forgot.”

They both laughed.

“I found it while cleaning my workshop.”

He paused.

“I repair fishing boats now.”

Antonio examined the worn metal.

Years of handling had polished its surface.

“I wondered whether anyone would still want it.”

Antonio smacked it gently on his palm.

Its note was softer than the newer tuning forks, but somehow steadier.

“We’ve been missing this.”

The older man smiled.

“So have I.”

The following Monday, Antonio placed the old tuning fork on the demonstration table.

“I want you to pass this around.”

No instructions.

No worksheet.

Just the object.

When it reached Miguel, he turned it carefully between his fingers.

“My father said...”

The room was silent.

“...when he repairs boats, he taps every plank.”

Antonio nodded.

“What is he listening for?”

“The place that sounds different.”

Joshua leaned back.

“So that’s physics?”

Antonio thought for a moment.

“Partly.”

“What else is it?”

He looked around the room.

“The patience to notice.”

At the end of the semester, the students submitted reflection journals.

Antonio read them one by one after dismissal.

Some were amusing.

Joshua confessed he had started clapping in shopping malls just to hear echoes.
Another student admitted she finally understood why thunder arrived after lightning.

Miguel’s reflection filled only a single page.

His handwriting remained careful.

Before this class, I believed physics was for students who solved problems quickly.

Sometimes I understood the experiment before I understood English.

I thought that meant I was behind.

Then I realized that sound does not care what language people speak.

It only needs something that can carry it.

Antonio shut the notebook slowly.

He remained seated long after the afternoon sun had gone across the laboratory floor.

When the last bell of the school year rang, students poured into the corridor with the noisy relief that accompanies long-awaited vacations.

The laboratory emptied in minutes.

Antonio locked the storage cabinet and gathered the tuning forks.

The old brass one remained in his hand.

Outside, the campus settled into its familiar soundtrack—brooms sweeping walkways, teachers saying their goodbyes, a basketball bouncing someplace beyond the covered court.

Twenty-four years.

Hundreds of laboratory activities.

Thousands of solved equations.

He could no longer remember most of his examination scores.

But he remembered voices.

The uncertain ones that gradually became confident.

The quiet ones that eventually asked the hardest questions.

The conversations began awkwardly because students were translating thoughts from one language into another before they could translate them into science.

People often suspected learning as a sudden flash—a perfect explanation, a breakthrough, a moment when everything finally made sense.

Physics had taught him otherwise.

Most changes happened below the threshold of notice.

A vibration too small to hear.

A crack in a wooden boat was discovered only by listening carefully.

A student who stopped apologizing for speaking slowly.

A tuning fork that disappeared for nineteen years before finding its way home.
Antonio switched off the lights.

The ceiling fan slowed until its familiar clicking disappeared into quietness.
For a moment, the laboratory seemed perfectly quiet.

Then he heard the loose windowpane answer the night breeze.
He smiled.

Silence, after all, had always been full of conversation.

The Beauty of Every Child

Prof. Mathew N. Gamboa

"Every child is like a flower in a vast and beautiful garden. Some bloom early, some bloom slowly, but each one carries a beauty that only they can share with the world."

A Classroom Full of Different Dreams The first Monday of June always carried a special kind of excitement.

The school grounds buzzed with laughter as children, dressed in freshly pressed uniforms, walked through the gates holding their parents' hands. Some skipped with excitement, while others clung nervously to their mothers, uncertain about meeting new classmates and teachers. Inside Room 104,

colorful posters decorated the walls. The words "Everyone Belongs Here" stretched across a bright bulletin board surrounded by paper flowers made by last year's students. Near the reading corner stood shelves filled with books, puzzles, building blocks, sensory toys, and art materials. Everything in the room had been carefully prepared by Ms. Elena, a teacher who believed that learning began with making every child feel welcome. As each student entered, she greeted them warmly. "Good morning, Sophia." "Welcome, Miguel." "I'm so happy you're here, Hannah." The children smiled as they introduced themselves and quickly found new friends. A few minutes later, another child quietly entered the room.

His name was Ethan. He held a small sketchbook close to his chest and wore noise-reducing headphones around his neck. Instead of looking at his classmates, he carefully studied every corner of the classroom, noticing the arrangement of chairs, the position of the windows, the colors of the posters, and even the gentle sound of the electric fan. His mother knelt beside him.

"You'll be okay," she whispered. Ethan nodded softly before taking his seat by the window. Several children looked at him curiously. "He doesn't smile." "He didn't say hello." "Why is he wearing headphones?" The whispers grew louder. Ms. Elena noticed everything. Instead of correcting the children immediately, she simply smiled. She knew that understanding could never be forced. It had to grow. The Garden Lesson The next morning, Ms. Elena carried a basket filled with flowers into the classroom. There were roses, daisies, orchids, sunflowers, lilies, and tiny wildflowers collected from her own garden.

She placed them on a large table. "What do you notice?" she asked. "They're different." "They have different colors." "Some are big." "Some are tiny." One student raised his hand. "The little flower isn't as pretty as the rose." Ms. Elena gently picked up the tiny wildflower.

"Who decides what beauty looks like?" The room became quiet. She invited each child to hold one flower. Some loved the bright sunflower. Others admired the delicate orchid. Several preferred the sweet fragrance of the jasmine. "No one chose exactly the same flower," Ms. Elena said. "Yet every flower was chosen by someone." She paused before continuing. "Our classroom is just like this garden." She looked around the room. "Some of you love reading."

"Some enjoy solving mathematics." "Some sing beautifully." "Some draw amazing pictures." "Some make everyone laugh." "And some understand the world differently." Her eyes briefly met Ethan's. "But every one of you has something beautiful to offer." The children looked around the classroom with new eyes. Perhaps being different was not something to hide.

Perhaps it was something to celebrate. The Boy Who Saw What Others Missed Weeks passed. Although Ethan rarely joined conversations, Ms. Elena noticed remarkable things about him. He could remember every classroom schedule after seeing it only once. He recognized dozens of birds simply by hearing their songs outside the window. He noticed tiny insects hiding beneath leaves during science class. When the class studied the solar system, Ethan filled page after page with detailed drawings of planets, stars, and galaxies far beyond the lesson.

His classmates were surprised. "How does he know all of that?" One afternoon, Ms. Elena quietly approached Ethan. "You love space, don't you?" Without saying a word, Ethan opened his sketchbook. Inside were breathtaking drawings of constellations, planets, lunar phases, eclipses, and distant galaxies.

Every page contained labels, measurements, and observations far beyond what most children his age could understand. Ms. Elena smiled with genuine admiration. "These are beautiful." Ethan looked up for a brief moment. Then, almost in a whisper, he spoke. "I like things that stay in patterns."

It was only six words. But for Ms. Elena, they were six precious words. When Differences Became Strengths Several weeks later, the school announced its annual Innovation Fair. Every classroom would design a model community that represented the future. The children excitedly formed groups. Almost immediately, disagreements began. "We need more houses."

"No, we need a bigger playground." "The roads don't fit." "There's no room left." Meanwhile, Ethan quietly observed. Without interrupting anyone,

He began rearranging the miniature buildings. He widened sidewalks. Added ramps beside every entrance. Created shaded pathways connecting each building. Placed tactile guide paths for people with visual impairments. Built playground equipment that every child could use. No one noticed him until the project was finished. The classroom fell silent. "What made you think of this?" Ms. Elena asked. Ethan pointed toward one tiny figure sitting in a wheelchair.

Then he quietly replied, "Everyone should be able to go everywhere." Those simple words transformed the room. The children suddenly realized they had been building a city for themselves. Ethan had built one for everyone. ... As the months passed, Room 104 slowly became a place where differences were no longer questioned but appreciated. The children discovered that kindness grows when people choose to understand before they judge, to listen before they speak, and to encourage before they compare. They learned that every learner brings unique gifts into the classroom, and that when those gifts are recognized, everyone benefits. By the end of the school year, the greatest achievement of Room 104 was not the awards they received or the projects they completed.

It was the community they had built—a classroom where every child felt seen, valued, respected, and loved. The mural hanging above the blackboard had faded slightly under the afternoon sun, but its message remained as meaningful as ever: "Every child blooms in a different season, but every child deserves the chance to bloom." And that became the lesson the children carried long after they had left Room 104. For the true beauty of a child is never measured by how closely they resemble others. It is found in their kindness, their courage, their dreams, and the unique light they bring into the lives of everyone around them.

A World Where Everyone Belongs

Prof. Mathew N. Gamboa

Every morning, children entered San Isidro Elementary School through the same blue gate. Some ran inside with backpacks bouncing behind them.

Some walked slowly while holding lunch boxes and notebooks. Others arrived with parents, grandparents, or older siblings who reminded them to study well, listen to their teachers, and be kind. But for many years, the school gate welcomed children in different ways. For some, it opened easily. For others, it felt heavy. One Monday morning, a boy named Lucas arrived with his mother. He sat in a wheelchair, his hands resting quietly on his lap. His eyes moved across the school grounds—the flagpole, the classrooms, the basketball court, the children laughing near the canteen. His mother smiled and gently fixed his collar. "Are you ready?" Lucas looked at the school steps in front of the main building.

There was no ramp. He tried to smile, but his voice was soft. "I want to be ready, Mama. But how will I get inside?" His mother looked at the steps, then at her son. For a moment, she had no answer. From the doorway, Teacher Ana saw them. She immediately walked toward the gate. "Good morning, Lucas," she said warmly. "Welcome to our school." Lucas looked up. "Good morning, Teacher." Teacher Ana noticed the steps. She also noticed the way Lucas tried to hide his worry. She turned to his mother and said, "We will find a way."

That morning, two teachers carefully helped Lucas enter the classroom. His classmates watched silently as his wheelchair was lifted over the steps. Lucas smiled politely, but inside, he felt different. Not because of his wheelchair. But because the world around him had not yet made space for him. The classroom Room 203 was bright and cheerful. The walls were covered with posters, drawings, and colorful words: *Respect. Kindness. Courage. Cooperation. Teacher Ana introduced Lucas to the class. "Children, this is Lucas. He will be learning with us this year." A girl named Mia raised her hand. "Teacher, can he play with us?" Lucas lowered his eyes. Teacher Ana smiled gently. "That is a good question, Mia. But maybe we should ask Lucas what games he enjoys."

Lucas looked at his classmates. "I like drawing maps," he said. "And I like stories about cities." "You draw maps?" asked Paolo. Lucas nodded.

"Roads, parks, buildings, bridges." Paolo grinned. "That's cool." During recess, the children ran outside. Lucas remained near the doorway because the classroom path was uneven. He watched his classmates play tag beneath the mango tree. Mia noticed him watching. She walked back and asked, "Do you want to come with us?" Lucas looked at the rocky ground. "I can't go there." Mia looked around for the first time. The path was narrow. The soil near the tree was rough. The playground had no safe space for a wheelchair. She had passed that same path every day and never noticed. "I'm sorry," she whispered. Lucas shook his head. "It's okay. I'm used to it." But to Mia, it did not feel okay. The next day, Teacher Ana wrote one sentence on the board: *What makes a place truly welcoming?

The children gave different answers. "A place is welcoming when people smile." "When everyone is allowed to join." "When no one is laughed at." "When people help each other." Teacher Ana nodded. "Those are beautiful answers. But let us look around our school. Is our school welcoming to everyone?" The children became quiet. Paolo raised his hand slowly. "Teacher, Lucas cannot go to the playground." Mia added, "And he cannot enter the building without help." Another child said, "The comfort room is too narrow."

Teacher Ana looked at them with gentle seriousness. "Sometimes, people are kind in their hearts, but the places around them still have barriers. Inclusion means removing those barriers so everyone can participate with dignity." Lucas listened carefully. For the first time, the problem was not placed on him. The problem was placed where it truly belonged—on the barriers that kept people apart.

Teacher Ana gave the class a project. "Let us create a map of a school where everyone belongs." Lucas's eyes brightened. The children gathered around him as he opened his notebook. Inside were drawings of roads, ramps, gardens, classrooms, and playgrounds. "You already made these?" Paolo asked. Lucas smiled shyly. "I like imagining places where everyone can go."

The class worked together. Mia drew a playground with swings that children of different abilities could use. Paolo designed wide pathways from the gate to every classroom. Hannah added signs with pictures and words for younger children and learners who had difficulty reading. Miguel suggested a quiet corner for students who needed a peaceful place when the world felt too loud.

Lucas carefully connected everything with smooth paths. "No dead ends," he said. "What do you mean?" asked Mia. Lucas pointed to the map

"If a path ends and someone cannot pass, they have to turn back. In a place where everyone belongs, no one should always be the one turning back." The children stared at the map. It was more than a drawing. It was a dream. The Day the School Listened* Teacher Ana displayed the children's map during the school assembly. Parents, teachers, students, and barangay officials gathered in the covered court. Lucas felt nervous as Teacher Ana invited him and his classmates to present. Mia began. "We learned that kindness is important, but kindness must also become action." Paolo pointed to the drawing.

"Our school has many good people, but some parts are hard for others to use." Hannah added, "We want signs, ramps, wider paths, and spaces where every child can feel safe." Then Lucas spoke. His voice was quiet, but everyone listened. "I do not want special treatment," he said. "I just want to enter, learn, play, and belong like everyone else." The covered court became silent. Lucas's mother wiped her tears. The principal stood and walked toward the children. "Today," she said, "you have taught us something important. A school is not truly excellent if some children are left outside its doors." The barangay captain nodded. "We will help build the ramp." The parents volunteered materials. Teachers offered their time. Students promised to help clean and prepare the pathways. For the first time, the map of belonging began to move from paper into reality. -Building

The following weeks changed the school. Parents came on weekends with tools, paint, wood, and cement. Teachers helped organize safe spaces inside classrooms. Students painted signs with words and symbols. The barangay workers built a ramp near the main building. Some children planted flowers beside the new pathway. Lucas watched as the place that once made him feel excluded slowly opened itself to him. One Saturday morning, Paolo handed Lucas a paintbrush. "What color should we use for the sign?" Lucas looked at the blank board. "Blue," he said. "Like the gate." Mia smiled. "The gate that now opens for everyone." They painted the words together:

Welcome. Everyone Belongs Here. When the ramp was finished, the whole school gathered near the entrance. The principal invited Lucas to be the first to use it. Lucas held the wheels of his chair and moved forward. Slowly. Steadily. Freely.

No one lifted him. No one carried him. No one treated him like a burden. He entered by himself. The children clapped, but Lucas did not feel like a hero. He felt something better. He felt included. The Playground The biggest change happened during recess. For months, Lucas had watched from the doorway as children played beneath the mango tree. Now, a smooth pathway led to the playground. There was a shaded table for board games and drawing. There was enough space for his wheelchair to move safely. There were games that did not require running, jumping, or speed. Mia ran toward him. "Lucas, we're playing treasure map!" Lucas laughed. "I can help with that." He drew a map of the playground with clues hidden near the tree, the garden, and the canteen. The children followed his directions, cheering whenever they found a clue. For the first time, Lucas was not watching the game. He was leading it. Teacher Ana stood nearby and smiled.

She knew the playground had not only changed for Lucas. It had changed for everyone. The children learned new ways to play. They learned to wait. They learned to listen. They learned that fun becomes richer when no one is left behind. -Beyond the School Walls News of the project spread through the community. Parents began asking if the barangay hall could also have ramps. The chapel added clearer signs. The health center arranged chairs to make more space for wheelchairs, elderly residents, and parents carrying babies. A small store near the school lowered part of its counter so children and persons with disabilities could reach it more easily. The children noticed these changes with pride. "Our map is growing," Paolo said one afternoon. Lucas smiled.

"It's not just a school map anymore." Teacher Ana nodded. "It has become a community map." One day, the class visited the barangay hall to present their project again. This time, Lucas spoke with more confidence. "Inclusion is not only for people with disabilities," he said. "It helps everyone. Ramps help wheelchair users, but they also help grandparents, injured people, pregnant mothers, and children carrying heavy bags. Clear signs help learners, visitors, and people who cannot read well. A quiet space helps children who feel overwhelmed.

When we make places better for one person, we often make them better for many." The adults listened carefully. A child had explained what many grown-ups had forgotten. A world where everyone belongs is not built by pity. It is built by understanding. The Festival of Belonging At the end of the school year, San Isidro Elementary School held its first *Festival of Belonging.

Every class prepared a booth about kindness, accessibility, communication, friendship, and respect. Lucas and his classmates displayed their original map beside photos of the completed ramp, pathway, signs, and playground. Visitors stopped to read the message written below:

Inclusion begins when we notice who is missing and ask why.* Lucas's mother stood beside Teacher Ana. "Thank you," she said softly. Teacher Ana shook her head. "Lucas helped teach all of us." His mother looked at her son, who was laughing with his classmates. "For a long time, I prayed for the world to be kinder to him," she said. "Now I see that children can teach the world how to be kind." During the program, the principal invited Lucas to speak. He looked at the crowd—students, parents, teachers, and community leaders. His hands trembled slightly, but his voice was clear. "Before, I thought belonging meant people being nice to me," Lucas said. "Now I know belonging means I can join, decide, help, play, and be seen as part of everyone." He paused. "A ramp is not just cement. A sign is not just paint. A pathway is not just a road. They are ways of saying,

"You matter. We made space for you." The audience applauded. But more than applause, there was understanding Years later, many children from Room 203 would remember that school year. Mia would become a teacher who arranged her classroom so every learner could participate. Paolo would study engineering and design public spaces with accessibility in mind. Hannah would volunteer in community programs for children with disabilities. And Lucas would continue drawing maps—not only of streets and buildings, but of possibilities. But the most important change began much earlier.

It began on the day a boy arrived at a school gate and saw only steps. It began when a teacher asked a simple question. It began when children learned to notice barriers they had ignored before. It began when a classroom chose inclusion over exclusion. A world where everyone belongs does not appear all at once. It is built in small decisions. A ramp added. A hand offered. A voice heard. A rule changed. A child included. A heart opened. And every time someone chooses understanding over judgment, action over silence, and welcome over rejection, the world becomes wider, kinder, and more beautiful. Because belonging is not a gift given to a few. It is a right that must be protected for all. And the world we dream of begins whenever someone says— There is room for you here.

From Old Clothes to New Opportunities: A Story on Community Entrepreneurship through a Focus Group Discussion

Dr. Cynthia A. Manalad

For many years, Barangay San Isidro struggled with poor waste management. Plastic bags littered the streets, empty bottles floated along the creek, and food waste attracted stray animals. During heavy rains, clogged drainage canals caused flooding that damaged homes and disrupted daily life.

Although garbage trucks visited the barangay regularly, the waste problem continued to worsen. Many residents mixed all their waste into one bag, while others burned their garbage or dumped it in vacant lots.

Concerned about the growing problem, Barangay Captain Elena Santos organized a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) involving different sectors of the community. Homeowners, youth leaders, teachers, senior citizens, health workers, business owners, waste collectors, environmental officers, and representatives from the Municipal Environment and Natural Resources Office were invited to participate. The purpose of the meeting was to identify the major waste management problems in the barangay and develop practical solutions that everyone could implement together.

Barangay Captain Elena welcomed everyone and emphasized that the meeting was not about blaming anyone but about working together to improve the community. She encouraged every participant to openly share their experiences and ideas.

The facilitator began the discussion by asking a simple question:

"What are the major waste management problems in our barangay?"

One by one, the participants shared their observations.

A teacher explained that while children learned proper waste segregation in school, many returned to homes where garbage was still mixed together.

A waste collector shared that most households failed to separate biodegradable, recyclable, and residual waste, making waste collection slower and less efficient.

A health worker reported that improper waste disposal had created mosquito breeding areas, contributing to an increase in dengue cases during the rainy season.

A business owner admitted that many stores continued providing single-use plastic bags because customers expected them.

The youth representatives observed that many residents simply lacked awareness and proper knowledge about responsible waste management.

After listening carefully, the facilitator summarized the concerns raised during the discussion.

The community identified the following major problems:

Improper household waste segregation.

Illegal dumping of garbage in vacant lots.

Open burning of waste.

Excessive use of single-use plastics.

Lack of community awareness about proper waste management.

Clogged drainage canals causing flooding.

Increasing mosquito breeding areas and dengue cases.

Limited recycling and composting practices.

After identifying the problems, the facilitator encouraged everyone to focus on possible solutions.

The discussion immediately became more energetic.

The first recommendation was to implement proper household waste segregation. Every family agreed to separate waste into biodegradable, recyclable, and residual waste. The barangay also committed to distributing color-coded labels to make segregation easier.

An agricultural technician suggested establishing backyard compost bins so that kitchen waste could be converted into organic fertilizer instead of being thrown away. Residents who already practiced composting volunteered to conduct demonstrations during community workshops.

The youth representatives proposed establishing a Materials Recovery Facility (MRF) where recyclable materials could be collected, sorted, and sold to recycling companies. The income generated would help fund environmental projects, purchase additional garbage bins, and provide school supplies for children participating in environmental activities.

Teachers recommended strengthening environmental education in schools by teaching students proper waste segregation, recycling, composting, and the principles of the 5Rs: Refuse, Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, and Rot. Students would also become Environmental Ambassadors who would encourage their families to practice proper waste management at home.

Business owners agreed to gradually reduce the use of single-use plastics by encouraging customers to bring reusable shopping bags, tumblers, and food containers. Some stores even planned to offer discounts to customers who brought reusable containers.

Senior citizens proposed organizing monthly community clean-up drives involving every sector of the barangay. Each zone would be assigned responsibility for cleaning streets, canals, parks, and vacant lots.

The municipal environmental officer recommended strengthening the implementation of Republic Act 9003, the Ecological Solid Waste Management Act.

The barangay council agreed to establish a Waste Management Committee responsible for monitoring waste segregation, supervising the Materials Recovery Facility, conducting household inspections, organizing environmental seminars, coordinating waste collection schedules, and implementing barangay ordinances against illegal dumping and open burning.

Instead of immediately imposing penalties, the committee proposed recognizing households that consistently practiced proper waste management through a quarterly Cleanest Household Award. The participants believed that positive recognition would encourage greater community participation.

The facilitator also emphasized the importance of continuous communication. The community agreed to use social media pages, school bulletin boards, barangay assemblies, posters, and public announcements to educate residents about proper waste management.

At the end of the discussion, the facilitator summarized the agreed Community Action Plan:

- Practice proper household waste segregation
- Establish backyard composting.
- Strengthen the Materials Recovery Facility (MRF).
- Conduct regular recycling activities.
- Reduce the use of single-use plastics.
- Organize monthly community clean-up drives.
- Integrate environmental education into schools.
- Strengthen the implementation of Republic Act 9003.
- Create a Barangay Waste Management Committee.
- Conduct continuous information and education campaigns.
- Recognize model households and community volunteers.
- Monitor and evaluate the program through quarterly meetings and follow-up Focus Group Discussions.

Before leaving the barangay hall, every participant signed the Community Waste Management Commitment as a symbol of their dedication to protecting the environment.

Over the following months, the agreed solutions were gradually implemented. Waste segregation became a daily habit, compost gardens flourished, and the Materials Recovery Facility generated funds for environmental projects. Plastic waste in public areas decreased significantly, monthly clean-up drives strengthened community relationships, and drainage canals remained free of garbage during the rainy season.

As a result, flooding was greatly reduced, the creek became cleaner, dengue cases declined, and visitors noticed the improved appearance of Barangay San Isidro.

During the next barangay assembly, Captain Elena proudly reminded everyone that their success was achieved not by one person but through cooperation, open communication, shared responsibility, and active community participation during the Focus Group Discussion.

The residents applauded, realizing that their greatest achievement was not only creating a cleaner barangay but also building a stronger, healthier, and more united community.

Beyond the Recipe: How Senior High School Cookery Students Are Learning to Cook for a Sustainable Future

Dr. Dulce B. Aurelio

A plate of food rarely tells its whole story.

A bowl of vegetable soup appears simple enough: squash, carrots, onions, and broth. Yet hidden within that meal are countless decisions involving land, water, energy, transportation, labor, and waste.

Scientists estimate that roughly one-third of all food produced globally is lost or wasted before it is consumed. At the same time, millions of people continue to face food insecurity. The contradiction is startling: societies produce enough food to feed billions, yet enormous quantities never reach a plate.

The kitchen sits at the center of this paradox.

For decades, discussions about environmental sustainability often focused on factories, vehicles, or power plants. Food systems received less attention. Yet research increasingly shows that food production contributes significantly to greenhouse gas emissions, land-use changes, and resource consumption.

This reality gives culinary education a new sense of urgency.

When students learn how to maximize ingredients, reduce waste, source responsibly, and appreciate local food systems, they are not simply developing technical skills. They are acquiring ecological literacy.

In Pinugay, where agricultural landscapes remain visible despite rapid development across Rizal Province, these lessons feel particularly tangible. Many students come from families with direct or indirect connections to farming. They have seen vegetables harvested from backyard gardens. They know what seasonal produce looks like. Some have watched relatives struggle with unpredictable weather patterns that affect crops.

Sustainability, therefore, is not an abstract concept discussed only in textbooks. It is woven into everyday life.

From Farm to Kitchen—and Back Again

One of the most overlooked aspects of cookery education is how closely it mirrors the broader food system.

Every lesson begins long before ingredients arrive in the laboratory kitchen. Consider a tomato.

Before it reaches a student's chopping board, it requires fertile soil, sunlight, water, labor, transportation, storage, and market distribution. By the time it becomes part of a recipe, it already carries a substantial environmental footprint.

Understanding this journey changes the way students view ingredients.

Instead of seeing food as a commodity that simply appears on supermarket shelves, they begin recognizing it as the final product of an intricate ecological and human process.

This shift in perspective often produces surprising results.

Students who once discarded vegetable trimmings without hesitation begin experimenting with stocks and broths. Others discover that overripe fruits can become jams, sauces, or desserts. What previously seemed like waste becomes an opportunity for creativity.

Professional chefs have long understood this principle.

Many of the world's most innovative kitchens now embrace "root-to-stem" and "nose-to-tail" cooking approaches that maximize ingredient use. Sustainability, in these contexts, is not a limitation but a catalyst for innovation.

The same principle applies in senior high school classrooms.

When students learn to transform surplus ingredients into new dishes, they develop problem-solving skills alongside culinary competence. They learn that resourcefulness can be as valuable as technical mastery.

The Cultural Wisdom We Nearly Forgot

Ironically, some of the most sustainable culinary practices are not new at all. They are old.

Long before sustainability became a global buzzword, Filipino households practiced forms of resource conservation out of necessity.

Leftover rice became fried rice the next morning. Vegetable scraps enriched soups. Banana leaves served as natural food wrappers. Backyard gardens supplied herbs and vegetables. Families purchased ingredients according to seasonal availability rather than year-round convenience.

These habits emerged from practical realities rather than environmental activism. Yet they embodied principles modern sustainability advocates now champion.

Among younger generations, however, some of this knowledge risks being lost.

Fast-food culture, convenience-oriented consumption, and highly processed foods have transformed relationships with cooking. Meals increasingly arrive pre-packaged, reducing opportunities to understand how food is prepared or where it originates.

Cookery education provides a valuable counterbalance.

By introducing students to traditional methods alongside modern culinary techniques, schools help preserve cultural knowledge while advancing environmental awareness.

This combination is particularly powerful.

Students discover that sustainability does not always require sophisticated technology or expensive interventions. Sometimes it involves rediscovering practices that communities have used for generations. In this sense, culinary sustainability becomes both forward-looking and deeply rooted in heritage.

Teaching Responsibility Through Taste

There is something uniquely persuasive about food.

Lectures may inform people. Statistics may convince them. But food engages all the senses.

Students can hear the sizzle of garlic hitting hot oil. They can smell fresh herbs. They can taste the difference between a dish made with fresh local ingredients and one made from heavily processed alternatives.

These sensory experiences create powerful learning opportunities.

When sustainability is taught solely through environmental science, students may perceive it as distant or theoretical. When it is experienced through cooking, it becomes immediate and personal.

A student who carefully separates biodegradable waste from recyclables begins seeing waste differently.

A student who prepares meals using locally sourced produce begins appreciating local agriculture differently.

A student who calculates ingredient costs begins understanding food economics differently.

The kitchen transforms into a miniature model of society, where every decision carries consequences.

This educational value extends beyond environmental outcomes.

Sustainable cooking encourages patience, discipline, planning, and mindfulness—qualities increasingly difficult to cultivate in a culture of instant gratification.

Students learn that good cooking, like sustainable living, often depends on thoughtful choices rather than quick solutions.

The Economics of Sustainability

One misconception continues to hinder sustainability efforts: the belief that environmentally responsible practices are always more expensive.

In reality, waste is often what costs the most.

For school-based cookery programs operating within limited budgets, ingredient efficiency becomes an economic necessity. Every discarded ingredient represents money that could have been used elsewhere.

This reality offers an important lesson for students preparing to enter the hospitality industry.

Restaurants face growing pressure to reduce operational costs while meeting customer expectations. Sustainable practices frequently align with these goals. Reducing food waste lowers expenses.

Supporting local suppliers can reduce transportation costs.

Seasonal purchasing often provides fresher ingredients at lower prices. Energy-efficient kitchen practices reduce utility bills.

Students who understand these connections gain a competitive advantage. They enter the workforce with a broader understanding of how culinary decisions affect profitability, environmental stewardship, and community well-being.

In other words, sustainability is not merely an ethical concern. It is also a practical business strategy.

Climate Change Arrives at the Dinner Table

The relationship between food and climate change is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore.

Extreme weather events disrupt harvests. Rising temperatures affect crop yields. Water availability becomes less predictable.

These challenges may seem global in scale, but their impacts are profoundly local. Farmers feel them first.

Consumers encounter them later through fluctuating prices and changing food availability.

Cookery students occupy a unique position within this chain. They are future chefs, food entrepreneurs, hospitality workers, and household decision-makers. The choices they make will influence what food systems look like in the decades ahead.

This reality gives sustainability education a significance that extends far beyond classroom requirements.

The question is no longer whether climate change will affect food systems. It already does.

The question is whether future generations possess the knowledge and skills necessary to respond.

The Classroom as a Laboratory for Change

Educational reform often focuses on large-scale policies, infrastructure investments, or technological innovation.

Yet some of the most meaningful transformations occur in ordinary classrooms.

A cookery laboratory may seem modest compared to research centers or government agencies. Nevertheless, it serves as an important site of cultural change.

Here, students experiment, fail, adapt, and learn.

They discover that sustainability is not a destination but a practice.

A recipe adjusted to reduce waste.

A menu redesigned around seasonal ingredients.

A composting initiative that transforms kitchen scraps into garden nutrients.

Each action may appear small. Collectively, they cultivate habits capable of producing lasting impact.

The most effective sustainability education does not rely on fear.

It relies on participation.

Students become invested when they see themselves as contributors rather than spectators.

The goal is not merely to teach them about environmental problems. It is to empower them to become part of the solution.

A Different Kind of Success

Traditionally, culinary excellence has been measured by taste, presentation, and technical precision.

These standards remain important

. But the definition of success is evolving.

Increasingly, a truly exceptional dish must answer additional questions.
How much waste did it generate?

Where did its ingredients come from?

What resources were required to produce it?

Who benefited from its creation?

These questions reflect a broader transformation occurring within the culinary world.

Food is no longer judged solely by what appears on the plate.
Its story matters too.

Senior high school cookery students stand at the beginning of this transition. They are entering a profession that increasingly values sustainability alongside skill.

The challenge is significant. So is the opportunity.

The Future Begins with a Peel

Back in the cookery laboratory, the student holding the squash peel eventually received her answer.

Yes, it could still be used.

The peel would be cleaned, processed, and incorporated into another preparation. What had seemed like waste became part of a lesson.

Not merely a cooking lesson.

A lesson about perspective.

Because sustainability often begins with noticing what others overlook.

A peel. A leftover ingredient. A forgotten tradition. A local farmer. A small choice repeated every day.

These details rarely attract headlines. Yet they shape the future in quiet, cumulative ways.

The students learning sustainable culinary practices today will someday manage restaurants, operate businesses, raise families, and influence communities. The habits they develop now will travel far beyond classroom walls.

In an era defined by environmental uncertainty, perhaps the most important skill a young cook can learn is not how to follow a recipe.

It is how to recognize connections—between food and land, consumption and responsibility, tradition and innovation.

The future of sustainability may not begin in a laboratory, a boardroom, or a government office.

It may begin in a school kitchen, where a student pauses before throwing something away and asks a deceptively simple question:

"Can this still be used?"

Sometimes, the future changes the moment someone decides the answer is yes.

The Love of Mang Edrong

Dr. Arnel S. Mirafior

“Cluck! Cluck! Cluck! the sound of a chicken”. It was a bright sunny morning. The place is covered with rice field and a few birds are playing on top of the leaves. Butterflies are enjoying the scent of the flowers underneath the tall grasses. At the edge of the rice fields are tall bamboos swaying with the touch of the wind. Beside the bamboo is a big Acacia tree on which the mini hut owned by Mang Edrong is built peacefully. Living with Mang Edrong is Macmac, his only grandson who was left to him by his son working with his wife in Manila. Macmas is 12 years old boy living apart from his parents because of the Pandemic. Macmac called Mang Edrong “Tatay”. Macmac is the only precious love of Mang Edrong, for he was alone for many years now as his wife passed away.

“Mac, get the kettle and start the fire for our coffee.” “ Yes, tatay! Give me a second, and I will fire it up! you will going to have a

delicious coffee made by your handsome grandchild!” Mac replied enthusiastically. “ Okay! Make sure that it is good-tasting coffee, or else I will have Brownie have it for himself”, he said naughtily as he brushed his hands to the dog sitting next to him.

Mang Edrong and Macmas were happily sipping their coffee when suddenly a loud voice was heard looking for Macmac. It was his friend Tony.

“Mac! Mac! Come with me, let us go to the river! Let us go swimming with my cousins who just arrived from Manila!”. “ Mac looks at his Tatay, asking for permission through merely looking at his eyes. Tatay Edrong nodded his head, and the two boys left.

Mang Tony started to get his working clothes and decided to check on his field. After an hour, he decided to come home, and at around 3:00 in the afternoon, Mac came home with a big smile on his face.

“Tatay! We had lots of fun in the river!” he said happily. “ I met Tony’s cousins, and they were so nice to me!, they taught me different strokes on how to swim, and they also showed me pictures of what Manila is like nowadays!

I hope I will be able to see Manila and visit mom and dad over there, Mac said,” with excitement shown on his face. Mang Edrong looked at his grandchild's face, and he felt a sudden pain stroke his heart knowing that his grandson did not see his parents for three years now.

“Mac! Do you want to see your dad and your mom? “asked Mang Edrong. “ Yes, tatay! I miss them, but I know It is impossible to see them or for them to visit me because they cannot pass through”, he said sadly. Mang Edrong tapped his grandchild's shoulder and smiled with a little sadness. “It is okay son...I will find a way for you to see them!” Mang Edrong said.“ Really tatay! How? “ Get yourself a nice suit, and we will go to town!

Mang Edrong and Macmac rode in a tricycle. When they got to town, Mang Edrong took him to a computer shop. Macmac looks at his Tatay with a question on his head. Mang Edrong talked to the computer shop teller, and then the lady set up the video and camera of the computer, and she got the information to Mang Edrong and had it put in the system. After a few minutes, the lady took Macmac in front of the computer and had him sit there using the headphone. All of a sudden, an incoming call is ringing.

Ring!ring!ring! “Answer the call, Mac,” mang Edrong said. “ Hello! Hello! Mom! Mom! It’s you! Mac shouted happily. “ Yes Son! Open your camera so that I can see you! “her Mom said. “ I miss you, mom! I miss you, dad! “he said with tears in his eyes. “ I miss you more, son!” Mom and dad replied to their son teary-eyed.

Hours had passed, and the family enjoyed having their conversations online until they realized that it was getting late and time to go home. Mac had such a wonderful day, and he was very thankful for his tatay Edrong for making his day a great one.

Entrepreneurial Behavior for Community Business Success A Story of Vision, Determination, and Community Growth

Dr. Ma. Lourdes H. Gomez

A Community Full of Potential Barangay San Isidro was known for its hardworking people. Every street was filled with small businesses—vegetable vendors, sari-sari stores, food stalls, tailors, carpenters, mechanics, bakers, and farmers. Although the community was rich in talent and determination, many entrepreneurs struggled to expand their businesses. Most earned just enough to support their daily needs. One afternoon, the Barangay Council invited local entrepreneurs to a community consultation. Teachers from the nearby university, representatives from the municipal government, and successful local business owners also attended the gathering. Barangay

Captain Roberto welcomed everyone. "Our community has many skilled people," he began. "But skill alone is not enough. We must also develop entrepreneurial behavior that allows our businesses to grow while helping our neighbors succeed." The participants nodded with curiosity. Professor Elena from the local university smiled. "Entrepreneurship is not simply about selling products," she explained. "It is about solving problems, creating opportunities, managing risks, serving customers, and continuously improving ourselves." The meeting became the beginning of a remarkable transformation. Section

Discovering Opportunities Among the participants was Maria, who had been making banana chips for almost ten years. "I've always sold my products in the local market," she shared. "My customers love them, but my sales never seem to increase." Professor Elena asked a simple question. "Have you ever asked your customers what improvements they would like?" Maria paused. "I've never actually asked." Another entrepreneur, Carlo, owned a small furniture workshop. "I build quality tables and chairs," he said, "but large furniture companies are taking most of my customers." A local businessman smiled.

"What makes your furniture different?" Carlo remained silent. The entrepreneur continued. "People don't buy products anymore. They buy stories, quality, uniqueness, and solutions." That statement stayed with Carlo for the rest of the day. Section Learning Entrepreneurial Behavior The following week, the university organized a free entrepreneurship seminar. The participants learned that successful entrepreneurs demonstrate several important behaviors:

They recognize opportunities before others do. They welcome innovation and change. They listen carefully to customers. They manage finances wisely. They solve problems creatively. They continuously learn new skills. They build relationships with customers and partners. They remain resilient during difficult times. They take calculated risks instead of avoiding challenges. They think not only about profit but also about community impact. Professor Elena explained, "A successful entrepreneur asks every day, 'How can I make my product better? How can I serve people better? How can my business improve the lives of others?'" The entrepreneurs realized that business success begins with the mindset of the entrepreneur. Section 4. Innovation Begins Maria returned home inspired. Instead of using ordinary plastic bags, she redesigned her banana chip packaging using recyclable materials with colorful labels that proudly displayed "Made in Barangay San Isidro." She also created different flavors including cheese, spicy barbecue, garlic, and caramel. Her daughter taught her how to create a Facebook page and upload short videos showing how the banana chips were prepared using fresh local bananas.

Within weeks, customers from neighboring barangays began placing orders. Meanwhile, Carlo transformed his ordinary furniture business. Instead of producing standard tables, he began creating customized furniture made from reclaimed wood. Every piece included a small story describing where the wood came from and how recycling helped protect the environment. Customers appreciated both the craftsmanship and the environmental message. Section 5. Working Together Instead of Competing During another community meeting, entrepreneur Liza shared an idea. "Why don't we help each other instead of competing?" Everyone listened.

"The baker can supply bread to the café." "The vegetable farmers can supply restaurants." "The dressmakers can produce uniforms for local businesses." "The woodworkers can build display shelves for market vendors." Soon the entrepreneurs formed the San Isidro Community Business Association. Instead of purchasing raw materials individually, they bought supplies together at lower prices. Instead of advertising separately, they created one community Facebook page featuring every local business. Instead of attending trade fairs alone, they rented one large booth representing the entire barangay.

The association became stronger every month. Section 6. Facing Challenges with Resilience Not every day was successful. Heavy rains damaged crops. A supplier suddenly increased prices. Electricity interruptions delayed production. Online competitors offered cheaper products.

Some entrepreneurs became discouraged. "We're working harder than ever," Pedro sighed, "but the challenges never stop." Professor Elena smiled. "Challenges never disappear," she replied. "They simply reveal which entrepreneurs are willing to adapt." Instead of giving up, the community brainstormed solutions. Farmers adopted climate-resilient farming techniques. Food vendors diversified their menus. Businesses accepted digital payments. Young volunteers helped older entrepreneurs learn online selling. The community discovered that resilience was one of the greatest entrepreneurial strengths. Section The Power of Customer Service Another lesson focused on customer relationships. The entrepreneurs realized that customers returned not only because of good products but because of excellent service. Every customer was greeted warmly.

Complaints were addressed politely. Products were improved based on customer suggestions. Businesses began offering loyalty discounts and personalized services. Satisfied customers recommended the businesses to their friends and relatives. Sales steadily increased. Section 8. Giving Back to the Community As their businesses became more successful, the entrepreneurs agreed that success should benefit everyone. Maria sponsored school supplies for children. Carlo hired young apprentices to teach woodworking skills. The bakery donated bread during disaster relief operations. Farmers shared seeds with beginning growers. The association organized free financial literacy seminars for families. Every entrepreneur understood that businesses flourish when communities prosper. Section 9. Recognition Beyond the Barangay Months later, the Municipal Government organized the Annual Entrepreneurship Expo. Hundreds of businesses participated.

The San Isidro Community Business Association attracted visitors because of its unique products, excellent customer service, sustainable practices, and strong community collaboration. The association received the Outstanding Community Enterprise Award. During the awarding ceremony, the mayor said, "This community reminds us that entrepreneurship is not simply about making profits. It is about creating opportunities, solving problems, improving lives, and inspiring others." The entrepreneurs proudly accepted the award together.

No single person claimed the success. It belonged to the entire community. Reflection As the sun began to set after the celebration, Maria quietly looked around the bustling marketplace. Children played nearby. Families enjoyed locally prepared food. Visitors purchased handmade products.

Young entrepreneurs eagerly discussed their future business ideas. Maria smiled. "When I started my business years ago," she reflected, "I believed success meant earning more money." She looked at her fellow entrepreneurs. "Today I understand that entrepreneurship is much bigger than profit." "It is about having the courage to innovate." "It is about solving problems." "It is about helping others succeed." "It is about creating jobs." "It is about protecting the environment." "It is about serving customers with honesty." "And most of all, it is about building a stronger community where everyone has the opportunity to grow."

The people around her nodded with pride. Barangay San Isidro had become more than a place of business. It had become a community of entrepreneurs who believed that success grows even greater when it is shared. Lessons Learned Entrepreneurial success begins with the right attitude and behavior. Entrepreneurs who are innovative, resilient, responsible, customer-oriented, and willing to learn continuously are more likely to achieve long-term success.

Successful businesses are built not only through hard work but also through creativity, collaboration, effective financial management, and the ability to recognize opportunities in every challenge. Communities become stronger when entrepreneurs work together instead of competing against one another. By sharing knowledge, supporting local suppliers, promoting sustainability, and creating employment opportunities, businesses contribute to economic growth and community development. Finally, entrepreneurship is not measured solely by profit. True entrepreneurial success is reflected in the positive impact businesses create for families, customers, employees, and the entire community. When entrepreneurs grow with integrity, compassion, innovation, and a commitment to service, they help build a more prosperous, resilient, and sustainable society for future generations.

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PIRE
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Dream.
Plan.
— Act.
Repeat.



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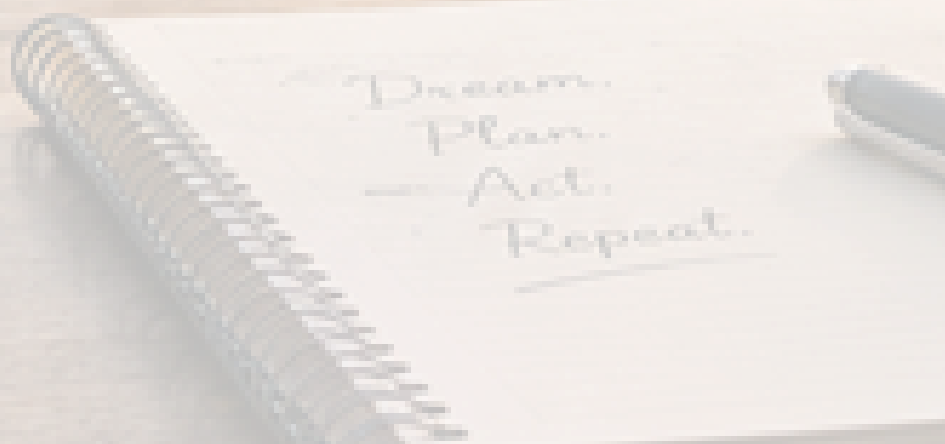
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