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**FEATURE**

**Reaching the Unreached: A Challenge  
for Filipino Educators**

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**Abstract.** *The increased competitiveness and openness that result from globalization necessitate quality education for workforce viability; however, some children are denied this necessity. They face challenges in the global community as a result of inadequate educational opportunities. This deficit is readily apparent in various parts of the Philippines, thus this study aimed at determining the position of marginalized youth in terms of two components of education—functional literacy and numeracy skills—as benchmarks based on the current level of intellectual capacity in the social areas. It additionally investigated possible ways these children can contribute to the global community. The study blended quantitative and qualitative methods to provide rigor in triangulation. The findings revealed that respondents manifested basic academic skills typical of children with a formal education, and poverty is a major factor contributing to academic inadequacies.*

**Keywords:** Unreached, challenges, basic education, Filipino educators, Philippines, competitiveness, challenges, alternative learning system.

**Introduction**

Education is a highly esteemed activity in the Philippines. Filipino culture and tradition regard it as a significant factor for advancement in life. Having an education increases one's chances of obtaining employment. As a result, the economic condition of a family may be improved. With an education, one has better chances of being successful. Although there is no guarantee, many will agree that education in itself is a means to an end.

In the Philippines, families go to great lengths to send their children to school. In rural areas, parents sell prized possessions just to send the eldest

of the brood to the city to get an education. When funds are low, the young ones usually wait for the older siblings to finish and find employment so that they can help finance the schooling of the younger ones. Likewise, in urban areas, parents work hard to send their children to the best school that they can afford. Just like their counterparts in rural areas, parents may incur debt to cope with educational as well as incidental expenses.

The declaration adopted by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) for Education for All (EFA) is designed to level the educational playing field; however, educational deficits still exist. Not every child is fortunate enough to receive formal schooling even when public education is free. When families cannot even meet the basic necessities of daily life, education takes a back seat. This compromise becomes a vicious cycle which goes on and on through consecutive generations. When parents themselves did not get an education, the likelihood for their children to be unschooled is high. Thus the cycle of poverty continues.

Hence the purpose of this study is to (1) find out the present scenario of the marginalized youth's functional literacy and numeracy skills; (2) determine the consequent entry level of the respondents' children in the mainstream educational system; and (3) assess children's current competencies that can contribute to the global community so that new ways of knowledge transfer can be implemented to arouse their curiosity and sustain their interests in pursuing formal education. The study also focused on the academic needs of the most marginalized children and adolescents in Cebu City, particularly those belonging to indigenous homes and communities, who have not had access to government education services or alternative learning systems.

### **Review of the Literature**

Education is one of the necessary elements for progress, a means of rising above poverty, bridging the social gaps, improving living conditions and health, and promoting wellness and a better life. It is required so that positive contributions to the global community may be addressed. Globalization is seen by teachers in the effects that it produces by following an economic, business-oriented model of the world that changes the classroom environment (Barron, Odell & Mercier, 2006); however, the various initiatives have failed to address poverty issues which result in increased dropouts and educational deficiencies. This oversight is a source of concern since the Philippine Constitution of 1987 expressly provides for free and compulsory elementary and secondary education. Education for All (EFA) recommends working with international agencies like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund to devise programs to reduce poverty-related barriers to learning (Goldstein, 2004). These agencies and opportunities must be utilized to address the issues

of education deficiencies related to poverty. In other words, the benefits of globalization should be employed to overcome some of its challenges, especially in poverty-stricken areas.

From another perspective, globalization impacts both the numeracy and literacy aspects of education since reading and math competencies closely determine job opportunities. Sparkes (1999) posited that the ability to participate effectively in the labor market, and its inverse—unemployment, are strongly affected by the realization of basic literacy and numeracy skills, adding that this is especially so in developing countries where the level of education is closely related to unemployment and earnings. Moreover, as globalization increases the intensity of competition in these areas, fewer jobs are available to those without these competencies (Bynner & Parsons, 1997; Moser, 1999). In terms of labor market access, only one in every 50 jobs is open to those without basic entry-level skills and only 50% of jobs are open to those with skills only at entry level (Moser, 1999). Given the increased availability of human capital provided by the mobility aspect of globalization, the job market is increasingly competitive and limited.

For any nation to be viable in the global economy it must strengthen its human capital and make its workforce more marketable. The human capital theory proposes that the quality of education of a country contributes to economic development. This theory highlights how education raises the productivity and efficiency of people increasing the level of cognitive stock of economically productive human capability (Olaniyan & Okemakinde, 2008). Knowledge is a fast-growing enterprise today and education and information are foundational components of this growth. Thus investment in human resource is essential for competitiveness in the global market. It is vital for governments to aim at increasing educational opportunities for children today to foster their development into productive citizens for tomorrow.

The Philippines is one of the countries that rendered their commitment to EFA by 2015. By then, it is projected that all children will be in school, thus leading to an expansion in early childhood education services. The senate in the Philippines appreciated the “No Child Left Behind” policy of the United States, which seeks to ensure that every child receives access to education. Likewise, the Millennium Development Goals and the Basic Education Sector Reform Agenda (BESRA) of the EFA initiative put education as their primary objective through efforts to mainstream all traditionally excluded and marginalized groups. The Philippines faces distinct poverty issues in realizing these goals and must focus on developing a personalized plan for their attainment that caters to the country’s specific circumstances.

One such personalized plan was the Alternative Learning System (ALS), a program that relocated teachers to remote and sometimes disadvantaged regions

of the country to provide education for otherwise marginalized children. This program was designed to increase access to education for children who are disadvantaged because of poverty, ethnic and linguistic differences, disabilities, abandonment, dislocation, and inadequate or no housing in an effort to achieve the EFA goals. The purpose of this and similar programs is to remove barriers that prevent children, especially those from marginalized groups, from learning and participating effectively in school systems.

The ALS program provided teachers for remote areas; however, education transcends teaching. Citing from the National Youth Commission, Ramota (2005) stated that the average elementary cohort survival rate in 1997 was 68.6 %. The study further disclosed that one in four barangays in the country has no elementary school, thus over one million children are deprived of basic education or must contend with long travel distances to school and overcrowded conditions. Children are discouraged from going to school because of these circumstances. Often about 60 students are crammed in one classroom, and sometimes, one educator teaches grades one through three consecutively (Ramota, 2005). These conditions can lead to neglect, absentia, and high dropout rates. Additionally, even if free public education is guaranteed, there are incidental expenses involved in sending children to school, and low-income families may not have the capacity to cover these expenses.

Free public education is not truly free. There are still additional expenses to be borne for school materials, uniforms, snacks, lunch, and transportation. Thus, the revenue a family generates influences at what age the children begin school, how frequently they can attend if they remain there, and if they eventually drop out. Furthermore, when parents are working for extended periods to meet financial responsibilities, there may be inadequate time to help children with schoolwork. The child's success in academics may then be restricted based on the support level offered by overworked, and sometimes uneducated, parents.

In his May 2009 speech to Congress, Mong Palatino, Kabataan Partylist Representative, cited the Department of Education which reports that while most children of elementary school age enroll in school, 33% leave before the fifth grade; and, similarly, while 66% of teenagers enroll in high school, 31% drop out before the senior year (Palatino, 2009). He added that during a ten-year period only 7 of 10 pupils graduated from the elementary level, notwithstanding that about 65% of them did not begin primary school on time (Palatino, 2009). This decline in enrolment is partially attributable to poverty issues that continue to plague the country. Bhargaya (as cited in Dollar & Kraay, 2004) stressed that poverty has not declined in many developing countries despite greater economic integration. Thus it is important to analyze the challenges and effects of, and solutions to this tenacious poverty that persists in spite of globalization and increased opportunities for access to education.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study made use of both quantitative and qualitative methods. It is a descriptive study wherein the numeracy and math skills of the respondents were determined using researcher-made questionnaires. The information was collected through the questionnaires distributed to the respondents by the researchers and student volunteers. Data gathered were validated through key informant interviews.

### **Participants, Sampling and Setting**

Study participants comprised 292 children, chosen through a purposive sampling procedure from the different cities and municipalities of the Cebu province known for its poverty and educational deficiencies. Student volunteers read and translated the questionnaire into the Cebuano dialect so that the children would understand it. Furthermore, the volunteers marked the answers in the questionnaires. The children were brought to the church grounds of local parishes, the public parks, or residences in the mountainous barangays with permission from local authorities. The researchers also coordinated the effort with the local government so that each barangay council could provide a suitable venue for the focus group discussions.

### **Data Collection**

The researchers and selected education students visited the different assigned areas in the province to administer the questionnaires and conduct interviews with the children, as well as obtain relevant background information. The children were invited to the assigned location and each completed a detailed assessment checklist designed to verify their competencies. The competency levels of the children were ascertained based on the checklist results. The results were validated through focus group discussions. Researchers obtained consent from parents through consent forms that the latter were asked to sign. Some quantitative data were obtained via the abovementioned researcher-made checklists, while the majority was obtained from Likert scale questionnaires distributed to the respondents. Qualitative data was obtained through the series of interviews geared towards identifying issues and concerns to verify the data obtained from the questionnaires. The data collected were supported by focus group discussions with the children and their parents. Ethical research consent was also obtained from the parents and guardians of the children.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis procedures involved the use of Minitab to interpret and analyze the data. Statistical formulas used included frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation. The interview results were transcribed and used as basis for discussion of the results.

**Discussion of Results**

Children's educational qualification data, presented in Table 1, indicate a wide spread in the grade levels with high points at the kindergarten, sixth grade and high school levels. Moreover, this table is a description of children in the province and city of Cebu still unreached by the mobile and Alternative Learning System (ALS) teachers.

Table 1

*Educational Attainment of the Unreached Children*

Grade Level	Male	%	Female	%	Total	%
Kinder	28	9.6	14	4.8	42	14.4
Grade 1	10	3.4	6	2.1	16	5.5
Grade 2	9	3.1	6	2.1	15	5.1
Grade 3	21	7.2	14	4.8	35	12.0
Grade 4	13	4.5	15	5.1	28	9.6
Grade 5	10	3.4	22	7.5	32	11
Grade 6	29	9.9	25	8.6	54	18.5
High School	33	11.3	20	8.6	54	18.5
Unschoolled	10	3.4	7	2.4	17	5.8
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>163</b>	<b>55.8</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>44.2</b>	<b>292</b>	<b>100</b>

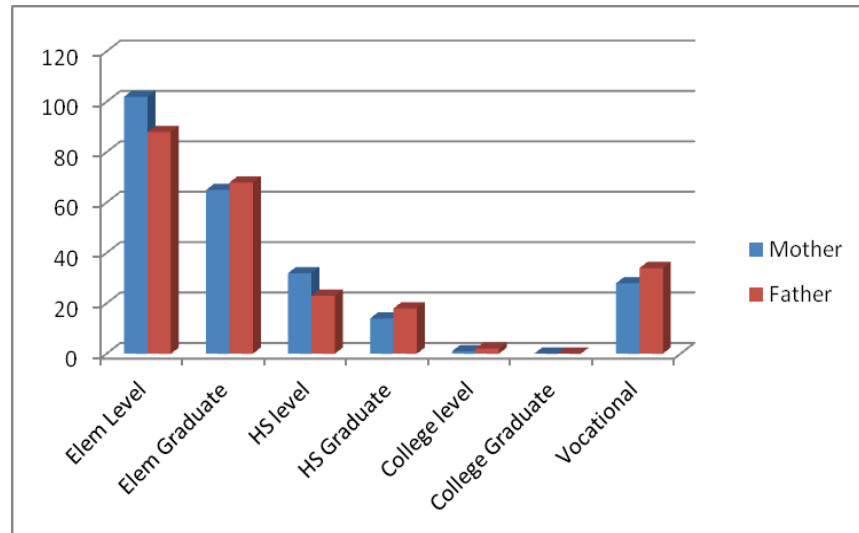


Figure 1. Parents' educational qualifications

Two hundred and seventy five (94.2%) of the 292 respondents in the study had been previously enrolled in various educational levels while 17 (5.8%) were unable to attend school. Forty two (14.4%) of those who had been enrolled were in kindergarten and 180 (61.6%) were able to attend the elementary grades. There were more children in the higher grades in the elementary level; however, children are more skilled at this age and may leave school to work and so it is possible that few will move on to high school.

The parent survey indicated that 182 parents had an elementary-level education. It is not surprising then that parents do not have the motivation to send their children to school. Evidence suggests that the experience of those with poor literacy and numeracy skills is particularly marked (Bynner & Parsons, 1997; Moser, 1999). As Figure 1 indicates, very few parents attained college level education and it appears that more parents moved into vocational training after elementary than the number going on to high school.

Other demographic information unearthed in the study indicates that there were families containing two or more school-aged children who were not in school because of poverty issues. Further, some children lived with both parents while others, whose parents were separated, tended to live with the mother. Amato and Keith (1991) stated that school dropout and delinquency are among a host of other possible problematic outcomes that increase

in likelihood following parental separation, so this is another issue to watch. Additionally, parental separations often result in parents having limited man-hours, ability, and drive to help children with school work (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999). Thus any initiative to provide educational opportunities would have to consider possible after-school programs for those students who need additional help that parents may be unable to provide.

The family income of the parents of out-of-school children is not enough for the basic needs. High percentage of parents with more than seven children has a monthly income below Php2,000.00; meaning the family lacks the finances to meet basic necessities such as food, clothing and shelter, let alone defray the incidental costs of education. Rumberger (1987) stated that there is a connection between socioeconomic status and dropping out of school, with students from lower socioeconomic (SES) families being disproportionately represented among dropouts. Hunt (2008) concurred adding that family income is a determining factor in whether or not children can go to school due to the accompanying costs. Given that the majority of parents in this study had a monthly income of less than Php3,000.00, it is evident that these children live below the poverty level and this circumstance would affect their schooling.

During the interviews, 48% of the parents cited similar difficulties in sending their children to school. They indicated that their ability to buy school supplies and clothing to wear to school determined their children's enrolment or withdrawal from the first grade. During the informal discussions conducted with the researchers, parents described their children dropping out just days after school opening because they could not meet the direct costs of schooling. These results support the study by Jordan, Lara, and McPartland (1996) who found that 82% of early dropouts in the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 belonged to families below the mean SES, which included family income and parents' education and occupation. It is thus vital to address the issue of family income in providing educational opportunities for children.

As Table 2 indicates, more than half (121, 54%) of the parents surveyed indicated that they were unwilling to send their children to school. The strain of working for daily subsistence keeps them from being able to assist with their children's assignments or help them with school activities. According to Maslow (1954), individuals need to satisfy the more pressing lower level needs basic to survival before they are willing to address higher level needs unrelated to immediate survival, such as educational attainment and advancement. Higher level needs can only be addressed after the lower level needs have been fully satisfied.



Table 2  
Parent Survey Data

	<i>Yes</i>	<i>I don't know</i>	<i>No</i>
1. If my child has a problem, I am confident that I can deal with such problem.	97	56	89
2. I am often angry and irritated every time my child encounters school problems.	27	32	183
3. I am willing to send my child to school.	75	30	121
4. I can assist with my child's assignments.	69	13	160
5. I can help my child in school activities.	62	52	128
6. I am willing to help the teacher in school.	25	34	183
7. I don't have money to finance my child in school.	226	9	7
8. My child doesn't like to go to school.	178	29	35
9. My child has fearful experience at school.	168	5	69
10. My child enjoys more in school.	78	31	133

Thus given that 226 (93%) of the respondents lack the financial capacity to take on the task of financing the education of their children (see Table 2), it is understandable that they would not prioritize this task. Additionally, the parent participants indicated that they were not confident that they could deal with a situation in which their child had a problem at school. They resort to anger and lose their temper when their children encounter a school-related problem. This anger, too, may be a symptom of the stresses of poverty and disenfranchisement.

Aside from financial problems, there are other reasons why children drop out of school. Of the 242 parents, 168 cited that their children had fearful experiences in school. Maltreatment and hounding in the school can be strong factors that damage the psychological, emotional, social and physical development of children (Slee, 1995a, 1995b) and further strengthen the resolve to drop out. Thus it is not surprising that 55% or 133 parents perceived that their children preferred to be out of school rather than be in.

Table 3

*Personal Information Data*

Personal Information Questionnaire (Children)	Yes	%	No	%
1. Have you been in school?	275	94.2	17	5.8
2. Do you like to go to school?	201	68.8	91	31.2
3. Do you have friends?	284	97	8	3
4. I am often unhappy, sad, or tearful	70	24	222	76
5. Do you mingle with other children?	207	70.9	85	29.1
6. I quarrel with my playmates.	110	37.7	182	62.3
7. I am frequently accused of dishonesty.	114	39	178	61
8. Many children of my age don't like me.	257	88	35	12
9. Do you like your teacher in school? *	107	36.6	168	57.5
10. Do you like writing?	215	73.6	77	26.4
11. Do you like reading books?	158	54.1	134	45.9
12. Do your parents like you to go to school?	96	32.9	196	67.1
13. Do you enjoy school activities? *	101	34.6	174	59.6

\*excluding the 17 children not enrolled in school

Two hundred and seventy five of the 292 children in this survey (94%) have been in school for either one or two years. Two hundred and one (69%) of the children reported that they would like to go to school because they gained new friends and play with them. Additionally, 222 (76%) reported feeling happy at school; however, when their friends leave school, they may want to leave as well. This situation may be exacerbated by their perceptions of teachers and interpretations of the treatment received. More than one-half of the children (168; 57.5%) indicated that they did not like their teacher, which could be interpreted as a legitimate reason not to like school. It is reasonable to conclude that students may be motivated to go to school every day when they like their teachers.

Two hundred fifty seven respondents (88%) had the perception that many children of their age did not like them. This perception indicates poor social relatedness, a disconnected feeling from the social interactions at school that can adversely affect learning. Specifically for girls, social relatedness correlates with learning in that a positive sense of social relatedness will produce positive learning behaviors and classroom participation while the inverse will produce negative results (Royer, Provost, Tarabulsy, & Coutu, 2008). The sense of

acceptance and safety that social relatedness can foster impacts the learning environment and eventual academic success.

One hundred and seventy-four students (59.6%) indicated that they did not enjoy school activities even if they liked going to school, while 196 (67%) felt that their parents did not want them to go to school. This data parallels data in the parents' survey, where parents indicated that they did not have sufficient funds to finance their children's education and thus believed that the children must work to make a contribution to family income instead of going to school. Consequently, what the parents deem as necessity, the children interpret as parental unwillingness for their school attendance. The parent factor is very important to the viability of school attendance since children are often helpless without the support of their parents. Parents would need to provide financial support and the necessary assistance to endure the challenges.

Two hundred and fifteen (73.6%) children reported that they like writing and 158 (54.1%) like reading, but 101 (34.6%) did not enjoy school activities. From this, it can be inferred that since students have an interest in schoolwork, there may be other reasons for the diminished interest or motivation for learning.

As Table 4 indicates, the majority of the respondents have very good mathematical skills as far as the numbers 0-20 are concerned; however, while most could count from 0 to 20 subtraction skills were at a low level (61%) compared to the other computation skills. This phenomenon could possibly be explained by the children's experiences.

Table 4

*Numeracy Skills Data*

Numeracy skills	Yes	%	No	%
1. Rote counts from 0-20	257	88	35	2
2. Identifies numbers from 0-20 from an array	260	89	32	11
3. Writes numbers 0-20 from dictation	261	89.4	31	10.6
4. Writes numbers 0-20 from objects	256	87.7	36	12.3
5. Matches objects and numbers from 0-20	248	84.9	44	15.1
6. Arranges numbers from greatest to least	250	85.6	42	14.4
7. Arranges numbers from least to greatest	240	82.2	52	17.8
8. Adds numbers from 0-20	210	71.9	82	28.1
9. Subtract numbers from 0-20	178	61	114	39
10. Identifies simple mathematical symbols	213	72.9	114	39

Some children have been in school and are now out in the streets. Streetwise children are exposed to common situations that involve the use of basic mathematical operations such as when they are paid for services or items that they peddle in the streets. In interviews, children indicated that more often than not they are paid in the exact amount so that patrons do not have to wait for their change and they in turn do not have to do subtraction computations. Thus, the children are more skilled at addition than subtraction.

As to reading skills, 169 participants (57.8%) could identify the sounds of letters. Data shows that 199 (or 68.2%) could write the letters from dictation and 139 (or 47.6%) could write the letters from the sounds executed by the researchers. This difference indicates that the children are more acquainted with the names of the letters than their sounds. The number of children who can match sounds to letters and objects to beginning letter sounds are 142 (or 48.6%) and 140 (or 47.9%) respectively. This data should cause concern. Children who have well-developed phonological awareness coming out of kindergarten have an increased likelihood of developing sound reading and writing skills (Adams, Foorman, Lundberg, & Beeler, 1998).

Table 5

*Reading Skills Data*

Reading skills checklist	Yes	%	No	%
1. Identifies sounds of letters	169	57.8	123	42.2
2. Identifies consonants	192	65.8	100	34.2
3. Recognizes letters from an array	146	50	146	50
4. Articulates sounds of letters	158	54.1	134	45.9
5. Matches sounds and letters	142	48.6	150	51.4
6. Writes letters from dictation (sounds)	139	47.6	153	52.4
7. Writes letters from dictation (letters)	199	68.2	93	31.8
8. Matches objects to beginning letter sounds	140	47.9	152	52.1
9. Identifies common everyday objects	160	54.8	132	45.2
10. Reads simple CVC words	121	41.4	171	58.6
11. Reads simple phrases	149	51	143	49
12. Recognizes common street signs/ads	156	53.4	136	46.6

Thus, equity in education would require greater attention to phonological awareness in entry-level education. Moreover, children would have to be exposed to books, a deficient resource in poverty-stricken regions. To develop reading and writing skills, children need to be exposed to various genres at appropriate reading levels.

Only 156 respondents (53.4%) were able to recognize common street signs such as the no parking sign, no left turn, no right turn, and one way signs, the logo of McDonalds, the logo for the disabled, and Dunkin' Donuts signs. Being frequently in the streets, these children become familiar with signs; however, this figure is still low. Additionally, while 149 (or 51%) were able to read simple phrases, only 121 (or 41.4%) could read simple consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) words. This difference may be partly because the simple phrases presented were those that were often encountered through the media and in local shops.

A national longitudinal analysis conducted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) found that while middle-class children know the entire alphabet, those in poverty-stricken regions may be familiar with only one or two letters (Lee & Burkam, 2002). Consequently, low-income children are less likely to be able to write their names, or express themselves competently, both verbally and in writing. These children are unprepared to face the incredible hurdles of life in general, much less coping with a globalizing world.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

This study has revealed that there are children who are being left behind due to different factors that are all related to poverty. The academic needs of the marginalized youth of society can only be met by educators based on case analysis and planned interventions. In addition, there is a need to educate parents about the value of education and its power to contribute to the economic growth of the family and country. To survive, much less compete, in an increasingly globalized world and competitive society, countries must seek to educate all citizenry and it must be a cooperative effort of all stakeholders—governmental agencies, communities, teachers and parents. Additionally, the strong involvement of the non-government organizations and religious and political groups play a critical role in educating the youth. Children are the future and a vital component of globalization. Educating children is important in attaining the country's missions for sustainable development, success in the global arena, and creating a climate of hope for its citizenry.

Based on the findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are offered. Steps should be taken to make public basic education free in the real sense of the word. The cost of school supplies and miscellaneous expenses must be minimized and subsidized. Implementation of centralized evaluation systems

for assessments at strategic educational levels should be in place to determine students' attainment in the appropriate competencies required for the levels. More focus should be on personalizing programs for communities to provide them with their specific needs for educating their population, for reaching the unreached with a basic education curriculum.

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