

# Prevalence of Bullying among Senior High School Learners towards a Safer Environment in a Catholic School: A Cross-Sectional Study

Dr. Teresita R. Dumlao<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Roderick A. Tadeo<sup>2</sup>, Dr. Zenia Gazo-Mostoles<sup>3</sup>, Dr. Narcisa R. Figuerres<sup>4</sup>, Rev. Fr. Dr. Roland M. Almo<sup>5</sup>, and Dr. David Cababaro Bueno<sup>6</sup>

**Abstract**— This study focused on the prevalence of bullying among senior high school learners (SHSL) in a Catholic school. The researchers utilized the descriptive cross-sectional design, closed-ended survey-questionnaire, and descriptive statistics for data analysis. All the senior high school teachers teaching among over 1,500 SHSL participated in the study. Verbal, emotional and physical bullying were prevalent almost weekly among SHSL. The bullying victims were usually thin, fat, considered ugly, talk or sound differently, shy, and those with low self-esteem. The bullies were cool and wanted to feel superior, powerful, and usually have psychological and family-related problems. There was a tendency for the bullies to feel better and impress others. Bullying behavior was a result of being from a broken home, copying parents' aggressive behavior, watching violent films, teachers' poor classroom management, retaliation for being bullied in the past, and feeling older or stronger than others, which may result to being fearful, lonely, and depressed. Reporting to family members, school counselors and authorities, being absent from school, and avoiding the bullies are the common strategies manifested by the bullied learners. The results indicated that bullying is prevalent and a problem in the school setting. Results indicated that bullying is a problem in the catholic school setting. This study demonstrated that if school authorities can bring their ideas together with a plan to help learners and other adults identify bullying, the negative behavior as effect of bullying may be decreased or prevented. The school authorities may enhance the prevention strategies towards safer school environment.

**Keywords**—Basic education, bullying, senior high school learners, safe environment, Catholic school, descriptive cross-sectional design, prevention strategies.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Bullying among school learners is certainly not a new phenomenon. Despite many strategies put in places to control

it, the problem persists. School is perceived to be a place where students should feel safe and secure but the opposite is the case. The reality is that a significant number of students are the target of the bullying. Bullying though old is a widespread and worldwide problem. Most adults can remember incidents of bullying in which they were either bullies or bullied. In fact, until recently, the common perception had been that bullying was a relatively harmless experience that many children experience during their school years. Bullying has been defined variously by researchers. Bullying occurs when a person willfully and repeatedly exercises power over another with hostile or malicious intent. A wide range of physical or verbal behaviors of an aggressive or antisocial nature are encompassed by the term bully. These include “insulting, teasing, abusing verbally and physically, threatening, humiliating, harassing and mobbing” (Colvin et al, 1998). Bullying may also assume a less direct form (sometimes known as “psychological bullying”) such as gossiping, spreading rumors and shunning or exclusion (O’Connell et al, 1999).

A broad definition of bullying as opined by Olweus (1993) is when a student is repeatedly exposed to negative actions on the part of one or more other students. These physical actions can take the forms of physical contact, verbal abuse or making faces and rude gestures. Spreading rumors and excluding the victim from a group are also common forms of bullying. These negative actions are not necessarily provoked by the victim for such action to be regarded as bullying; an imbalance in real or perceived power must exist between the victim and the person who victimizes him or her (Coloroso, 2002). According to Schuster (1996) this power of imbalance and the fact that bullying behaviors are repeated over time are what differentiate bullying from other forms of aggressive behavior. Pepler & Craig (2000) observed that bullying is the most common form of violence. It is what drives the culture of violence, permitting the most powerful to dominate the less powerful. These researchers were also of the opinion that bully starts out very young and small, a push during recess or some name callings. Bullying among children and adolescents is a growing concern among educators and parents. Bullying has been identified as a serious problem that is pervasive in homes and schools. Bullying in schools has been the focus of many studies over the last three decades (Dussich & Maekoya, 2007). Although bullying has been

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1Dr. Dumlao is the VP-AASS and concurrent Dean of CASE, and Graduate School Professor; 2Dr. Tadeo is an education program specialist at DepEd-Olongapo City and a Graduate School Professor; 3Dr. Mostoles is a Division Schools Superintendent, Iba, Zambales and a Graduate School Professor; 4Dr. Figuerres is Dean of Magsaysay Memorial College and a Graduate School Professor; 5Rev. Fr. Dr. Almo is former President of Columban College, and now a Graduate School Professor; and 6Dr. D. Bueno is Dean of the Graduate School, and concurrent Director of Research and Publications Office of Columban College, Inc.

widely investigated with students, adults have limited knowledge on bullying (Frisen, Jonsson, & Persson, 2007). Research studies have indicated that children often do not agree with adults on what behaviors should be regarded as bullying or how to address it (Larson, & Sarvela, 2002). This is a serious issue because adults are often the first line of intervention when bullying problems arise. Being bullied has been linked to future social and emotional problems in children (Crick & Bigbee, 1998) so it is important to be able to build consensus about perceptions of bullying between adults and students in order to design effective interventions. Discrepancies between student and teacher perceptions of bullying may make it difficult for teachers to recognize bullying and understand victims (Kockenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008). Therefore, it is essential to conduct research that identifies teachers' perceptions of who is bullied, who bullies, and why. It is also important to investigate teachers' understandings about risk factors and effects of bullying because it may contribute to teachers' willingness to intervene. Investigations of discrepancies among teachers' beliefs can contribute to staff training on how to recognize and deal with bullying occurring at school. The present study intends to examine senior high school teachers' perceptions on the prevalence of bullying in a Catholic school setting towards a proposed intervention strategies for a safer school environment.

## II. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study focuses on the prevalence of bullying as perceived by senior high school teachers in a Catholic school setting. It aims to analyze the: (1) the nature of bullying in school; (2) the perceptions of the teachers about the victims of bullying and bullies; (3) factors associated with bullying behavior among students; (4) the psychological consequences of bullying on the students; (5) the coping strategies the students are using to avoid bullying; and (6) the prevention action plan for a safer school environment.

## III. METHODOLOGY

The researcher used the descriptive cross-sectional design using a validated and reliable closed-ended questionnaire. It is one of the common study designs to describe the participants' perceptions on green practices during the specified period of study. The cross-sectional design is an observational study using a validated instrument. This means that researchers recorded information about the participants without manipulating the study environment. In short, the researchers tried not to interfere while the participants were surveyed using a well-defined instrument and compared the different perceptions and various variables within the specified time frame (Bueno, 2017). Information was collected from the teachers through the administration of the adopted instrument on "Perceptions about Bullying Behavior Questionnaire" (PBBQ) from Asamu (2006) and Forero, McLellan, Rissel & Bauman (1999). The data gathered were analyzed using Descriptive Statistical tools.

## IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

*Nature of Bullying in a Catholic School Environment.* The nature of bullying in school as described in this study includes the types, occurrence and characteristics of bullying. More than 10% of the students experienced physical bullying, 58.04% encountered verbal bullying, and 31.74% experienced emotional bullying. Thus, the most common type of bullying occurrence among is verbal bullying, followed by emotional and lastly physical bullying. Bullying is a situation when one or more students are repeatedly cruel to another student for a period of time, weeks or even months. Bullying behaviors can be physical by hitting, kick, pushing, etc., verbal through threats, name calling, teasing, taunting, etc., and/or emotional through exclusion, blackmail, spreading rumors, etc. Deciphering a bullying behavior from teasing behaviors can come with difficulty. Roberts (2000) explained that some teasing normally occurs during child development and is valuable in building social skills necessary to be assertive and stand up for themselves; it is the manner, incidence, and intensity that mark the behavior as bullying. In understanding bullying developmentally, the behaviors begin in elementary school, but reach their peak in middle school and begin to decrease in high school (Bulach, Fulbright, & Williams, 2003). The results were supported by the study conducted by Atlas and Pepler (1998), where 53% of observed bullying episodes included verbal bullying, while physical bullying took place in only 30% of the observed episodes. However, the most common definitions in use were adopted by Roland (1989) and Olweus (1991). Roland defines bullying as "long standing violence, physical or psychological, perpetrated by an individual or group directed against an individual who cannot defend himself or herself". In line with this Olweus also defines bullying, but more carefully and restrictive, as "repeated, negative actions over time, including hitting, kicking, threatening, locking inside a room, saying nasty and unpleasant things, and teasing". The two most common forms of bullying examined by researchers are physical and verbal bullying. Physical bullying involves physical attacks on the victim, including hitting, kicking, pushing, shoving, spitting, throwing object(s), or anything which does physical harm to the individual or their belongings (Olweus, 2001). Verbal bullying commonly involves verbal taunts directed at the victim. These can be actions such as insults, taunting, teasing, and name calling (Olweus, 2001; O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001). Although, physical and verbal bullying are often identified as two different forms of bullying, these forms of harassment tend to co-occur (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). For this reason, physical and verbal bullying can be placed into a category called direct bullying. Direct bullying, or overt type bullying, includes physical and verbal aggression repeatedly focused on a single target (Peskin, Tortolero, & Markham, 2006). For instance, research performed by Orpinas, Home, and Staniazewski (2003) found that close to 60% of students reported being victims of direct bullying. The other type of bullying identified by researchers is indirect bullying. Indirect bullying, also known as relational or social aggression, includes social exclusion or attempts to isolate a target from social participation, spreading gossip, refusing to socialize

with the victim or excluding them from activities, criticizing physical appearance or characteristics of the victim (Olweus, 2001; O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). Accordingly, while at school, participants have witnessed someone bullying to the extent that a student being bullied cries or appears to feel frustrated, sad, anxious, bad, angry, lonely, and/or worthless. About 16.34% have witnessed someone bullying other students daily, 55.40% have observed bullying weekly, 20.25% have seen monthly, and 8% have perceived bullying once a year. Thus, the frequency of occurrence of bullying is alarming to the extent that it is happening every other day in a week. The places of occurrence of bullying are classrooms (32.85%), hallways (26.72%), comfort rooms (19.66%), athletic field (10.29%), canteen (8.17%) and library (2.29%). This means that bullying among students can happen anywhere in the school premises. Thus, safe school environment is being sacrificed because of the occurrence of these types of bullying among students. However, it is commonly believed that bullying takes place primarily on the way to and from school, but Olweus (1993) has reported that without a doubt most bullying takes place at school. This is in support to the findings of the study. In fact, Olweus (1993) found that three times more bullying took place at school than in route to and from school. Sheras (2002) explained that the locations within the school that are unsupervised like bathrooms and locker rooms are most often used by bullies. In a study conducted by Winter (2001), tenth-graders in a rural school said that they thought adults should stop bullying, and situations should not be allowed to go as far as they do. In addition, Winter found the most problematic areas were hallways, the cafeteria, restrooms, locker rooms, and school grounds. Atlas and Pepler (1998) investigated bullying in the classroom. They found that teachers intervened in only 18% of the episodes counted by the researchers. As the observations were video recorded, the teacher was viewed in the same frame as a bully encounter 50% of the time. Teachers were unaware of a bullying interaction in 13 of the 30 episodes, and finally teachers were aware of 50% of bullying when in close proximity of the interaction. Atlas and Pepler's study explained the influential nature of the teacher's roles in reducing bullying in a school, knowledge on what bullying behavior entails, as well as intervening tactics, for both the victim and the perpetrator. About 37.27% mentioned that bullying is a large problem in the school, 48.59% revealed that bullying is somewhat of a problem, and showing signs of getting worse, and 14.12% mentioned that bullying in the schools is somewhat of a problem, but showing signs of getting better. The findings revealed that bullying among autonomous high schools is showing signs of getting worse. The school authorities can take a major role in preventing such occurrence. If not given proper attention, several effects may come into play as revealed by previous findings. Research indicates that all forms of bullying can produce social and emotional problems in children (Ostrov, & Werner, 2006). Cumulative evidence has shown that bullying has acute consequences ranging from suicide, murder, absenteeism at school, and medical conditions such as faints, vomiting, paralysis, hyperventilation, limb pains, headaches, visual

symptoms, stomachaches, fugue states, and long-term psychological disturbances such as anxiety, depression, loneliness, and hysteria (Bond et al., 2008). Gender differences have been found in the types of effects reported by victims. Boys who are victims are at a greater risk of acting out and delinquency as young adults while girls who are victims have a greater risk of experiencing poor mental health such as peer rejection, anxiety, depression, and isolation (Bond et al., 2008). Therefore, bullying is a serious concern and without intervention the effects are likely to worsen over time (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). Types of bullying can also make a difference in effects. Crick (1996) conducted a study with children from schools. At these two schools, she assessed aggression, pro-social behavior, and social adjustment three times during the academic year using a peer-nomination measure. Results indicated that students who experienced relational aggression were most at risk for future adjustment problems. Physical bullying, on the other hand, is most strongly associated with physical injuries and anxiety, while verbal bullying is associated most with reductions in self-esteem and increased depressive symptoms.

*Perceptions about the Victims of Bullying and Bullies.* The participants show the same level of agreement on their perceptions about the victims of bullying in all items. Thus, they revealed that victims are usually thin, fat, considered ugly, talk or sound differently, shy, and with low self-esteem. Moreover, they moderately agree that victims come from poor families, have no friends, changes classes just to escape bullies, and changes school to escape bullies. These mean that the victims are still on their respective schools despite the occurrences of bullying. Lastly, the respondents revealed the same level of agreement that victims should stand up for himself/herself and become more psychologically stronger to stop bullying. Moreover, the victims should stop being different by losing weight or getting the right clothes if they want bullying to stop. Thus, the overall computed mean is 3.64, which means "Agree". Bullies most often chose their targets based on the target's physical appearance, mannerisms, or the fact that the victim just does not fit in (Beane, 1999). Olweus (1993) explained that victims are usually more anxious and cautious than other students. Oftentimes, especially with boys, victims are physically smaller. Victims usually grant their perpetrator with a "reward" such as their lunch or an outward show of fear or sadness (Beane, 1999; Olweus, 1993). As general rule, according to Olweus (1993), victims do not have friends, and withdraw from others. Sheras (2002) indicated that victims are often socially isolated and have a low self-esteem. Burcum (2003) stated that the perpetrator of a school shooting was a victim of bullying. The mannerisms of the student indicated he could have been a victim of bullying. Many students who are bullied are invisible to school personnel (Bender, Shubert, & McLaughlin, 2001). In the school shooting incident, a teacher, described the bullied child as an ordinary kid (Burcum, 2003). School staff can have difficulties picking out children who are the victims of bullying. Victims of bullying begin to show signs of the negative behavior experienced (Sheras, 2002). Therefore, these students begin to spend less time in the classroom

learning causing a sudden drop in grades. Twenty-two percent of fourth through eighth graders say they experience difficulties academically due to bullying (Beane, 1999), and victims of bullying can become afraid of meeting new people, become frightened when approached by another child, and have more anger and resentment with no apparent reason (Sheras, 2002). Physically, explained by Sheras (2002), victims of bullying can experience more hunger due to fear of the cafeteria or their lunch being stolen, lack of sleep caused by nightmares, bedwetting, and pain due to waiting until getting home to use the bathroom. Researchers examining bullying have identified some key factors that correlate with becoming a victim of bullying, including: gender, being younger in age (higher risk in elementary or middle school versus high school), location of residence (school or residence is located in a low SES high crime area (Alvarez & Bachman, 1997), race or ethnicity (Caughy, O'Campo, & Muntaner, 2004), and visible signs of disability (Farrington, 1993). Farrington (1993), however, claimed that there was a slight difference between victims and other students and that the victim may have more signs of handicap (wearing glasses, physical limitations, speech difficulties) than other students. Lumeng and colleagues (2010) found that children are more likely to be bullied because they are overweight regardless of other socio-demographic, social, or academic performance factors. Individuals with aggressive attitudes (victim or non-victims) were more likely to report carrying weapons to school, use alcohol or engage in physical fights at school (Brockenbrough et al., 2002). Group memberships may be different depending on whether the individual is the victim or antagonist (Craig et al., 1998). In addition, researchers have found that individuals who were bullied were more likely to engage in aggressive behavior or fighting when compared to subjects who were not bullied (Rudatsikria, Mataya, Siziya, & Muula, 2008). On the other hand, a victim who was classified as aggressive was at an increased risk for victimization (Hanish & Guerra, 2000). Thus, studies have shown that students who have someone to confide in, a friend or adult at school, may not be victimized (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010). The participants agree that bullies are really cowards underneath, think they are cool, want to feel superior or to show that they have power, and have psychological or family-related problems. Moreover, they believed that bullies bully others to feel better and impress others. They are jealous of the victim, lack respect for other people, annoyed by the victim's appearance, become tired of bullying after getting older (matures), but can find other victims at the same time. Moreover, the respondents also shared the same feeling when they moderately agree that bullies have low self-esteem. Thus, the overall computed mean is 4.07, which means "Agree". Sheras (2002) clarified that all students feel anger; bullies usually have an inability to channel their anger in an acceptable fashion. Beane (1999) explained that bullies are different from a student who may tease someone occasionally, because a pattern of intimidation forms. Perpetrators of bully behavior have little empathy for others, have a more positive attitude toward violence, and are aggressive to parents and teachers as well as their peers (Olweus, 1993). According to

Sheras (2002), bullies find victims who are weak in some way to harass in mental or physical ways. Thus, the National Association of Social Workers (2002) explained that bullies are usually solely concerned with their own pleasure and will use others to get what they want. However, the National Association of Social Workers found that bullies are not always socially isolated, and it may even be easy for bullies to make friends. In fact, Sheras (2002) indicated bullies are often average or above-average in popularity. Bullies are reported to have poor behavior at school with destruction of property, intimidation of younger children and a short attention span (Sheras, 2002). These negative behaviors can be linked to lifestyle outside of school beyond the years spent in school (Beane, 1999).

*Factors Associated with Bullying Behavior among SHSL.*

All the participants agree that bullying behavior is a result of being from a broken home, copying parents' aggressive behavior, watching violent films, teachers' poor classroom management, retaliation for being bullied in the past, and feeling older or stronger than others. However, being from a monogamous or polygamous family may be "moderately" considered as factor of bullying behavior. Thus, the computed mean is 3.82, which means "Agree". According to Shen (1997), school violence is on the rise. Violence from the home and communities is stretching into the schools, and school shootings and suicide are the result of the advancement of traumatizing encounters over time (Hazler, 2000). Social withdrawal, feelings of isolation, loneliness, persecution, and rejection, as well as low interest in school, and expression of violent writing and drawings are indications of a student bullying that often lead to violence (Beane, 1999). Research shows that it is usually the victim of long-term bullying that commits violent school crimes (Bender, Shubert, & McLaughlin, 2001). Brown and Taylor (2008) is one of the few existing studies that actually investigate the link between bullying and educational attainment and wages. Henningsen (2009) identified the two main determinants of victimization as low family income and not feeling safe with one's parents, and Wolke et al. (2001) confirmed that low socio-economic status correlates with both victimization and bullying, and moreover find that ethnic background/skin color is associated with victimization. However, Persson and Svensson (2010) find no effects of class-size on victimization. Farrington and Tfofi (2009) systematically review evaluations of such programs to intensity interventions to reduce bullying and victimization.

*Psychological Consequences of Bullying among SHSL.*

The participants perceived the psychological consequences of bullying on school learners. They all agree that it may result to being fearful, lonely, and depressed. However, they moderately agree that bullying behavior may result to being happy and confident. Thus, the overall computed mean is 3.60, which means "Agree". Rigby, (2008) suggests that bullying is "the systematic abuse of power in interpersonal relationship". In other words, bullying is when a person is picked on over and over again by an individual or group with more power, either in terms of physical strength or social standing. Thus, there are apparently imbalances in physical and psychological strength between bully and the victim (Olweus and Solberg,

1998). Drawing from the work of Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990), Moon & al. (2008) have associated the phenomenon of bullying with a sort of criminal behavior. Rigby, (2003) identified and categorized the possible consequences and negative health conditions of those involved in bullying as follows: Low psychological well-being; poor social adjustment; and physical un-wellness. Other claims in relation to the negative consequences for those who bully are that children who habitually bully significantly experience higher levels of depression (Salmon, et al, 1998) or even suicidal ideation (Rigby, 2000). An alternative theory of bullying is the developmental psychological perspective on antisocial behavior (Patterson, Reid and Dishion, 1992).

#### *Coping Strategies Used by the SHSL to Avoid Bullying.*

The perceived coping strategies used by the learners to avoid bullying revealed that reporting to school authority/ counselor, running away from school for many days, telling their parents, and avoiding the person are the common strategies. However, they moderately agree that bullying the person back may be a good choice. Moreover, the overall computed mean is 3.83, which means "Agree". Interventions for learners should not only be directed to students who show characteristics of a bully or a victim, but should be preventative in nature for all students (Atlas & Pepler, 1998). Thus, Salmivalli (2001) reported it is helpful to give students an opportunity to take responsibility when a bullying episode occurs. Sheras (2002) provided simple intervention tactics for students, and Salmivalli (2001) noted though, that it is also necessary for students to understand when things are too out of hand for them to be involved, in which case adults need to have ultimate responsibility for reducing bullying in the school. A peer onlooker of bullying is defined as child who is watching the bullying episode for at least five seconds of any portion of the episode (Atlas & Pepler, 1998). An onlooker of a bullying situation attempts to avoid the situation, for fear they may be the next victim if there is an attempt to intervene (Beane, 1999). There are peer interveners, as well. They are students who physically or verbally end the bully-victim interaction (Atlas & Pepler, 1998). On the other hand, Newman, Horne, and Bartolomucci (2000) explained that peer onlookers are also considered to be bystander victims. Similarly, Newman, Horne, and Bartolomucci (2000) indicated some core conditions for teachers to maintain to help in the intervention and reduction of bullying behaviors. Visibility of adults (Beane, 1999); supervision (Olweus, 1993); and teacher intervention (Atlas and Pepler, 1998) were some of the recommendations.

*Prevention Action Plan.* Bullying is not only about learners' behavior. Preventing bullying requires everyone's cooperation. A "Bullying Prevention Action Plan" provides the necessary information and tools to successfully implement bullying prevention strategies in the education community, and defines key areas to engage and involve the broader community. When we create safe, respectful learning environments, we build and nurture safer school environment for all SHSL.

## V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The most common type of bullying occurrence is verbal bullying, followed by emotional and physical bullying. These types are occurring weekly in schools' premises such as classrooms, hallways, comfort rooms, athletic field, etc., and are somewhat of a problem, and showing signs of getting worse. The victims of bullying are usually thin, fat, considered ugly, talk or sound differently, shy, and with low self-esteem. The bullies are really cowards underneath, thought they are cool, wanted to feel superior or to show that they have power, and have psychological or family-related problems. Moreover, they believe that bullies bully others to feel better and impress others. They are jealous of the victim, lack respect for other people, annoyed by the victim's appearance, become tired of bullying after getting older (matured). All the respondents agree that bullying behavior is a result of being from a broken home, copying parents' aggressive behavior, watching violent films, teachers' poor classroom management, retaliation for being bullied in the past, and feeling older or stronger than others. The result to being fearful, lonely, and depressed. However, they moderately agree that bullying behavior may result to being happy and confident. All the respondents agree that reporting to school authority/ counselor, running away from school for many days, telling their parents, and avoiding the person are the common strategies. This study indicated that bullying is a problem in the school setting. This study demonstrated that if teachers can bring their ideas together with a plan to help students and other adults identify bullying, the negative behavior can be decreased or prevented. There were practical implications of these results for intervention or prevention strategies in schools. Schools can either use these results along with other related studies to create intervention/prevention strategies or conduct similar studies based on the current research study. The school authorities may enhance the prevention strategies towards safer school environment.

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Dr. Bueno is Dean of the Graduate School and concurrent Director for Research and Publications at CCI, a holder of Doctor of Education, MA in Science Education, Master in Public Management, Master in Business Administration, and Bachelor of Arts degrees. He authored books in Research

and Thesis Writing, Statistics, Quantitative and Qualitative Research, Biological Science, Physical Science, Human Resource Management, Organization and Management, Curriculum Development, Environmental Science, Research Writing Business and Hospitality, Food Safety and Sanitation, and Introduction to Human Biology. He is currently the Dean of the Graduate School and concurrent Director of Research and Publications at Columban College, Inc. Dr. Bueno is an active member of various national and international professional organizations, research technical committee and reviewer of various international conferences, statistician, seminar-workshop speaker and multi-awarded research presenter in the ASEAN community.



Dr. Dumlaog is the VP-AASS and concurrent Dean of CASE, and Graduate School Professor at Columban College, Inc. She is a recipient of various academic awards from learned societies and organizations.



Dr. R. Tadeo is an education program supervisor/specialist at DepEd-Olongapo City and a Graduate School Professor at CCI. He is an active professor-researcher, a curriculum developer and multi-awarded school administrator in the Department of Education.



Dr. Z. Mostoles is a Division Schools Superintendent, Iba, Zambales and a Graduate School Professor at CCI. Graduated Master of Arts in Education, and Doctor of Education in Educational Administration.



Dr. N. Figuerres is Dean of Magsaysay Memorial College in Zambales, and a Graduate School Professor at CCI. She is President of the Philippine Association for Teachers and Education-Region III Chapter, and well-rounded academician.



Rev. Fr. Dr. R. Almo is a former President of Columban College Inc. (CCI), Director of the Catechetical Center, ACSDI Superintendent, and now a Graduate School Professor. Fr. Almo is a holder of Professional License for Teachers.