

Adenauer Young Researcher's Report

From Right to Privilege: The Current State of Philippine Basic Education and Its Impact on National Development

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From Right to Privilege: The Current State of Philippine Basic Education and Its Impact on National Development

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In a developing country like the Philippines, education is a powerful driving force of change.¹ As a critical instrument in developing a country's human capital, education is an effective catalyst for societal progress and a powerful tool in the creation and preservation of national identities and culture amid rapidly changing times. Education has been correlated with higher income, greater social mobility, and other aspects of human development.² Such findings prove that quality education is integral to attaining national success.

Unfortunately, the Philippines is struggling to fully benefit from the positive effects of education and is currently facing a learning crisis.³ Based on the results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022, "less than a quarter of Filipino students reached basic proficiency in math (16%), reading (24%), and science (23%)."⁴ Aside from this, a 2023 policy note from the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS) states that the learning crisis extends far beyond the classroom and includes various political, social, and economic issues such as "the unconscionable stunting of 1 out of 3 under five-year-old children, the unprecedented challenges of the pandemic-induced shift in learning delivery modes, unemployment of graduates, and other perennial issues that jolted the education system."⁵ This is alarming because research has shown that learning deficits compound over time.⁶ Therefore, this crisis directly affects not just individuals but the future of societies and economies as well. A nation that is not well-educated will fall behind in progress and development.

The state of Philippine education

The crisis plaguing the Philippine education system is a systemic problem that requires substantial time, resources, and political will to resolve. But first, it is necessary to get a clearer picture of its problems and the vision for Philippine education that we wish to achieve in the future. In this regard, indicators of holistic education based on the Gross National Happiness (GNH) Index can be helpful as thematic tools for identifying the concerns that hinder the provision of quality education for every Filipino and, at the same time, the potential government interventions in the short term and long term.

The GNH comes from the country of Bhutan, the only country in the world that has an index for measuring happiness.⁷ The overall objective of this index is to ensure that development takes a holistic approach, therefore implying that equal importance should be given to both economic and non-economic aspects of well-being. According to *A Short Guide to Gross National Happiness Index*, “a holistic education extends beyond a conventional formal education framework to reflect and respond more directly to the task of creating good human beings.”⁸

In this regard, I will use the GNH's education indicators—literacy, educational qualification, knowledge, and values—to examine the current state of the Philippine basic education system.

Literacy

According to the GNH Short Guide, literacy is the ability “to read and write in any one language.”⁹

In the Philippines, learning poverty, or the inability of children to read and understand simple texts by the age of 10, is prevalent as children have a hard time understanding even a short story. When measuring learning poverty, the focus is on reading ability because it is an essential benchmark for learning opportunities in other areas.¹⁰ Thus, it is concerning that findings of the World Bank show that 91% of Filipino children aged 10 struggle to read and write simple text.¹¹ It shows that the current level of learning poverty in the country is alarmingly high.

Results of the PISA 2022 rankings also reveal that the Philippines ranks among the countries with the lowest reading and writing proficiency among young learners.¹² The average reading literacy score in the Philippines in the PISA 2022 stands at 347 points. Despite improving compared to the 2018 PISA results, this score remains significantly lower than the global average of 476 points.

In response to this dire situation, the Department of the Philippines (DepEd), under the leadership of the newly appointed Secretary Juan Edgardo “Sonny” Angara, redirected their long-term goals. Now, the DepEd aims to improve literacy scores in local and international tests. To this goal, one of their recommendations is to establish a task force for the PISA.¹³ The need for better-structured literacy programs to address the concerns of basic education has been once again put on the table. However, the vision and goals for DepEd need to be more consistent. Although urgency is indeed important, establishing a good system or plan that can continue despite changing regimes is the key to constant progress. Such should be done especially for literacy because it is one of the basic foundations of proper education.

Illiteracy has legitimate impacts on social welfare and the economy. According to a new report from the World Literacy Foundation, the problem of illiteracy costs the Philippine economy an estimated PHP258 billion or \$4.72 billion every year.¹⁴ A study also found that illiterate people earn 30%-42% less than their literate counterparts.¹⁵ Further results state that illiteracy has led to lost earnings and limited employability, and lost business productivity around the world. Low literacy rates for Filipino students would also impede them from accessing broader educational content, hindering their motivation to improve and overall learning and development. In the long run, this would, therefore, result in a low-skilled workforce that would limit the

country's potential for economic growth, circling back to the negative costs of illiteracy.

Educational qualification

According to the GNH, Bhutanese people must have completed at least six years of schooling from any source, including government, non-formal, or monastic schools, to be considered educationally qualified.¹⁶ When applied to the Philippine context, educational qualification refers to formal education and successfully achieving specific learning outcomes relevant to the country's identified academic requirements.

In the Philippines, the Philippine Qualifications Framework (PNQ) mandates the qualifications earned by individuals educated and trained within the country. The PNQ is governed by the PNQ National Coordinating Council, which is composed of the DepEd, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA), the Professional Regulation Commission (PRC), and the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE).¹⁷

According to this framework, a 13-year education is mandatory by law. These 13 years encompass kindergarten to grade 12, also known as the basic education or the K-12 curriculum.¹⁸ This curriculum was implemented to align Philippine education to international standards. Prior to this, the Philippines was the only country in Asia with a 10-year basic education program.¹⁹ Subjects that develop one's core skills and knowledge on subjects like math, sciences, language, and culture are continuously provided in these 13 years of education. The medium for teaching is Filipino and English. The K-12 curriculum was also designed to provide students with pathways to higher studies or to immediately pursue employment right after grade 12 graduation. Finally, the curriculum is aimed at preparing Filipinos to become competent citizens of the 21st century.

However, students, teachers, and parents alike encountered problems in the implementation of the K-12 curriculum.²⁰ Inadequate funding, lack of trained and qualified teachers, outdated course curriculums, and insufficient infrastructure such as classrooms are only some of the challenges that both teachers and parents have explicitly mentioned.²¹ These lapses in the curriculum directly affect the educational qualification of our citizens. Illiteracy rates and a growing skills gap are only some of the effects of low-quality education in the Philippines. It is also important to take note that these current challenges mean that there is unequal access to quality education for our nation.²²

Another concern is that even though the new K-12 curriculum allows senior high school (SHS) or grade 12 graduates to pursue jobs immediately, employment opportunities remain low for those who do not finish tertiary education. According to the 2024 Job Outlook Survey of the Philippine Business for Education (PBE), only 48% of the participating companies currently employ SHS graduates.²³ Although an improvement from previous years, there are still companies that are more inclined to accept applicants with at least two years of tertiary education.²⁴ This is why reforms to the curriculum can be further reviewed to ensure that job opportunities for SHS graduates are not that limited. One thing that can be considered is improving the structure of work immersion courses to provide better practical experiences that students can use for their job applications. This can be done by partnering with local industries so they can offer internships that are designed to train SHS students to gain skills that are essential in meeting the current job market needs. Students can also benefit from consistent career guidance, counseling, and job placement services to help them better understand the opportunities that are available to them.

Knowledge

The GNH divides knowledge into five variables: knowledge of local legends and folk stories, knowledge of local festivals, knowledge of traditional songs, knowledge of HIV-AIDS transmission, and knowledge of the Constitution.²⁵ In the Philippine context, knowledge would similarly focus on preserving cultural heritage, enhancing health literacy, and promoting civic engagement, but with local adaptations.

As a country with rich cultural diversity, knowledge of myths, folklore, festivals, and our history are essential aspects that are integrated into education. Information like this can be passed on even in early childhood by being taught at home through stories. Then, as children begin formal education, history, geography, and civics can be taught through Araling Panlipunan (social studies). This subject holds a crucial place in the curriculum, especially for the first three to six years of basic education.²⁶ It cultivates a sense of community and social awareness in a country with a rich history and culture. It is one of the foundations of creating the Filipino identity.

However, the effectiveness of this approach is being challenged because Filipinos are detached from participating in societal activities related to nation-building.²⁷ This lack of civic participation can be attributed to inadequate promotion of civic competence in the country's education system or curriculum. The proper and more effective integration of these elements in basic education can ensure that young learners will continue to appreciate and be aware of the important aspects of what it means to be a Filipino citizen.

Values

Another important indicator of education, according to the GNH Index, is instilling good values. The Bhutanese people are expected to behave according to their Buddhist culture. They must tame themselves and avoid destructive actions that create disharmony in relationships and societies.²⁸ Meanwhile, in the Philippines, values education encompasses important morals and Filipino traits that aim to build and strengthen our society. The K-12 curriculum includes subjects that also cater to this need, like *Edukasyon sa Pagpapakatao* (EsP) and Good Morals and Right Conduct (GMRC).²⁹ Students are expected to behave accordingly and treat our culture with respect at a young age. Filipinos should be educated to embody truth, freedom, justice, and love. These will build the foundations for their active well-being and even be carried over to their future careers.

DepEd has continuously emphasized the inclusion of values education across grade levels to shape the character of the Filipino youth. However, challenges persist when it comes to optimizing the teaching methods and ensuring their effectiveness.³⁰ Being taught as stand-alone subjects limits the opportunities for students to see the relevance of values in real-life situations. It is detached from other academic disciplines, such as science, which is why it also inhibits the students' ability to connect values to their academic learning.³¹ Moreover, due to the diversity of cultural backgrounds in the Philippines, a single approach to values education may not effectively resonate. Recommendations regarding interdisciplinary approaches have been laid out to address the concern. For instance, methods should be more holistic and consider the importance of Filipino cultural contextualization and inclusivity. Incorporating service-learning projects for students would also encourage them to be exposed to actual situations and demonstrate how they apply essential Filipino values.

Education on values is something that can help enrich a nation because it builds morale and a shared identity. A community built on good values will only continue to develop strongly over time. The motivation to be a person that can contribute to the success not only of oneself but also of their community is a goal that should always be kept in mind.

Measures for change

Recognizing education as one of the key factors that can contribute to national development has prompted different courses of action to address the learning crisis that we have continuously been dealing with.

First was the sudden shift in priorities for long-term plans by the DepEd. As mentioned earlier, DepEd Secretary Sonny Angara plans to lay out strategic plans to improve literacy rates and establish a task force for the PISA. This alone is a huge step, although the truth is that this goal will not be accomplished in a short amount of time. The goal is to sow seeds for long-term goals of improving the quality of education in the

country.³² However, one thing that can be improved from this is to have a sense of continuity with the DepEd plans or initiatives despite changing leadership. There should be clear and measurable milestones serving as priorities that will be carried over to future administrations. Consistency plays a major role in long-term projects like this one.

When it comes to addressing concerns about the K-12 curriculum, DepEd launched the revised MATATAG curriculum under the leadership of Vice President and former DepEd Secretary Sara Duterte. "MATATAG" stands for "MAke the curriculum relevant to produce job-ready, active, and responsible citizens; TAke steps to accelerate the delivery of basic education services and provision facilities; TAke good care of learners by promoting learner well-being, inclusiveness learning, and positive learning environment; and Give support for teachers to teach better." The curriculum aims to condense the competencies students are expected to learn and prioritize foundational literacy and numeracy that are expected to build up core competencies among them.³³ It will also emphasize the strengthened development of students' values and character in line with the Good Manners and Right Conduct (GMRC) and Values Education Act, while also incorporating 21st Century Skills.³⁴ This aligns well with the concerns presented in the previous sections on the different areas of education. Nevertheless, consistency and alignment of goals are important for this project to have fulfilling results, especially now that a new DepEd Secretary has taken over.

According to the Second Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM 2), the MATATAG curriculum has been implemented in 35 pilot schools across 13 divisions in 7 regions for the school year 2024-2025.³⁵ However, teachers have been raising concerns about their readiness to implement the changes needed, including issues on how sufficiently equipped they are to implement the revised curriculum that caters to the needs of students and classrooms, as well as the importance of minimizing their nonteaching tasks.³⁶ In response, the DepEd has been continuously providing training and conducting pilot-tests in different schools.³⁷

However, on August 15, 2024, several teachers' groups made the call to scrap or suspend the implementation of the MATATAG Curriculum as it has become very burdensome for most of them.³⁸ Current DepEd Secretary Angara wants to adjust the curriculum accordingly to become more flexible for the well-being of the teachers. Still, the new MATATAG curriculum has a long way to go, and amendments can be made to ensure that learners and educators benefit equally from this agenda. After a year of implementation, an external review of the curriculum is essential to pinpoint the necessary adjustments to be made.

A key factor that DepEd can consider would be to increase the benefits of Filipino teachers, especially now that they are expected to carry out more adjustments to the education system. This issue is also closely linked with the concern of a teacher shortage in the country.³⁹ Regrettably, teachers' efforts are not fully appreciated and compensated in the Philippines, which is why it is not an attractive career choice for Filipinos.⁴⁰ This is why pushing for better benefits would be a strategic move, along with better hiring procedures and a more comprehensive budget allocation for education. Specialized teacher training should also be held consistently to ensure that educators are well-equipped to deliver the proposed curriculum more effectively. A consideration would be implementing a professional development program where teachers are offered certifications that can be tied directly to promotions or salary increases. Tying the factors of professional growth and increased pay will provide the teachers with more motivation to actively participate in these trainings and become more competent educators. Finally, better budget allocations will address the need for proper infrastructure and resources.

Another thing that needs attention is to ensure that the public school system remains competitive to ensure that all students, particularly those from low-income families, are on equal footing and at par with their peers. This could be addressed if low-performing schools can be provided with targeted interventions like additional funding, infrastructure, resource upgrades, and student support programs. This can be done to improve the

delivery of education for all students in their area, regardless of social status. Moreover, this addresses the growing concern of education being seen as a privilege rather than a right. Policies and plans should always emphasize how both the learners and the educators are the priorities for us to be a well-educated nation that is at the forefront of development.

Finally, with all these new plans and changes to the education system, it is important to ensure that the goals set in the Philippine Development Plan (PDP) are achieved within a set period to keep up with the rapid pace of globalization and development, as well as its challenges.

From a student's standpoint

Education is fundamental for national development, as it contributes to growth, stability, and social progress. Unfortunately, in the Philippines, education has become more of a privilege than a right. This is a regrettable situation, considering that the country places a high regard for education. This shift can be attributed to the widening gap and reduced access to quality education. A prominent inequality is present, and the imminent risk of the learning crisis can be felt across different levels of society. This should prompt governing bodies to act in urgency regarding the matter.

Therefore, the Philippine government should continue investing in the provision of quality education and ensuring equal opportunities for everyone. True enough, efforts are being made to address this long-standing concern. However, as a student, I cannot say that I feel the impact nor the changes caused by such efforts. Nevertheless, I do not intend to diminish the efforts being made to address these concerns because the path we are treading may be slow-paced. However, even though this situation is not inherently problematic, one cannot help but feel that we are being left behind, especially when looking at how other countries are doing. This ought not to be seen as a setback but rather as a push to keep up.

In a rapidly changing world, Filipinos must be given the chance to succeed in a competitive global landscape, and good educational foundations will serve as our stepping stones. An educated nation leads the way in national development, and that is what we should aim to be.

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