Unraveling Social Epidemia through the lens of Public Education in the Philippines

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Abstract

Public education in the Philippines is 'free' and adopts a K-12 curriculum that is well-aligned with neoliberal global trend. These two aspects of public education speak not only the kind of education young Filipino students will receive, but also mirror the social ills the country is facing. First, I explore the concept of 'free' and the quality that comes with it. I then argue that free education and its low quality created space for private entities, which the rich and capable social class overly exploit leading to unequal opportunities, exclusion and faction among groups of people. Second, I argue that because of the misleading motivation behind K-12 curriculum, to address the needs of the global market and exporting its graduates, the country is now at risk of brain drain and puts its democratic citizenship and the construction of Filipino identity on the brink of obsolescence. I label these social ills as social *epidemia* because of its widespread occurrence in nature, just like an infection, which causes threat and harm to the society and its people.

Keywords: public education, K-12 curriculum, social *epidemia,* brain drain, identity

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1. Brief Introduction to the Public Education in the Philippines

The Philippine public school system has gone a dramatic overhaul when Republic Act No. 10533, also known as 'The Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013', was finally fully implemented in the year 2016. The ratified educational program, which was put into implementation by Kindergarten Education Act of 2012 and Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013, now suggests that the basic education system will take 13 years to complete. The old system, which ran from 1945 to 2011, was composed of six year-mandatory elementary education and four years of high school for children ages six to fifteen. Thus, entails that the previous 10-year basic primary and secondary education will be extended for two years and kindergarten became compulsory, hence, colloquially referred to as the K-12 Basic Education Curriculum. The basic education over public and private schools in the country is regulated and supervised by the Department of Education (DepEd). Whilst higher education affairs are being managed by two other agencies—Commission of Higher Education (CHED) and Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA). The former controls academic oriented universities and colleges while the latter regulates the technical and vocational training in the country.

2. Deconstructing 'Free" Education

Another feature of the local educational system is that public education is free. It denotes that tuition fees in the basic years of schooling will be waived through government funding. This is in response to the increasing pressure from the international agreed agenda set forth under Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) frameworks. And most recently, college education also became free to more than 100 state universities and colleges in the country, provided that a student secures admission to one. On the surface, these are victories as 'some' financial restrictions to access education are lifted. However, it does not erase the fact that schooling is still very costly. For a family earning a measly 4$/day, the cost of transportation, uniforms, books, educational materials are still a burden. This is true for more than 25% of the population in the country living below the poverty line. Given that access to public education is free, the reality is still apprehensive of tensions and corollaries that will be discussed in the following portions of this essay.

Various assessments and studies have exposed the low quality that comes with public education in the Philippines (Lam, 2005; Montalvo, 2004). Although considerably getting more and more budget from the government recently, it is still insufficient and cannot sustain all the financial requirements to keep the program running effectively. This resulted to problems such as hiring contractual teachers who typically do not meet eligibility requirements (Bau & Das, 2016), flawed facilities and low-quality learning materials (Orleans, 2007). This is where it gets messy. Because of the deteriorating image of public education, there rises the demand for an alternative—the education from the private sector which offers quality and excellence. These are spaces that the upper middle to high class in the society can exclusively penetrate. Because they

have the economic hold and power, they are the ones who can explore 'choices'. The 'choice' that only rich people exploit and are so willing to pay for to get higher quality, leaving those of the poor to simply accept government handouts and make the best out of it. Thus, private institutions only catered to students from affluent families are excluded to such educational benefits; giving them more competitive edge in higher education, social life and job opportunities. Unequal opportunities are social dilemmas because it has the potential to create a cycle of exclusion and faction among people. For example, those who graduate from private schools have the resources and the preparation needed to pass entrance examinations to the top universities locally and internationally. This also means they have higher chances securing a better job—jobs in businesses, politics, and aspects of life that are crucial to initiate change, lead and influence many. They remain at the upper class whereas the underprivileged and poor marginalized people who become products of free public education remain at the lower levels of the society. Free education is a great measure to end the barrier to access, but if it devalues the very essence of quality then the rich will always be 100 steps ahead of the poor.

To further interrogate the conceptions of 'free', I will move ahead and examine the connections between basic schooling and higher education. Most recently, the government-proclaimed victory and 'alleged pro-poor' law has been passed, known as the 'Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act' (Republic Act 10931). This law states that all government universities and colleges, and state-run technical-vocational training schools will receive full tuition subsidy to all students. Consequently, the reputation of the public basic education vs. higher education institutions differ from one another. I elucidated earlier that most public school offering K-12 have generally lower levels of quality. However, this is not entirely the case for higher education institutions. Some of the state universities like University of the Philippines (UP), Philippine Normal University (PNU), Silliman University (SU) amongst others still attract and admit the best students in the country regardless of their social class, poor or rich. So, even if the law is virtually free for all, students still need to go through rigorous and tough application and entrance examinations to get in. The system operates like a free market. It is bound for competition amongst students. Those graduates of top performing and high-quality secondary schools, usually private institutions will most likely overshadow those from underperforming public schools that cater the poor. Those with money who can afford tuition for review classes and extra-curricular will still be ahead and once they get in, they fully benefit from free tertiary education, no matter if they are financially capable or not. I can only question how this law is counterproductive, claiming it to be 'pro-poor' but in fact it creates more strains to them. The system does not position 'poor yet deserving' students to overcome such barriers. The intent of the government to 'free' the poor to access higher education is commendable but it cannot promote social justice if it does not create mechanisms to protect the poor or encourage them. As Burke (2012) explicates "*such barriers suggest that there is more to access to and participation in higher education than the simple 'removal' of barriers, including individual motivational factors and institutional procedures* (Chapter 8, p. 3). Indeed, access is not primarily the problem anymore, it is the actual system that needs a revamp. There needs to have quota, limitations, incentives and disincentives to ensure equity and limit exploitation from those who have money and that opportunities are well dispensed to everyone.

3. The Motivation behind K-12

I also argue that the enduring bottleneck that impedes the educational system in the Philippines is its misguided motivation. I will consider different motivations both from the government perspective and from an individual standpoint and weave these two together to make my point. The Philippine government holds a strong stance that K-12 curriculum will pave the way for the Filipino youth to be equipped with basic skills and knowledge on a par with its international counterparts. However, this educational reform has received criticisms especially by families from poor socio-economic backgrounds who perceived this as time and financial burden. Some others doubted the capacity of this reform to bring forth change. Thus, the manner it was sold to the greater public is through highlighting the economic purpose of schooling and getting a job or being ready to participate in the local and international labor market. This 'economic impetus' of schooling has become the de facto purpose of K–12 and higher education and is problematic in different ways. I still hold the belief that the primary purpose of schooling should be to gain knowledge, wisdom and core values. However, it has now turned into individualistic pursuits on economic gains. Thus, students generally aim to 'finish' school, and compete to get in a good university. This tough competition and the emphasis on standardized tests are dominating the curriculum so schools and teachers are so strongly inclined with scores and ranks in national exams. This also caused educational curriculum to favor a 'banking education' approach where students are expected to passively swallow whatever it is being taught to them and digest these facts uncritically. Although these issues deserve more elaboration, I will not dwell on it too much and attempt to discuss what I perceive are more compelling disputes.

Some of the worst social ills the Philippines is confronting nowadays is with regards to its failing democracy and depreciating democratic citizenship manifested through elite persistence or dynastic politics, corruption and impunity. Although the effects of dynastic politics can be argued, it cannot disentangle itself from the social inequalities that it manufactures, either directly or indirectly. Since the grasp of power remains restricted to those within the upper ranks of the society, social class mobility is almost impossible to happen, the wealth is undistributed and the power dynamics amongst social groups stays untouched. The problem is that, the educational curriculum now is so adamantly structured to maintain this 'status quo'. The education that is to liberate and empower has long since lost its charm. Consequently, we are only producing citizens who are 'laborers', but not as critical and active members of a democratic society, capable of challenging the 'status quo' and empowered to stand up for his rights and hold its government accountable for its shortcomings and deficiencies. Without education that nurtures to realize both freedoms and responsibilities toward others, democratic system can neither flourish nor endure. As Dewey (1938) articulately suggests, school is not the only means, but it is the first means, the primary means and the most deliberate means by which the values that any social group cherishes, the purposes that it wishes to realize, are distributed and brought home to the thought, the observation, judgment and choice of the individual (p. 296). Providing schools to learn the values, habits, and dispositions that form the heart of democratic living and that allow us to live "together in ways in which the life of each of us is at once profitable in the deepest sense of the word, profitable to himself and helpful in the building up of the individuality of others" (Dewey, 1938, p. 303). The most essential function of schooling is to help develop democratic

values and purposes. This goal should be the foundation for all other educational efforts. In the United States, the establishment of schools was influenced greatly with democratic ideals with the goal of educating the citizens to be critically literate and knowledgeable of history with the hopes of making citizens more willing and capable to participate in a democratic way of life. Evidently in George Washington's first speech to the Congress in 1790, he addressed the importance of "teaching the people themselves to know and to value their own rights; to discern and provide against invasions of them; to distinguish between oppression and the necessary exercise of lawful authority; between burthens proceeding from a disregard to their convenience and those resulting from the inevitable exigencies of society" (Cook & Klay, 2014, p.51). Indeed, education is crucial to democratic citizenship because this is where ideals and the vision of the democracy begins. People will never be politically equal or free except if they become active and involved citizens devoted to making the system work.

I believe that the K-12 curriculum is ill-advised, because of this misguided and misleading motivation, promising a semi-skilled youth to be deployed abroad or acquire qualifications (technical and vocational) in Grades 11 and 12, which are the new features of the education reform. This was heavily influenced by globalization, a force that put so much pressure to abandon the previous 10-year educational structure to meet the standards of global education which is at 12 years. Second, this also eases education requirements and provides certifications necessary for entry-level jobs in various service and trade markets. Thus, making the country's education system well-adapt to supply and export laborers to heavily industrialized countries abroad. Various data will show the increasing number of Filipinos leaving 'homeland' and offering their skills and services to other countries. In fact, more than ten million of its populations work overseas, moving to countries like the US, Singapore and the Middle East (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2017). This poses the inevitable wave of brain drain. The Philippines has been continually deploying its best and the most skilled in health care, education, IT and engineering and other talents in different corners of the world. As a developing country, we lose in the battlegrounds of 'knowledge economy' because we lose the brightest and highly qualified talents who are supposed to be shaping our local development. We need them to create the 'knowledge pool' we ever so need to transform and progress. Developed countries for example, who actively recruit our talents, gain directly from the harvests of our education system. We also lose the public taxes and funding we spend for our education, because we send our graduates abroad to serve others instead of our own. Our people are our assets. They are the earnest investments we have.

When the educational system is structured to encourage students to leave abroad to have a better future, and leave their families behind, and 'becoming' second class citizens to their chosen host countries, I worry that the contemporary and globalized essence of 'Filipino identity' is also in precarious danger. The transnational migration and the Filipino diaspora experience tension of 'belongingness' in their host countries due to the language barrier, culture and even political reasons of not being accepted as a true member of the society they emigrated. For example, in Mainland China, a lot of Filipinos work as English teachers and entertainers; whilst in Hong Kong, most of them are domestic helpers; in Taiwan, they are working in highly-industrialized cities as factory workers. In these cases, Filipinos contribute to their economies and yet never acknowledge as part of the society or limited to acquiring citizenships and class mobility.

Such friction that it causes creates tension in the construction of personal, professional and collective Filipino identity both in the host country and Filipinos homeland.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the public education in the Philippines is not perfect, neither any education system is. But the point of this essay is to dissect it and go beyond the surface level as I try to link the education system to the existing social *epidemia* that the country is experiencing. Thus, I came up with three reflections and recommendations. One, free public education should never compromise quality and excellence. Second, promoting equity rather than equality in educational access will promote better social justice. And lastly, education should not undermine local needs, democratic citizenship and identity in the process of global integration. Truly, education can be a solution if it's done right but it can also accrue complication if not thoroughly interrogated.

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