

Topic: Educational reform and employment opportunities

Entrepreneurship: Developing Philippine Education and Economy

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“Education is the single most important factor for young people to lead productive and responsible lives”

The UN lists education and employment as the two utmost concerns for the youth. This has always been the case for the youths all over the world. Governments understand that the future of a country's economy is highly dependent on its ability to produce and maintain a skilled and competent workforce.

Profiling the Filipino student and family

I live in the country where parents will starve themselves just to send their children to school, knowing that this will be their only “pamana” or legacy to them. For the poor, education is their only means to escape poverty that is why they are willing to sell and mortgage assets such as land, just to support at least one of their children through school.

There are numerous reports featuring children from poor families who at such young ages have to work as *sampaguita* vendors in high-traffic areas, or junk traders collecting bottles, newspapers and scrap just so they can eat for the day. These families survive at less than two dollars a day for their food, mostly eating the sole meal of rice and instant noodles.

Some, who are already lucky to send their children to public elementary schools, still lack the resources to pay miscellaneous school fees and student projects. Children of bigger families have to work part-time everyday, or stop schooling so their other siblings can study. In rural areas, children from remote *barrios* have to walk 4-6 kilometers a day just to go to the nearest school.

The Philippines is a developing country that faces myriad issues of poverty, corruption, malnutrition, overpopulation and many others. It is with this outset that I want to re-affirm the fact that problems in education and the employment situation is contributory and interconnected to many other root problems.

The bad picture

Every year, the Department of Education (DepEd) takes the lion's share of the national budget. Every year, this also proves to be inadequate. In 2007, there is a shortage of at least 55, 145 classrooms. 1 out of 7 primary school students have no chair or desk to sit on. There is also a huge lack of public school teachers. Some schools even have to conduct classes in the evening just to accommodate the number of students enrolled. There are times, when teachers have to conduct classes under trees because of the lack of classrooms. The supply of textbooks is also lacking that several students have to share on one book.

These numbers only indicate the staggering lack in the resources to provide even the most basic needs of students. The issue of lagging enrollment rates and most importantly, the erosion in the quality of education are also to be tackled.

According to the Department of Education, a large number of children who enter school do not reach the last grade of the cycle- 30 percent of those who enter Grade 1 and about 25 percent of those who enter first year high school. The rate of high school completion for children who enter Grade 1 is less than 50 percent. Half of these will enter college but only 10 percent will make it to graduation.

More disheartening is that the quality of education that these students receive is still not as high. An international survey in 1999 shows that the Filipino eight-graders rank 36th of 38th countries in math and science tests. The students also have low-performance in national diagnostic tests. On average, over the years, students are able to answer only half of the test material given in the NEAT and NSAT. The dismal results of the High school readiness test given in 2004 to first-year student's support the conclusion that the elementary education fails to produce graduates that have mastered the school curricula.

This is highlighted by the growing number of "cram schools". I have once worked as an English tutor for senior high school students in a review center. I can attest to the growing number of students who feel the need to take these review classes with the belief that this will make their chances to enter the top universities higher.

In the tertiary level, while Filipinos enjoy the distinction of being an English-speaking nation, several companies have complained on the graduates' declining competency in English and the mismatch between the things they learned in college and the skills they need in work.

In a public forum on the state of Philippine education, then DepEd undersecretary Juan Miguel Luz said that the quality of Philippine education has been declining continuously for roughly 25 years. He added that "Our schools are failing to teach the competence the average citizen needs to become responsible, productive and self-fulfilling. We are graduating people who are learning less and less."

Why?

In Ronald Meinardus' essay entitled "The Crisis of Public Education in the Philippines", he cited two figures: 17 million students enrolled in the country's public schools and an annual population growth rate of 2.3 percent, some 1.7 million babies are born every year.

He concluded simply that "there are too little resources for too many students". This point is very agreeable that it is more disgusting to know that majority of these limited funding goes to corruption.

According to reports from the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, only about one-third of the budget actually goes to concrete projects for education. Most are pocketed as "kickbacks" from contracts made by representatives.

As a student, I have seen my high school teachers and college professors leave for other schools where they can earn up to five times as much their often late and low-salaries. I have encountered teachers who have to do part-time work like selling snacks or processed food even to their own students just to complement their wage.

International student experience

Having been blessed with the opportunity to study in Taiwan as an international scholar, I was able to compare the state of my country's educational system to that of other's. It feels sad to know that in other countries, their government can subsidize even their college education, new universities have state-of-the-art facilities, air-conditioned classrooms while we, from the University of the Philippines, the premiere state university of the country, do with meager budget, old classrooms, frequent power interruptions, and old books. While my classmates in Taiwan may own at least two computers, not even all schools in the Philippines have access to the internet or a PC.

In a conversation with a Filipino teacher in Canada, I learned that in Canadian universities, they change textbooks often every 2-3 years to have a more updated reference while in the Philippines; textbooks rarely change for generations.

Taiwan, like the rest of Asia has a 12-year basic education system. This may prepare their students better before they enter the workforce. The Philippines is the only country in Asia with a 10-year basic education system.

In Taiwan, people working as factory workers earn much more than university professors with PhDs in the Philippine public schools.

Economy

This is why I find it hard to understand why the Philippines, which in the 80's was only second to Japan in terms of economic development is now lagging beyond its neighbors.

It is a wonder why the Philippine economy remains afloat and still record growth in its GDP. For the past several years, it is the Overseas Filipino Workers or migrant workers that have been doing the wonders. These more than 8million OFWs (now referred to as "modern day heroes") from all over the world sent home a record \$10.7 billion in 2005 and the government forecasts that at least \$14 billion will be sent this year.

OFW phenomenon

Nearly everyone I know has a member of their family working abroad. I, myself am a son of an OFW. My mom used to work in Hong Kong as a domestic helper as with the many other Filipinos who even as college degree holders settled for blue-collar jobs knowing that this is the only way for a brighter future.

There is a joke that one day Filipinos can conquer the world because you can find a Filipino almost everywhere, as entertainers, maids, medical assistants and other professionals.

Recently, the demand seems to be high on nurses and caregivers. This resulted to the sprouting of numerous nursing schools and employment agencies luring those who want to earn dollars abroad.

Sadly, even our doctors here are already giving up their licenses to become nurses. It is ironic that while the Philippines as one of the world's top exporters of medical healthcare professionals also have a shortage of doctors and nurses in our own hospitals.

What awaits us?

In two years, majority of my friends are planning to leave the country to become nurses abroad. Nearly everyone from my high school class took up nursing for college. I took the road less traveled, and chose Economics as a pre-law course.

This may not be the most practical choice, knowing that the demand for dollar-earning nurses will continue to grow in the next several years. Some students, even those graduating with honors find difficulty in looking for a job they want.

For those who are staying, the easiest way to earn is to work for a call center as agents/ customer service representative. The Philippines has one of the most vibrant business process outsourcing (BPO) industries in Asia. Numerous call centers and BPO

firms have infused momentum into the Philippines market, generating thousands of jobs, including Fortune 500 companies. Filipinos are preferred because with their English background, they can cater to the English speaking market.

Those who do not wish to work on graveyard shifts in call centers but want to land a good, high-paying job in the country may find it extremely difficult. Even those who have attended the top universities in the Philippines find difficulty looking for work.

According to Lloyd Luna's book "Is there a job waiting for you?", from among 100 elementary pupils, only 50 get to high school, and only 25 are able to pursue a college education. From this, only about 10 will finish their degree. And the more depressing news is that only one of these 10 graduates gets employed.

This is why it may be hard to believe the latest Labor Force survey conducted by the National Statistics office telling us that the employment rate in January 2007 was estimated at 92.2 percent, which placed the unemployment rate at 7.8 percent. This means that nine in every 10 persons in the labor force were employed. By comparison, the employment rate in January 2006 was 91.9 percent.

Among the various occupation groups, laborers and unskilled workers comprised the largest proportion (32.3%) of the total employed population. In January 2007, one in every five employed Filipinos was underemployed. The unemployment rate recorded in January 2007, which is 7.8 percent, is not significantly different to last year's estimate of 8.1 percent. Approximately one-half (48.8%) of the unemployed belonged to age group 15-24 years. Thirty-five percent of the unemployed had attained college level.

These statistics underline the shortage of jobs in the Philippines, even for those who have finished college. The Filipino worker's competitiveness is also at stake since there is a declining trend of the country's quality of education.

In order to address these issues, institutional reforms not just in education but to other sectors must be undertaken seriously.

The bottom-line is that we need an educational system that will produce quality, competent, and globally competitive workers who will be the driving force of the economy. Primarily, I believe that this can only be achieved through sustainable reforms.

Reforms being undertaken

There have been at least 3 major studies on education undertaken in the Philippines, namely Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM) of 1991, Philippines Education Sector Study (PESS) of 1998, and the Presidential Commission on Educational Reform (PCER) in 2000. As a result of EDCOM, three separate government agencies with more focused mandates now govern education: basic education is managed by the Department of Education; higher education is managed by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), and technical and vocational education is governed by the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA). PESS and PCER recommended other actions: ensure adequate financing and improve the quality of basic education; slow and reverse the haphazard expansion of low-quality tertiary institutions; provide equitable access at all levels so that deserving poor households and communities can benefit from public education provision; and improve overall sector management through greater local participation and accountability. These recommendations are still applicable.

Stumbling blocks

Policymakers point that although gains have been realized in the implementation of some reforms, such as the new restructured basic education curriculum (RBEC) and a rationalization of the establishment of new state colleges and universities, there are hindrances. One is the absence of a broad political support for real reform. Recommendations have been contested by stakeholders even at the time of deliberation; legislators are more committed in advancing reforms that will help them gain more popularity.

Aside from the rapid population growth, another problem is the weak institutional environment for change. “Trifocalization” has weakened the ability of the central government to act strategically and coherently across the sub-sectors. The National Coordinating Council on Education (NCCE) remains inoperative. The fast turnover rate of Education Secretaries (once about every 2 years) is also a hindrance for the sustainable implementation of reforms.

Areas of reform

Needless to say, the crisis of the Philippine educational system is largely financial. A comparative study conducted by the World Competitiveness yearbook showed that when it comes to spending on education, the Philippines lags behind other countries as it spends only 3.8 percent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or a per capita spending of US\$152 compared with Singapore's US\$1,500 or Thailand's 4.4 percent or US\$850.

Dr. Rosario Manasan for the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) computed that the Philippines would need at least P18 billion a year (roughly US\$340 million) per year in additional resources for basic education until 2015.

Philippine Business for Education associate director Peter Perfecto said aside from bigger funding, what matters most is the proper utilization of scarce resources as

he pointed out a little known provision calling on local government units (LGUs) to allocate a certain portion of their income to education as Special Education Fund [SEF] to be administered by the local school board.

Other areas of reform identified by PBED in their “Priority agenda for Education Reform” are as follows: 12-year plus pre-school basic education, institution of a competency-based rather than credentials-based teacher hiring, promotion and development, reforms in pre-service and in-service training, licensing, hiring and recruitment of teachers and a business-led process for monitoring of the implementation of education policies.

It likewise called for greater community participation, transparency in the disbursements of national and local funds, improving English proficiency and rationalization of the bureaucracy to save resources and rationalization of state colleges and universities to prioritize and maximize the use of scarce resources.

My suggestions

I believe that the government, for its part has already figured out the answers and are doing, albeit not enough, institutional reforms on education. What I am suggesting is that it is high time that the private sector, specifically the business sector to take a direct hand in addressing these issues.

For one, I find it imperative that young people, particularly students, be given more avenues to participate in these reforms and policy making. In state universities for example, the students are represented by a student regent that seats in the Board of Regents/ Trustees, the highest policy making body of the university. Such opportunities help voice the students’ take on these issues where they are stakeholders.

Promote vocational and specialization in courses. In May 2007, the Department of Education with the study from JobsDB asked students to reconsider taking courses that are in greater demand in the job market. The top 4 choices among college courses are Nursing, Business Administration, IT and Education. But the majority of the demand is in Engineering, Call center jobs, Sales and Marketing. To address the mismatch between jobs available in the market and the graduates, educators and leaders should promote other less preferred courses in demand, as well as specialization in these fields.

According to a study, there are many Education graduates who do not pass the licensure exams. These graduates can not avail if the competitive positions for teachers in Canada in the US if they can’t even pass the professional licensure. The lack of specialization in fields (such as animation) makes our IT graduates less hireable. Business Administration has been said to be a very general course, both a boon and bane for those taking the course.

Vocational courses and specialized training should also be promoted not merely for those who can not afford a 4-year college education. In the Philippines, people look down upon people who take vocational courses since those who take it mostly end up in blue-collar jobs. In Germany and other advanced nations, plumbers and other blue-collar workers are regarded highly. The problem with Filipinos is our mentality that the ideal job are the just the ones that make us go to posh offices, doing white-collar jobs.

Encourage participation of private and business sectors. The multi-awarded *Gawad Kalinga*, a house-building program for the poor families initiated by the Couples for Christ has gained wide support. They have successfully established chapters in various areas nationwide. *Gawad Kalinga* can be used as a template for volunteers who can build schools instead of houses across the country.

Filipinos are known for their "*bayanihan spirit*", the act of helping their neighbors expecting nothing in exchange. In some areas, this spirit resides among parents who volunteer their hours to work building school rooms or painting chairs to their local schools. The parent-teacher associations in schools also have a huge potential in doing such kind of endeavors.

Business enterprises should also enjoin these efforts to uplift the Philippine quality of education through the Adopt-a-school program, various scholarship opportunities, book donations and other ways. Worthy of mention is the Philippine Business for Education (PBED), the business community's response to the need for consensus and sustained advocacy in education reform. Composed of the biggest names in the business sector, the purposes of PBE will be "to nurture consensus on key directions in education reform and to initiate and lead the actions towards those directions".

Coca-cola, with its wide market and huge trucks, has also tried helping deliver textbooks in far-flung areas for free.

Modernization and internationalization. Among the skills and traits needed to be competitive in today's global workforce, one must, be computer literate, technology savvy have sensitivity to foreign cultures, have a strong background in trade and various global trends.

These can not be easily achieved by the Filipino student who does not even know how to use a computer. Various sectors must come up with a modernization fund and program so that at there can be computers in every school. With an internet connection, one can already have access to the most recent information, promote cultural understanding through social networking and blogs, participate in various forums, and connect with other people from different parts of the world.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology has already launched a program providing free learning resources such as presentations and academic papers to anyone who has an access to the internet. With the establishment of distance education, and online universities, people who are busy working can continue enhancing their potentials.

The DepEd has given out-of-school youth a chance to through an online schooling dubbed E-skwela. They can go to college after passing an online comprehensive exam.

Promote financial literacy at an early age. By laying the foundations early on, future managers and upcoming business owners can make wiser financial decisions. Being aware of current trends in trade and the global market will give them more options in their careers. As business-oriented minds, they know that they don't have to be mere employees waiting for their monthly salary.

The Philippine Stock Market conducts a dummy stock market game, participated by the youth from various colleges and universities. This is accessed online, a great forum for training young people in the investment field.

In my school, as a member of the student council, I helped found an annual seminar series on entrepreneurship and financial management. "Bizsics", which stands for "Business Basics", is now in its third year helping young people from high school and college level, including other interested individuals to learn more about financial literacy and business. We usually invite speakers, who are entrepreneurs themselves, so they can inspire and mentor others who are interested in establishing their own businesses.

Incorporate Entrepreneurship in the curricula. In relation to the above recommendation, I believe that we should incorporate entrepreneurship in the secondary and college curricula. Some would start as early as elementary level.

The Entrepreneurship educators association in the Philippines (ENEDA) provides high school and college teachers tools in teaching Entrepreneurship more effectively and motivate more young Filipinos to get into entrepreneurship after college. The Philippine Center for Entrepreneurship, Institute for small-scale industries conduct trainings and support such endeavors too.

The Philippine Emerging Start-ups Open (PESO) has been around for a several years, promoting creativity and innovation among various individuals in the academe. As a business plan competition, it has awarded budding entrepreneurs funding to venture in their business ideas.

Tourism development. Many people believe that the future of the Philippine tourism industry is bright. The Philippine archipelago is world-famous for its pristine beaches, its English-speaking natives and its hospitality to foreigners. The youth,

particularly those who are out-of-school and the handicapped can also use their time and efforts in improving the local tourism industry by working in cottage-type industries

Develop OFW-oriented entrepreneurship programs.When OFWs return home, they have enough savings to start a small business. However, most go with the traditional small merchandise-store ownership which is limiting and worse, others have no idea where to invest their money into. Some who are adventurous often fail because of the lack of knowledge in the financial and business aspects. Entrepreneurs and educators must realize the potential for OFWs and their families to be future business owners and job creators in their communities.

Go Negosyo, an affiliation of business think-tanks publishes online business modules for anyone interested in entrepreneurship. They have mentoring programs too, where aspiring business owners get pieces of advice from the business giants.

Conclusion

As a soon to be college-graduate, I have long realized that I need to have an edge when looking for work because surely there will be tight competition. Graduating from the top university is not even an assurance; I have to gain more skills, knowledge and experience to make myself more marketable.

I also believe that I have many options other than aspiring for a high-paying white-collar job, as majority of Filipinos do.

I can choose to become an entrepreneur. Entrepreneurship taught me that I don't necessarily slave all my years working so others can get richer. With enough preparation and capability, I can be my own boss. I know that this path can be a great way to help my country too. As a business entrepreneur, I will help create jobs for other people.

I believe that the hope lies in entrepreneurship, and the social entrepreneurs who will sustain and value these reforms.

