Education in the Philippines:

Why Decentralization is not the Answer

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Politics 351: Politics of Development

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May 13, 2013

The Philippines were once known for a well-educated, English speaking workforce, an asset that has made it an invaluable economic partner to many western nations. In the past 20 years it has become quite clear that the education behind the workers is no longer adequate. The system has fallen to a 68th place world wide ranking and it is unlikely that it will achieve universal primary education by 2015.[[1]](#footnote-1) Between 2005 and 2010 test scores have been in steady decline, a regional comparison ranks its education quality ranks above only Cambodia.[[2]](#footnote-2) This decline can be blamed on several factors from corruption to the lack of a coherent state education policy. To reverse the decline, the Department of Education (DepEd) is relying on the popular School Based Management (SBM) system, which decentralizes power and decision making to the local communities. Given a system rife with graft, inequality, and ethnic segregation, Filipino education would benefit not from greater decentralization, but rather from system wide restructuring accompanied by extensive transparency measures.

The Philippines have long prized education as an individual right. In its 1987 constitution the state not only guaranteed a “right to free education and high school education” but also that the “State shall assign the highest budgetary priority to education and ensure that teaching will attract and retain its rightful share of the best available talents”[[3]](#footnote-3). Despite its enshrinement in the constitution, education only gets three percent of the national budget, the lowest number in Southeast Asia. With a large population, strong ethnic differences, and scattered island geography to contend with, DepEd has to operate as a department under extreme scarcity.[[4]](#footnote-4) Even basic educational infrastructure is difficult to come by. The system lacks an estimated 2.5 million chairs and is short 60,000 classrooms. In some provinces the classroom to pupil ratio hovers around 53 to 1. [[5]](#footnote-5)

This is all assuming that the government can convince people to stay in school. Despite the cultural and social emphasis on the importance of education, 32% of children aged six to twenty-four are currently not enrolled in school. [[6]](#footnote-6) In many cases the costs generated by having a child in school are too great for a family to bear. Schools are often difficult to get to, do not provide free lunches, and are no guarantee of a better life. These problems are not equitably distributed. Schools in wealthy districts and provinces are better-equipped and better run. Studies have shown a clear correlation between the efficiency of a school in achieving educational results and the levels of inequality present. The most unequal provinces consistently are less efficient in using their money to achieve educational outcomes.[[7]](#footnote-7) The result is a rapidly increasing gap in the educational quality of the rich and the poor. Reform needs to explicitly address the problems and difficulties presented by poverty and inequality. Without this focus, education quality will remain mired in local politics and the state will remain fundamentally unequal.

The education system not only lacks resources, but also contains systemic flaws that prevent effective management, accountability, and reform. Authority over education is tri-focalized into three departments, DepEd, the Commission of Higher Education, and the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority. These agencies do not coordinate between themselves and in many cases have overlapping mandates.[[8]](#footnote-8) The result is an incoherent education policy that prevents meaningful guidance or leadership. Within the system, corruption is so widespread and rampant that it is estimated that lacking corruption the same results could be achieved with 52% of current expenditures.[[9]](#footnote-9) Corruption at DepEd has “led to hundreds of millions of pesos of public funds going to pockets of corrupt individuals, but also to a critical shortage of textbooks and school desks”.[[10]](#footnote-10) This is exacerbated by a “weakened system of accountability and distorted arrangement of incentives and disincentives.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Under pressure from its donors, the Filipino government has been utilizing SBM to try and boost its educational quality and equitability. This system decentralizes power by giving local communities the ability to hold teachers and schools accountable for educational results. It “empowers the school community to identify education priorities and to allocate the school maintenance and operating budgets to those priorities.”[[12]](#footnote-12) In many cases this can be an effective strategy as it makes the schools goal focused, results based, and efficient.[[13]](#footnote-13) It can actively engage the local community and prevent national politics from undermining local schools. This is not one of those cases. SBM is vulnerable in many ways. It could worsen the provision of public goods, localities may lack the technical capabilities to effectively implement SBM, and local education is vulnerable to capture by resident elites. [[14]](#footnote-14) The Philippines are especially vulnerable to these problems.

Many of the current problems with the education system stem from a difficulty accessing rural communities. These communities are poor and lack the basic services necessary to sustain effective schools. Philippine SBM success stories come from places like Davao City or Murcia, where modern infrastructure and educational resources are easily accessible.[[15]](#footnote-15) High population growth means that per capita spending on basic education is actually trending down. Rampant political interference ensures that the money available is kept from rural and indigenous groups, who lack political advocates or support.[[16]](#footnote-16) These communities have shown that they are unable to provide an adequate level of education without some sort of outside intervention. SBM would remove outside resources and expertise from these communities that need it most.

The political system in the Philippines, especially at a local level, is dominated by a regional elites. As one author put it “a considerable part of the discretionary education budget goes to pork barrel allocation by members of both houses, a process that not only directly undermines coherent administrative planning but has exacerbated corruption in school book procurement and contracts to construct schools.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Civil society, which usually serves to advocate on behalf of the people and marginalized groups, has been characterized as actually being anti-developmental because it is so dominated by elites that have an interest in maintaining high levels of inequality.[[18]](#footnote-18) By putting more discretion and money into the hands of local decision makers, the education system is opening itself up to capture by these groups. Rather than more meaningfully engaging the populace and marginalized groups in a grassroots democratic process, this would reinforce existing inequalities. SBM intends to invest people more deeply in their democracy, but these interventions are predicated on the idea that people can demand accountability from those in government.[[19]](#footnote-19) Local elites have no such accountability and giving them control over local education is a recipe for disaster.

Experimental data on the effectiveness of SBM in the Philippines is mixed. A commissioned World Bank study found a small, but significant improvement in educational results after the implementation of SBM.[[20]](#footnote-20) The authors remained circumspect though, calling their report “quasi-experimental” and too short. They acknowledge that the “others contend that SBM leads to the deterioration of educational quality especially among the weakest schools.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Reyes perhaps summed it up best though saying, “Initial results from the reform have been generally inconclusive: some say that significant improvements have occurred while others indicate challenges still persist”[[22]](#footnote-22).

Without a significant amount of direct experimental data to look to, we can use a similar experience the Philippines had with health care as a bellwether for the implementation of SBM. In 1991, the Philippines decentralized health care in hopes of increasing effectiveness by engaging local communities. The “local governments were given wide-ranging discretion in the financing of health programs, the determining of which programs to fund, and the process of health planning itself.”[[23]](#footnote-23) The results were not positive. Patron-client ties were reinforced, a lack of clear national standards promoted waste and corruption and the marginalized populations that the program had been designed to include were completely neglected. [[24]](#footnote-24) In other words the decentralized system only inflamed the initial problems present in Philippine governance. With such a poor record of decentralization of public services, it does not make sense to try it again with the education system.

The alternative option for educational improvement in the Philippines is to significantly step up investment accompanied by a top down restructuring of the education sector, all facilitated by radical transparency measures. DepEd simply lacks the money and resources to deal with the vast number of students and teachers under its command. Simply put, it needs a massive cash infusion to purchase the necessary desks, chairs, books, and teachers for the nation. If the government is to combat poverty as the leading cause of student attrition, spending needs to increase significantly. A larger budget ensures that programs like free school lunches and busing remain in place, lowering the cost of education for all families.

To effectively handle the influx of cash, the Philippines need to end the tri-focalization of education management and consolidate into one education department. This prevents departmental confusion, mandate overlap, and allows for coherent education reform to be implemented. Instead of a variety of small test reform projects, they could engage in a nationwide restructuring of the system.[[25]](#footnote-25)A unified department could institute national standards, provide the expertise needed by many small and poor districts, and ensure access to the marginalized.

These reforms all rely upon the utilization of all-inclusive transparency. From the salary of the undersecretary to local math scores, the government should actively harvest and publish and make available every bit of data possible. The process of testing and reporting scores alone is said to increase the performance of a school.[[26]](#footnote-26) The Philippines has an active and aggressive media that if partnered with activist NGOs and a newly informed populace would ensure that failing schools are held accountable and money is spent appropriately. If one department is going to undertake reforming the entire system, it needs to be governed well. There is no better way to ensure this than by making its dealings public.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Measuring the results of such a radical change in government structure and policy can be difficult and vague, but there are a few very important markers that should be improving. The gap in test scores and educational quality results across the income spectrum should decrease. Scores taken before and after the stoppage of SBM and DepEd restructuring should show an improvement in low-income education quality. The infusion of cash should manifest itself in lower dropout rates and higher rates of educational participation while simultaneously witnessing a decline in pupil to teacher ratio. Benefiting from a directed nationwide curriculum, Filipino test scores and worldwide standing will increase.

These results are idealistic. Doing something like restructuring a government department is never as simple as it sounds. Streamlining staff and leadership is a messy and unpleasant job that is sure to raise hackles, but it has to be done. If done inappropriately there could be an increase in institutional bloat and inefficiency. To combat this the populace must stay active and vigilant. If people fail to act on the information available to demand accountability, centralization could actually disenfranchise the populace and catalyze widespread corruption.

With the stroke of a pen the SBM system can be stopped, budgets can be moved, and the tri-focalization of the education sector can be ended. These would be significant and meaningful steps in improving school availability and quality. Education has been shown to be an engine of national growth and poverty alleviation.[[28]](#footnote-28) By putting its expenditures and management system on par with other Southeast Asian countries, the Philippines are laying the foundation for a stable future economy and country.

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