

Serious Problems with the K-12 Senior High School Curriculum

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During the Mindanao Summit of the Department of Education (DepEd) and the Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines (CEAP), organized by CEAP's National Basic Education Commission (NBEC) and co-hosted by Ateneo de Davao University (ADDU) on 17-18 February 2014, the intention was to appreciate progress attained in the implementation of the K-12 educational reform and to understand the requirements of the Anti-Bullying Act of 2013 (Republic Act [RA] 10627) for the Mindanao schools.

The presentation on the content of the Anti-Bullying Act was straightforward. Atty. Joseph Estrada combined competence with humor — *overcoming an irksome cough!*—to describe the content of the law and clarify its requirements for the schools.

But the presentations on the K-12 were more problematic. Bro. Armin Luistro, FSC, DepEd Secretary, who had come to the Mindanao Summit despite an injury sustained in a basketball match among Cabinet members, spearheaded the presentations with an update on where K-12 is at present. He reminded all of a prior commitment: Basic education was not merely to be reformed, but transformed. It was to be genuinely “learner-centered.” He pointed to a nearly-completed K-12 curriculum that would allow for creativity, innovation and, as for the case in Mindanao, allow for a

“Mindanao perspective.” Therefore, such features as the mother-tongue based education, and an assessment system based on the conviction that *No child is a failure!* were to be appreciated. He encouraged Catholic schools in Mindanao to return to their original religious charisms to understand how each might contribute uniquely to the success of the educational reform. In Mindanao, the special challenges that Catholic schools might address would be the educational needs of the indigenous peoples (IPs), of the out-of-school youth (OSY), and even of the street children.

Over-Congested Curriculum

No problem with that. When Mr. Elvin Ivan Y. Uy, DepEd’s K-12 Program Coordinator, presented the status of the Senior High School curriculum, problems began to emerge. He echoed Bro. Armin’s summary of the reform as “learner-centered” education. But from the PowerPoint Presentation entitled “The K-12 Curriculum: CEAP-NBEC Summit,” he spoke of “31 total subjects” required for senior high school (SHS), fifteen of which were “core subjects” and sixteen of which were “track subjects,” the latter broken down into seven “contextualized” subjects and nine “specialization” subjects. From the same slide came the “non-negotiable” announcement: “Each subject will have eighty hours per semester.”

The latter came as a shocker to curriculum planners from within the assembly like Dr. Gina L. Montalan, Dean of the School of Education (SoE) at ADDU, who was quick to point out that this would mean 6.5 hours of contact hours daily in the SHS for the DepEd’s required courses. If this were to be reckoned in today’s college units, this would be the equivalent to a whopping 32.5 units where college students—who need time to read and study outside of class—should be taking no more than about 20 units. The heavy daily 6.5 hours of required DepEd courses allowed little room for “mission-driven” schools—as all CEAP schools are!—to add courses required by their educational mission. These include subjects such as religious education or theology, philosophy, and special formational courses such as in leadership training.

From the floor, Dr. Montalan suggested that the 80 hour per semester per course requirement be tempered into 80 hours for some courses, and less for others. She even suggested that if the 80 hours per course be truly required then classes be allowed on Saturday in order for the mission schools to be able to accommodate their subjects. Bro. Armin, sensitive to the learner, was not too enthusiastic about the latter, and suggested that some of the mission courses might be the content of the required DepEd courses. How that might sit, however, with zealous guardians of disciplines or DepEd officials more sensitive to the letter of rules than their spirit, is a serious concern.

It was because of this that the CEAP-DepEd Mindanao Summit unanimously passed a resolution that the DepEd, in consultation with Mindanao educators on the ground, revisit the 80 hours per subject requirement.

Tec-Voc Track Won’t Prepare Students for Work as Industry Requires

A similarly serious problem came with the presentation of Fr. Onofre G. Inocencio, Jr., SDB, superintendent of Don Bosco Schools and TVET Centers, on “Implementing the SHS—Tech-Voc Track.” All know that the Don Bosco schools are long-time recognized experts in technical vocation educational training. Basically, Fr. Inocencio explained that the SHS “core curriculum” requirement is so heavy that there would be no time to develop the hands-on skills in the students such as the manufacturing industry requires. There is certainly adequate time to train manicurists and pedicurists, but will these provide the skills necessary for the industrial development of the nation? Within the time-constraints of the SHS, Fr. Inocencio’s thesis is that it is *not* possible to truly develop the multi-skilled students needed for the industry. He confirmed his thesis in recent dialogues with the industry: What is important is not that the student has gone through a required number of hours in vocational training, but that the student actually has the skills required by the industry. His solution:

For the Don Bosco schools, they will focus on teaching the skills as required by the industry, using skilled teachers and the industrial machinery and equipment required to impart them, and insure thereby that the student be employed. To do so, they will set aside the DepEd requirement of the core curriculum. Once employed—*without having graduated from SHS!*—the student will be given the opportunity to come back to school and finish the academic requirements that might also qualify him for college.

For the K-12 program, however, this position is disastrous. The K-12 program was precisely supposed to *either* prepare students for gainful work after basic education *or* prepare students for college. The *either/or* has become a *both/and*. It intends *both* to equip the students with the skills necessary for gainful employment *and* to prepare them for college within the same time constraint. And because the designers are all college graduates with PhDs from the best of higher educational intentions, but without the experience of training students in handling a lathe or a welding machine, we now have a policy which has effectively shut out meaningful skills development in favor of pre-college preparation. The K-12 program has been reduced thereby to pre-college preparation whose “core curriculum,” according to Mr. Elvin Uy, will prepare the student for college according to the College Readiness Standards (CRS) of the Commission on Higher Education (CHED).

Originally, there was supposed to be a pre-work track and a pre-college track. Pre-work would equip students with industry-required skills. The pre-college track (*not the core curriculum common to all!*) would prepare students for college according to CHED’s standards of college readiness.

Despite the fact that the K-12 reform was inspired by the conviction that not all need to go to college, it is designed so that all can go to college. This either disrespects the requirements for work, or disrespects the requirements for college. DepEd has chosen to disrespect the requirements for work. For Fr. Inocencio to continue respecting the requirements for work, he must sacrifice the DepEd requirements for SHS.

In fact, in the presentations given by Dr. Tina Padolina on the Science, Technology and Mathematics (STEM) strand and by Dr. Maria Luz Vilches on the Humanities in SHS, many of the subjects like Qualitative Research and Quantitative Research “sounded very HEI”—like belonging more to college or even graduate school education rather than to basic education. I squirmed to find out that future nurses shall be categorized under STEM and so be required to take even modified calculus. *Is this really necessary?*

So again, the participants of the CEAP-DepEd Summit in Mindanao unanimously resolved that the DepEd revisit the requirements for the Tech-Voc Track.

Flexibility Required: Less May Be More

Of course, putting together curricular requirements for the K-12 reform is one thing. Teaching them is quite another. A curriculum is like a wish list, but all the components of curricula need real teachers. Here is, I think, where reality will demolish the conceptual castles some may be taking satisfaction in, in the formulation of these curricula. For K-12 to succeed in being truly “learner-centered,” it must be realistically teacher and region sensitive.

In the implementation of the K-12 reform, it must be clearly set in policy that these curricular “requirements” for a long time cannot be decreed “FYI”—for your information” (as was asserted by one speaker at the Mindanao Summit), but shall have to be “tentative” and subject to the educational, pedagogical and industrial realities of the country’s many different regions—including the actual skills sets of our available teachers. The outputs of a relatively high concentration of highly-qualified educators in the Metro Manila areas cannot be expected in provincial areas. Tec-Voc training in industrial areas will have to be different from that in rural areas. Policy must be set so that there is ability to put the SHS together and operate with the limited resources of particular regions.

At this point, DepEd needs to take more of a dialogical rather than a prescriptive stance; it must be encouraging and empowering, not over-demanding and discouraging. It must capitalize on the goodwill of people who want this reform to work.

In this sense, less may truly be more.