Systemic Corruption and the Programme on Basic Education in the Philippine Department of Education

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ABSTRACT

This article contextualizes corruption and implementation as it occurs in the Philippine Department of Education (DepEd). Described as a national agency suffering from ‘systemic corruption’, an in-depth qualitative case study analysis of one of its programmes is imperative. The Programme on Basic Education (PROBE) hailed as a success and which has managed to be relatively free from corrupt activities is the focus. Providing findings from a study undertaken on PROBE participants from the three main islands of the Philippines, this article analyzes the various organizational factors that have an impact on the prevalence and absence of corruption and the enabling and disabling elements of successful implementation.

Keywords: department of education, corruption, implementation, reform, stakeholdership networks, teachers

Introduction: Contextualizing Corruption in Philippine Education

A 1960 study on teacher education and quality in the Philippines indicated that there was an ‘imbalance between a great quantity of teacher-education graduates and low quality of preparation’ as ‘11,000 to 14,000 teachers graduated annually from both public and private institutions, [but] only about 6,000 were passing the qualifying examinations given by the Department’ (Swanson in Cortes, 1980). The Department of Education (DepEd) was alerted in 1960 to the mismatch between the number of teacher-graduates and teachers with proper qualifications.
50 years later, the DepEd is still handicapped by the problem of inadequate teacher training (National Economic Development Authority, 2002). This dearth of quality teacher training is aggravated by allegations that DepEd is one of the most corrupt national agencies in the Philippines resulting in leakages of precious resources (Cariño, Iglesias and Mendoza, 1998). Philippine education depicts a context of acute scarcity prone to corruption where complex linkages determine policy implementation (Reyes, 2009). This article explores one aspect of these complexities – stakeholdership networks – in generating critical perspectives about the interface of corruption and policy implementation.

Education sector reform is an area in Philippine public administration that has encountered tremendous implementation deficits. Two of the most serious problems troubling education reform are (i) the presence of rampant graft and corruption and (ii) the terrible mismatch of resources and clientele served (Chua, 1999). Various programs and projects have been organized by DepEd to try to mitigate these implementation deficits but such efforts have at best produced mixed results.

One specific area experiencing varied results is teacher training as a specific thrust of education reform. A World Bank report assessed Philippine teacher training efforts as suffering from a ‘general lack of rationalization and low standards of the higher education system typically affect the teacher education institutions, both in the public and the private sectors’ (Paralkar, 2001). It provides more disquieting facts: ‘only 28 per cent of Graduates of Teacher Education Institutes (TEIs) taking the Licensure Examination of Teachers (LET) in 1996 passed.’

In other words, it is not qualifications but political connections and ‘pecuniary conditions’ that matter in the question of hiring and promotion at the DepEd. Chua in her investigative account says that teachers ‘found that a sure-fire way to land a job or promotion was to obtain a recommendation from a politician – from the mayor or governor to the congressman or senator’ (1999). Politicization of the public bureaucracy is rampant as stated by the former Civil Service Commissioner:

The bad news as shown by the numbers is that political patronage remains a stumbling block to professionalization efforts. And this is most evident at the local government level, the most politicized sector of the Philippine bureaucracy ... We can surmise that heads of local government units (LGUs) opt to hire people on a casual or contractual basis because the appointees
(presumably political protégés) do not meet the qualification standards prescribed for the regular positions. (Sto. Tomas, 2003)

**Programme on Basic Education (PROBE)**

Within this context of corruption and politicization as well as a declining quality of teachers, DepEd has launched a project together with the Australian government. Australia recognizes that ‘education and training opportunities are critical to expanding income-earning potential. Education is a high-priority for the Philippine government and an area where Australia has a strong record of achievement’ (AusAID, July 2004). The joint project is referred to as the Programme on Basic Education (PROBE), ‘focused on improving the teaching and learning of English, science and mathematics at the elementary and lower secondary school levels’. PROBE was ‘estimated to have benefited about 76,000 educators and approximately 3.7 million school-aged children in Mindanao’. Furthermore, it was reported that ‘the assistance had a particularly important impact on female teachers and their status within the education system’ (AusAID, July 2004).

Unlike a number of similar programs undertaken by DepEd that suffers from chronic implementation deficits, PROBE has generated a successful implementation record:

Within four years of implementation, PROBE has successfully operated cooperative linkages between the Teacher Education Institutes (TEIs), both public and private, and the public schools. Collaboration among project stakeholders is particularly evident in the TEI’s involvement in the professional development of in-service facilitators (ISFs) mainly through training workshops and curriculum support materials (CSMs) development. (Presidential Commission on Education Reform (PCER), 1999)

Figure 1 highlights the PROBE framework moving along its four different components in a dynamic and interactive fashion. Field interviews conducted revealed that such a framework allowed for active and frequent communication among different key actors.

The 2001 Project Completion Report of PROBE from 1999 to 2001 presents a comprehensive picture of its impressive gains. A key indicator of success, as defined in its Project Implementation Document (PID) is student assessment performance. Specifically, a crucial ‘performance
indicator of student assessment is for PROBE focus school students and pupils to perform 10 per cent higher in mean scores than the Non-PROBE school students and pupils at project end’ (Department of Education, December 2001).

Disaggregated results of student assessment for PROBE and non-PROBE students in the three core areas of the program, namely English, Mathematics and Science generally point to a positive impact. The Report states that ‘among the three subject areas of concentration, it can be concluded that the PROBE schools gained the most from the interventions initiated by the Project in English considering the higher percentage of mean scores of students and pupils than in Mathematics and Science. The target 10 per cent increase was exhibited in most of the student assessment in English except in the second assessment in Grades 3 with 2.5 per cent and 6 with 7.07 per cent and third assessment
in Grade 6 with 8.44 per cent. In High School English, it should be noted that the achievement level registered the most outstanding in all the focus subject areas.’ The Report presents a similar successful record for Mathematics: ‘In Mathematics, the PROBE Grade 6 pupils exhibited a higher percentage increase than the Non-PROBE pupils but the target of 10 per cent was not achieved. Percentage increases in the four series of assessments are 7.83 per cent, 6.16 per cent, 4.05 per cent and 4.17 per cent. The same finding holds true in the performance of PROBE First Year students in the first assessment with 4.48 per cent.’ In the last area of Science, the success enjoyed by PROBE was of mixed magnitude, managing to reach the goal of 10 per cent only during the benchmarking in the elementary levels, but showing impressive performances in First Year students with increases of 13.345, 19.92 per cent and 13.85 per cent respectively except in the benchmarking’ (Department of Education, December 2001).

Corruption and Implementation: Theoretical Bases

In the Philippines’ pursuit of its development goals, graft and corruption has been a perennial stumbling block. The Ombudsman observed that: ‘Graft and corruption continue to be pervasive in the Philippines, the government has lost an estimated $48 billion to corrupt practices over the last twenty years’ (September 2001). Heidenheimer’s typology of corruption proves useful in addressing this phenomenon.

Public-office centred definitions that are about forsaking accepted public norms for private benefits, market-centered definitions that are concerned with maximization of gains by public officials utilizing market supply and demand and public-interest centered definitions where particular interests are exchanged for what is referred to as public common good are classifications that may be applied to the widespread phenomenon of corruption that accompanies the implementation of DepEd teacher training programs (Heidenheimer, 1989). Several in-house studies conducted by the Philippine Congress embodied in the multi-volume Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM) Report have pinpointed widespread corruption – ranging from public-office centred, market-centred and public-interest centred types within DepEd. Rose-Ackerman spoke about the inefficiencies and unfairness, as first and second order effects respectively, that result from corruption occurring in various settings (September 1996). Continuously poor results of the
DepEd performance in teacher training confirm the acute inefficiencies in the bureaucracy and consequently the adverse effects of inequality manifested in the dismal condition of Philippine education in general. As the biggest public bureaucracy with the highest percentage of national budget allocation, DepEd typifies abuse of national wealth violating the common good. As such, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) corruption definition as ‘the misuse of public power, office or authority for private benefit – through bribery, extortion, influence peddling, nepotism, fraud, speed money or embezzlement’ (1998) encompassing both corrupt practices in the public and private sectors straddling the DepEd are applicable for this inquiry.

One of the problematic areas identified in the EDCOM report was lack of accountability hounding the overly-centralized administrative systems of DepEd. The report further stated that prevailing administrative systems at the inefficient DepEd raises doubts regarding the integrity of key data gathered and that these information should always be ‘beyond reproach’, while a constant vigilance against ‘connivance’ must be upheld. Aside from the inefficiency brought about by a weak and inept bureaucracy, the EDCOM report has implicated the monopoly of the DepEd, then known as the Department of Education Culture and Sports (DECS), and the discretion of its field officials as contributory factors to corruption (1991). These points find resonance in similar studies conducted on developing nations waging anti-corruption efforts (Dest, 2006; Rahman, 2006).

Klitgaard’s formula ‘corruption equals monopoly plus discretion minus accountability’ provides an important basis to the observations made by EDCOM on the possible causes of corruption in Philippine education (1997). This is especially significant in analyzing the current status of the DepEd which seems to possess these three ingredients for corruption to become widespread.

Quah highlights the presence of cultural values that have conditioned Filipinos to be ‘more tolerant of corruption’ (2003). Another equally compelling perspective in the study of corruption is that which centres on the role of the state vis-à-vis the market. One camp, also referred to as the neo-liberal camp, views corruption as the over spill from the ‘black market’ and as a consequence of a pervasive and increased disruptive state presence. The other adheres to a perspective that rests on the legitimacy of the state. The latter identifies the combination of erosion of public ethics and the loss of the state’s legitimate status as the main causes for the eruption of corruption (Meny, 1997). An alternate viewpoint on
corruption is summarized in Cariño’s analytical critique on the ‘revisionist’ school which ‘posited that corruption has many positive consequences on the development of new states’ (1986). Specifically, Cariño examines corruption not only from its mainstream feature of being ‘toxic’ but explores how revisionists have purported it to be a ‘tonic’ or a necessary ingredient for progress particularly for new developing states (1986).

More recently, Johnston’s definition of political corruption as a dissipation of sustainable democracy moving through four different quadrants, namely: (1) interest-group bidding; (2) elite hegemony; (3) fragmented patronage/extended factionalism; and (4) patronage machines’ provides an interesting backdrop (1997). The categorization of political corruption by Johnston and the debate on corruption – fomented by the neo-liberal camp and its critics as equilibrium between the state and the market can be safely characterized as the mainstream approach in the study of corruption and politics. Johnston’s identification of the dominance of elites represented either by ‘elite hegemonies’, ‘interest groups’ and ‘political parties’ indicate the central role that a select few in society hold over the majority. Kerkvliet and Mojares initiated a shift from an analysis of politics away from traditional elite viewpoints and towards local perspectives in political transition (1991). Patron-client approaches, that could be attributed to Lande (1965), a class of powerful oligarchs, formulated by Hutchcroft (1997) and the proliferation of local and national bosses, traceable to Sidel (1999) have gained foothold as dominant paradigms in Philippine politics. Ileto (1997) criticizes the ‘elitist’ nature of these dominant paradigms. David (2000) on the other hand, cautions against excessive ‘essentializing’ of culture in explaining Philippine political realities. This article argues that while it is instructive to explore corruption from elite perspectives; interrogating corruption from a non-elite perspective – the multitude of implementing agents down the hierarchy of the bureaucracy – proves to be truly insightful.

In 1969, Scott writing about politics in the Philippines, linked corruption with implementation arguing that ‘a large portion of individual demands, and even group demands in developing nations reach the political system, not before laws are passed, but rather at the enforcement stage’ (1969). Szefel issues a timely and relevant rejoinder on the possible obscurantism that may result in scrutinizing the interplay of corruption and implementation criticizing current preoccupation – propagated primarily by international organizations – of governance as an antidote to corruption and as a salve for better implementation. What is most
compelling of the notions introduced by Szefelt is the failure of ‘addressing the deeper political and class forces which drive the politics of clientelism and corruption’ and the danger of undermining ‘institutional development’ that typically bedevils grand scale governance campaigns (1998). Ball’s insights on policies particularly how these are ‘contested, interpreted and enacted in a variety of arenas of practice and the rhetorics, texts and meanings of policy makers’ and how these do not ‘always translate directly and obviously into institutional practices’ provide analytical illumination (2008).

The article critiques Philippine political analysis and investigates the interplay of corruption and policy implementation by assuming the perspectives of key policy implementation actors involved in the political processes. Owing to the sensitivity of the issue of corruption, interviews of key actors formed the main bulk of this project. These narratives of actors navigating through overlapping spheres in implementation were the analytical building blocks of this study (Hack, 2004).

Field work was undertaken across different geographic settings which were the policy implementation sites of PROBE: selected impoverished locales in the three main Philippine islands, namely: mountainous Nueva Vizcaya in Luzon, coastal Zamboanga City in Mindanao and the urban-rural mix of Cebu City in the Visayas. From these three sites, sixty-three key participants were purposively selected for this inquiry.2

All the 63 interview respondents of the field study were asked to describe whether their respective programs (that is, PROBE or non-PROBE) were ‘working’ or ‘non-working’. Cross-tabulations produced statistically significant results (Approx. Sig. for $\gamma$ Gamma is less than .05). An examination of the value of Gamma (.86) means that there was an 86 per cent reduction in error in predicting the dependent variable when the independent variable was taken into account (See Liebetrau for example). An interpretation of this is that information about membership in PROBE helps in predicting the outcomes of implementation (‘working’ or ‘non-working’) by 86 per cent. This relationship between implementation and PROBE participation is explored in greater detail in the subsequent sections.

A conceptual map exploring causal linkages between corruption and implementation was used as the analytical framework. Chase’s obstacles of implementation (1979) were combined with Van Meter and Van Horn’s implementation elements (1975) and grouped into three
analytical constructs taken from Klitgaard: monopoly opportunities, discretion compliance and accountability of incentives (1997).

**Operational Demands**

Education is the teacher factor. Even if the books are good, if your teachers are of poor quality, what would happen? (Personal Communication, June 2004).

The senior official underscored an essential aspect that permeates the mission of PROBE – the cultivation of teachers to overcome the ‘poor quality’ that afflicts the Philippine education situation. The implementation of PROBE in selected areas of the Philippines has benefited 76,000 educators and 3.7 million school children (AusAID, July 2004). Putting these huge numbers into perspective, the description by the Visayas school principal about their adherence to the policy standards and objectives of PROBE was truly enlightening: ‘we tried to implement or to apply them’ and that they ‘really wanted to see the teacher participants, doing it’ (Personal Communication, October 2004). What is truly remarkable is the fact that the school principal was not a PROBE fellow and furthermore was not required to personally train other teachers.

Table 1.
**Status of Implementation and Membership in PROBE**

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<th>Status of implementation</th>
<th>PROBE or Non-PROBE membership (per cent)</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PROBE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Working</td>
<td>41.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-Working</td>
<td>4.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>46.0</td>
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Not assuming the null hypothesis.
Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

\[
\gamma (\text{Gamma}) = -0.867, \quad \text{approx. Sig.} = 0.000
\]

Table 2.
**Conceptual Map in Analysing Corruption and Implementation (Reyes, 2007)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Determinants and obstacles to implementation</th>
<th>Causes of corruption</th>
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<tr>
<td>Policy Implementation Outputs</td>
<td>Operational Demands</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Nature and Availability of Resources</td>
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<td>Power and Shared Authority</td>
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<td>Monopoly Opportunities</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Discretion compliance</td>
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<td>Accountability incentives</td>
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Nevertheless, she manifested a genuine attachment and dedication to the programme.

This commitment to the mission of training teachers was a common characteristic noted among the PROBE fellows interviewed in all the three case areas. The depiction of the tasks of a trainer by the Luzon PROBE fellow is another example of this steadfastness. He recounted that they ‘gave the training to the teachers, in Bontoc province, that is really up in the mountains and far from here, it was no longer within our scope and jurisdiction, but they requested for a training in strategies and we obliged, visited them and also gave assistance to them’ (Personal Communication, December 2004).

Without doubt though, the most disconcerting implementation hindrance that PROBE fellows faced was the lack of support from their superiors. Frequently, they would be stymied by ‘supervisors who are hesitant and who would ask: What is this? What is it for’ (Personal Communication, December 2004)? Sometimes, some supervisors refuse to cooperate when ‘they do not like the concept of our school having to take care of other neighbouring schools from other districts’ (Personal Communication, December 2004). On other occasions, the newly-assigned superiors are unfamiliar with the concept of the PROBE thus ‘they have no orientation of the PROBE programme and so they are not supportive’ (Personal Communication, November 2004). Some superiors, aware that PROBE has already been completed, do not approve of teachers who still conduct training. They say that: ‘PROBE already ended and so the supervisor of that district or the division office would question us and ask why we are still conducting training and making INSET (In-Service Training Materials) without informing them’ (Personal Communication, December 2004). In cases such as these, the PROBE fellows would usually make representations to the concerned officials and try to explain PROBE. Perhaps the PROBE fellow from the Visayas expressed it most clearly: ‘we just have to try to explain PROBE and show the good things that are done by the programme’ (Personal Communication, December 2004).

**Nature and Availability of Resources**

Most of the PROBE fellows from Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao categorically stated that the greatest strength of PROBE was the provision of teaching materials in aid of classroom teaching. During and after the completion of PROBE, one of the institutionalized changes implemented
in PROBE participating schools nationwide was the creation of a Teacher Support Unit (TSU). The TSU was one room within the school where teaching materials, equipment and other related paraphernalia were kept. The agreement between PROBE, DepEd and the participating schools was that the TSUs would be maintained and would not be used in any other way, other than the purposes specifically mandated by PROBE (Personal Communication, December 2004).

A Visayas DepEd senior official recognized that an important characteristic of the success of PROBE is that some of its components have been built into the DepEd system and have been ‘institutionalized’. For her, PROBE ‘is the same everywhere’. She added that PROBE came up with one room where they can put up everything at the school level to the division level up to the regional level (Personal Communication, October 2004). A Luzon university administrator attached to a PROBE TEI pointed out that ‘instructional materials that were prepared in Australia by the Australian instructors and the Filipino PROBE fellows are made available at the TSUs’ (Personal Communication, December 2004). The installation of the TSUs in the DepEd schools, district, division offices as well as in the participating TEIs would not have been made possible without local counterpart support. Another university administrator of a TEI in the Mindanao region expressed her gratitude for the ‘facilities provided by PROBE’. She also acknowledged the overwhelming support that administrators of the TEI – a private university – gave to PROBE. A formula that is unmistakably clear in the successful experience of the TSU component of PROBE is the cooperation among key stakeholders of the program.

Commentaries from the field also revealed that the breakdown of cooperation among the various participants of PROBE led to shortfalls and implementation failures. The Visayas university administrator of a PROBETEI in the region bemoaned the unilateral decision of a few of the TEIs to renege on maintaining the integrity of the TSUs. She complained that ‘in some schools and in some TEIs, they have lost their school materials, and the programme is not there anymore, materials have been confiscated; it has been turned to other uses’ (Personal Communication, October 2004).

**Disposition of Implementers**

A source of healthy pride that could be detected upon conversing with PROBE fellows was the opportunity to conduct training for their fellow
teachers. Most of them mentioned that although conducting training would oftentimes be ‘difficult’ and ‘time-consuming’ since in their return contract with PROBE they had to undertake at least one teacher training session per month for two years, they still found the experience – on the whole ‘enjoyable’, ‘rewarding’, and ‘fulfilling’ (Personal Communication, December 2004).

The Mindanao PROBE fellow touched on a similar sentiment that quite a number of PROBE fellows or In-Service Facilitators (ISFs) expressed. The Luzon PROBE fellow talked about these different versions of ‘compensations’ as well – when she mentioned that one of the things ‘she looked forward to was the excitement of travelling to different places and meeting very eager fellow teachers’ (Personal Communication, October 2004). The Luzon PROBE fellow shared how she would often be moved with how the teachers, especially those she visited in the far-flung mountain schools – would be so ‘generous’ in ‘sharing so much of their warmth and hospitality’ (Personal Communication, December 2004).

Professional and personal growth were intangible benefits always mentioned by PROBE fellows as one of the program’s strengths. Most of the fellows interviewed stated that they were ‘very happy’ and that the overseas trip and the training of teachers were ‘very meaningful’ experiences. A Mindanao PROBE fellow expressed the professional maturity she gained: ‘I learned that a teacher has to enhance her own skills in teaching and I also learned the value of student participation, student learning is more meaningful if the teacher knows how to plan and how to make them involved in the activity’ (Personal Communication, November 2004). A counterpart from Luzon explained the positive transformation that she experienced: ‘when I was not yet a PROBE fellow then, I really banked on the books but when I was trained as a PROBE fellow, I began to make my own activity sheets, reflection sheets, my portfolio and my diary, I facilitate the things that my students learn in a group and they themselves would learn, they would lead by themselves’ (Personal Communication, December 2004). The Mindanao PROBE fellow made clear what she meant by not only professional but personal growth:

PROBE has really improved me as a teacher and also as a person because what I do in PROBE, I also do with my family. The achievements that I have made also affected me with the relationship I have with my family, with my kids and it somehow broadened my horizon and it has changed my outlook to become a little bit more positive. (Personal Communication, November 2004)
Nonetheless, the task of being a PROBE fellow – particularly of being a teacher trainer was never easy. This was the common observation of a considerable number of the fellows interviewed. The usual problems encountered in carrying out one’s role were the bureaucratic delays and the natural occurrences of teacher transfers and promotions.

A Mindanao school principal described other types of problems: ‘there are still complaints from the other teachers, especially when we cannot hold seminar-workshops during class days because it may affect the contact time with the pupils. Thus, we negotiated for a half-day during Friday, to do the workshop, because Saturday for them is wash day, market, cleaning up day, family day and all other sorts of complaints, and I understand also why teachers give those reasons’ (Personal Communication, November 2004). Another problem was the need to obtain prior approval from superiors: ‘sometimes when we go to the satellite schools, we have to arrange, we have to write a letter first before we could go there because otherwise the teachers will not be there or the principals will not be there and then we would also have to pay for our own transportation expenses’ (Personal Communication, November 2004).

A more serious difficulty was presented by the Luzon PROBE fellow. He was hired during the conduct of PROBE and was committed to work full time at the Regional Learning Materials Centre (RLMC), but after PROBE ended his future became uncertain. He lamented that as a teacher trainer, there were no existing continuity plans conceived, thus some of the ‘very good’ trainers had to go to other fields for employment. Another problem identified by the Mindanao PROBE fellow was that: ‘we really went to Australia and then some of the teachers we trained back here and who joined us in the conduct of workshops, many are not using the strategies we taught them – so much money spent and so little result’ (Personal Communication, November 2004). He also commented that a relatively small number of PROBE Fellows chose to pursue other fields after having completed their return service contract. The continuity of tenure for teacher trainers and the possibility of qualifying or measuring the actual impact that PROBE has made in Philippine education are some of the more critical issues that were brought up by PROBE fellows.

**Economic, Social and Political Conditions**

The international official outlined the working arrangement that the AusAID had with the DepEd, stating clearly that in coordinating with
the partner agency, they would ‘deal with the Educational Development Projects Implementing Task Force (EDPITAF) of the DepEd and if they had to go higher, at the levels of the Undersecretary for Programmes and Projects’ (Personal Communication, November 2003). Thorny issues in dealing with the DepEd have been delays in coordination and resource constraints. In relation to the effective implementation of PROBE, the International Official described the type of coordination that exists between AusAID and DepEd, an example of which is: ‘addressing issues such as the de-loading of PROBE fellows’ through representation with the DepEd and the regional directors’. Despite the obvious sensitive nature of the issue – particularly since de-loading would have direct implications to the limited funding of the bureaucracy – there were still some regions with proactive and resourceful education officials and local chief executives who were able to continue allowing PROBE fellows to ‘undertake training elsewhere’. Another issue brought up was the timely issuances of fund allotments to PROBE projects that were always coursed through the channels of the bureaucracy. The international official pointed out frequent delays in fund releases and the adverse impact these had on the effective implementation of teacher training undertaken by PROBE fellows.

The project gets stalled, that’s what happens. And another issue is related to the travel allowance for their training, that would be interesting to know about these teachers, how they cope with the expenses for training other teachers in their respective areas and outside their areas, notwithstanding the delays in the bureaucracy, because they are so committed. (Personal Communication, November 2003)

**Causes of Corruption**

Figure 2, completed on the basis of observations and interviews with different actors and analyses of official documentation, reports and press releases outlines the corruption-prone linkages within the bureaucracy. Corruption linkages uncovered seven points in which corrupt practices may have occurred. The Commission on Audit – COA official reports and newspaper accounts have not uncovered any reported corrupt practices in the conduct of PROBE thus far. However, based on field interviews conducted, cases of corrupt practices have been uncovered.
Cases of nepotism and favouritism occur in the selection of possible PROBE fellows in the stages between the submission of the candidates’...
names from the School, District, Division and Regional Offices. The final approval of candidates for the PROBE training is made at the national level with AusAID representatives, which severely limits influence-peddling and thus acts as a natural barrier for nepotism and favouritism to occur.

Cases of lack of transparency in the use of PROBE funds occurs within the jurisdiction of school administrators and principals, the District, Division and Regional PROBE representative offices which have been provided with funds (from both the national government and the PROBE) for program implementation. The PROBE fellows reported delays in the reimbursement of expenses and a general lack of awareness on what actually happens to the PROBE funds that they heard were allocated to PROBE Districts and Schools.

Monopoly of Opportunities

It can be argued that the DepEd Central Office is one of the biggest staging grounds for corruption. Chua discovered that politicians ‘who hold the power of the purse and can block appointments and initiate investigations also poke their fingers in the DECS procurement pie’ (2001: 59). A national DepEd senior official related that ‘corruption is so embedded’ in the system that fundamental changes are necessary. He confided that some time ‘in early 2003, he received a phone call from a member of the Philippine legislature instructing him to select a particular local private publisher – whose price quotations were too expensive over several international publishers whose quotations were lower – since doing so according to the caller, would result in monetary rewards for the senior official and would be a contribution to patriotism and national interest for preferring a local over a foreign supplier’. The senior official flatly rejected the offer and warned the legislator of consequences for interfering with DepEd functions (Personal Communication, November 2003).

In the case of PROBE a monopoly happens when the school is tasked to identify candidates for selection as potential PROBE fellows for the coveted overseas training in Australia. One PROBE fellow related her experience in which some DepEd Officials abused their monopoly power to commit corruption. The PROBE fellow indicated that during the selection of possible candidates, ‘she was informed by her school principal that based on the ranking she was number five out of five possible candidates for the region’. After a week, her school principal
told her that she was displaced in the list because a ‘god-daughter of the Regional Director’ was placed on the list instead. Upon hearing this, the teacher wrote letters to the Regional Office and to AusAID demanding an explanation. After several weeks, she was reinstated in the list and eventually made it to the final cut of teachers sent to Australia (Personal Communication, December 2004). Another PROBE fellow expressed her confusion at why a teacher ‘who came highly recommended by all three PROBE fellows in the school as a potential Assistant In-Service fellow (AISF)’ was bypassed for someone else. It was only later that she ‘discovered that the teacher assigned was the god-daughter of the school principal’. When this example of disregard for meritocracy and influence peddling and ‘other similar cases were pointed out by the other PROBE fellows, the school principal dismissed the allegations’. What happened next was a protracted teachers’ strike that lasted for a week. The strike ended when proper restitution and compromise was made between the school principal and the striking teachers spearheaded among others by the four PROBE fellows’ (Personal Communication, December 2004).

These experiences are reminiscent of the findings of Chua on corruption at the DepEd when she concluded that ‘largely because of political patronage and payoffs, a number of people unfit for the teaching profession end up teaching in and running public schools’ (1999).

Monopoly situations in schools are not necessarily concerned solely with dispensing sanctions, authority or selection. Prevailing office practices and norms within a school environment can sometimes also cause similar exclusive control. One of the PROBE fellows related her immediate experience prior to being chosen. ‘After participating in a conference at another city, she was asked to sign a document stating fraudulent amounts of expenses for reimbursement’. She refused and was ‘reprimanded not only by her school principal but by the rest of her colleagues for being so difficult and for not conforming to office norms and procedures and was even warned of dire consequences’. This institutionalized corruption is similar to the findings uncovered by Chua where ‘cheating becomes compartmentalized and subtle’ and where ‘the superior and the subordinate act out their respective roles according to a defined script’ (1999). The PROBE fellow’s experience of extortion ended though after her request for transfer to another school was granted. She was fortunate to land in a school that respected ‘merit and good performance’ and was eventually nominated and became a PROBE fellow (Personal Communication, November 2004).
On the other hand, a noteworthy feature of PROBE is absence of monopoly in crucial stages of implementation. An example of this is the selection of PROBE fellows or in-service fellows above the regional and division level of DepEd. Instead of the controls of sanctions and operative procedures being placed on one agency, the PROBE experience is a welcome contrast:

The identification of ISFs followed a rigid selection criterion prepared by the Bureau of Elementary Education (BEE), Bureau of Secondary Education (BSE) and the Project Monitoring Unit (PMU), where the applicants had to go through three rounds of screening. The selection was conducted at the regional/division levels: (1) Paper Evaluation I – focused on assessing pre-requisite skills and preparation; (2) Paper Evaluation II – focused on using a scoring system on performance undertaken by candidates and (3) Writing Task and Interview – completion of exam and interview conducted by BEE, BSE, Regional and PMU staff. (AusAID, 2001)

This consistent and regular coordination made certain that PROBE actors followed the mandated operative procedures. The RLMC within PROBE is another example of a functional partnership. The PROBE fellow explained that the centre became the focal point ‘where everything is pouring in as if the centre is merging the three other components’ (Personal Communication, Dec. 2004). This convergence would be a highly credible reason for the overriding importance of ‘instructional materials’ from the perspective of almost all the PROBE fellows interviewed. Another probable reason for the confluence of the three other PROBE components at the RLMC would be its somewhat ‘unique’ nature. It was still an integral part of the DepEd bureaucracy functioning within the chain of command of the hierarchy. However, being a programme, it enjoyed certain ‘special features’, for it had additional funding from AusAID going through the DepEd hierarchy. In addition, the RLMC had a specific individual referred to as the Regional Long Term Advisor (RLTA), employed by the Australian Management Consultant team hired by AusAID to be the implementing arm. The RLTA communicated directly with PROBE fellows working at the RLMC and in the schools. Moreover, the RLTA, being technically ‘an outsider’ could generate more rapid and relevant suggestions for decisions to be made by the joint policy-making bodies of the DepEd (represented by EDPITAF) and AusAID.

The provision of ‘learning materials’ was not only greatly appreciated by PROBE fellows but also by DepEd officials at the district, division
and regional offices. A Visayas DepEd senior official stated that ‘for the teachers, because of the support and the materials that I have given to those teachers by way of the RLMCs, hopefully they do not need to be conscious nor anxious about the things that they need, because the RLMCs who manufacture the instructional materials already generously provide them’ (Personal Communication, October 2004). The Luzon DepEd supply officer reiterated: ‘I believe and being the supervisor, I am letting the English teachers in the field continue using the PROBE INSET materials, at the high school’s TSU, given by the PROBE-RLMC’ (Personal Communication, December 2004).

In the schools, vital learning materials were similarly not under the monopolistic control by certain actors. Classroom practitioners interviewed in the three case areas never failed to mention how often they would frequent the ‘very accessible’ PROBE TSUs in their respective schools. Being the repository of learning materials, that is, reference books, photocopiers and audio-video equipment, the TSU provided a useful source of information to other teachers. The Luzon school principal claimed that accessibility to PROBE resources alleviated the poor ‘conditions of the rooms, [and] the lack of the textbooks’. On the part of the teachers, the TSU and the availability of PROBE fellows helped them gain a deeper understanding of the interactive teaching strategies that make students become ‘engaged with educational materials that really help them in explaining the objectives of the lesson’. He added that ‘it was a great time and opportunity for the school to be a PROBE school with its own TSU. It is an honour for this school, I should say, so that the teachers and students gain a lot’ (Personal Communication, December 2004).

A shared leadership and partnership in implementation as key features of PROBE minimized monopoly control of the actors involved in it. PROBE encouraged leadership in its local participating units. However these opportunities for leadership were located in its core area: provision of education and training and not on the arbitrary allocation of personnel benefits and allowances. This is clearly evidenced in the partner institutes of the PROBE.

One of the pillars of the implementation of PROBE was the TEIs, recognized national centres of excellence that were tapped to assist in the training and monitoring of selected teachers who would form the vanguard of exceptionally-trained teachers mobilized to train others. The Mindanao university administrator described the general features of the mission they performed in teacher development as a PROBE partner:
The scope of the Mindanao PROBE TEI included not only their ‘own teachers,’ but also ‘teachers outside.’ The PROBE TEI’s were able to provide training to teachers through their ‘Continuing Professional Education seminars’ – an efficacious project whose extent reached ‘teachers throughout the region.’ (Personal Communication, November 2004)

This is repeated by the Luzon university administrator. He described that PROBE fellows – Philippine teachers trained in Australia and then trained likewise in Philippine TEIs – shared teaching ‘strategies’. He explained that on a regular basis, the University served as a venue for teachers from other parts of the region who had come over ‘and the PROBE fellows introduced certain strategies to teachers and they have had demonstration teachings’ (Personal Communication, December 2004).

**Discretion Compliance**

The article posits that the vulnerability of resources and the lack of adherence to functions can be causes of corruption. Excessive and abusive discretion on the part of actors over vulnerable resources lead to corruption. An example of this is related by the DepEd supply officer in Luzon.

He confided that an existing provision in textbook delivery stipulates that private publishers who cannot distribute textbooks directly to the beneficiaries can give a ‘delivery fee of Ps. 1 per book’ to the corresponding DepEd office to ‘facilitate delivery’. He stated that some of his colleagues ‘negotiate an increase in the delivery fee’ (Personal Communication, December 2004) with some private publishers in order to ‘prioritize delivery’. He continued by saying that these unscrupulous individuals ‘after pocketing the extra amount’ do not actually ‘lift a finger in hastening deliveries’. Instead, they advise the supply officers of respective schools to come to the office to collect their books – usually at the expense of the respective schools. He reiterated that the use of ‘bonus’ or what may be referred to as speed money is commonplace particularly in his office. He personally declared that he does not participate in such ‘hocus-pocus’ but does not likewise ‘rock the boat’ for fear of agitating others. This account corroborates Chua’s findings on ‘kickbacks’ enjoyed by regional and division offices as these ‘transact directly with the private sector’ in the case of textbook purchases and deliveries (2001: 66).
A PROBE fellow shared an experience that highlights discretionary abuse leading to corruption. She related that ‘funds that were specifically earmarked for the use of PROBE fellows – in this case mobile phones for their use in outreach training – were improperly used’. She and the other PROBE fellows in school were ‘dismayed to learn and actually see that the school principal, the supply officer, the accountant and a Department Chairperson of the school had new mobile phones’. Chua also exposed other similar situations where the complexity of the organization gives rise to discretion leading to a situation conducive for corruption. She argued that due to the sheer size of the DepEd bureaucracy, it ‘fails to monitor every employee, school and office under it, especially in hard-to-reach areas’ (1999). The school principal at this remote PROBE School is a testimony to such unmonitored discretionary practice. This brazen example of embezzlement of PROBE funds prompted the PROBE fellows to submit formal complaints to the higher authorities and to AusAID Manila. She explained that ‘several months later, the phones were taken back by AusAID’ (Personal Communication, December 2004).

A remarkable trait of PROBE is the precise implementation procedure it follows. PROBE established specific, guidelines and functions for its implementation:

The Project Implementation Document (PID) of PROBE was prepared by PMU and the Australian Technical Group led by the Philippine Project Manager and the Australian Team Leader, respectively, at the start of the Project. The PID was submitted to and approved by AusAID and the GOP authorities. Upon acceptance, the PID became the base document for project management and monitoring. (AusAID, 2001)

A frequent comment on the strength of PROBE is the efficiency in which the project was completed. A considerable number of the fellows identified smooth ‘budget’ operations as a key success factor. The Luzon PROBE fellow who was formerly assigned to the RLMC said that ‘our budget had easier access, it’s really fast, materials are fast and we’re providing all the needs of the teachers there’ (Personal Communication, December 2004). The Luzon university administrator supported these observations by making comparisons:

Okay, first, I think the funding, it was properly managed. I mean we have had so many programmes and it was very difficult for us to get money from the Commission on Higher Education (CHED). Our PROBE scholars would already get their allowances, while our other scholars have not received theirs.
yet. So, from that perspective, I think management of finances under PROBE was done very well. (Personal Communication, December 2004)

In spite of the safeguards that were promulgated by PROBE, the inefficiencies of the DepEd bureaucracy still managed to dampen PROBE effectiveness. An implementation difficulty identified by PROBE fellows was the ‘costliness of undertaking teacher training’ as part of their duties. Ideally, PROBE fellows should not spend anything for teacher training because these were covered by supplementary funds from PROBE through DepEd. However, the reality was that securing these funds through the rigid bureaucratic layers of the department was difficult. A Visayas PROBE fellow commented that: ‘we also need to look for the money to spend for training in going to other schools and in order to do these we have to support our training plans with many papers’ (Personal Communication, October 2004). A personal account from a Mindanao PROBE fellow communicated quite eloquently the travails that PROBE fellows needed to go through in order to conduct teacher training: ‘I’m spending my money unwillingly because I am responsible and I have to spend my money in advance if I wait for the money from the higher ups it would take so long and by then the teachers who need my assistance would have been disadvantaged’ (Personal Communication, November 2004).

Although discretionary abuse was limited in PROBE due to the built-in PID, compliance to several provisions of the return service contract was difficult to fulfil on the part of PROBE fellows. A common concern raised is the duty of writing the INSETs. A Mindanao DepEd senior official, who is in charge of monitoring PROBE activities recalled the complaints: ‘we were not trained to write teacher support materials, we were only trained in Australia to learn different teaching strategies’ (Personal Communication, November 2004). The DepEd official pointed out that for the school teachers to find time within their busy schedules to prepare INSETs was very difficult. Nonetheless, PROBE fellows were encouraged to prepare INSETs. Moreover, fellows are not expected to receive any form of remuneration for whatever INSETs they may have produced (Personal Communication, June 2004).

The Luzon university administrator of one of the TEIs attached to PROBE discussed a key issue related to compliance difficulties experienced by PROBE fellows. She mentioned that there were mainly several types of teachers who were sent to PROBE. The first type and the most numerous are the public school teachers and the second were the lecturers
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of universities – chiefly from TEIs. These two types were obliged to comply with a return service contract which means the regular conduct of training and the preparation of INSETs. For the fellows attached to TEIs, these chores were not difficult to perform. However, as correctly pointed out by the university administrator, the busy and relatively inflexible schedules of the school teachers made these two components of the PROBE return service contract, ‘a constantly challenging obligation to fulfil’ (Personal Communication, December 2004).

Although PROBE fellows generally produced INSETs for use in schools, and subsequently disseminated to the beneficiary schools (or satellite schools) the spectre of discretionary abuse in relation to the INSETs and on the part of non-PROBE schools frequently occurred. Aside from the difficulty of resources and time needed to prepare for the INSETs, the Visayas PROBE fellow, on contract at the Visayas RLMC, raised an equally vital concern in relation to the INSETs. After reflecting on the fact that some of the INSETs are simply ‘stowed away in a corner’ in some schools, the PROBE fellow brought up several key questions: ‘Are the materials really used by the teachers? Are they really used for the students’ (Personal Communication, October 2004)? An equally relevant question raised by the Luzon University Administrator also deserved serious consideration: ‘But then do they know or understand the concept of using the materials effectively’ (Personal Communication, December 2004)?

Accountability Incentives

Textbooks and supplementary materials worth Rs 769,649 were not received by the Designated Property Custodians of the Districts from the Division Offices. Although Memorandum Receipts (MRs) were prepared and signed by the Designated Property Custodians, they executed sworn statements/certifications stating that some of the books indicated there were not actually delivered. These violate Sec. 444 of the Government Accounting and Auditing Manual Vol. II. (COA, 2001: 36–40, emphases added)

Three supply officers from two of the case areas described similar experiences that point to the existence of fraud in relation to textbook delivery. The Mindanao supply officer related that ‘books that were delivered to her, did not comply with the stipulated Basic Education Curriculum (BEC)’. She also confided that upon requesting for a copy of the allocation list from the DepEd Office, she was told that ‘it would be coming soon,
but six months later it has not arrived yet’. She related that even without
the stipulated allocation list, she ‘signed the Memorandum of Receipt
(MR) since the private publishers and an official from the DepEd office
assured her that the books were in order’. She had recently vacated her
position as supply officer and has focused on her job as school teacher
(Personal Communication, November 2004). Another Mindanao supply
officer described that he ‘could not reconcile the disparities between the
BEC books and those that have been recently delivered to the school’.

He confided that he signed the MR because the teachers were ‘urgently
asking for textbooks since the school already started for more than six
months’. He was assured by the private publisher representative and
the DepEd Office that everything was in order. He has requested the
school principal to relieve him of his duties as supply officer to focus on
his work as school teacher (Personal Communication, November 2004).
Both signed the MRs even when the delivered products were not in order.
Chua uncovered this phenomenon where suspected corrupt officials would
invoke the ‘Arias doctrine, meaning they signed documents on a purely
ministerial basis or by claiming that decisions were made on a collegial
basis and not on an individual basis’ (1999: 147).

Lack of accountability in the proper use of the funds may have actually
occurred in the case of PROBE. A PROBE fellow described that ‘she
and other PROBE fellows have perennial difficulties in reimbursing ex-
penses that they made for their outreach training’. She expressed her in-
dignation, when she discovered – upon interviewing the school accountant
– that the PROBE funds were available, but that the school principal
was re-channelling them for other purposes – the beautification and pur-
chase of computers for the Office of the Principal’. Asked what she did
upon realizing the misuse of the PROBE funds, she replied that she was
on a government scholarship for graduate studies and was unwilling to
compromise anything by ‘rocking the boat’, thus she remained silent about
the issue (Personal Communication, November 2004).

Another case of lack of accountability is related by a PROBE fellow
from Luzon. She described that in December 2001, ‘the last month of the
PROBE, the entire region had a lavish overnight excursion at a resort
in the north’. Food was plentiful and even ‘jackets and giveaways were
generously handed out’. She inquired from the DepEd officials present
as to why there were no AusAID representatives and the response she
received was that the ‘they did not know about this activity, and that they
were just liquidating the remaining balance of the PROBE funds before the end of the year'. She ‘was saddened with the misuse of funds that could have been used for more seminars in her poverty-stricken region instead of being spent by unscrupulous DepEd officials for a junket’ (Personal Communication, December 2004). This observation confirms one of the key arguments that Chua raised about the propensity towards corruption at the DepEd particularly in situations where both central and field offices are faced with a situation where ‘there is so much money’, that ‘drives officials into a spending frenzy’ and where such abuses are not subject to regular accountability procedures (Chua, 1999).

An exceptional feature that PROBE possessed was its well-established accountability scheme. Since, project management and monitoring, comprised the fourth component of PROBE, proper implementation accountability was assured.

A group of ten people representing each of the Department’s bureaus, the CHED and the original 4 participating regions were identified to form a group called the Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) fellows who were directly involved in the establishment of a monitoring system for the Project...Periodic reports from the project regional and divisional offices were submitted to the PMU in various forms that were consolidated and submitted to AusAID and other Government of the Philippines (GOP) partner agencies. Monitoring visits in the field were regularly undertaken by the PMU to validate paper reports and gather substantial project implementation updates and concerns from the project stakeholders. (AusAID, 2001)

In actuality AusAID through PROBE, was primarily motivated to provide aid and assistance to DepEd. As a result, the issues that AusAID as the partner agency experienced in relation to the unique contexts of the DepEd bureaucracy are not directly exposed to the most corrupt activities (that is, materials procurement). Instead, these implementing issues deal with the contextual limitations inherent in the DepEd bureaucracy. These problems were in the area of organizational contexts where local discretionary power and authority contravened PROBE implementation. Even though PROBE fellows tried to perform their functions dutifully, their superiors oftentimes obstructed their efforts. Moreover due to the absence of proper incentives schemes, there was no motivation for others (non-PROBE teachers and non-PROBE school administrators) to cooperate with the goals and objectives of PROBE.
Reflections

The experience of PROBE has proven to be an unusual success story in the otherwise poor implementation performance of the DepEd. Despite being part of a national agency that suffers from systemic corruption, it has managed to maintain a functional shared arrangement among key stakeholders, with predictable manageable processes and outcomes. More importantly, it has established a remarkable degree of transparency. The experiences of PROBE detailed in the accounts of the actors highlight the fractured and diversified ‘implementation process’ (Bowe, Ball and Gold, 1992) and how these are mediated by the ‘cultural and political histories’ of the stakeholders (Ball, 2008).

The operational demands of PROBE are characterized by a shared mission among its stakeholders. Similarly, the implementers practise a proactive approach which allows them to overcome the systemic weaknesses of the DepEd. The nature and availability of resources of PROBE are likewise exceptionally managed as contrasted with other existing programmes at the DepEd. Key planners and implementers of PROBE adopted a focused administration. Furthermore, meritocracy and instilling a sense of duty and mission among key stakeholders proved powerful in overcoming systemic deficiencies. Power and shared authority in PROBE possessed unique features typified by a ‘grassroots moving up’ system as opposed to the traditional top-down approach prevalent in the DepEd. The investment that has been made by PROBE on its key implementers has also enriched stakeholders.

The positive elements of the implementation of PROBE provided ample safeguards against corrupt practices. Monopoly opportunities are minimized due to a highly-coordinated approach. Discretion is limited by clear implementation guidelines while compliance seems to generally function. Accountability and incentives to perform are similarly built-in the implementation program – though not without difficulties.

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NOTES

1. The LET is a national board examination for prospective teachers (usually a graduate of BA or BS Education degrees or those with sufficient number of education units) to become an accredited member of the corps of teachers.

2. In order to honor the confidence of those persons who were interviewed in the course of this research, their names and complete job designations are omitted here. Nonetheless, where data source is reported from an interview, the interviewee is identified by their position.

3. One of the fundamental agreements forged between AusAID and DepEd in the implementation of PROBE was to ‘de-load’ PROBE fellows. This means that PROBE fellows would be given less teaching and administrative work in their respective schools in order to conduct training of teachers and to write In Service Education for Teachers (INSET) resource materials.

4. Assistant In-Service fellows (AISF) are trained by PROBE fellows within the country. AISFs also participate in training sessions in Manila, enjoy periods of de-loading and are entrusted as apprentices to PROBE fellows. The AISFs are usually nominated by the school principal based on merit and ranking and upon recommendation from current PROBE fellows.

5. The allocation list is the official enumeration of books assigned per level per subject that emanates from the DepEd.

REFERENCES


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