The Philippine Department of Education: challenges of policy implementation amidst corruption

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This inquiry interrogates the experiences of local implementation actors of the Philippine Department of Education as they navigate through reform efforts within systemic corruption. Departing from dominant analytical paradigms centred on patron–client frameworks, the article introduces the typology of complex linkages where local actors play their roles as they find themselves trapped in between the powerful discourse of reform on the one hand and corruption on the other. Empirical findings of how local actors make sense of the challenges of reform amidst corruption as well as reflections towards greater analytical clarity are proposed.

Keywords: Philippines; educational governance; corruption; implementation

Introduction

The Philippine Department of Education (DepEd) is a historic institution in Philippine public administration. On the one hand, DepEd is the biggest bureaucracy in the Philippines with over half a million people employed (Abad, 2005). On the other hand, it is considered to be one of the most corrupt national agencies of the country (Cariño, Iglesias, & Mendoza, 1998).

DepEd suffers greatly from severe implementation deficits. However, this deficit is not uniquely confined to DepEd, as it is a malaise that besieges Philippine public administration. A succinct analysis of one of the major implementation pitfalls bedevilling the Philippines is that “it operates under conditions of extreme scarcity” (Quah, 1987, p. xiii). The size, scope and vast differences that characterize the geographic and cultural landscape render the bureaucracy in a situation where it experiences difficulties in delivering much needed services to its populace. What makes matters more acute is that within a situation of “extreme scarcity”, the Philippines has in the past – and most especially beginning during the 1950s till the present – suffered from chronic and debilitating corruption. The problem of corruption in the country has been described as “a way of life” (Quah, 2003, p. 81). In a recent Transparency International study on the “Ten Most Corrupt Leaders”, the Philippines earned the dubious distinction of having two ex-Presidents: Ferdinand Marcos and Joseph Ejercito Estrada (Hodess, Inowlocki, Rodriguez, & Wolfe, 2004). Quah adds that “corruption is a serious obstacle to policy implementation because scarce resources are wasted on bribes and not on the prescribed activities, and delays are quite common and do not contribute to the swift implementation of public policies” (p. 59). A serious attempt to analyse policy implementation deficits in a Philippine setting requires an explicit recognition of the almost ubiquitous impact of corruption. This article contextualizes the issue of corruption and

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implementation as it occurs in DepEd by focusing on the experiences of stakeholders – as local actors – in the education landscape.¹

Philippine education historical panorama: continuity and change
The roots of the Philippine education crises can be traced to the American occupation. Seizing control over a majority of the islands, the Americans retained the system of government during the 400-year Spanish colonial occupation. It was highly centralized; local political power rested only at the municipality, where church, government offices, and centres of local commerce were located. The barrios – composed of one or more barangays – or the pre-Hispanic governmental units remained isolated. In education, power was centralized along two tiers: the Superior Advisory Body in the centre of the country and the Division Offices at the municipal levels. The barrios where schools were located had no “form of government at all” (Powell & Wyndham, 1931, p. 6). One indisputable cause of the current malaise afflicting Philippine education is that schools in the barrios historically became institutionally dependent on the municipal and the national education levels (Powell & Wyndham, 1931).

Not only was political historical emasculation of local units problematic; education programmes introduced in the genesis of Philippine education were also suspect: “The system of education is not based on the culture and the life of the Philippine peoples – its basis is American. Books used are American texts which have been modified and adapted for Filipinos: Had the system grown slowly, it could have been built on native culture and developed to suit native needs” (Powell & Wyndham, 1931, p. 16). The early tremulous history of Philippine bureaucracy had undeniable repercussions on contemporary administration systems.

The birth of the Philippine education system can be traced to the landmark Act 74 “approved on January 21, 1901, that provided in its Article 4 for the creation of a Superior Advisory Board and in its Article 10 for the establishment of a local or municipal advisory board in every organized municipality” (Martin, 1955, p. 4). The Philippines was under the control of the United States government through the American Governor-General. Although it may appear that the creation of local or municipal advisory boards seemed to be moving towards decentralization and a greater sharing of authority with local boards, the early years of Philippine education shows an unmistakeable trait of centralization. An early 20th century account describes the encroachment of the division superintendent:

It is clear from a reading of the law that the board’s duties and powers were very much overshadowed by the decisions of the division superintendent. In fact, the superintendent had the power to suspend, pending investigation, any appointive or elective board member. (Martin, 1955, p. 7)

Several critical transition points in the history of the Philippine education system transpired. One of these is the controversial Monroe Report, praised and lambasted by educators and lawmakers in the 1920s. It was commended because it pointed out and warned against a dangerous path that Philippine education was treading – the populist stance of universal education for all. It was derided because it pointed an accusing finger at politicians who had been identified as meddlesome in Philippine education (Martin, 1955).

The Quezon Educational Survey Committee of 1936 recommended that a “moderate education for a greater number is better for the country than a quality education for a select few” (Martin, 1955, p. 19), a dictum that to this day has become a distinguishing feature of Philippine education – quite the opposite to the Monroe Report recommendations. Similarly, another equally important attribute of Philippine education, the politicization of education, a caution that was raised by the Monroe report, came through (Martin, 1968).
Post-war Philippines saw a continuity of the dangers raised in the Monroe and Quezon Educational Survey of the early twentieth century. High centralization persisted during the Marcos era beginning in the 1970s: “Decision-making and the power of administration still remained distant from the implementing agents on the ground” (Wong, 1973, p. 54). In the 1990s, the Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM) reported on an uncanny resemblance to the situation of Philippine education of the 1970s and the 1900s: “With decentralization, the authority to hire, fire and appoint teachers and janitors has been delegated to the schools division superintendent” (EDCOM, 1991, p. 39). Moreover, severe resource constraints have perennially plagued DepEd. Limited resources compounded by a centralized education system concentrated on the bureaucratic hierarchy rather than in the frontlines drained much needed inputs, exacerbating the dire situation (Macasaet, 2002).

Continued centralization can best be illustrated by analysing several features of DepEd’s organizational structure and manpower. Outlining major challenges facing the organization, former Secretary Abad described its dimensions:

There are 318 officials in the central, regional and division offices nationwide who manage DepEd, the biggest agency of the government. Because of its sheer size and number, it has been managed for the past decades like a typical bureaucracy with policies and programmes from Central Office, headed by an appointed Secretary and his management team, overseeing 16 regions headed by directors supervising 182 divisions headed by superintendents overseeing 41,989 school heads or principals. The bulk and core is its 458,282 teachers; 337,597 elementary and 120,000 high school representing one-third of the entire government workforce of the Philippines. (Abad, 2005, p. 2)

Figure 1 illustrates how a bureaucracy whose numbers reach more than half a million covering 7100 islands is governed in a highly centralized fashion. Power concentrated at the top where decisions on programmes are planned and decided at the highest level does not seem to properly address the uniquely diverse concerns of the disparate regions. For example, 16 Regional Directors (encompassing close to 500,000 superintendents, school heads, principals and teachers) are under the administrative control of the Undersecretary for Operations manned by one full-time Undersecretary and seven staff members.

Notwithstanding the debilitating continuities afflicting the Philippine education system, initiatives for change have been put forward. This is exemplified in the incessant efforts undertaken by DepEd to fine-tune its mandate, particularly in the fast modernizing twenty-first century. One of the more promising attempts was Republic Act (RA) 9155, the Governance in Basic Education Act of 2001 more commonly known as “empowering the School Principals Act”. Aside from a modification of its institutional identity, this was an invitation to break the cycle of centralized education administration that had crippled effective implementation of education for almost a century. Built upon School-Based Management (SBM), this initiative has given birth to the Basic Education Sector Reform Agenda (BESRA) that acknowledges among its key priorities the strengthening of SBM (National Education for All Committee, 2006). Initial results from the reform have been generally inconclusive: some say that significant improvements have occurred (see, e.g., Khattri, Ling, & Jha, 2010; Kimura, 2008) while others indicate challenges still persist (see, e.g., Bautista, Bernardo, & Ocampo, 2008; Caoili-Rodriguez, 2008).

Overview: corruption-implementation analysis
Aside from a highly centralized set-up, DepEd remains one of the most controversial national agencies besieged by recurrent corruption scandals. Chua, of the Philippine Centre for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ), described the magnitude of corruption at DepEd, formerly known as DECS:
Figure 1. Organizational setup of the Department of Education (Source: Department of Education, n.d.).
DECS is fertile ground for corruption because it is oozing with money. Education has always accounted for a huge chunk of government spending. The 1987 Constitution, in fact, made sure it would get the biggest slice of the annual budget. In 1998, Congress gave DECS P86.9 billion or 18.9 percent of the national budget. That’s an allocation of P238 million a day. Money from other sources also flows to the public school system: foreign loans and grants, pork barrel funds of legislators, assistance from local government units, and contributions of parents. (1999, p. 7)

Starting with hiring and training of teachers and provision of adequate classrooms and distribution of essential textbooks to the estimated 15 million schoolchildren, DepEd has been typified by rampant corruption and concomitantly a severe implementation shortage. Corruption at DepEd has been described as “large-scale” and with “tragic results” that have not only “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” (Chua, 1999, p. 52). In order to contextualize this anomaly, the first policy to be reviewed is the nationwide Textbook Development Program (TDP), described as a perennial failure in attaining a 1:1 student to textbook ratio nationwide as pursued by DepEd – an agency described as suffering from systemic corruption. This article uses “systemic corruption” according to Cariño et al.:

Corruption becomes “systemic” when it is undertaken with the knowledge and participation of other civil servants up and down the hierarchy who share in the proceeds of their activities. Under systemic corruption, an informal corruption organization coexists with the formal organization and mandates a quota for all personnel, rates for each person who participates in, shields or abets corruption, and rules for their recruitment, participation and termination. (1998, p. 4)

Systemic corruption also permeates the corps of public school teachers. Chua portrays its insidiousness by stating that “many of the country’s half a million public school teachers are initiated into the culture of corruption at DECS early in their careers” (1999, p. 73). In contrast, the second policy to be analysed is the Program on Basic Education (PROBE), a teacher training programme that seems to have been spared from the crippling effects of corruption and acclaimed as a towering success.

Both TDP and PROBE receive substantial amounts of financial assistance, in loans and grants from international agencies and from Local Government Units (LGUs). Chua underscores these huge outlays: the Programme for the Development of Education (PRODED) funded by the World Bank for DECS from 1973 to 1988 totalled US$217.16 million. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) issued a US$70 million loan in 1988 while the Canadian government also forked out US$12 million for printing of high school textbooks. Starting from the year 2000, the DECS also received fresh loans from the World Bank and the ADB for the Third Elementary Education Project (TEEP) and the Secondary Education Development and Improvement Programme (SEDIP). Philippine Congress and LGUs give financial assistance to the DECS through pork barrel funds which “also included the Congressional Initiative Allocations (CIA), which were intended to pay for projects inserted in the approved budget of the agency through the initiative of the legislators” (Chua, 1999, p. 20). The LGUs also provide additional financial help to the DepEd through the Special Education Fund (SEF) and the General Fund of LGUs:

SEF is drawn from proceeds of the one percent added to real property taxes supporting education. This is disbursed by local school boards for teachers’ allowances, construction and maintenance of classrooms, and procurement of instructional materials and school supplies. In 1997, the SEF nationwide totalled P4.3 billion; it grows annually at 15 percent. (Chua, 1999, p. 21)

The article uses the typology of Heidenheimer (1970) in analysing corruption. Public office-centred definitions that are about forsaking accepted public norms for private benefits, market-centred definitions that are concerned with maximization of gains by
public officials utilizing market supply and demand, and public interest-centred 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 which accompanies the implementation of the school materials and teacher training programmes of the DepEd. Several in-house studies conducted by the Philippine Congress embodied in the multi-volume EDCOM report (1991) pinpointed widespread corruption – ranging from public office-centred, market-centred and public interest-centred types within the DepEd. As the biggest public bureaucracy with the highest percentage of national budget allocation, DepEd typifies the abuse of national wealth that violates the common good. As such, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) definition of corruption as “the misuse of public power, office or authority for private benefit – through bribery, extortion, influence peddling, nepotism, fraud, speed money or embezzlement” (1998, p. 22), which encompasses both corrupt practices in the public and private sectors that straddle DepEd operations – also serves valuable analytical purpose.

Problematic areas identified in the EDCOM report included the lack of accountability that hounds the overly centralized administrative systems of DepEd, the monopoly of DepEd, and the discretion of its field officials as contributory factors to corruption (EDCOM, 1991). Klitgaard’s formula “C ¼ M þ D 2 A, corruption equals monopoly plus discretion minus accountability” (1997, p. 500) provides an important basis to the observations made by the EDCOM on the possible causes of corruption in Philippine education. This is especially significant in scrutinizing the current status of DepEd, which seems to possess these three core ingredients for corruption to become widespread.

The article problematizes policy implementation within systemic corruption by critiquing “dominant paradigms” – consisting primarily of patron–client frameworks (PCF) – employed by scholars in Philippine political analysis (Reyes, 2009a, p. 523). Thus, the article responds to calls by Ileto (2002) and Kerkvliet (1995) to interrogate Philippine politics and public administration beyond existing models that are “trapped in a modernist ‘concept of development’ discourse” (Ileto, 1997, p. 98). By focusing on the experiences of local actors at the forefront of educational governance in a Philippine setting; the article provides a typology of “complex linkages that transpire in the intersections of corruption and implementation” (Reyes, 2009a, p. 523). The article argues that the language of reform characteristic of the changes and continuities in educational governance is one of the powerful narratives in the Philippines; the other one is systemic corruption. Local implementation actors in the education sector wedged within these two forceful narratives make sense of their experiences by carrying out their roles intersubjectively within localized “policyscapes” (Carney, 2008, p. 63), which can be situated within complex linkages (Reyes, 2009b). In undertaking corruption-implementation analysis, the article provides a more nuanced, layered and complex picture of the challenges faced by implementation actors. (See e.g. Hack, 2004.)

Corruption-implementation analysis: perspectives from local actors

Sixty-three key participants were selected in the attempt to contextualize corruption and implementation at DepEd. Semi-structured interviews with respondents were complemented by observations and document research. Key participants were categorized into six groups of representatives: (1) DepEd (broken down to national, regional, division and district); (2) legislators; (3) private sector (broken down to the three main geographic areas); (4) civil society organization or CSO (broken down to the three main geographic areas); (5) international organization; and (6) local government (broken down to the three main geographic areas). Pattern matching and explanation building during extensive
content analysis was used. Testimonies given by the respondents subjected to content analysis were triangulated with official reports from DepEd, the Commission on Audit and independent investigative reports.

Inferential analysis: status of implementation and incidences of corruption

The 63 interviewees were asked to rank the status of implementation of their respective programmes from failure to functional (i.e., TDP and PROBE) and to rank the incidences of corruption that they encounter from never to always. Table 1 compiles measures of association between implementation and corruption.

Cross-tabulations produced statistically significant results $p < 0.05$. Furthermore, a closer examination of Gamma$^3(g)$ reveals a negative yet strong value of 2.874. In other words, based on the rankings done by the interviewees, corruption has a strong negative relationship with implementation: the greater the incidences of corruption, the greater the likelihood that the status of implementation becomes a failure (see, e.g., Liebetrau, 1993).

This study utilizes van Meter and van Horn’s (1975) seminal elements of policy and Chase’s (1979) difficulties in implementation in reviewing the effectiveness of the implementation of the TDP and PROBE. These elements have been integrated to form the construct referred to as the factors of implementation (Reyes, 2009b). These elements are seen as an interactive progression, which not only confines itself to the process but more importantly recognizes the roles of the actor and the context of the implementation sites. The article also notes and is sensitive to possible interactions and dynamics that transpire between the deep-rooted bureaucracy and networks of actors found within the hierarchy (Reyes, 2002). In studying the implementation experience of the two policies, the delicate pendulum that swings between the influence of the entrenched bureaucracy and emerging networks will be carefully analysed.

Policy standards and objectives

Would it be safe to say that the incidences of corruption impact on the status of implementation of the programmes, as can be seen from Table 1? A better gauge of the causal relationship between the two variables could be approximated if other possible intervening variables were controlled. Subsequent sections deal with this scenario.

DepEd faces enormous challenges in implementing its mandate on two of its major deliverables: teacher training and textbook provision. This has prevailed since the 1970s until the present (Camagan, 2002; Lapuz, 1996; Richter, 1987; Yanos, 1994). The overwhelming implications from previous studies indicate that (1) severe technological incapacities, (2) resource inadequacies, and (3) incongruence among key actors grievously impede successful implementation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status of implementation</th>
<th>Incidences of corruption (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Never</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problematic</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional</td>
<td>34.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>36.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Inferential analysis: implementation and corruption controlling for bureaucracy

Table 1 reveals that there is a statistically significant negative relationship between implementation and corruption. In Table 2, this initial relationship is tested further by controlling for one variable – the respondents’ programme participation. The cross-tabulations produced statistically significant results \( p < 0.05 \) except for simultaneous programme participation for both TDP and PROBE with a non-significant value of (0.157) indicating no meaningful inferences can be derived for participants who participate in both TDP and PROBE. Similar to the zero-order table (Table 1), an examination of \( \gamma \) (20.380 for TDP and 20.701 for PROBE) reveal negative values between implementation and corruption with programme participation as a controlling variable.

The programme participation variable registered significantly higher and lower partials respectively for implementation failure compared to the zero-order table (Table 1). It can be deduced that programme participation manifests an interaction effect between the variables. TDP (higher ranking of failure) and PROBE (higher ranking of functionality) participation registered higher partials. It can be deduced that these two are conditions where the original negative relationship between the dependent and independent variable is relatively stronger. This would be substantiated by the qualitative cases described in the next sections.

Inter-organizational communication

One of the more serious pitfalls of DepEd is the frequent systemic failures in inter-organizational communication. For the huge bureaucracy, communication breakdown severely incapacitates implementation performance. The accounts taken from key actors involved in TDP and PROBE provide a glimpse of the breadth and depth of communication failures.

As far as DepEd is concerned, there are many layers of authority before that particular amount of money reaches down to the teachers themselves. In my experience with the department, a memo that gives the needed training funds for teachers would require 27 signatories before such request would eventually reach the teachers concerned. (Personal communication, November 2003)

Table 2. Status of implementation and incidences of corruption controlling for programme participation.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Programme participation/status of implementation</th>
<th>Incidents of corruption (%)</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Never</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TDP</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problematic</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROBE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problematic</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional</td>
<td>65.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>65.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TDP &amp; PROBE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problematic</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>0.0</td>
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The demands that need to be performed by the Instructional Materials Corporation Secretariat (IMCS), a staff agency of DepEd tasked with overseeing the entire textbook programme, are tremendous. For school year “2004 alone, there was an estimated 15 million schoolchildren taking up an average of six subjects, located in 3000 high schools and 3000 district offices spread all over the Philippine islands” (personal communication, December 2004). Although the figures are daunting, what is even more staggering is the set of figures within IMCS itself: The office is “composed of 30 officers and staff, 15 of which are hired on a contractual basis”. A contractual DepEd senior official who has been with IMCS since the very beginning of the agency stated that the office is “facing tough times, there are very few of us, but the amount of work that we are supposed to accomplish is so great, in fact, you can take a look at our mandate and you will see what I mean” (personal communication, June 2004). Another national DepEd senior official expressed one of the major frustrations that troubled the IMCS – the perennial failure of compliance of actors involved in the TDP. She recognized that the delivery of textbooks and the desired goal were “clear-cut” tangible outputs. Pressed as to what possible reasons hamper effective compliance and general lack of communication with field offices, the senior official responded by saying: “I don’t know” (personal communication, November 2003).

The worrisome implication here is that the DepEd agency tasked to provide advice to the policy makers and implementers of the textbook delivery programme was unfortunately also unaware of the causes of failures that continue to bedevil such an important educational service. Is the lack of awareness of the IMCS on the root causes of the problem due to their distance with respect to the field offices? Or is it because of an inherent confusion as to their roles: purely secretariat, secretariat plus line functions, or line agency masquerading as a secretariat?

Resources

Previous historical analysis of the DepEd pointed out resource gaps that have characterized the bureaucracy since its inception in the early 1900s (Martin, 1955, 1968; Sotto, 1999). The testimonies from classroom practitioners in the different case areas underscore the seriousness of resource deficits plaguing DepEd that hinder effective implementation.

Across different levels of the DepEd hierarchy, a universal aspect is constantly observed and encountered – the gross imbalance between tremendous demands of education and the oftentimes ineffective capacity of the organization to address these. From the level of the national office, one of the biggest concerns is the training of teachers: “Of the almost half a million public school teachers we have, a very small percentage who have received adequate teacher preparation training” (personal communication, December 2004). Another issue that has beleaguered DepEd is teacher shortage. Some concrete steps have been taken in the past (e.g., raising the minimum wage of teachers and aggressive recruitment, and posting teachers at priority areas in the country) but as observed by the international organization official: “there’s still a problem and we know there’s still some shortages in many areas especially in the remote areas” (personal communication, December 2004).

The confounding scope that the national headquarters of DepEd needs to deal with is replicated at the school and district levels. The Mindanao DepEd supply officer, whose professional preparation was a bachelor’s degree in accountancy, has been at the position for eight years. After two years as a teacher, he received the additional assignment as supply officer of the school and the district; he has never had any formal training in management and administration. Currently, he is saddled with acute management responsibilities: “Can you believe that I’m responsible for nine schools and more or less
16,000 pupils and about 400 teachers in the entire district?” (personal communication, November 2004).

Classroom practitioners interviewed in the different case areas presented some of the more common issues they faced in relation to the supply of textbooks. The Luzon classroom practitioner confirmed what almost all the interviewees felt about the availability of vital classroom learning materials: “It’s nice to have several sets of books because they also serve as references, the more textbooks the better” (personal communication, December 2004). Another common issue raised by teachers is the reality of additional work brought about by textbook shortage. The Visayas classroom practitioner elucidated on this dilemma: “We would ask our children to read stories, but if everybody does not have books it would be difficult.” Counterparts from Mindanao stated that as a coping mechanism, what they did with the class work and assignments was to “write it on the board and that would mean added work for the teachers”. Classroom practitioners from Luzon mentioned that some resort to writing the schoolwork on the board but commented that this could be avoided altogether with the availability of books and added that “assignments can be easily checked and you can even use the textbook for the assignment” (personal communication, October–December 2004). Findings from the interviews in the three case areas provided a sketch of the commonalities of experiences classroom practitioners have which are directly related to textbook shortage.

Fieldwork research uncovered a controversy that is intrinsically related to the proper management of textbook resources at DepEd: the widespread multiple-titles phenomenon. Interviews with teachers in the three case areas revealed the incorrigible and pedagogically unsound multiple titles issue. A Visayas classroom practitioner with more than 25 years experience explained that the multiple-title phenomenon is something that she encounters “frequently”. She explained that with so many titles in a given subject for a particular grade level, what would happen is that “there is only one functional book inside the classroom at that very moment” (personal communication, October 2004). The supply officer shared his ideas on this issue. He indicated that there is an inherent lack of co-ordination among different parties involved in the provision of textbooks. He explicitly identified them as different sets of publishers, one from the national level, and two from the city. The LGUs tapping into their SEF, without co-ordinating with DepEd, “procure different titles of books for particular grade levels” that eventually leads to “duplication” such that classrooms would have “different titles for the same subject in the same grade level” (personal communication, December 2004). The lack of co-ordination and the concomitant wastage of resources between different publishers, DepEd field offices and LGUs are characteristics of bureaucratic incompetence. However, if one examines the process carefully, one may deduce that the continual bureaucratic incompetence might actually be seen as recurrent incidences of collusion and corrupt activities between those involved in textbook distribution.

Disposition of implementers

A significant aspect that permeates implementation outputs of DepEd is the disposition of its implementers, which include field offices, LGUs, and even members of civil society. De Vera (2001) and Laquian (1995) highlight differences that exist between national and local implementers. Ortiz (2002) elucidates the role of local empowerment. Findings from the field interviews conducted for this study also reveal the valuable role that the disposition of implementers plays in policy implementation.

PROBE fellows who were interviewed from the three different case areas exhibited a universal trait with regard to their classroom teaching experience: all of them seemed to be confident and unafraid to experiment using different teaching strategies in their classrooms.
From interviews and observations, unmistakeable distinctions could be made between the PROBE and non-PROBE classroom practitioners. Where non-PROBE classroom practitioners expressed “frustration at the perennial textbook shortage and the increase in work on the part of teachers”, the PROBE fellows recognized the ill-effects of the textbook shortage but also acknowledged that “these shortages could be overcome by using In-Service Education Training Packages (INSETs) and for teachers to do research and to use creative teaching strategies” (personal communication, October–December 2004).

Characteristics of implementing agency

Despite gridlocks and delays experienced in implementing PROBE, the international official stated that valuable lessons were learned in the process. One of these is to have “more of the focused country programme strategies like PROBE that worked well as future initiatives in the enhancement of basic education” (personal communication, November 2003). Another important point that was raised by the international official was the need for both partner agencies to continually evolve, in the process “making timely compromises” in order to accomplish the mission. Considering the differences in working culture and disparities in fund allotment, she emphatically stated that these timely compromises were essential for the mission to move forward.

An outstanding trait observed in the interviews in all three case areas was the consensus that PROBE training – both in Australia and back in the Philippines – were valuable and rewarding. Fellows from all three case areas reported that “they were properly welcomed, comfortably housed and taken care of pretty well while overseas.” The Mindanao PROBE fellow stated that while in Australia, “money was never a problem and that food was abundant” (personal communication, October – December 2004). Another Mindanao PROBE fellow commented that “the training in Australia was very rewarding, because when I converted the Australian dollars to Philippine pesos I found out that the allowance that was given me in two weeks was more or less equivalent to my one month pay in the Philippines” (personal communication, November 2004). The Visayas PROBE fellow commented that “the experience in Australia was materially rewarding as well as enriching for teachers” (personal communication, October 2004).

Moreover, a frequent comment on the strength of PROBE was the efficiency in which the project was completed. A considerable number of the fellows identified smooth “budget” operations as one key success factor. The Luzon PROBE fellow, who was formerly assigned to the Regional Learning Materials Centre (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 of how efficient PROBE was compared to other DepEd and the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) programmes that were then happening at the same time (personal communication, December 2004). The praises for PROBE are not unfounded though. A remarkable characteristic of PROBE is the very precise implementation procedure it follows, as embodied in its stakeholder-driven Project Implementation Document (AusAID, 2004).

Economic, social and political conditions

An inescapable fact that faces DepEd and its various line agencies in the successful implementation of its numerous programmes is the dire economic, social and political condition of the countryside where a majority of its beneficiaries reside.
The AusAID strategy is both practical and achievable. Instead of targeting large areas, it identifies “vulnerable areas” – usually the most impoverished regions – and carries out its interventions as far as is practicable. Moreover, the kinds of programmes that they have chosen – teacher training – in order to address their priority concern is a doable project. Teachers, by nature and especially in a Philippine setting, are generally “generous, stable and committed” in their work and are usually not averse to additional supplementary training that they themselves administer to their own students. AusAID’s targeted training interventions, although noble by itself, pale in comparison with the very real needs that the country faces:

There are roughly 480,000 of them and our guess is that less than one percent have actually gone through real training. Everybody has a chance to go through these orientations. But we don’t consider these orientations as training. So the orientation on the basic education curriculum is important. They call it training here but by definition it can’t be training. So the number is I think, you’re lucky if you get 20,000 to 30,000 teachers who actually go through training. (Personal communication, November 2003)

Reforms amidst corruption: perspectives from local actors

Documented accounts of corrupt practices are outlined in the succeeding sections. Within DepEd, where the controls for sanction and decision making to operating procedures are monopolized by certain sectors, the propensity for corruption becomes higher.

Monopoly opportunities

In Regions III and IV, the Commission on Audit reported widespread violations of illicit purchases of school materials “which are not in accordance with the Approved DepEd Instructional Materials or Teaching Aid” (2005, p. 50). These actions highlight a breach of operating procedures. Despite proper documentation of official policies and guidelines, controls of sanction and procedures are faulty. Further investigation on the nature of the arbitrary behaviour within Division Offices reveals monopoly power:

Division Offices are also allowed . . . to directly procure textbooks from funds such as Special Education Fund (SEF) and savings from Maintenance Operating and Other Expenditures (MOOE) of the Divisions. For this reason, while waiting for deliveries from the IMCS, Division Offices and LGUs resolve the issue of insufficient textbooks by procuring books from their respective funds without coordinating with IMCS. (Commission on Audit, 2005, emphases added)

Dysfunctional bureaucracy

Highly questionable instances can be attributed to conflicting directives that have given the Division Offices monopoly control. Chua alluded to this in investigating the SEF, which “is disbursed by local school boards for teachers’ allowances, construction and maintenance of classrooms, and procurement of instructional materials and school supplies” (1999, p. 21). Field interviews identified similar cases of arbitrary monopoly power. Ambiguity of policy as well as the distance and lack of timely dissemination of procedures have often been cited as some of the reasons for the increased opportunities for monopoly. A senior official identified these and has attempted to put in place a plan to address these shortcomings. He stated that with the institutionalization of these measures, “starting in 2001, when the International Competitive Bidding (ICB) started and foreigners started to come in, the prices really dropped to about 30 pesos from the original price of around 65 pesos per book” (personal communication, November 2003). An international civil society representative corroborated some of the positive results due to these reforms (personal communication, November 2003).
Clientage linkages

Notwithstanding preventive measures, there were still documented attempts made by unscrupulous individuals to engage in corrupt activities. The Senior Official recounted the corruption-prone bidding process: “Some private publishers would be able to switch their bid documents even after the official submission of sealed bids was completed. These blatant examples of fraud were done in order to favour them over other prospective textbook suppliers through the switching of documents” (personal communication, November 2003).

In order to avoid these, “the bidding conference was made into a very transparent procedure, open to the public with video coverage from beginning to end.” A radical alternative undertaken was “to physically isolate members of the committee assessing textbooks to prevent interference from private publishers – frequently happening in the past.” The senior official recounted how he personally witnessed representatives of private publishers who attempted “to get in touch with the isolated committee of assessors” in order to engage in influence-peddling. These were charged with interference and their submitted bids were automatically disqualified.

Recently with prices significantly dropping due to the ICB, unscrupulous private publishers made “their illicit profits by dropping the quantities. So instead of printing a million for example, they would only print and deliver 600,000 and thus would make their money in smaller volumes. Or oftentimes, unscrupulous private book publishers collude with like-minded DepEd supply officers and some LGU officials in committing fraud through ‘ghost deliveries’ of textbooks. Old textbooks kept in school warehouses are passed off as new deliveries which are frequently overlooked by auditors.” As a response, the senior official launched a massive and unprecedented campaign dubbed the Textbook Count, where “DepEd recruited civil society organization volunteers to monitor the 6,000 textbook delivery points nationwide.” He reported that they had “70 percent of the sites properly monitored” (personal communication, November 2003).

On the contrary, findings indicated that Textbook Count could not mobilize the desired number of monitors. The Luzon CSO said that she was the sole “representative in the province” handling thousands of deliveries (personal communication, October 2004). Interviews of key school personnel revealed that parents who happened to be waiting for kids outside school were invited to “help out in monitoring textbook deliveries”, conflicting with official policy of ample preparation for monitors. Interviews with the Cebu National Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) office revealed that “for this year and for last year, our manpower has been stretched in providing election education campaigns, and we could not attend to the Textbook Count” (personal communication, October 2004). This was similarly expressed by the Mindanao NAMFREL: “Last year, we participated only in some areas of Textbook Count; this year we focused on election issues thus we had no monitors” (personal communication, November 2004). Several school property officers interviewed related incidents of collusion to commit fraud between private publishers and some LGU officials, emboldened undoubtedly by the lack of external monitors during the point of delivery.

Discretion and compliance

Another cause of corruption is related to the increased incidence of discretion along bureaucratic layers. The vulnerability of resources and uncertainties related to adherence to functions of implementers directly relate to high discretion and its concomitant lack of compliance. The Commission on Audit highlighted gross violations of the “New Government Accounting System Manual, requiring deposits of all collections with
Authorized Government Depository Banks (AGDB) daily or not later than the next banking day” (2003, p. 34) that were rampant, particularly in Regions I, V, IX and XI. Resource vulnerability highlights a problem encountered in discretion and compliance among key implementers. Existing safeguards for proper usage of collected fees and proper disbursement of money transactions are violated.

Cases of irregularities support a key argument that this article posits regarding corruption at DepEd. Chua showed that “corruption takes place wherever discretionary authority lies; bureaucrats who have the power to request for supplies, to sign contracts, to monitor delivery, and to release payment” (2001, p. 45). Undoubtedly, compliance to rules is weak. This is exacerbated by a high incidence of abusive discretion, leading to the commission or omission of actions tantamount to corruption.

A senior official implied that numerous incidents of non-compliance and discretion provided an impetus for corrupt practices to occur within the national agency. He indicated several compelling reasons for the preponderance of non-compliance to current resource safeguards. One of the first priorities he identified was to determine the existing parameters and extent of the challenges faced in relation to textbook delivery:

When I asked how the numbers were predicted, it was purely based on surveying. And I said, “You surveyed 40,000 schools?” “Yes”, they said. The problem is there’s a two-year lag and then what happens is even before you deliver the next round, you’re already surveying to find out the next. After a while you really are guessing. (personal communication, November 2003)

Uncertainties related to functions of actors lead to a higher incidence of discretion resulting in corruption. Ambiguity of functions ranges from alleged ignorance or incompetence, to a total lack of capability in performing mandated functions. A key choke point identified with respect to corrupt practices is the supply officer. This position is mirrored throughout the bureaucratic layers of DepEd. Failure to carry out their functions force other related agents (namely, accountants and auditors) to exercise discretion – a direct cause of corrupt practices.

Patron–client relationships

One issue that has produced peculiar consequences is the policy on resolving textbook losses. The counterproductive practice of a number of teachers, who deliberately “collect only a few textbooks to be distributed to a few choice students”, is disturbing. The Luzon classroom practitioner explained the nature of the problem and highlighted how misuse of public power for private benefit could occur: “The teacher gets the books from the property custodian and then issues that to the students and in cases when the students don’t return them, the teacher is liable. So, teacher gives out the books only to those she knows, she trusts or those she is related to and also to those she’s sure can either return the book or pay for, in case it can’t be returned” (personal communication, December 2004). The Visayas classroom practitioner detailed consequences of this when she stated that “the problem of teachers here is that if students leave and do not have proper clearances, the teachers would not be able to get their salaries. So teachers have to make promissory notes, sometimes amounting to a couple of thousands of pesos” (personal communication, October 2004).

The supply officer from Mindanao acknowledged this problem: “That’s true if pupils do not pay, the teachers will pay” (personal communication, October 2004). The Visayas supply officer explained that “there are some pupils really who have no money and who are neglectful about their things and then the teacher will also pay for those” (personal communication, October 2004). Faced with a situation that may cause them financial losses, a scenario where textbooks are incomplete in number or are prepared in different and
confusing titles, teachers have broken the bureaucratic impasse: they either distribute books to a reliable clientele or choose to default and not use government-supplied textbooks, which explains why in a country where schoolchildren suffer severe book shortages, the stock rooms of typical classrooms are overflowing with unused and wasted textbooks (Figure 2).

Accountability and incentives
A third cause of corruption is the weakened system of accountability and distorted arrangement of incentives and disincentives. These are manifested clearly in organizational contexts and local power relations within the bureaucracy. Lack of consistency and contradicting policies characterize the different organizational settings. The study argues that variations in context undermine accountability and become an unmistakable cause of corruption.

Taking the case of two geographic regions (i.e., Region VII and NCR), a total of P3,093,693.96 were spent on unused or unfit textbooks for the needs of the various schools (Commission on Audit, 2003). Such a serious misuse of limited resources must be accounted for and if possible, just restitution be made in order to rectify the damage done. However, scrutiny of the accountability mechanisms exposes an obtrusive anomaly: the TDP has no accountability mechanism.

The function of determining the textbook requirements and ensuring that the needs of the students are addressed IS NOT among the explicit functions of any office as defined under Republic Act (RA) 9155 or the Feedback Mechanism or in any DepEd issuances creating offices and committees specifically for implementation. (Commission on Audit, 2003, p. 46, emphasis added)

A flawed accountability system breeds not only inefficiency but corrupt practices. Corrupt linkages between private publishers and district supply officers in the school, district, division and region can be easily taken advantage of since accountability measures do not exist. A specific example would be the case of liquidated damages amounting to P499,372 incurred by various suppliers in Region VI. The Commission on Audit report (2005) uncovered this discrepancy, however since there is no entity within the regional office (or, for that matter, the DepEd) specifically tasked to check on issues of accountability in relation to TDP, this particular case of liquidated damages still remains unresolved. Chua’s exposé on irregularities at DepEd already identified accountability flaws when she identified some corrupt officials who persist even after they “skew decision-making process or flout the rules” (p. 48) in order to make profits. The inherent weakness of accountability in the DepEd has already been identified by Chua as a potent cause for persistent corruption.

Figure 2. These pictures were taken during the fieldwork of this inquiry (in Mindanao, Visayas and Luzon), highlighting how school stockrooms are filled with boxes and sacks of books that are not utilized in schools. (Photographs by Vicente Chua Reyes, (a) 2004, (b) 2004, (c) 2003.)
The existing power relations in DepEd provide another cause for corruption. Field interviews reveal that discretionary power and the accompanying weak accountability and incentives and disincentives systems on the part of school administrators and school principals can cause corruption. The Commission on Audit underscored several instances where school principals abused funds entrusted to them by treating them as “outright expense thus overstating the expense account and understating Cash-Disbursing Officers account which is a violation of pertinent provisions” (2003, p. 81).

Ideally, such practices should be prevented through proper identification of responsibilities (accountability) and the imposition of corresponding disciplinary action (incentives and disincentives). However, the Commission on Audit reports that in the cases above, “the disallowances are not recorded in the books of the accountants as accounts payable and that the non-settlement can be mainly attributed to the failure of concerned officials to enforce appropriate action against persons determined to be liable” (2005, pp. 81–82, emphasis added).

Stakeholdership networks
Despite the recorded perceptions of implementation failure amidst systemic corruption plaguing DepEd, its PROBE programme provided positive and optimistic experiences of success reminiscent of what is described as “islands of integrity” in anti-corruption literature (Johnston, 1998, p. 85). In this inquiry, it was discovered that PROBE fellows had an explicit idea of their roles as “stakeholders” of the programme (Reyes, 2009c, p. 506). Fundamentally, it can be argued that the “stakeholders involved in PROBE had a strong sense of professional identity which propelled them to consciously perform well despite the odds” (personal communication, October – December 2004). This is exemplified by an international government official in PROBE recognizing contributions made in its implementation: “I am also making a difference, I am not doing the big things, I am doing small things, the concrete things but with passion” (personal communication, November 2003).

The sharing of responsibility and authority between AusAID and its DepEd representatives at key levels of the bureaucracy minimized monopoly opportunities. An example of this was the Teacher Education Institutes, which were recognized national centres of excellence tapped by PROBE to assist in the training and monitoring of selected candidates (PROBE fellows) who would form the vanguard of exceptionally trained teachers and be mobilized to train their peers. Moreover, since project management and monitoring were key components of PROBE, proper implementation accountability was assured. This was embodied in its Project Monitoring Unit which received guidance from the Monitoring and Evaluation Fellows composed of a team of DepEd and AusAID personnel. More importantly, with the Project Implementation Document serving as the PROBE implementation blueprint, unchecked discretion among its key stakeholders was prevented.

Reflections on reform in DepEd: the way ahead
This inquiry attempted to document the experiences of local actors making sense of the challenges of education reform governance on the one hand and the choking grip of systemic corruption on the other. Rather than rely on dominant paradigms in Philippine politics and public administration that focus on patron – client relations, the article proposes that PCF is only one of the analytical ways to understand Philippine governance. The article proposes that recognizing complex linkages at the intersection of corruption
and the implementation of policy and how local actors carry out their roles could offer a more nuanced analytical illumination.

The article proposes that understanding reforms in Philippine educational governance could become more meaningful if seen from various typologies of complex linkages. Local actors describe how dysfunctional bureaucracies characterised by technological shortcomings, severe resource constraints and conflicts among actors prevent proper implementation to occur. Similarly, TDP and PROBE implementers lament how illicit clientage networks among questionable members of the bureaucracy rob DepEd of various vital resources. These groups take advantage of bureaucratic weaknesses and engage in corrupt activities – not dyadic as described by PCF – but more complex and widespread. Local actors reaffirmed the prevalence of patron-client relationships and how these impact implementation efficacy. More importantly, the inquiry took note of stakeholdership networks – local actors imbued with strong professional identities – keen on embracing universalistic goals in education as opposed to actors engaged in particularistic and oftentimes corrupt practice.

DepEd should attempt to minimize the implementation inefficiencies caused by dysfunctions that plague an immensely huge yet resource-strapped bureaucracy. DepEd’s attempts to simplify and streamline the deliverables of the TDP are positive steps. Moves towards this direction should be institutionalized by making sure that current reforms like BESRA are insulated from leadership changes. Addressing the gaps and weaknesses in the bureaucracy is a fundamental first step in ensuring that unscrupulous individuals do not exploit these and resort to corrupt clientage networks intent on plundering vulnerable DepEd resources. Breaking up natural monopolies in the DepEd found in the division offices or at the national office and strengthening current vital sections of DepEd like the IMCS through manpower and resource inputs is essential. Patron–client linkages could be limited if DepEd can delineate areas in which discretion may be exercised by local leaders. The areas of day-to-day operations (that are greatly affected by the context and locale of an implementing unit) may be devolved. However, sensitive areas such as budgets must be properly controlled. Related to this, chief implementers who carry out these roles must likewise be sufficiently trained and empowered to do their jobs. DepEd may need to invest in re-training and constantly upgrading the school supply officers. The selection of personnel for this post may also need to be re-evaluated. Recognizing that supply officers play key roles in TDP, an institutionalized training programme in partnership with existing Philippine centres may be considered. The positive experience of the highly trained and subsequently committed PROBE fellows serves as a valuable learning experience.

In prescribing solutions to tackle the ever-growing education challenges of a steadily growing developing nation like the Philippines, perhaps what would be more insightful for practitioners and scholars of educational governance would be to continue to interrogate the experiences and roles carried out by local actors and the complex linkages that they navigate through as they make sense of the overpowering waves of education reform and the irrepressible stranglehold of systemic corruption.

Notes

1. This article is based on data from the author’s research on corruption and education that was first reported in a book launch and conference of the International Research Development Centre at the University of the Philippines, National College of Public Administration and Governance, 28 August 2009.
2. DECS stands for the Department of Education Culture and Sports. DECS has been the identity of the national agency since 1991. Its new name, which this study uses – the Department of Education, or DepEd – was recently institutionalized in 2001.
3. The test statistic absolute value of 0.874 indicates that one has reduced the error rate by 87.4% over what one could expect by random chance. It should be pointed out that Tests of Measures of Association like Gamma primarily verify whether chance can be used to explain the observed association. Statistical results and statistical analysis alone cannot constitute proof of the existence of a causal relationship.

4. Gamma \( \gamma \) is a suitable statistic to use in assessing measures of association between two independent variables. In the case of Gamma, the two variables are treated symmetrically. In Table 1, status of implementation is used as the dependent variable while incidences of corruption is used as the independent variable. The negative value of Gamma indicates a “discordance” among the rank orders of the two variables. Consequently, it can be inferred that there is a negative relationship between the two variables.

5. In order to honour 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 a data source is reported from an interview, the interviewee is identified by his or her position.

Acknowledgement

The author wishes to thank the editors and reviewers for helpful comments to improve the article.

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