

heidegger and k-to-12

un-learning as the proper task of educational reform

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to provide a critical perspective in examining the government's rationale for implementing the new K-to-12 program for education. It must be said at the outset that this is not an affront against the policy nor is this a critique for the sake of critique. It is also not the goal of this paper to present a revised policy of any sort. The goal of the essay is to provide a descriptive yet critical perspective into the presuppositions and implications of adopting this new educational program. It will be the ideas of Martin Heidegger which shall be consulted in offering this critique. Heidegger's ideas on the essential meaning of thinking, teaching and learning within the context of the modern epoch of *Ge-stell* and *Be-stand* shall serve as our guideposts in proceeding with the reflection.

Keywords

Heidegger, Philippine K-12 education, *Ge-stell*, *Bestand*



Introduction: The Rationale behind the Reform

The aim of this paper is to provide a critical perspective in examining the government's rationale for implementing the new K-to-12 program for education. It must be said at the outset that this is not an affront against the policy nor is this a critique for the sake of critique. It is also not the goal of this paper to present a revised policy of any sort. The goal of the essay is to provide a descriptive yet critical perspective into the presuppositions and implications of adopting this new educational program. It will be the ideas of Martin Heidegger which shall be consulted in offering this critique. Heidegger's ideas on the essential meaning of thinking, teaching and learning within the context of the modern epoch of *Ge-stell* and *Be-stand* shall serve as our guideposts in proceeding with the reflection.

Republic Act No. 10533, more commonly known as the K- to-12 Educational Reform Program of the Philippines, is a historically unprecedented comprehensive state policy, which not only aspires to improve students' learning capacities, but is essentially aimed towards the production of a globally competitive labor force. Raymond Palatino of the Kabataan party list remarks that one can define the concept of being "globally competitive" in terms of a state's ability to "produce a pliant work force to fill in the global demand for semi-skilled and cheap labor."¹ There are of course other facets to the rationale of the policy, such as the adopting a more context-based and constructivist approach to learning, the incorporation of philosophy in the curriculum as well as the novel proposition of educating children in their mother-tongue; however, these shall not be the focus of this exposition. Section 2 of the Act categorically declares that the purpose of this shift is anchored on the hope that the new educational system will be able to "develop productive and responsible citizens equipped with the essential competencies, skills and values for both life-long learning and employment...and that in order to achieve such an end, the State shall: (a) Give every student an opportunity to receive quality education that is globally competitive based on a pedagogically sound curriculum that is at par with international standards and (b) Broaden the goals of high school preparation, vocational and technical career opportunities as well as creative arts, sports and entrepreneurial employment in a rapidly and increasingly globalized environment. . . ."² As

¹ Cf. Liza Calangin-Fernandez, "Ready or Not, K-to-12 curriculum starts," www.interaksyon.com/article/33727/ready-or-not-k-to-12-curriculum-starts. 4 June 2013. Accessed 5 March 2014.

² Section 2, Par. 3 of Republic Act No. 10533. 15 May 2013, www.gov.ph/2013/05/15/republic-act-no-10533. Accessed 5 March 2014.

per the government's official online gazette, the new curriculum promises to be "sufficient to prepare students for work."³ In addition:

The curriculum will enable students to acquire Certificates of Competency (COCs) and National Certifications (NCs). This will be in accordance with TESDA Training Regulations. This will allow graduates to have middle-level skills and will offer them better opportunities to be gainfully employed or become entrepreneurs.

There will be a school–industry partnership for technical–vocational courses to allow students to gain work experience while studying and offer the opportunity to be absorbed by the companies.

DepEd has entered into an agreement with business organizations, local and foreign chambers of commerce, and industries to ensure that graduates of K to 12 will be considered for employment.

There will be a matching of competency requirements and standards so that 12-year basic education graduates will have the necessary skills needed to join the workforce and to match the College Readiness Standards for further education and future employment.

Entrepreneurship will also be fostered in the enhanced curriculum, ensuring graduates can venture into other opportunities beyond employment.⁴

The shift from a 10 to a 12 year basic education also effectively steers the country clear from having the reputation of being one of the last three countries in the world, along with Angola and Djibouti, to implement a 10 year basic education program. One of course, is free to read between the lines of this fact. One cannot deny the pragmatism underlying the policy's goal and rationale. This is a government awakening from its dogmatic slumber, as it were. This is government telling itself, "Djibouti? Really?" The social, economic and political pressures involved in running a state in the age of global liberal economy surely dictates state policy, and this educational reform act is government logically and logistically responding to such pressures. Notwithstanding the fact that poverty and corruption are in fact the real culprits in the failures of the educational system,⁵ many see this act as a requisite step in tediously reforming the very framework of

³ Cf. Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines, <http://www.gov.ph/k-12>, Accessed 5 March 2014.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Cf. Calangin-Fernandez, Liza. "Ready or Not, K-to-12 curriculum starts," www.interaksyon.com/article/33727/ready-or-not-k-to-12-curriculum-starts. 4 June 2013. Accessed 5 March 2014.

education itself—that with such reforms, students will at least be (in principle, though not necessarily in fact), individually equipped with the necessary tools and skills in pursuing an economically viable future for themselves, despite the perennial problems of poverty and corruption.

In other words, with a rationalized system in place sponsored by the coercion of law, state educational policy, in principle, must produce citizens that are capable of lifting themselves out of obscure poverty towards independent economic prosperity by reconfiguring the system of education so as to produce a labor force worthy of the name. In this way, government accomplishes two things: first, it is able to present itself to its citizens and to the global community as a leadership responsive to the local and global demands of economic sustainability through its adept efforts at re-fashioning its future workforce and secondly, it also places the responsibility of economic and social welfare at the hands of the citizens that it had properly groomed and equipped with rudimentary means of economic survival (by way of COCs, NCs and partnerships with local and foreign chambers of commerce), which in effect feeds the national economy with a more viable income generating population. Simply put, the reform, especially considering the clause on the production of a technically and vocationally sound senior high school graduate, is focused on making sense out of one's education. And by "making sense," I mean, being assured that all those years in school bring you opportunities for income. The common argument for pushing for the reform, as we know is the glaring disparity between the kinds of graduates we produce and the kinds of jobs available in both local and international industries. Such is the reason why call centers and BPO's have found a niche in our economy. Since talking to people on the phone about how to operate a printer doesn't really require much other than an accent according to some quarters, the specifics of one's formal education attainment don't really factor in much in the hiring process. Though one cannot argue that such jobs do require a specific set of skills, it may be argued that these skills may be acquired without the necessity of formal education. The K to 12 program, therefore, is a way of re-engineering and re-orienting education towards the prevention of wasted diplomas and the rationalized and systematic compatibilization of labor supply and demand. It is formal education professionalized and vocationalized; in a word, *technologized*.⁶

Heidegger and the Modern Epoch

⁶ Iain Thomson, "Heidegger on Ontological Education, or: How We Become What We Are," *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 44:3 (2001): 243-268; 244.

Heidegger opines that, "The sciences are fully entitled to their name, which means fields of knowledge, because they have infinitely more knowledge than thinking does."⁷ For him, the scientific reckoning of reality in our age is not exclusively confined to the advances made by the natural and human sciences. The drive towards an ever-precise, calculated and objective knowledge is grounded upon a more primordial happening in history, essentially understood. Modern representational thought, the origin of scientific knowledge, owes its pervasiveness from the historical transformation of the essence of humanity from that of an awe-struck participant in the unconcealment of truth to the authoritative *subiectum*, or that which lies underneath what-is, the *cogito*—the so-called measure and condition for the possibility of knowledge. The pre-eminence of the *cogito*, seen as the *fundamentum absolutum inconcussum veritatis* (or self-supported unshakeable foundation of truth in the sense of certainty) projects in advance the rational limits of truth.⁸ By rational limits, we mean the essential characteristics of phenomena that are mathematically and scientifically admissible to reason. Within the confines of a rationalistic reckoning of reality, man, armed with his measures, measures the conditions for the possibility of appearances and is, in the end, the measure of reality itself. What does this Heideggerian insight imply? The historical transformation of the essence of humanity into the measure, according to Heidegger, is not merely the work of man himself, but is a historical dispensation of Being itself.⁹ Modernity, marked by the age of progress, scientific and industrial revolutions, the era of labor economy, alienation and bureaucracy is destined by the historical oblivion of the essential truth of Being as *alétheia*. In this age, the only mode of revealing that is granted validity issues from a challenging-forth (*Herausfordern*) which sets-before, objectifies, en-frames beings, including *human beings*, the result of which is a steady supply, a stockpile (*Be-stand*) of resources (human and non-human) ready for use and set-up to be fully optimized.¹⁰ The thrust towards academic specialization is a function of the mathematical reckoning of reality rooted in the ever-resounding call not just for *more* knowledge but for more precise, that is, scientifically grounded knowledge that is deemed useful by commerce and industry. Instrumental or calculative reason is a function of a demand issuing from the epochal unfolding of Being's withdrawal from man. Heidegger, astutely observing the mysteriously coercive power of capital and industry over man says:

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1968), 33. Henceforth WCT.

⁸ Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. with an introduction by William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1977), 148.

⁹ Cf. Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, 18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 14-19.

The current talk about human resources, about the supply of patients for a clinic, gives evidence of this. The forester who, in the wood, measures the felled timber and to all appearances walks the same forest path in the same way as did his grandfather is today commanded by profit-making in the lumber industry, whether he knows it or not. He is made subordinate to the orderability of cellulose, which for its part is challenged forth by the need for paper, which is then delivered to newspapers and illustrated magazines. The latter, in their turn, set public opinion to swallowing what is printed, so that a set configuration of opinion is available on demand.¹¹

Alienated from his essential nature, as proffered by oblivion itself, man seeks and sees fulfillment in subordination. He, unbeknownst to himself, becomes part of the supply line itself. What we see therefore is that in the epoch of *Ge-stell* is a steady flattening of human possibilities. Ironic though, in the sense that in unlocking the hidden energies of nature, including human nature, man, though undeniably more knowledgeable and adept in his dealings with the world, remains stranded in but one way of revealing—challenging-forth; a straining imperative programmed to meet the demands of functionalization and optimization. As Heidegger says, “The inordinate forgetfulness of humanity persists in securing itself by means of what is readily available and always accessible.”¹² Viewed from this perspective, it would appear that the rationale behind K-to-12 is a concrete example of how the modern epoch levels human possibilities in economic terms, measuring the success of one’s education on the basis of one’s ability to land a decent job, avoiding any chance of becoming an economic liability for society. The government plots in advance the coordinates for its students’ future, organizing economically profitable partnerships with cooperative and forward-thinking businesses, effectively engineering a stockpile of not just able-bodied but able-minded individuals eager to make something out of themselves. In stressing vocationalization and technicalization, the educational system is virtually transformed into a factory, or in Heidegger’s words, a gasoline station, continually maintained and ordered to stand by in case of a rise in demand. Education, simply put, becomes challenged-forth, forcefully strained to yield the most vital resource of all—human labor, specifically the universalizable kind, the one size fits all kind, the kind any employer local or foreign would want to hire.

This in fact is already happening starting with how universities around the world are run. As Iain Thomson astutely observes, “Since only those disciplines (or sub-disciplines) able to produce instrumentally useful results regularly find external support, all disciplines increasingly try to present themselves in terms of their use-value. Without a

¹¹ibid., 18.

¹² Martin Heidegger, “On the Essence of Truth” (1930), trans. John Sallis, in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 150.

counter-ideal, students too will adapt this instrumental mentality, coming to see education merely as a means to an increased salary down the road. In this way, fragmentation leads to the professionalization of the university and, eventually, its deterioration into vocationalism.¹³ One can argue that such a stark criticism of the university does not and should not apply in the context of a developing nation where the need for basic necessity drastically outweighs the thirst for knowledge; that the Philippines can only be globally competitive and economically attractive if its labor force is holistically formed at best and technically specialized at the very least—there is no alternative, such is the spirit of R.A. 10553. Nonetheless, Thomson does make a valid point. Is education ultimately a function of capital?

Heidegger on Teaching How to Learn: *Paideia* as Letting-Learn

For Heidegger, learning happens only if we unlearn at the same time.¹⁴ Unlearning signifies re-orienting ourselves within the historical epoch proffered by the history of Being. It constitutes a step-back, as it were, a re-viewing of how we have been, how we are and how we should be comporting ourselves within the domain of unconcealment. We live in the age of information. Commodified information, consumed and reproduced in the form of mediatized and digitized knowledge unrelentingly provides us with a steady supply of motives and methods concerning decent or productive ways of life. Social media, for instance, for all its usefulness, can be seen as the public sphere turned obscene—a pornographic exhibition of liberal capitalist economy's power over the private sphere. We live in an age where everything is learn-able, wikipedi-able, google-able, twitter-able; in a word, en-frame-able.

Yet, for all our certainty with regard to what is useful, what is profitable, what is in demand, what is optimal, the momentum of history does not seem to carry with it any reliable vector for genuinely establishing the meaning of what we do and the why's behind them. We seem to be swimming, as Descartes was, half a century ago, in a sea of uncertainty. Do we really understand why we need to produce a globally competitive workforce or are we impulsively pushing forward with an agenda laid on us by demands of an unknown origin or maybe an origin so obvious we no longer give it a second thought?

The government, for its part, must be lauded for its efforts in improving the educational system. The thrust towards holistic education and the pragmatic adjustment

¹³ Iain Thomson, "Heidegger on Ontological Education, or: How We Become What We Are," 251.

¹⁴ WCT, 8.

of the curriculum to appropriately respond to the ever-evolving global economic environment deserves much praise. The K-to-12 program is political will concretized. It is government, applying strategized forethought. Our country really does need holistically developed students with 21st century skills. Whether this experiment succeeds or fails, the spirit behind it—the preparation of the youth for an economically viable future is beyond criticism.

Despite this, Heidegger nonetheless invites us to un-learn what we are certain of. He encourages us to leave the safety of common sense to venture into the essential meaning of education. Pondering on Plato's Allegory of the Cave, Heidegger says, "Plato seeks to show that the essence of *paideia* does not consist in merely pouring knowledge into the unprepared soul as if it were a container held out empty and waiting. On the contrary, real education lays hold of the soul itself and transforms it in its entirety by first of all leading us to the place our essential being and accustoming us to it."¹⁵ For Heidegger, education is not merely the transmission of useful skills to those who might need them in the future. Correctness of procedure is only a derivative form of truth. Education, if it is truly aimed at human development, as one of the etymological meanings of *paideia* suggests, must not merely be designed in the light of current demands for skilled labor or a self-reliant population. Education, essentially speaking is a letting-learn.¹⁶ By letting-learn, Heidegger is not merely speaking of the current trend of student-centered learning, the so-called progressive, constructivist approach to education. From the perspective of thinking and not just of a pragmatic, results-based assessment of the educational system, Heidegger boldly claims that real education teaches students to learn how to learn; and this he/she achieves by un-learning. Students must be allowed to see for themselves what remains hidden and mysterious in this age of information and hyper-education. The political firmness and resolve behind the K-to-12 program must leave space for human possibilities that remain hidden in our epoch. Educational reform must not be undertaken solely for the sake of internationalization. In the midst of the ceaseless beckoning of the global economy, we must safeguard our own quiet spaces reserved for hearing the essential meaning of *paideia*. Skills compatibility, technical know-how, information management, holistic human development—these are but words, until they truly speak to us, inviting us to ponder the mystery behind their coming to presence in this particular point in history; thereby granting us with time—the necessary time to un-learn them and thereby, learn.

¹⁵ Martin Heidegger, "Plato's Doctrine of Truth" (1931/32, 1940), trans. Thomas Sheehan, in *Pathmarks*, 217.

¹⁶ WCT, 15.

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