

Understanding the Philippine Learning Crisis: From 1990 to the Present

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Abstract. This study argues that the protracted learning crisis in the Philippines, the deficiency in basic literacy and numeracy is an accumulated result of thirty years of systemic failure and not a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the analysis of the major policies and reforms in education from 1990 to the present, this paper has identified three critical fragments that sustained the steady decline in the quality of Philippine education: the implementation gap of policy, the structural gap of pedagogy, and the access gap of infrastructure. Empirical data from international large-scale assessments, specifically the 2018 and 2022 PISA results, are utilized to support the failure of hardware-centric modernization programs that have neglected to integrate internet connectivity and teacher readiness. Grounded in the Thomistic theory of learning, the paper problematizes the shift toward independent, modular learning, in a situation characterized by instructional poverty and the outsourcing of educational responsibility to the family. This research concludes with an evidence-based proposal toward personalized, decolonized instructional frameworks to span the divide between policies, as theories, and the real conditions in classrooms.

Keywords: Philippine learning crisis, ISLA, implementation gap, structural gap, access gap

Introduction

The Philippine education system is currently in a crisis characterized mainly by significant gaps in its basic literacy and numeracy programs as evidenced by the consistent low performance in international large-scale assessments (ILSAs) such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). While present discourses often treat this phenomenon as a result of the pandemic, this study has proved that this educational crisis is rooted in decades of systemic denial leading to the modern degradation of educational standards. Learning, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is the process by which people acquire knowledge, skills, and attitudes (2013). However, in the Philippine context, this learning process has remained elusive.

The decline in the quality of Philippine education can be traced back to the early 1990s. The First Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM 1) recognized a downward movement in education When they released their

report in 1991, EDCOM 1 attributed this failure to two primary structural factors: underinvestment and inefficient systemic management (Congressional Commission on Education, 1991). This, despite efforts to modernize the bureaucracy through the trifocalization of the educational sector, the fundamental challenges identified in 1991 persisted up to the present.

While the noticeable drop was observed in the educational structure of the Philippines, the internet is being recognized globally as a revolutionary tool as indicated by international policies and agenda. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has been considered as transformative, aside from it as a source of knowledge, allowing for the revolution of the delivery of information vis-a-vis its integration especially in education (UNESCO, 2003). When the internet reached the Philippines, many hoped that the ICT would stop the learning crisis. The idea that the internet is the most significant tool as a source of information tends to support the notion that the internet was invented for learning (p. 6).

In a philosophical context, the movement toward independent, personal and technology-mediated learning resembles the Thomistic theory of learning. St. Thomas Aquinas (Gulley, 1964) distinguished between learning through discovery and learning through instruction. Here, Aquinas posits that learning can happen through discovery. Though both offer learning, if applied in the Philippine context, the presence of ICT in the country would mean Filipino students can learn by themselves through self-paced instructional materials (modular), allowing for the recovery of the losses in education. Yet, without the necessary infrastructure, this shift has worsened the crisis instead of resolving it.

Methodology

Despite 30 years of policy intervention, from EDCOM 1 recommendations to the K-12 transition in 2013, to the MATATAG curriculum, the learning gap remained and became more defined. This paper provides a rigorous historical reconstruction of the Philippine learning crisis from 1990 to the present. This study argues that the crisis is a result of a continuous gap in the implementation of structural and technological reforms in education. By employing a qualitative historical research design, the examination of the evolution of the Philippine learning crisis will go beyond chronological listing of events. In the analysis of policy shifts, ICT adoption trends, and performance data, the goal of this study is to find clarity why, despite 30 years of reform, educational excellence in the Philippines remained elusive.

Data Sources

This paper relies on primary and secondary sources available online. The selection is based on the relevance to Philippine education and ICT integration. Also, sources were selected based on their historical significance and thematic relevance in addressing the problem of integrating technology in pedagogy. The data categorized into the following divisions: (1) Primary documents including the EDCOM 1 (1991) and EDCOM 2 (2023) reports, Republic Act 10533 or the K-12 Law, and the Five-year development plans of the Department of Education (DepEd); (2) Performance data from PISA, The Trends in Mathematical and Science Study (TIMSS), Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) to provide empirical grounding for the learning crisis narrative; and (3) Peer-reviewed journals and research papers regarding learning crisis and ICT integration in developing nations especially in the Philippines.

Analytical Framework

This study utilized the Aquinas' theory of learning. By contrasting the two principles of learning, the paper evaluates whether the historical shift toward ICT centered solution matches with the socio-economic realities of the student population of the Philippines as well as the availability of the structures that allows for the flourishing of ICT among the Filipino learners. Also, by moving beyond descriptive lenses, this research has critiqued the system towards self-paced learning.

Results

The study has found a persistent cyclical gap in the implementation in the Philippine education system from 1990 to present. Despite the government's attempt to modernize the ICT sector by integrating it with the education section, their intentions were frequently undermined by structural deficiencies and the absence of policy frameworks.

Detached Policy Infrastructure (1990-2015)

Although the Philippines established its first internet connection on March 21, 1994, the government has failed to provide the necessary legal and regulatory framework to integrate technology into the national curriculum. According to the data, it has remained absent for nearly a decade revealing a passive policy environment. The initial effort of the Department of Trade and Industry's (DTI) Personal Computer for Public Schools (PCPS) program, which focused on hardware acquisition, resulted in the absence of internet connectivity denying both the students and teachers full utility of the

technology. This defect can be attributed to: lack of centralized procedures like proper documentation, communication between private and public sectors, and the delayed training for professional development especially among teachers who were tasked with these new educational tools.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and the Worsening Digital Divide (2016-Present)

In 2016, the world entered the 4IR. The term was coined to describe the rapid advancement and involvement of technology in ordinary human lives. It built upon the digital revolution of the 20th century for which the Philippines have failed to capitalize, resulting in an intensified pressure on the Philippine educational system to realign with global standards. Since there is an existing infrastructure gap, the situation remained the same. When the pandemic hit in 2020, the disruption it caused the educational institutions made modular learning (printed) as the primary modality. The choice was not a result of preference but of the reality that the government could not provide stable internet connectivity aside from the lack of access or the total absence of the technology required for continuous learning. The 2022 PISA result served as the empirical validation that the lack of foundational infrastructure and inconsistent utilization of technology contributed to the digital divide and unequal learning environment. Compared to international standards, Filipino students ranked lower in basic literacy and numeracy.

Philosophical Altering: From Right to Responsibility

The educational paradigm has shifted: education is no longer simply a right. It has been transformed into a responsibility. The state policies and reforms on education have resulted in a learning crisis. From a historical perspective, this transformation is rooted in a shift in the perception that education has transitioned as a tool for survival, far from the original intention of making informed citizenry. Whether intentional or not, the absence of state-sponsored infrastructures, a systemic neglect, have resulted in a privatization of learning, placing the burden on the Filipino learners who are already disadvantaged.

Discussion: Major Developments in Philippine Education (1994-Present)

To understand the current crisis in Philippine education, this paper conducted a historical reconstruction of the events that led to the present quandary. By learning how these seemingly fragmented elements caused the

persistent gaps in the implementation of education policies and nurtured a stagnant infrastructure that ensured failure.

Table 1. Result from 1991-present.

Year	Goal	Program/Policy	Observed Limitation	Metric
1991-1999	Systemic Reform	EDCOM 1/ Trifocalization	Underfunding; lack of IT policies	NAT Scores
2000-2011	Hardware Accumulation	DTI-PCPS Program	Focus on hardware, ignoring connectivity and personnel training	Underutilization of resources
2012-2019	Global Alignment	K-12/4IR Integration	Implementation gap; Digital divide	2018 PISA: low-tier result
2020-Present	Crisis Recovery	MATATAG Curriculum/ Distance Learning	Modular reliance	2022 PISA: continued low-tier result

Legislative Reforms, Fragmentation and the Trifocalization (1994-2000)

The internet has shifted the global educational landscape towards a student-centered learning. The integration and mediation of technology in education modernized learning. However, the Philippines continued to anchor its pedagogical practices in teacher-led methodologies.

As a response to the 1991 EDCOM report that Philippine education was declining continuously, President Fidel V. Ramos initiated a series of educational amendments. Among these were the passing of RA 7687 or An Act Instituting A Science and Technology Scholarship Program and for Other Purposes and RA 8439 or the Magna Carta for Scientists, Engineers, Researchers and other Science and Technology Personnel in Government. Yet, this legislative response failed to establish pedagogical modernization. RA 7687 and RA 8439, for example, were established to increase manpower in Science and Technology but did not mandate the integration of ICT within the classroom environment (Bautista & Aranas, 2023). despite having connected to the internet on March 21, 1994.

On July 28, 1994, a legislative act decentralized the structure of education, by virtue of RA 7722, creating the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), and RA 7796 creating Technical Education and Skills

Development Authority (TESDA). This trifocalization is intended to manage separately and effectively Basic Education, Tertiary Education, and Vocational Education. While it was intended to improve education, this trifocal structure created a fragmented approach and contributed to the learning crisis since there is a constant disruption in policies between basic education and higher education and a lack of unified strategy (EDCOM II, 2024).

According to the Department of Information and Communications Technology (DICT), Filipinos established their first internet connection on March 21, 1994 (DICT, 2005).

But the lack of a centralized regulatory framework led to its non-integration into the learning process. The I.T Action Agenda for the 21st century (1997) proposed that “by the turn of the 21st century, the Philippines will have laid the infrastructure for every business, every agency of the government, every school, and every home in the Philippines to have access to information technology” (NITC, 1997). The idea was conceptually ambitious since it was promising infrastructure for everyone despite the absence of a budget and mechanisms for actualization.

Despite the existence of legal bases, the apparent omission of ICT integration suggests that the initiative to fully integrate technology in educational institutions depended on the willingness to implement a proactive response to the changes brought about by the advancement in technology. Even today, educational institutions in the country remain slow to change their teaching methodologies and learning approaches due to the same reasons that were apparent thirty years ago (Bautista & Aranas, 2023). In fact, there is still an absence of a definition of EdTech in the Philippines to this day (Espinosa et al., 2023).

According to De Dios (2016), then DECS, now the Department of Education (DepEd), began implementing information and communication technology initiatives in the country in 1996. To fully understand the ICT issues of the country at that time, De Dios emphasized the importance of examining the problem within the context of the development of the Information and Technology (IT) sector. The educational goal of this agenda is to “make more intensive investments in ‘dual-training’ systems, ‘remote’ educational institutions, and ‘open’ universities. The agenda continued, “We must make our schools not only communities of learners, where our children learn to read, write, and compute. We must make them schools of the future, which nurture young Filipinos to become responsible citizens and enlightened leaders of our country. Public and private education and training

institutions will adopt IT in education and develop a critical mass of IT professionals and an IT-literate workforce” (NITC, p. 6).

In 1998, several government agencies teamed up to develop an extensive ICT education policy. The Departments of Science and Technology (DOST), Education (DECS), Trade and Industry (DTI), the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), and the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) drafted an interagency manifesto on education that would improve access and the delivery of education (Rodrigo, 2001). The objectives of the plan were (1) to promote the use of ICT in education, (2) to develop competence in the design, production, and (3) use of ICT in education, to provide the physical infrastructure and technical services needed for the educational technology programs, and to monitor and evaluate outcomes of these programs. The implementation of ICTs in Philippine education was unsuccessful. According to Rodrigo (2001), the reasons for its shortcomings include the absence of documentation, a lack of coordination between the public and private sectors, and insufficient teacher training. Many of the initiatives that were proposed in the 1990s were unsuccessful (Llana, Pascual, & Soriano, 2002). Even the recommendation to establish the Department of Information and Communication Technology was halted due to an absence of a legal framework (de Dios, 2016).

Hardware Solutions and the Isolated Realities (2001-2012). During the period between 2001 and 2012, DTI procured hardwares for the department’s Personal Computer for Public Schools (PCPS) program. The Japanese government funded this program, which aims to enhance the IT skills of Filipino youth as the country’s future knowledge workers. The PCPS enabled the establishment of computer laboratories in public high schools, teacher training, and the implementation of a computer education curriculum in recipient schools (DTI, n.d.). This project ended in 2014. According to their website, the project has provided more than 60,000 computers to more than 5,000 schools nationwide. The report did not mention internet connectivity. This significant finding would explain why the failure to procure provisions for internet connectivity isolated computer laboratories from the bigger global information framework.

In 2002, DepED implemented the Basic Education Curriculum (BEC) of 2002, which hoped to improve the quality of education of Filipino learners by making them literate and equipping them with enough knowledge to survive the real world or life skills (by focusing on five learning areas, namely English, Science, Filipino, Mathematics, and Makabayan) through the traditional mode of delivery. For the computerization program of DepED, the

department distributed computer packages to approximately 48 public secondary schools for academic use. Teachers were also trained through the Intel Teach to the Future Program and provided basic digital literacy yet remained fixated in traditional delivery modes. ICT was treated as a technical skill rather than a transformative pedagogical tool (NEDA, 2004).

A clear disconnect started to emerge between policies and classroom realities. The National Framework Plan for ICTs in Basic Education of 2005 (Dunuan, 2005) concluded that ICTs widen access to education and improve the quality of learning, as the presence of technology enhances teaching methodologies and efficient educational management. These recommendations were intended to assist the agency. However, the report also concluded that, despite acknowledging the role of ICT in the economy and the opportunities available due to the demand, development, and integration of technology, “they do not determine policy direction or desired outcomes” (p. 18).

Sec. Ramon P. Sales, Chairman of the Commission on Information and Technology (CIT), developed the *Philippine Strategic Roadmap for the Information and Communications Technology Sector: Empowering a Nation through ICT* in 2006. The position paper recognized the inadequacy of education and experience in relation to the revolution that was happening at that time. “Each person will have to be able to adapt and learn new technologies and new ways of doing business if he or she is to prosper in the 21st century. Moreover, the learning curve is only to grow steeper, requiring everyone to become more efficient, doing and learning more, in less time” (CIT, 2006). This early recognition of the demand is the result of globalization. Eighteen years ago, the reality of reinventing labor and skills in relation to production had already presented itself. The Philippine education program, with its curriculum design, lacks structural continuity. For programs from kindergarten to the tertiary level are not connected, nor are they linear or circular. Although the use of technology has advanced research, Filipino education managers have much to learn about the real problems of education in the country.

In 2008, DepEd implemented the Learning Resources Management and Development System (LRMDS). It was not until Department Order (DO) 78, s. 2010 that DepEd formally institutionalized the DepEd Computerization Program (DCP) and the DepEd Internet Connectivity Program (DICP). The Enhanced Basic Education Information System (EBEIS) was added in 2017. According to Dunuan, no new, formal ICT plan was created to follow the previous 5-year plan (2020).

While this initiative strengthened the 14 year old initiative, the implementation remained underutilized because of an access gap (digital divide). In a 2012 data provided by DepEd, de Dios (2016) noted that “only 51% of public primary schools and 88% of public secondary schools had computers.” Since the population of public schools varies by area, not all schools with computers have the same level of access to them. In short, despite the presence of computers in schools, the Secretary of Education at the time stated that the ideal ratio would be one computer for every eight students (2016).

The almost exclusive focus on hardware procurement (PC units) neglected the environment necessary for discovery (internet access).

Table 2. Synthesis of hardware initiatives.

Initiative	Goal	Finding	Impact
DTI-PCPS (2001)	IT skill enhancement	Focused on hardware procurement; ignored connectivity	Underutilization of the technology
BEC (2002)	Literacy and life-skills mastery	Maintained traditional instructional delivery	Pedagogical stagnation
Strategic Roadmap (2006)	Adaptation to 21st-century labor demands	Non-linear curriculum design	Lack of continuity
DCP/DICP (2010)	Standardized computerization and connectivity	Access gap at 51%	Digital Stratification

K-12 Transition (2013-Present). The decision to transition to K-12, institutionalized through RA 10533 (The Enhanced Education Act of 2013) signalled a move away from RA 9155 toward a globally-aligned curriculum. This shift, however, was characterized by a reactive policy of global benchmarking that prioritized international parity over local efficacy, favoring a pace-following rather than “setting.” By adding two more years, essentially extending the educational cycle instead of deepening the pedagogical content, the reform basically institutionalized a period of extended stagnation.

While the form of implementation is on par with international standards, the substance remained tethered to an unsolved crisis in literacy and numeracy. Ultimately, the expansion failed to address persistent gaps in teacher master and technological infrastructure. Furthermore, the

fragmentation and disconnection of DepEd, CHED, and TESDA into silos (EDCOM II, 2024), hindered the creation of a unified and continuous system, leaving K-12 graduates to navigate a transition that is not aligned or no curricular continuity to a higher education system or labor market with the reforms intended output.

The 4IR and the Acceleration of the Learning Crisis (2016-Present). In 2016, the world entered the 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR). The 4IR, according to Schwab (2016), is a technological revolution that will fundamentally alter how people live, work, and relate to one another. The transformation will be unlike anything humankind has experienced before, in terms of its scale, scope, and complexity. The change brought about by the 4IR is, according to Reaves (2019), a disruption¹. In an article, Steyn (2021) noted that innovative developments have often been described as *disruptive*. In the Philippine context, the period exposed the fragility of the country's learning ecosystem.

The disruption brought about by the presence of technology in traditional educational approaches has clearly altered practices absent from it. Modern-day students are characterized as digital natives. Those who do not belong to the generation are called digital immigrants. (Wang et al., 2013) Digital immigrants are known to resist new technology, or at least have some difficulty accepting it." (Vodanovich, 2010) When the pandemic struck, the technology that allowed the migration of education to online platforms had been available since 2017. The technology that is available revealed that its availability would automatically equate with human readiness. Although seen as both positive and negative, the disruption caused by COVID-19 is non-technological in nature. "In this context, technologies have been deployed as an antidote to disruption, not least in enabling some social and economic activities to continue while maintaining physical distance." (Boucher et al., 2020).

Modular Distance Learning (MDL) in the Philippines. The adoption of MDL emanated not as a preferred pedagogical approach, but as infrastructural surrender. Dangle and Sumaoang (2020) stated that "modular learning is the most popular type of Distance Learning. This learning modality is currently used by all public schools because, according to a survey conducted by the

¹ The term was coined in 1995 by Bower and Christensen. They wrote, "disruptive technologies introduce a very different package of attributes from the one mainstream customers historically value and they often perform far worse along one or two dimensions that are particularly important to the customers. As a rule, mainstream customers are unwilling to use a disruptive product in applications they know and understand." (Bower & Christensen, 1995)

DepEd. Learning through printed and digital modules emerged as the most preferred distance learning method of parents with children, especially with the learners in rural areas where the internet remained a luxury. Printed Modules will be delivered to students, parents, or guardians by the teachers or through the Local Government Officials. Since education is no longer confined to the school, parents serve as partners with teachers in the educational process. Parents play a vital role as home facilitators.

Luaña (2021) revealed the malpractice of parents answering their children's modules is an offshoot of the challenges faced by the parents, to wit: a) poor reading and writing skills of their children; b) time constraints due to work and household chores; c) too many children to attend to; d) too difficult lessons and subjects; and e) too many learning activities in the modules. If these challenges are left unaddressed, modular learning will fail, and no learning will take place whatsoever. Hence, parents, being the facilitators of learning, should be capacitated and empowered to facilitate learning at home effectively. His view on what is happening at home is precisely the concern of this paper, as the researcher aimed to explore the possibility of self-learning modules' (SLM) inadequacy in facilitating learning, especially for children.

The call for quality education, despite the difficulty in employing different learning modalities due to the pandemic, has been made. However, the economic situation of some students, especially those in public schools, has worsened. The technological disparity and economic divide between some have been highlighted. They are considered one of the primary causes of the lack of focus among students, especially those without access to technology and economic stability.

The modular distance learning (MDL) modality has resulted in concerns, one of which is the parents acting as both facilitators and students. "In facilitating MDL, any member of the family or other community stakeholders will serve as para-teachers, while the teachers will be responsible for monitoring the progress of the learners. This abrupt shift in learning delivery modality from the traditional set-up to modular distance learning modality has introduced novel concerns among teachers. One of these concerns is the problem of parents answering the self-learning modules (SLMs) on behalf of their children. Estela Cariño, director of the Department of Education's office in the Cagayan Valley Region, reported in a virtual press briefing that there are parents who answer the SLMs on behalf of their children. This scenario prompted Education Undersecretary Tonisito Umali to urge parents not to take over their child's school activities. He said, 'They are not the ones who

should answer the test, or the assignment, or the children's schoolwork. That is clear" (Luaña, 2021).

There are two significant aspects to consider when reflecting on the topic. The first is that, although the problem of technology absence in some public school students exists, the government was able to circumvent the issue by providing them with alternative learning methods, such as SLMs. The solution, ironically, created a new problem. An unprecedented problem, as parents would want their children to learn, and for the things mentioned above. "The honor and award system of the public school system [in the Philippines] reproduces a certain hyper vigilant parenting that will ensure access to quality yet affordable education for their children." (Arzadon, 2017, 99)

Secondly, on whether or not the intended target of the SLMs learned from this type of learning modality. "Self-learning modalities on their own (e.g., radio, TV, paper-based learning kits, and even online platforms and mobile apps) are unlikely to be very effective in ensuring learning continuity if teacher-guided modalities do not complement them." (UNICEF, 2020) According to Luaña (2021), the majority of the parents raised concerns regarding their children's poor reading and writing abilities.

Data on the failure of Philippine education

Clearly, the effectiveness of the DepEd-issued SLMs depends on the comprehension and the language mastery of those using them. Its efficacy is lessened not because it is flawed. It is ineffective because the intended users, to whom it was designed, were not reached, i.e., the children, as parents or older relatives took it upon themselves to help the confused students with the obvious shortcomings. English, as the medium of instruction for core subjects such as Mathematics and Science, makes it difficult for learners to comprehend these subjects.

Substantiating the Gaps: The Anatomy of Failure. The following tables synthesize the historical and contemporary data of the Philippine educational system into three analytical perspectives: the implementation gap, structural gap, and access gap. The tables are designed to explain how (implementation), where (structural), and for whom (access) the system has failed.

Table 3. The educational gaps from 1990-Present.

Gap Category	Definition	Proof
Implementation Gap	The disconnect between legislative formulation and policy goals and their misalignment with real conditions in classrooms, schools or in the communities.	RA 7687 and RA 8439 prioritized S&T manpower but failed to mandate ICT integration, due to omission, in classrooms. The 1997 I.T. Action Agenda promised universal infrastructure but budget deficits lead to the realization of the actual mechanisms. The 1998 Interagency Manifesto failed due to an absence of documentation, poor coordination, and insufficient teacher training. The failure to establish DICT due to an absence of a legal framework delaying the centralization of ICT. The DTI-PCPS program distributed 60,000+ computers but excluded internet provision resulting in digital isolation. The treatment of ICT as a technical skill rather than a transformative tool. The 2005 National Framework Plan concluded that ICT initiatives did not determine policy direction or outcomes (Dunuan, 2005). No new formal ICT plan was developed to follow the initial 5-year strategic plan from 2012-2018.
Structural Gap	Flaws in the design of the education system that prevented a unified, continuous, and modern pedagogical structure and strategy.	The trifocalization created systems that do not communicate with each leading to disjointed policies and fragmented strategies. The system remained fixed and anchored on traditional teacher-centered methodologies while the global educational landscape has shifted towards student-centered, technology-mediated learning. As of 2023, there is still no formal definition of Edtech that prevents standardized curriculum and professional development. Programs from kindergarten to tertiary level were non-linear and fragmented, lacking structural continuity (CIT, 2006). The 2002 BEC integrated ICT as a supplement to traditional delivery in core areas (English, Math, Science) failing to evolve the learning approach itself. A recognized inadequacy in educational management to adapt to the difficulty of adapting to the demands of globalization and the reinvention of labor.

Access Gap	The inequality in the availability, distribution, and reach of technological resources and structure.	The Philippines connected to the internet in 1994 but a lack of regulation prevented this connection from being integrated in the learning process. The ambitious goal for IT access in every school and home remained an ambition for the majority. The 1996 goal for remote educational institutions and open universities failed to bridge geographic and economic divide worsening digital inequality. A significant divide existed where only 51% of primary schools had computers compared to 88% of secondary schools (de Dios, 2016). The focus on hardware created an environment that lacked the necessary internet access disabling for learning by discovery. Even in schools with hardware, the high to student ratio remained far from the ideal 1:8 target, substantively limiting individual access.
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In the context of this study, the definition of the identified gaps shifted. These signify movements from a state of scarcity and absence, as evidenced by Table 3 to a misaligned focus described in Table 4.

The early definition of implementation gap describes a failure to continue an action until its completion. The execution was a logistical failure. In the period of K-12, the implementation revolves around the bureaucratic failure of coordination. Ideally, the distinct mandates of the trifocal units is not an impediment for a seamless education system. Over the years, they have acted as isolated institutions making collaboration and smooth transition impossible. The implementation gaps between these institutions are now the “cracks” that have ensured misaligned credentials in universities and in labor requirements.

The structural gap was about a system that has remained traditional, teacher-centered, and that which values rote memorization. The “old way” was a failure since it has failed to integrate ICT in its pedagogies, allowing for passive learning and at the same time ensuring the students remained handicapped in literacy and numeracy. The implementation of RA 10533 has ensured global parity, globally aligned agenda. But the reality is still the same. The structural gap remains the same since the K-12 Curriculum failed to address local concerns and instead institutionalized a longer period of stagnation.

The earliest definition of access gap was just digital divide, the unequal distribution of resources i.e. some schools have computers, other schools have no computers but both without internet access. The new definition of access gap in the K-12 era is this: access is no longer about the presence of a tool but a total dependency on that tool. RA 10533 simply assumed that there existed a technological integration. This foundational fracture, in effect, institutionalized inequality. 21st century learning requires the necessary gadgets. Its absence becomes a mechanism for exclusion.

The failure to coordinate a continuous curriculum caused the implementation gap of the K-12 program. According to EDCOM II (2024), this is a manifestation of the Silo Effect. This is a detrimental characteristic, by limiting their connections with others, resulting in a failure in coordination that highly affected the students. A 2024 EDCOM II report shows that almost 49% of learners have a difficulty in reading by grade 3, collapsing further by senior high school. This implementation gap was an administrative failure. By 2016 and during the pandemic, the gap has transformed into human readiness. When education migrated online, those who have difficulty with the technology utilized for distance learning chose not to engage it. The government's inability to empower teachers and parents eventually led to lack of coordination and lack of operational capability.

By deliberately ignoring the crisis in literacy and numeracy, and adopting an external practice, the structural gap during the K-12 era formalized stagnation. When the pandemic hit in 2020, the system retreated to a survival mode. The paper module reflects the structural gap that forced modular learning, completion of the activities designed, despite the lack of formal cognitive development. The pandemic reversed "years of progress in the educational system" and forced a regressive state of education. By abandoning the 4IR goals, the government has surrendered learning over an honor system that forced parents to be hypervigilant in the hope that their children will be recognized among those with honors despite not learning their lessons.

The access gap during the K-12 transition was of the digital divide, those who have computers and those who do not have. Computer hardware was an advantage since it allows for access to the internet. During the pandemic, the reality has transformed into social seclusion. It is no longer an advantage but a necessity, a prerequisite to move forward (Dangle & Sumaoang, 2020). A student who lacks both the internet and the foundational literacy and numeracy skills were functionally excluded in an educational ecosystem who secure it.

Table 4. The K-12 Transition and Systemic Fractures (2013-Present).

Gap Category	Definition	Evidence
Implementation Gap	The disconnect between the legal mandate and the fragmented execution across concerned agencies.	The trifocal institutions have isolated themselves preventing a unified, continuous, and relevant educational system. The extension failed to address the persistent problem of teacher mastery, leaving the pedagogical basis without necessary backing.
Structural Gap	Flaws in policy design that prioritized external standards over the remediation of internal curricular and cognitive needs.	RA 10533 prioritized global parity over local efficacy required to solve the pre-existing educational crisis. The reform modernized the form by adding two years but failed to deepen the pedagogical substance, essentially institutionalizing a longer period of stagnation. K-12 outputs remain structurally unaligned with the actual requirements and demands of the higher education system and the labor market.
Access Gap	The persistent disparity in the distribution of learning infrastructure and technological tools.	Without first resolving the foundational fractures especially in the technological infrastructure, the transition will remain inaccessible to the significant portion of the student population.

International large-scale assessments. According to a Manila Times article, the Philippines ranked last in the latest Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study 2019 (TIMSS) report by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. “Prior to this, Filipino students ranked dead last among 79 countries when it came to reading comprehension in 2018. The country also ranked second lowest in both mathematical and scientific assessment in the Program for International Student Assessment.” (Mendoza, 2020).

The 2022 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) revealed the actual situation of Philippine education. The report indicated that 15-year-old Filipino students are the least competent among their peers in the participating countries in basic academic subjects, such as math, reading, and science. These core subjects form the very basis of their future successes, both academically and in life. The concern stems from the reality

of whether Filipino students are actually learning, which is the focus of this paper.

Table 5. The 4IR, COVID-19, and the Modular Crisis (2016-Present)

Gap Category	Definition	Evidence
Implementation Gap	The inconsistency between the availability of technology, technological solutions, and the actual readiness of the stakeholders.	The struggles of the digital immigrants in shifting/resisting the technological offer of 4IR (Vodanovich, 2010). The ineffectiveness of the SLMs without the teacher-guided modalities and systemic hope that they become standalone tools. In the end, the SLMs failed in providing the necessary pedagogical scaffolding. Parents answering the modules on behalf of their children instead of acting as home facilitators (Luaña, 2021).
Structural Gap	Systemic failures where policy choices are dictated by necessity rather than pedagogical efficacy creating new institutional developments.	The use and adoption of MDL was an admission that the state could not provide options for learning. The honor and award system in Philippine schools caused parents to be hypervigilant and prioritize completion over actual learning (Arzadon, 2017). Modules were designed to be overcrowded with difficult lessons accompanied with learning activities which led to a failure in self-paced learning.
Access Gap	The widening disparity in learning continuity caused by the cost of connectivity and the economic stability of the household.	The rural areas have remained isolated since there is a lack of infrastructure to access the internet. The lack of economic stability is a primary cause for a lack of focus among public school learners. The shift to self-learning exposed a foundational access gap in basic skills: students with poor reading and writing activities were functionally excluded in modular learning (Luaña, 2021).

According to the PISA report, 1152 students or 16% of the total 7,200 15-year-old Filipino students who participated in the 2022 assessment, attained at least a level 2 proficiency in mathematics (average among

participants is 69%), 1728 or 24% of students achieved level 2 or higher in reading (average is 74%), 1656 or 23% of students attained a level 2 or higher in science (average is 76%). The Filipino participants were from 188 public and private schools throughout the country (Punongbayan, 2024). The proficiency scores are based on the OECD (NCES, 2018).

It is important to note that this range of scale scores, as the basis for measurement, has another column, that of Financial Literacy. Despite considering the realities that impact student performance, such as their domestic and economic status, access to resources, and other factors, the data revealed that the quality of education in the Philippines is in a critical stage. This PISA report clearly indicates that Filipino students, in general, struggle to achieve proficiency levels in core subjects and meet international standards.

The report, conducted by the OECD, provides Filipino policymakers and educators with essential insights, revealing the strengths, if any, and the apparent weaknesses of the educational policies this country is using. Policy makers and educators should prioritize and make urgent reforms to improve the quality of education in the country. If this crisis is addressed immediately, every Filipino student will be equipped with the necessary skills to meet the ever-growing demands of the economy and labor market. If changes do not take effect soon, education in the Philippines will stagnate.

Table 5. Assessment results and systemic gaps.

Assessment	Result	Gap Identified
PISA (2018)	Last among 79 countries.	Failure in Reading Comprehension.
TIMSS (2019)	Lowest rank in Math and Science	Inability to use foundational concepts
PISA (2022)	Bottom-tier performance	Systemic unreadiness

The data (Mendoza, 2020) showed that the learning crisis is not a singular, isolated event but as a result of a cumulative failure in the reformation of educational policies. The ILSAs proved this stagnation.

Evidence-based proposal: A way forward

This part of the paper explains why the persistent failure in Philippine education is rooted in the disconnect of the agencies, the trifocal units of DepEd, CHED, and TESDA, and the lack of institutional permanence.

The Series of Policy Instability (1991-2007). In line with the recommendation of EDCOM II (2024), which has noted that the lack of coordination among the trifocal units have ensured a disconnect between the basic education outputs, the entry requirements in the tertiary level, and the labor market. Back in 1991, when the educational system was divided into three separate agencies, the Presidential Commission on Educational Reform (PCER) was created to continue and build on the work of EDCOM 1. PCER reiterated and adopted the EDCOM's recommendation to create a National Coordinating Council For Education (NCCE). NCCE was created under Executive Order (EO) No. 273, s. 2000 under then President Joseph Ejercito Estrada.²

In 2007, then President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo issued EO. No. 632, s. 2007, which amended EO No. 273 by abolishing the NCCE, and mandating a Presidential Assistant (PA) to exercise its function of assessing, planning, and monitoring the entire educational system. In that same year, President Arroyo created a Presidential Task Force to commission highly qualified experts/specialists and/or education consultancy groups to provide specific service under EO No. 652, s. 2007. Yet, despite these past issues, the efforts to coordinate the three sub-sectors of education and training failed to fully deliver the desired outcomes, elevating the urgent need for further reform to pivot the crisis in the education system.

This part of the history of the learning crisis proved that the educational coordination in the Philippines depended on prerogative rather than a state imperative. The lack of a permanent structure is the primary reason why the country is currently in a state of crisis. Instead of an Act of Congress, the entire educational roadmap is hinged on a temporary, movable authority. To reverse this crisis, it must shift to a legislative solution.

On March 30, 2017, Sen. Sherwin Gatchalian introduced Senate Bill (SB) No. 2017 or the National Education Council Act during the 19th Congress. Sec. 3 of SB No. 2017 aimed for the following objectives:

Promote a culture of long-term, strategic, and collaborative planning among the three sub-sectors through the formulation and implementation of

² According to Philippine Education Policy Reforms in Action (2004), implementation problems existed such as the budget cuts, lack of continuity of project administration and the change in focus of the agency due to frequent changes in leadership. The report also indicated that “important gains were achieved such as the successful elimination of textbook shortages in basic education...but there is little progress observed in improving teaching productivity and utilization.”

a national education agenda that will compel the adoption of a long-term vision and focused priorities for the education sector;

Improve education governance in the country and ensure effective coordination and eliminate fragmentation of education policies and programs among the three sub-sectors; and

Establish an efficient institution through the creation of the National Education Council with the necessary authority to mandate the integration of education policies and programs, and strengthen the collaboration of the three sub-sectors to improve education outcomes and achieve the goals set under the national education agenda.

Table 6. SB No. 2017.

Sec. 3., SB 2017 Objective	Target Systemic Gap	Significance
Promote Strategic Collaboration	Structural Gap	Objective No. 1 replaces reactive benchmarking with a long-term national education agenda that will remain constant until it is amended by an Act of Congress.
Expel Fragmentation	Implementation Gap	Objective 2 expels what EDCOM II (2024) identified as “silos” ensuring that policies are synchronized across the trifocal sectors.
Institutionalization of a proper authority	Access Gap	Objective 3 creates the necessary authority that will mandate integration bypassing consultative bodies.

Ultimately, a way-forward demands governance change. Those in positions to effect change should recognize that the trifocal solution of EDCOM 1 cannot function separately. Legislators must create a system that will integrate the individual mandate of trifocalization into an integrated system, one that ensures agility to survive the ever-changing reality of 4IR.

Conclusion

Initiatives are merely starting points, not end points. In the three decades since 1994, Philippine education has successfully institutionalized stagnation. What was once promised as a social right, starting from Quezon to the present, has been subtly transformed into an individual, private responsibility. By failing to go over the obvious fractures in the system, the Philippine government has outsourced education to the Filipino family, adding to their burden resulting in the exploitation of their reverence for the college diploma.

The 2018 and 2022 PISA results are empirical evidence of a thirty-years steady decline in the quality of education in the Philippines. As well as the 2019 TIMSS result wherein the Philippines ranked last. This study has shown that the implementation gaps, structural gaps, and the access gaps identified in the 1990s remained unsolved up to the present. This crisis is not an accident. This crisis is a system failure.

In the Philippines, the state has allowed students to experience different values imposed on the student's proximity to technology, even domestic stability. With institutions being underfunded, the aim to reform created a system that exploits the dreams of the Filipino youth instead of helping them realize it.

Unless the government moves beyond administrative prerogatives and moves toward legislative permanence, by creating, for example, a National Education Council, the system will remain a machine for reproduction. Instead of a transformative institution, this government inaction will repeat the alienation of the indigenous people of the country, by alienating the Filipino students of their future. To deny them pedagogical substance is to isolate their futures essentially repeating the cycle of indigence the state promised it would break.

The task now is to reclaim education as a fundamental element of the state, ensuring that it allows for the fulfillment of dreams by turning them into achievable states.

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