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At the Forefront of Reforms: Teacher Emotion and Agency in the Appropriation of Recent Education Initiatives in the Philippines^[1]

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The interpretation and implementation of education reforms are mediated by the teachers who enact them in multiple and complex ways as local conditions intersect with teacher emotions and identities. This study explores Filipino literacy teachers' emotions vis-à-vis a series of educational reforms and the various articulations of teacher agency amid the constellation of resources and constraints in their local contexts. Teachers' narratives suggest that they see themselves primarily as part of the system, feel grateful to be part of it, and feel responsible for the successful implementation of these reforms. Since the reforms are cascaded on a top-down model, teachers engage in "emotion management," which are deliberate attempts to navigate through their subjective experiences to align their emotions with "normative requirements." They employ "hidden scripts," e.g., venting their emotions among themselves as a therapeutic social practice. Driven by their commitment to teaching as a caring profession, a sense of accountability grounded on their spirituality, and deep gratitude to the government's initiative to improve the socio-economic status of public school teachers through the legislation of a salary standardization scheme, teachers creatively comply with mandates of the Department of Education resulting in various articulations of the reforms. Thus, although the teachers may be viewed from the surface as technicians who are uncritical of the system, a closer examination revealed teachers owning the reform through their creative appropriations of the program informed by their personal and professional experiences, a constant appraisal of the resources at their disposal, and their beliefs and aspirations.

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The interpretation and appropriation of education reforms at the field level are mediated by the teachers who enact the reforms in their local contexts in the exercise of their agency. By appropriation, I mean the “ways that creative agents interpret and take in elements of policy, thereby incorporating these discursive resources into their own schemes of interest, motivation, and action, or their own ‘figured worlds’” (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, as cited in Levinson, Sutton, & Winstead, 2009, p. 779). Thus, there is a need to listen to teachers’ voices and examine the ways with which they negotiate and navigate through education reforms. This study draws from the work of Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson (2013) who proposed that teacher agency is anchored on the understanding that agency is 1) something that is achieved in and through concrete contexts-for-action; 2) the outcome of the interplay of the iterative, practical, and evaluative dimensions, and projective dimensions, i.e., teacher agency emerges from the constant appraisal of one’s personal and professional life history, the aims and means that inform education action, as well as one’s professional values, aims, intentions, and ambitions; 3) impacted by the availability of cultural (e.g., ways of thinking, understanding, and talking about issues and conditions); material (e.g., physical and spatial-geographical resources); and social (i.e., relational) resources that may be deployed in a particular situation (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015).

Moreover, this study assumes that teachers are beings with emotions and that these emotions impact their practices. This paper draws from the poststructuralist perspective, where the central argument is that emotion is “interactional and performative” (Zembylas, 2003). In other words, the language used “to describe emotions are not simply names for ‘emotion entities,’ or preexisting situations with coherent characteristics; rather, these words are themselves practices performed to serve specific purposes in the process of negotiating reality” (Lutz, 1988, as cited in Zembylas, 2011, p.32). Zembylas further posited that “emotions are not private; neither are they merely the effects of outside social structures.” Rather, emotions are trans-

formative (Chubbuck & Zembylas 2008; Zembylas & Chubbuck 2009), in that they are not simply “products of events” but are “constitutive forces for (trans) forming individuals, social interactions and power relations” (Zembylas, 2011, p. 33). Teachers have “spaces for emotional freedom” and they have the ability to resist external normalized rules for emotion, although...some constraints are virtually inevitable.” Thus, “emotions are not the anticognitive domain of life but rather the very site of the capacity to effect change” (Zembylas, 2005b, p. 470).

This paper makes an argument that teachers’ emotions are critical in the achievement of agency and that its consideration may present a possibility for the expansion of the Ecological Model of Teacher Agency. However, I would like to pose a caveat that the findings presented here are the initial data collection in an on-going research that I am conducting for my dissertation, and that the main purpose of this presentation is to generate suggestions and comments for its direction and refinement. Moreover, this is the first time that I am presenting the initial observations that form part of my on-going dissertation work. This is also my first time to present a paper outside of Southeast Asia, thanks to the International Bursary of BERA.

This paper is organized in three parts. First, I will present a brief overview of the rationale, key features, and criticisms on the newly implemented education reform in the Philippines, the K-12 program. Then, I will discuss initial observations on an ethnographic study that I am currently conducting in multigrade schools located in remote island communities to generate a thick description on how teachers exercise their agency in the appropriation of the education reform. Finally, I will argue for the importance of looking into teacher emotion in exploring teacher agency amid education reform implementation.

The Philippines has recently embarked on what it considers as the most comprehensive education reform program in the history of the country, the K-12 program. The government’s rationale for the reform program are as follows. First, the Philippines must catch up with the rest of the world because international trends and research on education have indicated that the basic education in the country has failed the nation. For example, the World Economic Forum Global Competitiveness Report 2012 showed that compared to its ASEAN neighbors, the Philippines ranked 4th from the bottom of the eight countries that participated in the study, in terms

of education quality. It ranked 2nd to the last in the quality of primary education, and it ranked last in the quality of Math and Science Education and capacity for innovation. Second, a study conducted by the Department of Education suggested a very low survival rate of students. Specifically, a study conducted in 2010 showed that of the 100 children who enrolled in Grade 1, only 46% completed secondary school, and of that number, only 16% earned college degrees. The government attributed these to the lack mastery of basic competencies due to the congested curriculum. While most countries already had a 12-year basic education cycle that included kindergarten, four years of junior high, and two years of senior high school, the Philippines only had six years of elementary and four years of secondary education. The Philippines was one of only three countries worldwide and the only one in the ASEAN with a ten-year basic education program.

Republic Act 10533 (An Act enhancing the Philippine Basic Education System by strengthening its curriculum and increasing the number of years for basic education from 10 to 12 years) was thus signed into law in 2013 as a flagship education reform program of the Aquino administration as part of its Basic Education Reform Agenda. The goal of the program is the strengthening of the curriculum through the identification and systematic assessment of identified key competencies for each subject at each level of schooling; the use of mother tongue-based multilingual education; and the introduction of four tracks in senior high school: Academic, Technical-vocational Livelihood (TVL), Sports, and Arts and Design.

The K-12 reform program was not without critiques, the main criticism being that 1) the government was ill-prepared for the full-blown implementation of the program; 2) studies suggested that lengthening the educational cycle, calendar-wise, did not always result in improved quality of education; 3) the addition of two years of Senior HS would entail additional costs that could be fully covered by the Government's SHS Voucher system (Tucay, 2015); and 4) tracking senior high school students had been designed to serve the government's labor export policy since the remittances of overseas contract workers, most of whom were in the technical-vocational fields, accounted for about 10% of the annual national Gross Domestic Product. In fact, in 2016 alone, cash remittances from OCWs reached a record of \$26.9 billion (de Vera, Feb 16, 2017).

Despite the protests, the flagship program of the Aquino Administration

persisted: teachers were required to undergo a series of trainings on both the content and pedagogy espoused by the program, and the first cohort of Senior High School graduates were to graduate in 2017-2018. In this context, what happens to the teacher on the ground? Particularly, how do they make sense of the program and appropriate it particularly in schools located in remote island communities which may not be reached by the surveillance mechanism that is often associated with top-down approaches to reform implementation? Given the top-down orientation of the program, how does teacher emotion intersect with teacher agency in the enactment of the program in MG schools located in remote island communities?

This study explores teacher agency and emotions in teachers' appropriation of the education reform program in a relatively unexplored context: teachers in multigrade schools located in remote island communities. By multigrade I mean contexts where a teacher may handle two or more grade levels in the class, depending on the student population. Around 30% of the schools in the Philippines are multigrade (SEAMEO, 2014), many of which are located in remote communities. Remoteness is defined in terms of distance from the nearest DepEd regional office, travel time and travel cost (Pante, Umali, & Ongkiko, 2015). The islands where the participants of this study were located rated high in all three indicators.

Initially, I conducted semi-structured interviews with eight teachers, focusing on their personal and professional histories; their thoughts and experiences in implementing the K-12; their aspirations vis-à-vis the reform in general and literacy instruction in particular since all of the participants in this study were Grade 1-3 teachers who attended a series of trainings on literacy instruction within the MTBMLE framework. Then, I shadowed eight MG teachers for about two months, i.e., at least two weeks in each of the three schools. I resided with two of the teachers in the two islands observing them as they tried to make sense of the newly introduced materials; sat in their classes and assisted the children during their "free reading" sessions; and joined them in school and district MG meetings, and went to social functions that they were expected to attend. To get a broader understanding of the vertical and horizontal relations that may have facilitated or constrained the emergence of teacher agency, I conducted informal interviews not only with the teachers but also with parents, school principal, the district MG coordinator, and the leadership at both the district and division level.

Based on the open coding of data, I found emerging themes suggesting that teachers engaged in what Zembylas (2005) called emotion navigation “which entails a ... dynamic emotional response to experience, a process that allows more space for the person to use emotions to explore or alter identity, perhaps even redefine the situation or modify goals in order meet larger higher level aims or ideals” (Reddy 2001, p. 122, as cited in Winograd, 2009, p. 303).

Ok na lang: On Constrained Agency and Emotion Navigation

A prevalent theme that surfaced in the conversations was that teachers had reservations and concerns about the education reforms primarily because a) they felt it was rushed; b) they feared that this was another experimentation that, like in the past, may be modified or superseded by another reform before its effectiveness was thoroughly investigated; and c) they knew that the new reform would add to the already heavy work load of teachers. What one teacher said exemplified the other participants’ responses:

Initial training on K-12 was exasperating. They rushed everything. It was not clear. The Grade 1 teachers were confused on how to implement the program. The information dissemination was rushed. The trainers did it so fast. They rushed the training. We were not given the chance to express how we felt. We could not express our reaction because time was limited. We were expected to absorb and execute. Everything was rushed.

On the other hand, despite these personal and private protestations, the teachers unanimously articulated during the interviews their willingness and commitment to abide by the mandate the Department of Education, to comply with the requisites in the program implementation, and to follow all orders from the “higher up.” Second, they felt that since the government had recently established a salary standardization scheme that greatly improved their compensation package, least that they could do was to do as they were told. Third, they were convinced that this reform would ultimately be for the good of the children and the future generations despite their fears that K-12, being the most recent reform, might end up just like other reforms in the past: experimentations that were short-lived. One teacher had this to say:

The thing is, we just follow what DepEd says. This is the unwritten rule: Obey first before you complain. We comply because we work for DepEd... Besides, [if we don't follow], the children will be at a loss. So, we comply. We just follow....

However, what I saw happening in the classroom during my stay in the islands painted a different picture. At the level of practice, the teachers did not simply follow what was required of them. They appropriated the program as they saw fit in their local contexts. For example, all of the three Grade and 1/2 MG teachers did not teach two subjects, *Edukasyon sa Pagpapakatao* (Values Education) and Music Arts, Physical Education, and Health (MAPEH). Instead, they used much of the day teaching the children beginning reading skills in the Mother Tongue (for Grade 1) and in Filipino (for Grade 2). When I saw that this practice was inconsistent with the DepEd-prescribed daily schedule posted on the teacher's table and by the classroom door, the teachers said that they would shift to the officially published schedule when observers visited them. However, since their schools were rarely visited even by the school principal who was based in another island, the unofficial schedule was the schedule. The interview with the principal corroborated what the teachers said: The principal was head of three schools in two islands, and the cost of plying from one island to another is prohibitive considering that principals were not allotted transportation allowance for such travels. In this context, the teachers in these remote island communities had relative autonomy in the program implementation.

When asked why they decided to modify the schedule at the exclusion of Values Education and MAPEH, the teachers argued that in extending the time allotment for language and literacy subjects, they were, in fact, ensuring that the government's ECARP (Every Child and Read A Reader Program) which is consistent with the K-12 goals was met. The statement of an MG 1 and 2 teacher resonated in the two others as well:

What is important is that the children can read in the mother tongue at the end of grade 1. How I do it is my own thing. I know what works in my class. Besides, I will still be the Grade 2 teacher of the Grade 1 children I have now, and I know what they need to succeed in all of the subjects in Grade 1 and beyond: They need to learn how to read and write. The other subjects can wait.

The teachers further argued that DepEd-target competencies and standards in Values Education were, in fact, already addressed since children learned these values more meaningfully in the context of the stories that they talked about during the Read Aloud Activities. As for Grade 2 MAPEH, the teachers believed that the singing and dancing, and indoor-outdoor play that were integrated in their lessons had already covered the target competencies. In the observations and conversations I had with the teachers, I also found that there was great pressure on the teacher to make the students in Grade 1 Mother Tongue and Grade 2 Filipino classes read because the students' beginning reading skills were assessed at the end of the year using a tool called EGRA (Early Grade Reading Assessment).

In the public domain where state surveillance mechanisms are tangible, teachers' discourses about certain aspects of the reform program are often subordinated because of the strong vertical power differential. The teachers articulated that they feared discussing such practices during the trainings, even when they believed in their effectiveness because the district and division heads were present. However, in the classroom, the teachers wielded power over the implementation of the curriculum. And in a context where surveillance mechanisms were limited to teachers submitting reports to the principal who had neither had the time nor material resources to visit the school regularly, the teacher was relatively autonomous and powerful to appropriate the program in the manner that they saw fit.

Mugna: Creative Articulations of the Reform Program

Data from classroom observations suggested that teacher agency emerged in their daily appropriation of the reform program through various strategies.

- A. They engaged in hybridizing, finessing, or the temporary suspension of certain aspects of the program. "Finessing" is a process in which teachers "review the available options and make purposeful decisions to attend to some things while ignoring others" such as teachers extending literacy instruction in MTBMLE and Filipino while opting not to teach other subjects. In "hybridizing," teachers blend "aspects of the literacy instruction package with existing pedagogical practices" as they "draw upon a range of knowledge sources and past experiences" (Kersten &

Pardo, 2007) to inform decisions aimed at meeting the needs of students given available resources. Sometimes, the teachers did not follow the prescribed Revised Teachers' Guide at all. Instead, they used materials that they had collected from years of teaching.

- B. Teachers engaged in performativity and claimed to be ready with the tools to do it when DepEd observers did observe them. Teachers seemed to have embodied this sense of performativity in order to cope with the complexities of reform implementation such as the lack of understanding of the principles behind the RTGs and the difficulty of procuring and preparing instructional materials given their inaccessibility in remote island communities, and the lack of strong supportive vertical and horizontal social relations because of the relative physical isolation in the island. One teacher said:

If someone observes, we go by the required format, and we have the DLL to show them, but if there are no observers, we find ways to ensure that what we believe 10 works best for the children in our local contexts is done given what we have. We do not necessarily follow the DLL.

All of the teachers in this study expressed their support to the K-12 program and held high hopes that this would ultimately forge a better life for the children and a hope for the country. This prevailing belief and the economic benefit of being part of the DepEd payroll, which in remote island provinces means decent pay given that the standard of living is quite low, appears to constrain possibilities of expressing their emotions and thoughts freely especially in public. Teachers did not want to risk their jobs and the positions that they aspired for so that they could maintain their place in the system or move up the promotions ladder. Van Veen and Slegers (2009) argued that "how teachers respond to educational reforms is determined, to a great extent, by their feeling towards the reforms themselves. If they feel that their personal and professional identity are threatened by the reform, they may not support or endorse it" (p.237). To the teachers in this island province, the greatest threat was losing their jobs, and so they strategically positioned themselves to ensure that they maintained their place in the system. Thus, emotions such as fear, burnout, and disenfranchisement were not expressed before authorities who could threaten their position in the system. Instead, their objections, protestations, and lamentations became part of the hidden

scripts, something talked about in hushed voices, something discussed with colleagues who shared their predicaments, something laughed at or talked about cynically among themselves.

Such emotions embody teacher agency since it is the experience of these emotions that instantiates the transformation of teachers' personal and professional identities, and contributes to what of Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson (2013) called the "achievement" of agency. In the top-down management system of the DepEd, there are rules on how teachers are supposed to act and emote. In the presence of surveillance structures and mechanisms, the teachers may display compliance and resignation. However, in their own spaces, they "redefine the situation or modify goals in order meet larger higher level aims or ideals" (Reddy 2001, p. 122, in Winograd, 2009, p. 303). In their classroom, when surveillance is limited or weak, they engaged in "emotional control" and exercised their ability to resist external "normalized rules for emotion," suggesting that indeed "emotions are not the anticognitive domain of life but rather the very site of the capacity to effect change" (Zembylas 2005b, p. 470). In the teachers' engagement in emotion navigation, they formed and transformed the reform program in order to realize what they felt would work best for their students. The program as appropriated on the ground ceased to be the program that the government had intended it to be.

Driven by their commitment to teaching as a caring profession, a sense of accountability grounded on their spirituality and deep gratitude to the government's initiative to improve the socio-economic status of public school teachers through the legislation of a salary standardization scheme, teachers creatively complied with mandates of the Department of Education, resulting in various articulations of the reforms. Thus, although the teachers may be viewed from the surface as technicians who are uncritical of the system, a closer examination revealed teachers owning the reform through their creative appropriations of the program, informed by their personal and professional experiences, a constant appraisal of the resources at their disposal, and their beliefs and aspirations. Finally, it appears that teachers' constant appraisal of such iterative, practical-evaluative, and projective dimensions of teacher agency was mediated by their emotions, suggesting that emotions are an important dimension in the exploration of teacher agency in the appropriation of education reforms.

This presentation therefore ends with more questions:

1. How might the ecological model of teacher agency be further expanded to reflect the critical role of emotions in teacher agency?
2. The initial observations suggest that the geographical and psycho-social space has agency. When teachers move from space to space, their personal and professional identities are transformed. How may we expand our understanding of teacher agency to include the importance of space? There is something that needs to be said about methodology here.

Given the apparent contradiction between what teachers say from what they do, interviews alone are not sufficient for us to theorize teacher emotion and agency. Qualitative approaches that entail prolonged engagement, participant observation, and thick description, among others are needed to triangulate data sources and methods in order to generate more robust data for theory building and expansion.

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