

# **A DEHUMANIZING KIND OF EDUCATION: THE PHILIPPINES' CONTINUING EDUCATION CRISIS AND NEOLIBERAL EDUCATION**

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*The struggles of the common Filipino student manifest in the different aspects of their daily lives. They are faced with seemingly insurmountable socio-economic challenges as they traverse their educational development towards their career of choice, which can be a dehumanizing experience. Given these problems, the objective of this paper is to (1) provide a survey of the socio-economic experiences of the Filipino students from the pre-pandemic to post-pandemic Philippines, (2) explain Paulo Freire's problem of dehumanization, (3) discuss neoliberalism and the educational restructuring under it and its influence to the Filipino student, and lastly (4) contextualize Paulo Freire's levels of consciousness within the social classes in the Philippines. The paper will primarily argue on the dehumanizing impact of the Philippine education crisis under the ongoing Neoliberal restructuring in education towards the Filipino student.*

*Keywords: dehumanization, neoliberalism, Paulo Freire, Philippine education, student life*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Throughout the decades of educational development worldwide, the Philippine education system has revealed its shortcomings and neglect of the populace, particularly Filipino students from the marginalized sectors (EDCOM 2024). For a huge segment of our society, education has not brought better conditions or fulfilled the free market promise/s of the greener pastures brought by the ongoing Neoliberal educational restructuring and developments. The students were left vulnerable to major societal ills such as poverty, which reinforces miseducation and often leads towards criminality (Advincula-Lopez, Leslie, & Yoshida, Mai, 2023), to name a few. The struggles that they are encountering range from their own personal everyday subsistence and escalating to the community's issues and concerns that affect them in many different aspects of their lives. Clearly, the issues within a community and wider society profoundly affect individuals, playing a vital role in shaping a student's social, economic, and most notably, their educational development. For us to make sense of

the continuing education crisis and its manifestations, let us first take a quick look at the status of Philippine education over the recent years.

## **A BRIEF SURVEY ON THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC LANDSCAPE OF PHILIPPINE EDUCATION IN CRISIS: THE PRE-PANDEMIC TO POST-PANDEMIC EXPERIENCES OF THE FILIPINO STUDENTS**

Financial hardship is one of the top factors and growing concerns in education in our country. In the Philippines, A huge number of families in Metro Manila—about half of all households—are struggling financially. They face tough living conditions, often in temporary homes with no access to clean water or proper plumbing, and are forced into tiny spaces. This environment poses significant health risks, and children are disproportionately affected by the lack of safe housing and access to clean water. On top of that, these communities are often stigmatized and live with the constant worry of eviction and the threat of crime and violence (Jocson, 2016). This results in more students, especially in the marginalized sector, being left behind because of unfair learning access. Then, the COVID-19 pandemic occurred in 2020, and to this day, the impact of the socio-economic crisis is still felt by the populace. The failed government response of the Duterte Administration to the pandemic's onslaught exposed the deteriorating educational system of the country. The prolonged lockdowns and inefficient Covid-19 response led the Department of Education to resort to Distance or Blended Learning, where the learning varies from the student's capability for technological access. Lessons were conducted online via synchronous classes, asynchronous task completion through printed and electronic modules, and viewing television or radio broadcasts. The excruciating problems of blended Learning are exposed only a few months after its implementation. Students and their parents shared concerns about hostile learning inequalities, erroneous learning modules, academic burnout, and inefficiency in the existing educational system (IBON, 2021). According to a 2020 poll conducted by Social Weather Stations among 1,200 respondents, 89 percent of families reported that distance learning is more difficult than the traditional face-to-face method. Another survey from Movement for Safe, Equitable, Quality and Relevant Education revealed that many of the students had a difficult time participating in limited onsite classes (Hernando-Malipot 2022). The public clamor for the resumption of Face-to-Face classes has been rejected several times, until December 2021, when the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF) issued its recommendations and guidelines. Schools were required to follow physical distancing, proper hygiene and sanitization, manage large classes, and implement alternate schedules, but these measures only highlighted the underlying reasons behind the prolonged reopening of schools. Our public school system is not equipped to handle oversized classes and crowded school grounds, which is further exacerbated by the lack of sanitation facilities, clinics, and other basic school services. Also, we need to include the ineffective action plan for COVID-19, as it should be concurrent with the plans for reopening the schools. The government's incompetence discouraged students from attending school (IBON, 2021).

Cruz (2021) narrated an experience from a student named Sophia Enriquez, who was not eager to return to school. Aside from her fear of COVID-19, she also struggles with distance learning. She stated that it was challenging to learn on her own and had difficulties understanding the lessons, learning software and gadgets, and coping with poor internet service. Remote learning is not suitable for everyone, especially students who are more physically, mentally, emotionally, and financially challenged and are therefore more prone to burnout. Students, most especially from marginalized and low-income families, struggled with the sudden shift in the education system, experiencing issues such as lack of money to buy equitable gadgets for the online class, juggling household responsibilities with schoolwork, and an inconducive learning environment. The system established robbed children of proper learning development and the opportunity to learn with the care of a professional teacher and reduced the socialization component that is essential in raising future Filipino citizens (IBON 2021).

IBON Foundation (2021), an economic research think-tank in the Philippines, provides an overview of the problems within the post-pandemic Philippine education and identified several underlying factors, which are (1) the tuition fee hikes due to the continuous rising inflation in the Philippines which directly affects the educational expenses for the students such as the tuition fees, books, uniforms etc., (2) lower educational spending of the government compared to other countries (Neoliberal Austerity measures). (3) Online learning/hybrid learning, due to the pandemic, has been implemented, where technological innovations enabled the student to cope with distant learning was utilized, but even beyond the pandemic, schools still utilize this innovation as a part of their educational pedagogy, thereby contributing to the country's digital divide. Lastly, (4) a huge percentage of parents still choose to enroll their children in private schools with the belief that it is way better than the public schools, in terms of educational instruction and facilities. A low competence level among students is an inevitable outcome of poor educational quality during and after the pandemic, resulting from the government's and the education sector's inadequate response. Such a low level of competence is evident in the results of the 2018 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), where 72% of Filipino pupils underperformed for their academic level. Compared to the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) average of 487 points in reading, Filipino students got an average of 340 points. Compared to an OECD average of 489 points for both Mathematics and Science, they achieved an average of 353 and 357 points, respectively. These results were also reflected in the recent 2022 PISA results, where the Philippines ranked 347th in reading, 355th in math, and 356th in science, indicating that there has been no significant progress in the educational standing of Filipino students. Analyzing these results and the contributory factors, there is a link between the school budget and student achievement because they lack finances and access to technology, underfunded schools are underequipped, and so they underperform. This has an impact on how quickly they can update the curriculum and execute improvements (PIDS, 2021). The problems identified and discussed above affect the learning capabilities and critical faculties of the students, hindering substantial improvement in the quality of education in the country, as seen in the results of PISA. An unfortunate outcome for the Filipino students who are dedicated

and committed but are deprived by the education system. In retrospect, the focal problems identified in this brief survey, such as inefficient and poor government planning in education throughout the pandemic, inaccessibility of the learning modality, insufficient facilities and learning materials, and students' low competency levels, can be a source of a dehumanizing experience for Filipino students. This begs the question of what dehumanization is and what it means for a human (student) to be dehumanized. We will delve deeply into this question in the next part of this paper.

## PAULO FREIRE'S PROBLEM OF DEHUMANIZATION

In light of the continuing education crisis in the Philippines, as manifested in the pitiful experiences and conditions of Filipino students discussed above, it is imperative for educators, academics, activists, and education advocates to revisit Paulo Freire's ideas. This part of the paper will illuminate the core of his revolutionary educational Philosophy – dehumanization.

Paulo Freire, in his influential book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, recognized that the primary struggle for humanity is achieving humanization —a state that has been corrupted by dehumanization. This problem is made worse when people accept this reality instead of striving to break the shackles of their dehumanizing condition. Both the oppressed and their oppressors suffer from a "fear of freedom." Consequently, the oppressed are hesitant to accept their emancipation, while the oppressors fear losing the power they have over others, for they have already grown accustomed to control and manipulation and the gratification they get from it (Oppressors consciousness). However, Freire (1993) argues that freedom is a necessary condition for people to become fully human (27-29). Hence, authentic human completion is only possible if those who are oppressed become aware of their own dehumanizing experience and take an active role in their own emancipation. The oppressed cannot be freed by others; they must liberate themselves. Freire elucidates the pathway to human completion and liberation:

. . . In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of the oppression not as closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform. This perception is necessary but not a sufficient condition for human liberation; It must become the motivating force for liberating action (Freire 1993, 31)

Therefore, the emancipation of the oppressed from dehumanization must come internally (from themselves) and be coupled with a critical awareness of their condition and the realization of their ability to transcend their inhumane status. Dehumanization, as discussed by Freire, has a dual expression. It can manifest both from the point of view of the oppressed and the oppressor, and liberation can only be realized when this duality ceases to exist. The process of dehumanization in the experience of the oppressed detaches them from their world and their society, making it impersonal for them. The world becomes an object rather than a subject to be re-created and

transformed. It turns humans into passive onlookers of history instead of being active agents of change and participating directly in it.

We can trace Paulo Freire's integral conception of Dehumanization from Karl Marx's notion of alienation. In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscript of 1844*, under the discussion in "Estranged Labour". Marx (1844) notes that the working class is detached from the commodities and services they produce for society. Marx calls this the "objectification of labor". They struggle to afford their basic needs for survival, sustenance, and human development, including food, education, housing, and essential services. The owners of capital, meanwhile, accumulate wealth through the workers' labor. Thus, labor, which is supposed to be a creative and liberating act, becomes an abomination only accomplished in the name of survival instead of a creative and genuine process of shaping and transforming the world to accommodate people's aspirations and dreams. It robs them of creativity, passion, and life; consequently, labor becomes a gruesome, painful, and tiring activity they must undergo to continue existing. Life itself becomes an everyday alienating and dehumanizing experience. An oppressive society rooted in exploitation and domination dehumanizes people by separating them from the fruits of their own labor and by robbing them of their ability to genuinely participate and engage with Socio-economic activities that can uplift themselves and society at large.

Furthermore, Freire (1993) expounds the concept of dehumanization through "internalized oppression", which creates a grand illusion of stereotypes and narratives against the oppressed, which the oppressed believes to be true. It creates a twisted narrative where humans cannot change an oppressive system that is embedded in our society. Through internalized oppression, the oppressor gains a foothold on the Socio-economic-political consciousness of the oppressed, turning them silent, passive, and inactive. Eventually, the oppressed become accustomed to this reality and oppression is further normalized as a part of their daily lives (Freire 1993, 29). These daily encounters of the oppressed and oppressors form a relationship which Freire calls prescription, where an oppressor's choice is imposed upon the oppressed; a prescription alien to the prescribed but unconsciously assimilated and accepted. Ironically, this results in the oppressed struggle for liberation without an aim to ouster the oppressor or change the oppressive system it perpetuates, but to become the oppressor themselves, twisting the very narrative of liberation. However, the result of prescription does not make the oppressed less conscious of their oppression and the struggles they are experiencing. Instead, they fear the consequences of acting against the pervasive structures that perpetuate oppression. The inevitable result is that the oppressed concede and become resigned to their situation; they become too inhibited to pursue liberation. This is because they perceive the dangers of fighting for freedom as unmanageable and insurmountable (29). The consequence of this domination is seriously debilitating for the oppressed, making them subservient and meek into the injustices they have been enduring. A fear of freedom envelopes them; it pacifies their actions and dehumanizes them.

Dehumanization, as previously discussed, can be attributed to human consciousness/ awareness, which constitutes their worldview and how they respond and react to their environment as they interact with it. To understand the dynamics and complexity of human consciousness, let us turn our analysis to Paulo Freire's (1974,

13-14) classification of the levels of consciousness discussed in his work *Education for Critical Consciousness*. In this work, he argues that human consciousness undergoes continuous development in certain historical conditions. The levels of consciousness are classified as (1) semi-transitive, (2) transitive, and (3) critical transitivity. Wheeler (2016) made a concise summary of these levels:

- (1) Semi-transitive consciousness is considered the initial stage where humans feel powerless and lack control over their lives, attributing their circumstances to external factors like fate, luck, or God. They often resort to magical explanations due to their lack of (rational/scientific) knowledge when trying to make sense of the problems they are experiencing or their own condition. As a result, they make no personal effort and/or can't take actions to change their situation and always expect any meaningful transformation to originate from an outside (Metaphysical) source beyond themselves.
- (2) Transitive consciousness is a step higher than the former level of consciousness, also called the Naïve transitivity, which marks a transition where the individual experiences a limited sense of agency. While they conceptually understand that improvement is possible, their outlook remains skeptical and their approach is reactive, addressing challenges piecemeal as they surface. Furthermore, they exhibit an inclination to delegate responsibility by placing their faith in powerful figures, trusting these leaders to implement the necessary transformations on their behalf. Freire believes that most of the urban and/or modern societies (He used Brazil as his example) are already on this stage, and even though this is a desired development within the human consciousness, it still lacks depth and critical awareness. Freire, in detail, characterizes insufficiency within the qualities of the said consciousness as:

...Oversimplification of problems; by a nostalgia for the past; by the underestimation of the common man; by a lack of interest in investigation, accompanied by an accentuated taste for fanciful explanation; by fragility of the argument; by a strongly emotional style; by the practice of polemics rather than dialogue; by magical explanations.” (Freire 1974, 14)

Notice that this level still includes the tendency for people to fall upon “magical explanation” in addressing problems, issues, and the world, but this is only partial and is only a remaining semblance of the former level. Freire warns us that if this consciousness does not develop or progress to the next level, it might be negated by sectarian irrationality and become a form of blind obedience or fanaticism. Moreover, this is also the stage where the oppressor's consciousness resides. Given that this stage, in some aspect is still resistant to change or the formation of critical consciousness because it still lacks the dialogical character, which is the cornerstone of critical consciousness (ibid). This dialogical characteristic

is present with the next and last level of consciousness in which Freire acknowledges as the highest form of consciousness.

- (3) Critical transitivity, the last level of consciousness, for Freire is the pathway for humanization, where a critical realization and understanding of one's place in the world are gained. A human who embodies critical consciousness understands the power of one's actions and is capable of meaningful societal action.

These levels/stages described by Freire gave us a vivid description of how dehumanization can occur or manifest within different kinds of people with different kinds of circumstances throughout the course of time. However, it is important to note that dehumanization is concentrated at the first two levels of consciousness (semi-transitive and transitive) and is transcended at the last level (critical transitive).

## EDUCATION AND DEHUMANIZATION

The ramifications of dehumanization are strongly apparent in education, beginning within the four corners of the room where both the student and the teacher interact with one another, forming an oppressor-oppressed nexus that binds them together. Freire (1993, 52) writes:

...The teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable. Or else he expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the students. His task is to "fill" the students with the contents of his narration— contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance. Words are emptied of their concreteness and become hollow, alienated, and alienating verbosity.

Instead of the student actively participating in the learning process, students in this model of education are passive recipients who simply receive information from the teacher, like empty glasses that need to be filled. They are expected to memorize facts and skills without truly grasping why these ideas taught to them are important or how they connect to the real world and their lived experiences. This approach is often criticized because it favors rote learning, which is obsessed with gaining information for gaining sake or just for the sake of getting lucrative scores in examinations. Thus, the development of critical thinking and problem-solving abilities is sacrificed within what Freire calls "banking education," which ingrains false consciousness in the minds of the students. (Freire 1993, 52-53). Also, the school discipline established through banking education by an authoritarian educator identifies the diversity of students as abnormal and deviant, while conformity is normalized and often praised (Cortez 2023, 49). This kind of education stifles critical thinking and puts the student into an oblivious semi-transitive and/or transitive, annihilating the possibility of attaining critical transitivity. As a result, colossal social institutions like government,

religious, and educational institutions manipulate people and promote values and rules that people then follow without question through the proliferation of false consciousness and the employment of disciplinary methods of banking education. This keeps the students from challenging their predetermined roles in a society with unequal power dynamics. This process ultimately leads to a dehumanized state where individuals fail to see or challenge an unfair system (Sarroub and Quadros 2015, 252).

In summary, a state of dehumanization refers to a condition where a human feels alienated from his environment (world) and is in a state of deprivation caused by the injustice/s rooted in the oppressor's domination, which results in an internalized oppression that creates disillusionment within the oppressed. Inexorably, this form of oppression inculcates false consciousness where the oppressed are robbed of their critical thinking, making them helpless, hopeless, and/or skeptical of genuine change.

However, Freire is not a pessimist. He does not only criticize education but also see its transformative power and argues that even though education can be platform for control and domination and oftentimes weaponized by the oppressor to maintain the status quo (oppression) and consequentially normalize dehumanization as part of our existence, education can also serve as a channel for humanization through critical consciousness (as described in the levels of consciousness). An optimistic view that we hope to sow within the current system of education, which is confronted by a crisis. That being said, it is time to raise our consciousness about this education system and make a critical analysis of its policies.

## NEOLIBERALISM: THE UNFULFILLED PROMISE

Neoliberalism as a global phenomenon is not a novel undertaking. For decades, leading countries with highly paid, suit-wearing policymakers and scholars have promoted the neoliberal agenda, hoping to make powerful countries prosper more and developing countries, such as ours, achieve significant economic improvements through massive structural adjustments – including privatization, deregulation, and liberalization (Scholte, 2005, 1). David Harvey (2005), in his work *Brief History of Neoliberalism* best describes its principles and aspirations:

Neoliberalism is, in the first instance, a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. For instance, it must guarantee the quality and integrity of money. It must also set up those military, defense, police, and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights and to guarantee, by force, if need be, the proper functioning of markets (2).

This is the world neoliberalism wants to create. A flourishing society based on the liberty of individuals in their entrepreneurial pursuits and a Smithsonian



paradise where the invisible hand fulfills its promise of abundance. However, the long-awaited promise of neoliberal progress does not come to fruition; the miserable condition of the poor and marginalized continuously worsens due to the aggravating crisis of the global capitalist order under the dictates of Neoliberal policies, more seriously in third-world countries. Despite its clear failure to reduce poverty, the global push for neoliberal policies like privatization, liberalization, and deregulation continues, especially in developing nations. The core ideas of this economic model also involve cutting social spending (Austerity measures) and weakening workers' rights are becoming increasingly unpopular. This is because the policies have consistently failed to improve the lives of the billions of people who are still struggling with hunger and poverty, revealing a significant gap between what these policies promise and what they deliver (San Juan 2016, 81).

### AUSTERITY POLICY AND THE DECLINING QUALITY OF EDUCATION

Neoliberal policies have brought about radical changes in the Philippine educational system, and one of the most notable of these policies is the austerity measures implemented by the government, which have had a significant impact on the quality of education Filipino students are receiving. Aligned with the Neoliberal agenda and its neo-classical economic principles, the rationale of Austerity policies is to reduce government spending and increase tax collection (except for corporation/business entity which often is favored by tax cuts) to enable the government to manage its finances and be able to pay debts, often coming from international financial institutions that finance development projects in the country (Blythe 2013). These policies will pave the way for the expansion of the private sector while reducing the role of the public sector. This is rooted in the belief that the private sector is more competent, functional, and productive compared to the public sector (Government). Are these desired objectives realized in the education sector? Let us examine its implementation and the ongoing results of this undertaking.

Throughout the decades, The neoliberal restructuring in educational policies has caused budget cuts and tuition fee increases to universities and colleges in the country due to austerity measures implemented, commercialization in education has rapidly escalated in the Philippine education system that brought havoc to the most vulnerable sectors of our society, though safety nets are being implemented it did not stop the plummeting condition of the poor and marginalized in the country (Lumbera, B., et al, 2007). Radiamoda (2021, 22) further exposes the policy of austerity in the Philippine education and argues that neoliberal policies in education has strongly manifested through massive budgetary constraints implemented in the education sector in the Philippines arguing that even though the education sector has received more budget in the General appropriations act in the past years, the neoliberal policies in education has further reinforced privatization and limits government spending that it fails to meet the UNESCO's prescribed government spending of 4- 6% of the annual GDP of a country. In response, Radiamoda (ibid, p. 28) suggested that to effectively implement the right to education for every citizen in the country, the government must ensure a sufficient proportion of the national budget. Ironically, despite a growing clamor for educational

improvements, the IBON Foundation (2021) pointed out the erroneous priorities of the government, which allocate more budget for infrastructure projects than for education. For the year 2022, the budget for Education is only Php774 billion, which is 15.4% of the total Php5.024 trillion in the proposed 2022 National Budget. In contrast, infrastructures are allocated Php 1.2 trillion (23.5%), and out of that staggering amount, only 0.72% is allocated for school buildings. A clear indication of the prioritization and infrastructure obsession of the recent Duterte Administration. The said government undertaking was further exposed by the results of the World Bank Collection of Development Indicators (2021), showing the country's government expenditure on education has declined from 3.81% GDP in 1998 to only 2.65% GDP in 2008, thus resulting in a massive shortage of educational resources such as classrooms, educational materials, and employment of effective teachers.

With the neoliberal-led austerity measures implemented in the Philippines over the past few decades, the education system has been unable to keep pace with the country's growing school population and has proven to be a heavy burden for millions of poor students who rely solely on public education and government support. Inevitably, this resulted in a decline in the quality of education in the Philippines and an aggravation of the struggles of Filipino students (Bello, 2009). Quality education is crucial for a meaningful and holistic development of the students; however, as shown from the data provided, the austerity policies implemented in the education sector through reducing the budget for crucial educational resources have deprived the students of acquiring sufficient and efficient education. The flamboyant promise of a better quality of education under the growing influence of the private sector within the neoliberal restructuring is far from reality. The narratives presented indicate a declining trajectory in the quality of education. The Philippine education crisis is far from over.

## **K TO 12 PROGRAM: A NEOLIBERAL LABOR POLICY?**

For the labor market to catch up with the continuous expansion and growth of global capitalism, spearheaded by transnational and multinational corporations and their governments, a mechanism has been created that allows them to easily and conveniently outsource workers from different parts of the world by establishing a global chain of labor markets. But the problem lies in the difficulty of executing it just by enacting or promoting economic laws, regulations, and policies. The neoliberal machine, to sustain this mechanism, requires another platform, and that platform is an institution whose main objective is to develop, shape, and mold the participants who, by necessity, will wholeheartedly join this market. That platform is education (Davies, B., & Banse, 2007, 247-251)

The most recent comprehensive educational policy implemented in the country is the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013, or commonly known as the K to 12 Program. The program restructured basic education in the country by adding two more years in secondary education and altering the curriculum by introducing new subjects for the additional years of schooling. The new curriculum introduced 5 primary strands that the students can take, namely: GAS (General academic strand), HUMMS (Humanities and Social Science), STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and

Mathematics), ABM (Accountancy, Business and Management), and lastly, TECHVOC (Technical Vocational courses). There are two primary objectives to this undertaking, (1) To make the graduates of the K to 12 Program (Senior Highschool) more employable by gaining enough skills and competencies in the basic education and (2) to level the country's educational standard with the pre-existing international standards and make our students globally competitive (Okabe M 2018, 113-129). After a decade of implementation, the K to 12 program has shown inefficiency in achieving its stated objectives. According to a landmark 2018 survey by the Philippine Business for Education (2018), the debut of the first batch of Senior High School (SHS) graduates into the job market met with considerable resistance. The study, which gathered insights from 70 prominent Philippine companies, revealed a critical finding: only 20% of these major employers were prepared to hire the new K-12 finishers. The primary cause of this hiring hesitation was the business sector's doubt regarding the work readiness of the graduates. Firms largely viewed the SHS completers as lacking the necessary competencies for professional roles. As a result, companies exhibited a clear preference for candidates with a college degree or at least two years of tertiary education. This suggests that the K-12 curriculum's goal of producing job-ready high school graduates was initially undermined by the deeply entrenched industry expectation of post-secondary qualifications for entry-level positions. Graduates of the Senior High School (SHS) program who immediately enter the job search commonly encounter obstacles in finding work because employers tend to consider them deficient in practical work history. Since the corporate world places a high value on applicants with an established professional background, these newly finished high school students are placed at a significant competitive disadvantage when navigating the labor market (Castillo, R. C., et al. 2024). Up to this day, the Philippine labor market still prefers employees who has a college degree regardless if they have a special technical certification (NC II) upon graduating from Senior Highschool (Orbeta et al 2022).

Who mainly benefited from this major educational restructuring, and why is there a continuous adherence to this failed educational experiment? As seen with the overwhelming studies concluding its inefficacy. San Juan (2016 85-90) exposes the true colors of the education policy and strongly asserts that the K to 12 Program embodies the "Anti Tertiary Education Mantra" of the Philippine government which adheres to the Neoliberal agenda rooted from a profit driven scheme of Monopoly capital (Multinational/Transnational corporations) to ensure cheap labor markets and intensify the labor export policies in the 3rd world countries (periphery). Core countries, international business organization and international financial institutions such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Asian Development Bank, and the World Bank gave their full support and backs the implementation of K to 12, given that there is a much needed skilled workers in the international labor market and they can have access to it with a much lower wage rates in the underdeveloped (periphery) and developing countries (semi periphery) compared to a relatively higher wages in the developed countries (core). The "Anti Tertiary Education Mantra" as discussed by San Juan (ibid) is shamelessly executed by the Philippine government by its blatant and unapologetic promotion of Technical-vocational programs in senior high school as an alternative to tertiary education to ensure work readiness of the graduates and to provide a fresh supply of laborers for

the international labor market. Why continue educational growth and endure 4-5 years of college education if you can work (preferably overseas) as soon as you graduate in the K to 12 Program? With austerity measures implemented, the lack of educational support from the government, and the seductive promise of neoliberalism, The Filipino students are left with no choice.

The neoliberal architects seem to be doing a great job with their crusade of restructuring and influencing the labor export policies in the Philippines in the service of the neoliberal agenda. As shown in the recent Asian Development Bank's research, the Philippine economy heavily relied on foreign remittances within the past decade, representing approximately 12% of the country's total economic output (GDP). The workers' earnings have grown to become the most crucial inflow of foreign currency (external revenue) for the nation and provide a major stream of income for Filipino families who receive them (Rivas, 2019)

It hits two birds with one stone: the architects of neoliberal policies can posture themselves as torchbearers of educational development in the underdeveloped and developing world, while reaping the benefits of cheap, skilled labor (given the K to 12 Program) to the advantage of transnational and multinational businesses.

## ZOMBIFICATION OF THE NEOLIBERAL STUDENT

In the last few years, the world has seen a steady growth in the number of zombie movies and series produced and released across different platforms. Netflix, A major online streaming platform, has released multiple zombie movies and series in the recent past, some of the most notable are "Army of the dead" (2021), "All of us are dead" (2022), "Valley of the dead" (2022), and recently, "Outside" (2024), which is a Filipino made film. Following this trend, I've seen myself binging through these movies for hours, unsure if I am procrastinating or just simply like the said genre. Like me, Filipinos seem to be fascinated with the thrill and excitement that the undead can elicit through our sensibilities. Perhaps, this renewed fascination with the undead was re-ignited because of our experience of the pandemic, which held the world hostage for years and made us fear for our lives in a setting closed to a post-apocalyptic world. However, my fascination springs from my curiosity towards their qualities, characteristics, and their peculiarities, for they (In a way) resemble a condition known to us as dehumanization.

A zombie is defined as a reanimated corpse - "walking dead"- which already loses its ability to think, express, and communicate (Merriam-webster) and is essentially devoid of human qualities besides its basic instinct for sustenance. To survive, they are often depicted as monsters who eat human flesh and often kill the victim in the process (Cambridge dictionary). Dehumanization, as espoused by Paulo Freire, has a striking similarity with the rudimentary qualities and characteristics of the undead and/or the process of becoming one - "Zombification". Both experiences/conditions lead to the loss of our humanity via the corruption of our rationality and morality. I decided to use the term "zombie" to personify the abstract and complex idea of dehumanization. By corporealizing the said concept, the reader will be able to grasp the extent and severity of the condition. The undead are the flesh and blood of the dehumanized human (as ironic as it may sound).

Like a zombie, portrayed in films and vast literature, The Neoliberal education mirrors the mindless and lifeless post-apocalyptic world, overwhelmed by the undead, by corrupting our rationality, critical thinking, and reflexivity through the overwhelming forces of capitalism in education. Lanuza (2022, 157), citing Giroux (1992, 5) argues on the dehumanizing impacts of the Neoliberal restructuring in education, where the language of pedagogy is replaced by the language of free market and capital, resulting in the prevalence of what he calls “illiteracy”:

. . . Illiteracy has become a political weapon and form of political repression that works to render critical agency inoperable and restages power as a mode of domination. Illiteracy serves to depoliticize people because it becomes difficult for individuals to develop informed judgments, analyze complex relationships, and draw upon a range of sources to understand how power works and how they might be able to shape the forces that bear down on their lives. Illiteracy provides the foundation for being governed rather than how to govern (Giroux 1992, 5)

The problem of illiteracy presented is more than inefficiency and insufficiency in reading and writing, as per its usual definition, but dwells on social, political and civic illiteracy within the populace. The ramifications of the “illiteracy problem” have exacerbated in the Philippines through the implementation of K to 12 Program through the decision made to reduce or trim down selected general education subjects within the humanities and social sciences, such as Philippine History and Filipino subjects, down to the Senior High School. This undertaking is anchored within the rationale of the Neoliberal policy in the international labor market, maximizing skilled labor across the world (as expounded on the previous section of this paper).

To make matters worse, recently, during the hearing of the House Committee on Basic Education on May 28, 2025, the Department of Education proposed another round of trimming down of general education subjects, specifically Ethics, Contemporary World, and Art Appreciation. Ed Fermin, the chairperson for the CHED Technical Panel for Education, made the neoliberal bureaucrats proud when he exclaimed that “the tertiary education is heavily saturated with general education subjects and lacks practical training, hence a need for subject reduction” (PIDS, 2025). This recommendation has triggered indignation coming from various groups of scholars and academics. The Union of Societies and Associations of Philosophy in the Philippines (USSAP), an organization composed of academic departments, scholars, and educators across the country, released a public position statement addressing the recommendation to remove ethics from the General education curriculum at the tertiary level. The position statement entitled “Reaffirming the role of ethics in the Philippine higher education: A call to retain GE Ethics in the tertiary curriculum” (2025) expresses the following concerns:

1. There is an ambiguity with the use of Philosophy in basic education
2. Philosophical ethics is not basic moral training
3. Ethics is integral to citizenship in a democracy

#### 4. This moves erases Philosophy in General education

The key points of the statement highlight two important claims. First is the shortcoming of the basic education curriculum, especially values education/ GMRC, to incorporate and apply Philosophy within the content and pedagogy of these subjects. Albela (2024) precisely sums up the rift between the pedagogy and Philosophy in the field of education, arguing:

In the Philippine situation, the connection between philosophy and pedagogy is blurred by the setting of disciplinal boundaries, which assume that the former is theoretical, and the latter is empirical and practical. Adding to this is the thick layer of bureaucracy, which highly favors the pedagogues and legalists that densely comprise the educational sector. In this thick wall, philosophy finds it difficult to discourse with disciplines designated by the pedagogues to achieve curricular goals that are essentially philosophical in content or by skill (Albela 2024, 270).

Unfortunately, the pedagogues in the education sector are oftentimes (if not all the time) blind followers of the educational trends, which unsurprisingly are anchored on the Neoliberal ideology (take the K to 12 program as an example). Looking back, prior to the implementation of the K to 12 program, we have seen the pedagogues triumphantly praise and place the K to 12 program on a pedestal, capitalizing on its practical and employment benefits to the students.

Second, the position statement serves as a warning from the Filipino philosophers regarding the catastrophic outcome of the said recommendation to the mental, moral, and civic well-being of the Filipino students. To remove Ethics/Philosophy at the tertiary level is to veer away from strengthening our democracy, nation-building, and the pursuit of human development.

The simultaneous demolition of general education subjects, especially subjects within the humanities and social sciences (if not negated), can be detrimental to the holistic development of the students since these subjects are foundational disciplines that raise literacy and social consciousness. The government's blatant disregard for the mentioned foundational courses/subjects and its focus on skill-based education limit the essence and purpose of education to exclusive job acquisition and job performance, and result in regression in the quality of education and de-intellectualization. For whose sake? You already know the answer by now.

The Filipino students produced by Neoliberal education are the "undead" of a post-apocalyptic world of Neoliberalism. A violent world of cutthroat competition between the hegemonic power of capital. The system meticulously and carefully, like a voodoo witch, raises uncritical and de-intellectualized (un)human beings and treats them only as labor power, feeding from their hard work, all for the continuous creation/recreation of capital to fuel the rapacious and unquenchable accumulation of wealth in the Neoliberal order. Human beings are expendable and can be replaced at any time if needed, especially if the goal of education is not holistic development but merely to create an army of laborers whose sole purpose is to find their means of subsistence and survive like the undead.

## CONTEXTUALIZING FREIRE'S LEVELS OF CONSCIOUSNESS WITHIN THE SOCIAL CLASSES IN THE PHILIPPINES

In retrospect, this (un)human condition presented throughout the paper is a glaring manifestation of Freire's conception of dehumanization, encapsulating its very essence. Utilizing Paulo Freire's theory on the level of consciousness, we can deduce three tendential types of dehumanized human who are distinct with their dehumanizing qualities associated with the levels of consciousness espoused by Freire. I have categorized them into the following: (1) The uncritical, (2) The Apathetic, and lastly, (3) The reactionary.

The *uncritical* lacks social awareness and critical understanding of societal problems and their underlying causes, making them naïve and usually vulnerable to external manipulation and primitive views towards the society; we can associate these characteristics with semi-transitive consciousness.

The *apathetic*, on the other hand, has a higher state of consciousness and social awareness but shows no interest or skepticism in addressing the problems he is aware of, often dissociating himself with the public sphere. It can be attributed to the privileges he has as a student and as someone detached from the societal ills experienced by the common people or the marginalized. These characteristics embody the transitive consciousness.

Lastly, the worst of them all are the *reactionary*, who are not only apathetic to the plight and suffering of the masses but may be considered as enemies of transformative actions and change/s in the Philippine society. As evident in history, the reactionaries (in general) always had the practice of challenging progressive undertakings and/or sabotaging valuable reforms in society when felt threatened and in their vested interest. The said student from the ranks of the reactionaries carries the oppressor's consciousness, which intends to continue dominating the oppressed.

With the distinction made, I would argue that the identified dehumanizing qualities can be attributed to social classes in the Philippine society, following a startling semblance between the defining characteristics of Freire's levels of consciousness and the essential nature of social classes in the Philippines. In his influential Marxist text, *Philippine Society and Revolution* (1968), Jose Maria Sison (writing as Amado Guerrero) provided a sharp class analysis, dividing Philippine society into two clear groups: the oppressors and the oppressed. This structure, he argued, is fundamentally evident in the long historical conflict between U.S. Imperialism and its domestic allies versus the toiling masses (working class).

Continuing the exposition of social classes in the Philippines, The peasants, often landless, carries the burden of high land rent and usury (due to the remnants of feudal system) is considered to be one of the most oppressed social class in the country along with the workers, whom Sison (1968) considered to be the most advance, concentrated and disciplined social class but are forced to sell their labor in return for low or meager wages and often without access to quality education and resources, they embody the characteristics of the uncritical student. While the petty bourgeoisie (middle class), referring to the ranks of intellectuals, professionals, and/or small property owners, has a dual nature, they can serve as a progressive force for change while on the other hand, due to their inherent privileges and distractions, can be easily

swayed by socio-political forces that envelops them and turn them apathetic. Lastly, the elite, which is composed of the Landlord class and the bourgeoisie comprador class, are the biggest property owners in the Philippines and is amassing unimaginable wealth. the landlords monopolize massive agricultural lands in the country benefiting from land rent, usury and other forms of oppression against the poor peasant. The Bourgeoisie comprador, on the other hand, are Filipino capitalists who manage the country's largest businesses—including commercial, financial, and manufacturing sectors—but these enterprises are fundamentally reliant upon and governed by external, monopolistic foreign capital, particularly that originating from the United States. Sison (1968), branded them as the “chief political and economic agent of U.S imperialism. The elite with their inherent oppressive and exploitative nature can be classified as reactionaries.

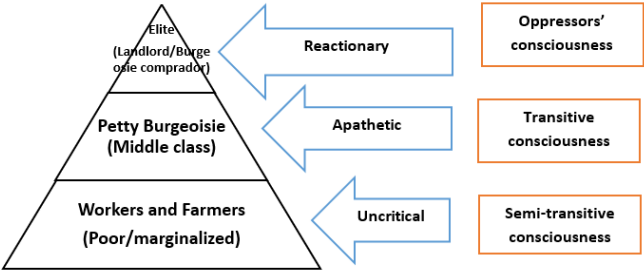


Figure 1. Types of Dehumanization across the Social Classes

Examining these qualities and characteristics, dehumanization can manifest in various ways across different social classes within the Philippine setting, not merely as a state of deprivation, but also as the ability to subject others to a state of deprivation. It is essential to recognize that the qualities and consciousness assigned to each identified classification are tendencies, not iron laws or generalizations. Humans can transcend their current consciousness and break free from dehumanization, as discussed in relation to Freire’s levels of consciousness and the people’s history of revolutionary movement.

Dehumanization in the context of the Philippine society has taken its own unique form and structures compared to the industrial countries in the global north, while at the same time anchored on Freire’s universal conception of dehumanization of the oppressed. The internalized feeling of dehumanization, if left unaddressed, would perpetually deter students from taking transformative or, to a certain extent, revolutionary actions that could bring about meaningful change in their society.

CONCLUSION

Paulo Freire’s conception of a dehumanizing experience/condition coincides with the experiences of the students in the Philippines' neoliberal education. The neoliberal restructuring of education through austerity measures had severely stunted the educational development and well-being of the Filipino student, placing them in a



state of governmental neglect and deprivation. While the quality of education is declining, The Neoliberal assault aggravates as it bends its knees with the hegemonic nature of global capitalism to subjugate labor and create an army of workers that are skillful but incapable of making smart and accountable decisions. Despite the impression that everything is developing, the status of Philippine education remains critical, as the condition of public education worsens, with it continuing to be structured along a neoliberal pattern.

A dehumanizing condition under the neoliberal order creates an oppressive society that turns people into passive observers of society, which silences them through the alienating forces of the educational system and the bureaucratic elite that serves as the clerics of the neoliberal deity (Capital). Driven by desperation and frustration, people (students) often resort to inaction over their own societal problems, turning them blind and sometimes apathetic to them. The poor, given their condition, do not have the luxury of critically assessing the causes of their oppression and participating in important life-changing societal decisions that can influence their well-being. They are mostly concerned with their own daily undertakings, often disregarding societal issues and concerns that they think do not concern or affect them. That makes them more vulnerable to manipulation and control by their own oppressor while being completely unaware or unconscious of it.

Philippine education will be in perpetual crisis without genuinely and critically addressing the roots of dehumanization within the lived experiences of the Filipino students. The task of educators, scholars, and most importantly, the Filipino people is to learn from the centuries of our dehumanizing experience and to enrich both discourse and practice (Praxis) of grappling with this problem.

Now, more than ever, with the aggravating crisis in Philippine education under neoliberalism, revisiting and rediscovering Paulo Freire's revolutionary philosophy is not just an option but a radical necessity, and for education to be truly liberating and genuinely resistant to the dehumanizing influence of neoliberal education in its forms and manifestations, there is a need to inculcate a type of Filipino critical consciousness:

. . . that is not simply as censorious or intelligent griping but more specifically as "proactive, purposeful, clear, organized and self-initiated," which results in a sound grasp of important issues, liberation from ignorance and conformism, and empowerment to build goals and purposes (Aguas 2023, 176 as cited by Albela 2024, 270).

To further advance the undertaking made by this paper, I would highly recommend dedicating our time and tireless effort to writing and/or conducting research that will take Paulo Freire's ideation of dehumanization into perspective to craft a pedagogy that is critical, transformative, dialogical, non-neutral, and is rooted with praxis (Cortez 2013, 50), which most importantly, is suited to our country's condition in the hopes that the day will come when the Filipino students and all the students in the world can finally reach their fullest potential as what Paulo Freire would want. But the work must start somewhere, and that should be what Cortez (2023) called the heart of the educational system, which is the classroom.

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