

Reading Between the Lines: Learning Poverty and its Effects on Philippine TVET

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"What can TVET do about Learning Poverty in the Philippines?"

Introduction

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has a lasting impact in the world, particularly in terms of education. School closures, restricted mobility, limited social interactions, and other similar disruptions has resulted in students of all ages having less opportunities to learn, and therefore being less knowledgeable in subjects that they otherwise should be versed with at their current level. In the Philippines, Economic Planning Secretary Arsenio Balisacan of the National Economic and Development Authority of the Philippines, recognized the severity of this problem that he encouraged the government to initiate remedial classes as soon as possible in order to help schoolchildren throughout the country to catch up with their lessons to pre-COVID levels. Such a drastic step may be necessary to help generations of students find meaningful and gainful employment once they become old enough to find meaningful employment.

That being said, the World Bank thinks that the impact on education is much worse than it seems to be. The World Bank specifically refers to the **"learning poverty"** that has become quite prevalent throughout the world, especially in South East Asia, since the pandemic started. According to a 2022 Update to the State of Global Learning Poverty that the organization published in June, 90.9% of Filipino children aged 10 are not proficient at reading *and* understanding simple text. If this is not corrected, the country risks having a less qualified workforce than what it started with before COVID-19. As Secretary Balisacan put it, these children run the risk of becoming less competitive in a world where countries are favoring foreign workers who come from countries that responded to the pandemic much better than the Philippines did.

Learning Poverty is therefore a problem that needs to be addressed as soon as possible: particularly in the realm of technical vocational education and training (TVET), which is one avenue for further learning that Filipino children could take up in the future.

Country	Learning poverty	Learning deprivation	Schooling deprivation
Singapore	3	3	0
South Korea	3	1	3
Japan	4	2	2
Vietnam	18	18	0
China	18	18	0
Thailand	23	22	2
Malaysia	42	42	1
Indonesia	53	49	7
India	53	49	7
The Philippines	91	90	5

Source: The Strait Times

The effects of these closures, and Learning Poverty by extension, have been covered before in this year's first TVET Brief, "The Catch Up Game: Reverting TVET Learning Losses Due to COVID. However, one effect that deserves attention is the disruption of cumulative learning caused by COVID and Learning Poverty, which the World Bank says may have long-term consequences. **Cumulative learning** refers to the process where students obtain knowledge and skills, stacking them up in order to help them obtain a higher level of that same knowledge and skills. However, disrupting the cumulative learning process (i.e. learning loss) tends to make it difficult for students to resume their progress. As an example, Grade 2 students who experienced two years of school closures (i.e. 2020-2021) may not necessarily be ready to face Grade 4 curricula, given that the said closures have disrupted their usual learning process. According to experts, children in countries that experience Learning Poverty tend to lack appropriate skills in mathematics, cognition, and critical thinking, which need to be developed over time. These skills will also be critical in their adult life once they start looking for gainful employment. Disrupting this cumulative process of learning will result in students losing momentum - perhaps requiring them to relearn what they missed, and thereby extend the duration they spend in education as a result. This is further illustrated in the concept of Learning-Adjusted Years of Schooling (LAYS): according to the World Bank, the LAYS in the Philippines has decreased from 7.5 years to 6 years due to COVID, which means that the standard 12-year education system for the country's schoolchildren only imparts 6 years' worth of effective learning.

When it comes to TVET learners, it can be argued that the impact of learning disruptions is more keenly felt. According to the Asia Development Bank (2020), the constant closing and reopening of schools, as well as changes in the method for instruction (i.e. between in-person and online learning) may result in problems during apprenticeships, which TVET learners typically take part in so that they can have firsthand working experience. Due to constant disruptions to the "normal" way that TVET students learn, they may encounter trouble translating their theoretical knowledge into practical actions during apprenticeships. In turn, many of the industries that were severely affected by the pandemic, like Tourism and Aviation, will suffer shortages in capable and competent apprentices, making it harder for these industries to recover once the COVID-related closures and disruptions have been lifted.

The long-term impact of all this, according to analysts, is a **Philippine labor force that may be ill-equipped to be even considered employable in the future, both domestically and internationally**. This exacerbates two issues that the country currently has with its labor force: 1) in that at least one out of two workers has not finished high school (as of June 2022), 2) and that only 1.9% of Filipinos aged 15-64 are engaged in vocational training, both factors leading to higher unemployment and underemployment due to the workers' lack of basic competencies and qualifications. At least the issue of lack of engagement in vocational training could be remedied by reducing employee training costs, but that still leaves the problem that learning poverty is enabled in the country due to learning disruptions, even when not including the COVID-19 pandemic.

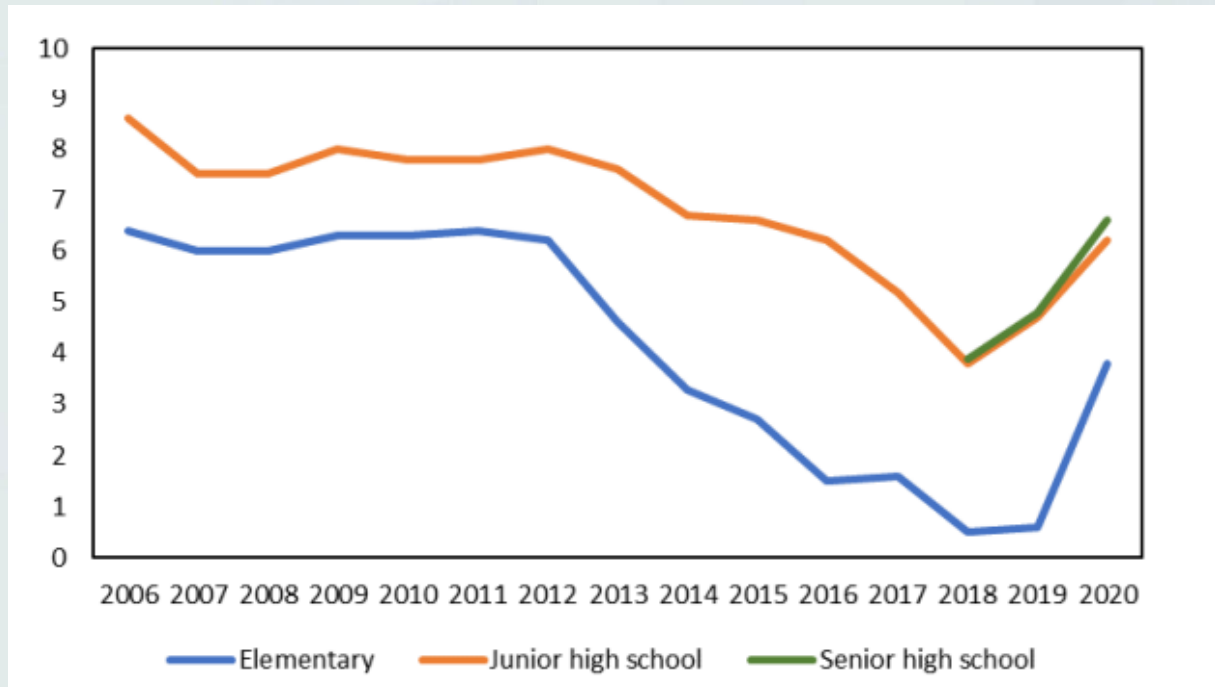
Thus, reading between the lines, an education system suffering from learning poverty will definitely have a

III. How Can Learning Poverty Affect TVET?

As said before, the biggest impact of learning poverty is its disruption of cumulative learning among the youth, which in turn jeopardizes their ability to learn higher-level skills necessary for work. While the effects of this disruption are not necessarily felt right now, they will materialize once the affected school children enter tertiary education or TVET. And taking into account the perspective of LAYS in the Philippines, these children may end up being less knowledgeable and less skilled once they reach the higher levels of education.

In more practical terms, however, learning poverty leads to an across-the-board decrease in participation in education overall. In a September 2022 study published by the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS), COVID-19 caused the country's declining dropout rate to increase again, particularly in 2020. Worst hit are the junior and senior high school levels, as indicated in Figure 3. Quarantines and lockdowns were cited as the biggest cause of these dropouts, but lack of interest was also mentioned by PIDS as the second biggest cause - something that TVET may wish to consider moving forward.

Fig. 3 Dropout rate by educational level (%) in the Philippines during the COVID-19 Pandemic (via the Philippine Statistics Authority OpenStat Database)



Source: PIDS

This lack of interest for learning mainly stems from the Philippines' overall poor investment in education, which includes TVET. In Singapore, the average annual amount spent on one TVET student in 2015 was about USD 8,830, or about PHP 402,000 as per the average exchange rate of PHP and USD during that year. By contrast, the highest annual expenditure per TVET student in the Philippines was only around PHP 180,000 in 2016 (Notes Techniques, 2019), already including scholarships and fees. The lack of investment in education, including TVET, means that the learning experience is not optimized well, and oftentimes prove to be more difficult than the seamless transmission of knowledge that it is expected to be. Therefore, the country's TVET learners likely obtain their skills far less effectively than other students in the region, making them not as competent or employable.

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While it is difficult to completely dodge the adverse impacts of learning poverty, it is possible for the government to revert them and hopefully undo the damage they have done. The key here, however, is that policymakers need to enact interventions as soon as possible in order to prevent these impacts from causing more permanent damage. Keep in mind that the bulk of the downward trend that led to the Philippines' current learning poverty occurred during the period of 2020-2021, at the height of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Thus, the following actions should be undertaken in conjunction with COVID recovery measures that the government is currently implementing:

- **Focus on School Deprived Youth for Enrollment** - as previously stated, a significant factor that leads to learning poverty is the prominence of school deprived youth (i.e. school dropouts). There are many reasons why these youths are unable to continue with their schooling, but TVET institutions and policymakers should concern themselves with being a safety net for school deprived youth.

As previously mentioned by the World Bank, many TVET learners are generally those who come from impoverished backgrounds as they are unable to go to colleges and universities for higher level education. This description also applies to the school deprived youth. It is therefore important for policy makers to cater to this demographic by providing more TVET scholarship and/or financial aid programs (or even free tuition) so that these prospective students can have a chance to obtain competencies they will need when looking for work. Partnerships with industry groups and other government agencies may also be essential so that the burden of providing quality TVET with little to no cost to the end-user will be easier to bear by TVET institutions. Raising awareness may also be an important step to take, as school deprived youths may not necessarily be aware of such initiatives in the first place, and therefore be limiting their opportunities to learn outside of the traditional school setting.

TVET institutions, meanwhile, should consider using a different approach for instructing school deprived youth. As these students are likely to have less skills in comprehension, TVET instructors may have to focus more on hands-on demonstrations and visual aids rather than written instructions. Using simpler language for lectures will also help so that the students are not easily overwhelmed when encountering long texts, which adds needless pressure to their learning experience. Of course, these recommendations work best if TVET institutions could somehow profile their learners beforehand and see the true extent of learning poverty among school deprived youths or other learners enrolled in their TVET programs. Of particular interest would be the learners' science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) skills, as these are prevalent in most TVET courses. The STEM skills of those who come from basic education may be markedly different from those who have dropped out. All these information should be determined in profiling students beforehand.

As long as they receive an acceptable level of education, TVET learners stand a good chance of

- **Build New Skills that Benefits Learners Post-COVID** - TVET institutions are in the position to provide all learners with short training courses that directly cater to current industry needs and trends. An example would be **micro-credentialing**, which learners can take up to obtain specific skills in a shorter period of time than they would in a more conventional setting. These micro-credentials often incorporate essential skills (i.e. digital literacy, soft skills, etc.) that learners will need to navigate through a Post-COVID world, as there is a greater focus on flexibility and adaptability among learners. Further collaboration with industry groups may be needed in this regard, particularly in creating/providing a platform with which TVET learners will have an easier time selecting what kind of micro-credential do they want to take.
- **Enact Measures to Curb Learning Losses and Lessen Learning Poverty in TVET** - the World Bank recognizes TVET's role in ensuring quality education can persist during the COVID recovery period. However, it is also recognized that not all TVET institutions have since reopened after quarantines and lockdowns were largely lifted by the Philippine government. Additionally, not all TVET institutions that reopened were able to function back to their full capacity for one reason or another. Therefore, it is important for policymakers to enact measures to help these institutions recover completely so as to minimize the learning losses that students have incurred in the interim, and in turn ensure they do not become "learning poor".

One way to achieve this is the implementation of remedial classes or extended learning hours so that the affected students would have time to catch up with their studies/training in the TVET space. Another is to implement remote learning mechanisms so that students can still receive their lessons while at home or elsewhere, particularly if their TVET center has not yet completely returned to face-to-face learning sessions. For the latter recommendation, it is also acknowledged that remote learning may not be a completely viable alternative for TVET given that certain courses have hands-on training.

Perhaps more importantly, however, the students need to be gauged and determine the level of knowledge they currently possess. This is brought about by the fact that the learnings they have accumulated during the height of COVID-19, particularly the lockdowns and the quarantines, are likely not the same as what they would have had under normal circumstances. If policymakers can devise a way to accurately determine this variable, then TVET institutions will have sufficient information to revise or to improve upon the current TVET curricula, and thereby create a more appropriate environment for learning that can help these students resume cumulative learning and in turn undo the adverse effects of learning poverty.

· **Ways Forward**

In the Philippine context, TESDA will be one of the government agencies who will be responsible for addressing

Study Learners' Profile and Determine How Learning Poverty Affected Them - given that the World Bank's 2022 Update to the State of Global Learning Poverty mostly covered students engaged in formal primary and secondary education, TESDA should seize the opportunity to conduct a study profile of the learners engaged in its TVET programs. Of particular interest is their reading comprehension skills, which is the main crux of learning poverty, which is usually the identified entry requirement of the for TVET program. Again, if TVET learners have poor reading comprehension skills, then it is important for TESDA to devise mechanism either within the TVET or through other government agencies. A quick way to determine this is to have the learners read a particular set of text then have them retell what they read or explain the nature of the text using their own words, then measuring their answers on a certain metric (Fletcher, 2006).

An analysis of the language being used for TVET may also be necessary, as the language used for instruction at present may be too complex, at which case TESDA may look into the instructional materials considering different vulnerabilities of an individual. It may also be worthwhile to confirm the World Bank's findings that males are more likely to experience learning poverty than females.

Additionally, it is also important for TESDA to learn about the factors that contributed to the country's overall learning poverty problem by looking at dropouts from TVET programs. To reiterate an earlier finding, the World Bank said that most high school dropouts in the Philippines say that they lost interest in learning - TESDA should determine if this is also the case for TVET.

Enhance Support for TVET Institutions and Trainers - in order to equip students with the skills they need to find gainful employment in the future. Given the learning situation brought about by COVID-19, TESDA may wish to invest more in providing institutions with more resources to **enact distance or remedial learning to counteract the effects of learning poverty**. In that same vein, more trainers should be hired and capacitated to meet the ever-growing need for learning deprived students and turned into highly productive workers with the right technical skills.

The learning methodology through the conduct of training needs upon entry in the training program should be strictly conducted to understand the trainees and determine the best methodology not only on the learning style of the trainees, but also their special needs.

Align Current TVET Issuances to Respond to Learning Poverty - Since the COVID-19 pandemic started, TESDA has issued a number of circulars and memoranda geared towards ensuring that TVET instruction continues amidst the government's implementation of enhanced safety protocols. Examples include TESDA Circular No. 76, s. 2021 ("Amended/Supplemental Guidelines for TVET Under the New Normal Arrangements") and NITESD Memo No. 216, s. 2021 ("Invitation on the Opening Program to the Trainers' Methodology Course Level II for TTI Trainers and Staff"). With these issuances in mind, TESDA should consider aligning them to respond to the country's learning poverty problem.

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