ADDRESS THE GAPS BEFORE LEAPING INTO ACTION

by:
Michelle Serenas Nebrija
Teacher III, Balon Elementary School

Amidst a pandemic, the option of returning to physical classes is still farfetched given the risks. Hence, the Department of Education (DepEd) proposed digital and distance learning for students to continue their formal education despite the threat of getting infected. However, the question is, are we truly prepared for this?

To assess the situation, we should first look at the realities faced by our students and their families, and the capabilities of our education system. According to the Social Weather Stations’ (SWS) survey during the last quarter of 2019, around 13.1 million Filipino families considered themselves poor and stated that they need at least ₱12000 monthly to overcome poverty (CNN Philippines, 2020). Combined with the current economic insecurity we are experiencing, a portion of parents belonging to these families have lost their jobs and therefore they would not afford the cost of an internet subscription needed for digital learning. If they could even manage to pay for prepaid loads for a data promo, the struggle would emerge from weak communication signals especially in rural barrios. Some of them may even be suffering from hunger since the beginning of quarantine, and they could only rely on government support to survive. Thus, we could not certainly consider their homes as a conducive learning environment.

Digital and distancing learning sounds like an easy repair to the coronavirus situation. But if we truly think about it, they would only be in favor of the privileged: children who have internet access, parents who are available to teach them at home, or collectively those above the poverty line. There is indeed an existing gap that the government needs to address to ensure that no children would be left behind. We could tap into the potential of mainstream broadcast media as a solution in addressing the
challenge of obtaining digital learning materials. However, ABS-CBN, which has a wider reach of the audience than other channels, was recently shut down and their franchise renewal is still on hold, and not all Filipino families have a television in their homes. Assuming that we have no problem with traditional and digital media, online learning resources could still be bogged down by issues on accessing the internet due to poor data speed in the Philippines. The Speedtest Global Index recently claimed that the country's average internet speed of 19.51 Mbps is below the global average of 57.91 Mbps (ABS-CBN News, 2019).

We could not overcome the limitations of digital and distance learning through only providing a technological fix, but we should also consider the students’ level of motivation and their support systems at home. Looking at the economic struggle, and digital burdens that our country is experiencing, we could not refute the prevailing social and economic divide among us – even before the pandemic. The way I see this, insisting to implement these new learning methods despite unanswered challenges would only further widen the gaps if they were left unchecked. The regime should first address the material needs for digital and distance learning before leaping into action.

References:
