Distinguished guests, colleagues, and friends,

For over a century, our nation has gone through many seasons of education reform, each sowing seeds of hope, with sprouts of initiative coming to life, but with growth confined to small and separate plots. In many parts of the field, growth may have even been stunted or aborted. Why reforms don’t take root, spread throughout the education field, build up from one season to the next, and transform the sector and Philippine society is the subject of our narrative this afternoon.

I will walk you though the reform seasons in broad sweep, mentioning some of the seeds of hope planted and highlighting those that bloomed. I will explore institutional reasons why reforms are not sustained or scaled up, arguing strongly for the decentralization of education and the active involvement of various human agencies, networks, and organizations on the ground.

Allan will move on to narrate the constraints posed by ways of thinking that frame education practices. Observing that learning remains at the margins of reform efforts, he will argue that it ought to take center stage. In terms of learning goals, Allan will stress the need for expanded forms of functional literacy and the development of transformational citizenship. More specifically, he will highlight the importance of building every Filipino’s competence to learn how to learn throughout life in a fast changing global environment while remaining deeply rooted in our nation.

On the premise that functional literacy, learning how to learn, and critical thinking must be developed as basic competencies of Filipino children in this century, Dina will discuss how entwined the language policy and building these competencies are. Language has been a major constraint to the development of thinking skills that our people needs to solve our nation’s 19th and 20th century problems and to participate in the knowledge-based world of the 21st century. It is, therefore, an issue that we must resolve once and for all.

The three of us will conclude with broad strokes recommendations for cultivating a more fertile soil so that education reforms can take root, build up from one season to the next, and help transform the education sector and our society.
The Seasons of Education Reform: An Overview

The Philippines has had a long history of education reform. Although our education system evolved from a colonial cocoon, the American imperialist agenda nevertheless included a reformist seed. It made elementary education compulsory to enable mass participation in elections and thereby break the hold of the oligarchy. By so doing, it hoped to undermine the elitist educational system under Spain that left the Filipino masses unschooled.

However, transplanting an American education model into an oligarchic system that the Americans reinforced by co-opting the elite, did not result in egalitarian structures. Neither did it level the playing field in education. The education system in the early American colonial period supported prevailing inequities. Primary education was for the working class; secondary education for the middle class, and tertiary education for leaders and the economic elite who demanded the establishment of an American system of higher education. The creation of the University of the Philippines in 1908 satisfied this demand and capped the development of a three-tiered public education system which has morphed into our system today.

Despite its class bias and colonial orientation, the reformist seed planted in the early days of colonial education sprouted somewhat. It provided a means of social mobility for significant numbers of poor Filipinos. It also produced critical and nationalist thinkers who pushed for social reforms in different periods of the 20th century.

The establishment of the public education system heralded a series of reform-oriented initiatives with progressive assumptions. Consider the 1925 Monroe Survey. Yale professor George Counts was part of this team. In October 1925, his assessment of the key problems of Philippine basic education sounded like the issues confronting our country today. Half of the children were outside the reach of schools. Pupil performance was generally low in subjects that relied on English although achievement in math and science was at par with the average performance of American school children.

Counts attributed these problems to the language of teaching in a culturally diverse colony. In fact, Counts bewailed the teaching of subjects in English in the absence of a lingua franca. He argued that this sacrificed “efficiency of instruction in the native tongue”.

Counts also argued that the curriculum was not suited to the Filipino children of the 1920s. They were handicapped by their reliance on experiences drawn from a civilization alien to them. Not only were they acquiring new ideas in a language not their own, they were also studying under a curriculum borrowed directly from the United States using materials suited for American children. Their teachers were also professionally untrained. But the Monroe Survey’s severest criticism of the Philippine education system in 1925 was on its excessive centralized control which resulted in the uniform implementation of a Western curriculum throughout the archipelago. For Counts, this “one-size-fits all” practice was utterly indefensible considering the great diversity of climate, occupation, and cultural traditions in the Philippines.
UP history professor Digna Apilado wrote that our public education had not always been centralized. The American colonial government initially required municipalities and provinces to finance primary and secondary schools, respectively, setting aside state funds only for the state university. Local primary schools briefly enjoyed a wide range of autonomy to design their curriculum and educational materials. However, they lost this freedom to innovate and respond to local needs because towns and provinces were too poor to defray the costs of free and compulsory schooling. The insular government was thus compelled to assume funding for all three education levels.

Since 1925, various reviews have cited the same fundamental issues afflicting Philippine education. This prompted four leading educationists to facetiously say that the education landscape has not changed since colonial days.

We will not repeat the usual lamentations about persistent inequities and poor pupil performance. We will, however, cite two less known but nevertheless disturbing observations. The Basic Education Assistance for Mindanao or BEAM’s Region-Wide Assessment in Mathematics, Science, and English revealed that sample students in three Mindanao regions including ARMM had great difficulty with items requiring higher-order thinking skills. In particular, the high school students in the sample were unable to apply concepts and reasoning to real life situations.

Equally distressing are comparisons of the country’s primary net enrolment and completion rates with those of other countries in Asia-Pacific. The 2008 World Bank education data show that Cambodia and Laos have higher primary net enrollment and completion rates than us. The contrast with our neighbors Indonesia and Malaysia is sharp. The two countries have primary enrollment and completion rates that are much higher than ours.

Although the same issues have persisted since the 1960s, a review of the last forty years reveals significant changes within and outside our education institutions. The 1970 Presidential Commission to Survey Philippine Education, for instance, reorganized the educational system to address over-centralization and the mismatch between educational output and the country’s needs. Outside the education bureaucracy, the late UP professor Malu Doronila claimed that the NGOs and POs of the mass movement in the same period sought to address the irrelevance of education with “counter-education, literacy, and other community-based political education efforts”. Spanning the education spectrum, these initiatives included neighborhood daycare centers, alternative schools for special children, and farmer-scientist programs. Some of the education practices of these groups were eventually mainstreamed; the groups also participated in extensive networks of educators in and out of government.

Four broad education reform frameworks emerged in the last 20 years. Jointly led by Senator Angara and Congressman Padilla and implemented by a Technical Secretariat headed by former
UP Chancellor Dionisia Rola/, The Congressional Commission on Education or EDCOM proposed a comprehensive set of reforms/ on issues ranging from access and quality/ to language of instruction. It restructured the education system into DepEd, CHED, and TESDA. Subsequent plans drew from its analysis/, frameworks and recommendations.

The Basic Education Sector Reform Agenda or the BESRA/, DepEd’s latest reform framework/ is comprehensive and offers enough spaces for NGO and private sector networks outside the basic education bureaucracy/ to carve their respective niches in.

In addition to these frameworks/, the country has two landmark policy covers affecting basic education/: the transfer, at least in theory/, of the governance of basic education to schools/ through the 2001 Governance of Basic Education Act; and the promulgation in 2006/ of the National Competency-Based Teacher Standards/ which aims to develop higher thinking skills and learning competencies.

The last 40 years also saw at least one major DepEd-related reform project every three years on the average/. This number excludes smaller DepEd projects/ and those undertaken by the more than 60 NGO and private sector groups, some of which are represented here today.

**Initiatives that Bloomed**

Reviewing the reform projects/, we realized many of them planted seeds of hope that sprouted wonderfully in the areas where they were implemented/. Project IMPACT, or the Project on INSTRUCTIONAL MANAGEMENT BY PARENTS, COMMUNITY AND TEACHERS) is an example. It was initiated as a practical intervention / to address overcrowding in Philippine public schools/, as well as the lack of teachers, textbooks, and other learning materials. Its notable features include /: the supervision of as many as 120 students by one teacher /; the active role of parents and other community members /; the community rather than school locus of learning/, the help extended by other primary students who were trained to teach specific lessons to beginning students/; and the option of students to learn by themselves / or with a friend, neighbor, or in small groups/ once language skills had been developed.

At 50% reduction in education costs/, IMPACT students acquired higher levels of cognitive skills compared to those in regular schools/. They also demonstrated better social and communication skills, a greater sense of commitment,/ and overall leadership potential. The staunch education reform advocate in the National Economic Development Authority or NEDA, Mr. Nap Imperial, validated these observations/. Project IMPACT has been re-launched as e-IMPACT /. What puzzled us though/ is why the effective IMPACT technology of the 1970s/ was not used to address Metro Manila’s overcrowded public schools.

Unlike Project IMPACT/, BEAM and the Third Elementary Education Project or TEEP reflected scale/. Together, they implemented School-Based Management or SBM/ in 40 of the country’s 188 divisions, affecting more than 12000 schools/ or as many as a third of Philippine public
elementary schools. As practiced in the Philippines, SBM is a framework that integrates school governance with various school level inputs for achieving equitable access to quality education. This includes changes in perspectives on learning, pedagogy, and community participation. BEAM and TEEP differed in many respects but they had remarkable outcomes.

BEAM aims to improve the access and education quality in three regions in Mindanao. Its underlying learning philosophy assumes the active construction by learners of their own knowledge through interactions with their natural and social environment. BEAM asserts that higher order thinking skills develop in flexible and cooperative learning classroom environments rather than in classrooms characterized by a one-way transmission of knowledge to passive learners. This explains BEAM’s focus on training in learner-centered management, teaching, and learning materials development.

The average scores of sample learners in the BEAM areas increased significantly across subjects through the years particularly in higher-order thinking skills. With regards to the enabling conditions for effective classroom learning, BEAM has established a management training system utilizing appropriate learning systems for Regional, Division, District, and School managers; effective teacher training; and a system of producing culturally-sensitive learning materials. BEAM has also forged partnerships with Teacher Education Institutions or TEIs and the National Educators Academy of the Philippines or NEAP.

In contrast to BEAM’s philosophical coherence, TEEP was less mindful of its learning philosophy, although its more pragmatic and eclectic thrust incorporated some of BEAM’s social constructivist notions. The decentralization objective and research-identified determinants of desirable student outcomes rather than specific learning theories guided the formulation of TEEP. Hence, civil works and goods procurement were significant components of its reform program.

SBM iterated in TEEP. Since the consultant who fleshed out SBM in the ADB report on decentralized basic education management, joined TEEP subsequently, TEEP did not have to invent the wheel. The number of schools that adopted SBM expanded exponentially within three years to all 8600 schools in 23 TEEP divisions. Like BEAM, TEEP’s SBM operationalization included the formulation of 5-year School Improvement Plans together with parents, communities, and other stakeholders. TEEP differed from BEAM however, because it drilled down SBM cash grants or MOOE to schools and its school heads supervised classroom construction within a 90-day cycle without any reported anomaly.

The student outcomes in the TEEP divisions are impressive. Although they started out with lower average scores in 2002, they consistently outperformed schools in provinces that were less poor. They also ranked as well, if not better, than schools in non-poor divisions, a performance TEEP schools sustained beyond project completion in 2006. Moreover, systematic
targeting of disadvantaged schools/ also narrowed the gap between monograde and multigrade schools in TEEP divisions.

Reflecting on BEAM and TEEP/, we strongly believe that combining the features of these projects/ is the fastest way to achieve the BESRA goal of implementing SBM nationwide./ BEAM’s philosophically coherent educational interventions / would have a much higher probability of taking root / if TEEP’s SBM strategy is used to till the soil. This means that in addition to community and LGU participation/ we propose the giving of direct accountability for SBM implementation to division offices/ and the drilling down of funds to schools. These would prepare systems for the shift in learning paradigms / so that BEAM initiatives can grow and spread faster.

Why Reforms Don’t Transform: Institutional Constraints

What would constrain these initiatives/ from taking root and rolling down to other parts of the country? Although policy covers for decentralization and pedagogical reforms are in now place/, a number of institutional factors constrain the scaling up and implementation of reform. We will cite only three at the level of DepEd/--dependence on external initiatives/; the pilot project mentality that we referred to as “education reform in a petri dish”/ and the culture of hierarchy and obeisance in DepEd.

What is clearly discernible in DepEd’s reform activities over the last twenty years/ is its almost exclusive dependence on foreign-assisted programs/ that have pilot-project components. It seems that reform activities were undertaken/ only as DepEd moved from one donor-funded project to another/. It is important to ask/ whether this indeed is a question of finance/ because Project Impact has shown that costs can be reduced by as much as 50%.

It seems to us too/ that DepEd’s manner of undertaking reform is to projectize it/ and the Department’s idea of projectization is to pilot test/ the efficacy of reformist interventions on a limited scale/. Fortunately, BEAM and TEEP pushed the limits of such experiments to cover a third of all elementary schools/. Their experiences give credence to the argument  that /reform efforts are best when large scale, coordinated, context-sensitive, and sustained over time.

Waged at the margins of DepEd operations/, the projectization of externally-induced education reform seems to have prevented the Department/ from directing the reform process. It does not seem to have fully embraced/ the tasks of processing the lessons of every reform project/, drawing their implications/, and planning how to scale up ideas that work/. Instead/, DepEd seems to have simply moved/ from one project to the next/, without really fully connecting the projects to its larger reform agenda.
There is nothing wrong with treating the conceptualization and implementation of particular reform interventions as projects. In fact, this might be the way to focus the attention of units within DepEd on ways to achieve particular performance outcomes. Projectization becomes a problem for two reasons. First, when a mission as important as scaling up or sustaining reform is not undertaken without external prodding. Second, when the bearers of institutional reform in the bureaucracy no longer vigorously exert efforts to sustain reform after project targets have been met.

The governance of DepEd is not only highly centralized, it is also extremely hierarchical. For instance, no policy or practice in the lower levels of the hierarchy may change or take place unless there is an explicit DepEd Memo from the central office that allows it. An example is the rather ridiculous scenario of schools rejecting much-needed donations from credible donors because of the absence of a DepEd Memo. This cultural mindset is undermining DepEd’s moves towards decentralization. Indeed, despite the success of SBM in both BEAM and TEEP and the proven capacity of school heads to supervise classroom construction and manage funds, there still prevails a general distrust of school heads and classroom teachers in the field.

The hierarchical culture is reinforced by a culture of obeisance that characterizes many of our bureaucracies including DepEd. Teachers, for instance, hardly complain about multiple tasks away from the classroom that include cooking for visits of officials from central or regional offices. The observation visitations of the higher-ups have actually been described as “bitbitations” that are fruit-ful and fish-ful. Nor would teachers argue on substantive issues. School heads, division superintendents, and regional directors, no matter how outspoken, tend to defer to those above them even if they are more experienced or knowledgeable on an issue. Such deference can kill initiative. There are hopeful signs, however, that the culture of obeisance is changing with SBM. Some officials decry the empowerment of school heads whom they think have become stubborn and arrogant. Why? Because school heads have begun to answer back, that is, they now argue their points.

The constraints to the transformation of our education landscape go beyond institutional, administrative, and cultural factors. Education Reforms will not transform unless we go back to fundamental questions about what education is and what it is for.

**Learning in the periphery of reform**

For decades now, we have been talking about education in the Philippines in “crisis” terms. As in any such situation, decisions are made out of urgency or exigency, instead of long-term considerations. Thus, education reform often resembles relief operations that hurriedly address obvious gaps and plug problematic holes in the system. The problem with doing reform using a “crisis-relief” framework is that it does not directly resolve the crisis. We never get to truly reflect on what it is we should be reforming and how.
In contrast, countries that successfully reformed their educational systems used a long-term transformational approach. The process of reform was both comprehensive and sustained over time. The transformation of their educational systems was designed and so that they could meet long-term national development goals. These successful reforms first reckoned with a rather simple question: “How do we reform the school system so that students learn better?”

Corollary is the more difficult problem: “What should students be learning in schools?” These countries have grappled with defining what kind of knowledge and skills their citizens need to allow them to be effective participants in today’s rapidly changing, highly networked, knowledge societies.

In the Philippines, there are initiatives that aim to improve student achievement levels, such as the 57-75 advocacy to reverse the low academic achievement of students. But the question of what and how our students should be learning has not been a central concern in discussions of education reform.

We propose that all education reform in the Philippines first formulate answers to these fundamental questions: First, what kinds of knowledge and skills will enable Filipinos to participate effectively in the world of work and also to transform their communities and societies? Second, what kinds of knowledge and skills will enable citizens to build better futures for themselves and for others in their communities?

The present answers to these questions can be found in the DepEd and CHED curriculum standards for schools and specific courses. The present learning goals are defined in terms of particular sets and sequences of concepts and procedures. In contrast, in current reform discourses, students need to learn competencies, and not just knowledge and skills.

A competency is the ability to successfully carry out a task with complex requirements. It includes both cognitive and non-cognitive knowledge and skills. Cognitive knowledge requires higher levels of thinking such as being able to manage and critically reflect on information in order to apply these for the learners’ purposes. The non-cognitive dimensions refer to values, beliefs, and attitudes that motivate and guide the performance of these complex tasks.

The key competency that should be targeted by all school systems is subsumed under the expanded definition of functional literacy. For example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development or OECD defines functional literacy as “the capacity to access, integrate, evaluate and manage information and knowledge. It provides learners a window to the world and the linguistic, textual and symbolic tools to engage with the world as acting and autonomous individuals interacting with various groups.”
This expanded definition is now a key feature of learning goals in truly reformed educational systems. In addition, reformist educational systems include “transformational citizenship” as an important learning goal, where citizenship is conceived of as involving the competencies to make societies and communities better for all people.

We underscore that expanded functional literacy will promote transformational citizenship if the texts and materials of our public social life are used as objects of the competencies. As a result, learners will not be mere passive observers of public services and governance. Instead, they will participate in transformative ways; they will learn to understand and analyze, to negotiate and cooperate, and if necessary, to protest and initiate new forms of social participation.

This is when the non-cognitive dimensions of these competencies become important. It is not sufficient to simply equip our students with high level technical knowledge. We must develop in them the motivation and the confidence to apply their mental abilities to transform Philippine society. More importantly, we must develop the belief and the conviction that, yes, they can transform Philippine society.

On paper, the various DepED and CHED curricular statements make reference to such goals and aspirations. But what we find in these national curricula are still isolated bits of knowledge and skills which are clearly inadequate compared to the expanded concepts of functional literacy and transformational citizenship. So far, we have not seriously discussed how to reform this curriculum in substantial terms.

In many Philippine communities, the successful high school or college graduates are the ones most likely to leave their community. Why? Because the knowledge and skills they have acquired in our schools are often irrelevant, or worse, opposed and hostile to the ways of life in their community. The modus vivendi is that these educated persons leave the community, and support the community by sending money or other forms of support to their families. This will always be the case as long as our schools do not develop the competencies that will motivate them to be useful and transformative in communities they value.

Since the 1960’s, mass movements have criticized the irrelevance of our formal education system to the plight of Filipinos in poor communities. Our partners in industry have also called our attention to the mismatch of what our students are learning in our schools to their employment requirements. These are presently complicated by the fact that social environments are rapidly transitioning, and that Filipinos now move across different geographic and cultural spaces, either by choice or by circumstance. Because of this, specific competencies become obsolete rather easily, and persons have to acquire new sets of competencies as they move on in their lives.
This leads us to the discourse of lifelong learning. Ten years ago, noted scholar Simon Papert wrote: “…the model that says, learn while you’re at school, the skills that you will apply during your lifetime is no longer tenable. The skills that you can learn when you’re at school will not be applicable. They will be obsolete by the time you get into the workplace and need them… The one really competitive skill is the skill of being able to learn…”

In addition to the two goals of expanded functional literacy and transformational citizenship, we should add a third goal which is to develop in all our students an intrinsic value for learning and knowledge. This will ensure that the competencies associated with functional literacy and transformational citizenship are continuously renewed as the person grows and moves through different spheres of life and work.

So far, we have emphasized the need to shift from developing knowledge and skills to developing competencies that are comprised of expanded functional literacy; transformational citizenship; and the value for lifelong learning.

How does one actually develop these types of competencies? What types of schools and learning activities would help our students develop these learning goals?

Our answer is: Schools that create powerful environments where diverse types of students can work together to develop these competencies. There is no single standard of powerful learning environments, instead these are characterized by core features. Schools must:

1. articulate and aim to develop high standards of performance related to the target competencies,
2. provide opportunities to actively work on real-life problems and projects, where the integration and application of rich knowledge is experienced;
3. provide opportunities for students to process, negotiate, and apply varied forms of knowledge in cohesive and iterative activities;
4. provide many opportunities for students to work collaboratively, to share and to negotiate with other students who have diverse ways of experiencing this knowledge;
5. support the learners aspirations to grow and to transform their life circumstances by affirming their personal agency, their capacities to make choices, and respecting their individual and social identities and motivations; and
6. utilize various forms of authentic formative assessment to help students clarify the learning goals, to articulate their personal learning goals, and to provide them with feedback to better control their own learning.
Educational reform must transform our schools into powerful learning environments. The adoption of these features in our school system is not an easy process to facilitate. It is difficult because the practices of teachers and activities of students in the classrooms and schools are actually sanctioned by explicit and implicit regulatory processes that limit the options of teachers and students.

One prevailing constraint to transformation is the privileging of traditional pedagogies for classroom instruction. The core features of powerful learning environments can be encountered in varied types of experiences in classrooms. But they are also found in informal and nonformal activities and practices based in communities, places of work, and even in the virtual spaces of the internet. These learning environments outside the classroom can provide more authentic, more contextualized experiences that support complex learning. Thus, it makes no sense to completely privilege formal classroom instruction over the learning activities in alternative learning systems both in and outside schools.

The combination of creative and flexible forms of alternative learning systems will best provide access to powerful lifelong learning opportunities to as many diverse learners as possible. Filipino students are very diverse in their prior experiences and knowledge, social-economic circumstance, geographic location, and individual learner characteristics. We need to match the students’ diversity with an equal measure of diversity in our pedagogical approaches and learning environments.

We now know that the one-size-fits-all approach is most harmful to highly diverse student populations. Thus, our schools and teachers should be allowed to explore diverse approaches to helping our students attain the desired learning competencies.

Yet our educational reforms have still focused primarily on the formal school systems and the traditional curricular and pedagogical forms. The explicit and implicit educational regulatory bodies, including the accrediting bodies and professional regulatory agencies, have also limited the options and spaces for schools to experiment with these alternative learning systems.

We must acknowledge that there have been many attempts to apply the various learning-oriented reformist concepts, particularly in the basic education sector. As early as the late 1940s, there was already the community school movement that was a forerunner of the lifewide learning approach.

Project IMPACT, implemented in 1973, was a successful lifewide learning project that promoted learner empowerment and featured many key qualities of powerful learning in non-school activities. Perhaps the first coherent articulation of the need to refocus the goals of Philippine education came from the education NGOs like Education Forum, supported by the Association
of Major Religious Superiors in the Philippines (AMRSP) in response to mass movement’s criticisms of the Philippine educational system during the 1960s and 1970s.

Remarkably, this articulation was developed from outside the DepED but eventually found itself expressed again in Projects BEAM and Strengthening Basic Education in the Visayas or STRIVE that are being administered by the DepED. Today, the goals of expanded functional literacy, transformational citizenship, and lifelong learning are fully enshrined in both the Philippine Education for All 2015 Plan and the BESRA.

These learning-oriented reform concepts are much less evident in the higher education sector. Learning activities in most colleges and universities still embody traditional didactic approaches that transmit concepts and teach skills instead of developing competencies. This continues even as there are now equivalency and accreditation programs in CHED that recognize the knowledge and skills acquired by persons outside the college system.

Perhaps the University of the Philippines should assess itself against these observations. Indeed, the higher education system as a whole seems to be more focused on credentialing students rather than their acquisition of complex competencies. Although there are learning-oriented reform concepts that are alluded to in some colleges and universities, by and large, these concepts are not the guiding principles of reform efforts.

And this is the point that we wish to emphasize. In educational systems that have been transformed successfully, the design and implementation of the reforms were guided by the strong purpose of improving student learning of the highest possible form. All specific reform activities such as designing alternative learning experiences, assessment systems, teacher development, educational technology, educational management processes are supportive of the core features of powerful learning environments.

Unfortunately in the Philippines, discourses on learning have remained in the margins. All the reforms suggested by the different major educational surveys, starting with the Monroe Survey, have all been based on some implicit discourse about how students learn. But the appreciation and understanding of such frameworks by our lead educational agencies, by our schools, and by the larger society have remained superficial. And the goals and processes of high level student learning have never become the key organizing and unifying frame of Philippine educational reforms.

Instead, in most contemporary discourses of education/reform has focused on crisis and relief, addressing poor inputs and gaps in the processes. The discourse is sometimes accompanied by simplistic arguments about how reform efforts relate to improving learning, such as what we saw in the DepEd’s fairly recent CyberEd proposal which was unwittingly premised on some of the most outdated principles of learning that are definitely inappropriate for young learners.
We strongly believe that the most enduring exemplar of the harmful effects of ignoring the discourses of learning can be seen in our educational system’s inability to meaningfully resolve the language of instruction issue, and Dina will now discuss this issue with us.

**The Case of Language and Education**

Our contention is that learning has not been the true focus of reforms / though these have been touted as their primary objective. The most glaring example of this / is the policy on the medium of instruction. We will convince you / that the child’s language is best / as the first language of education. We will offer four hypotheses / explaining why the DepEd has not morphed its policies and practices / according to the scientific evidence on language, literacy and learning and on the socio-cultural premises of education.

Our first consideration is the linguistic context / of the Philippines. We are a multi-lingual nation / with more or less 171 living languages. Filipino is spoken by at least 84% of the population. Philippine English is spoken by 56% of the population and is still / an official language of government, business and education. There are 10 regional lingua francae. Additionally, Arabic, Chinese, and Spanish are also valued. All these constantly interact / as people move from place to place, / meet sweethearts from across the river, / or migrate from town to town. In short, the average Filipino is quadrilingual.

If we subtract 15 widely spoken languages / from all of our 171 unique tongues, / there remain 156 other vernaculars / actively used in daily living. In addition, we aspire to teach our citizens / to be fluent in our national language and / competent in English. With the institutionalization of the Madaris schools by the DepEd, / Arabic is likewise a language to be learned in schools.

Given the socio-linguistic landscape of the Philippines, / multilingualism should be placed at the center of the education discussion. / Multilingual persons have unique linguistic configurations / made up of interacting systems of phonology, semantics, and syntax / in their linguistic repertoire. / Drawing from the findings of Philippine research, / bilingual Filipino children are of two types. First are children who learn the first language at home / and then acquire additional languages from their community. / The second are those without a singular mother tongue. / That is, they reside in home environments with two or more languages perpetually used. / These children are, from the beginning of their lives, bilingual. In both instances, it can be said that Filipino children / acquire one to two languages spontaneously, / and, learn the next languages in school.

The medium of instruction issue / in Philippine basic education / is a recurring nightmare. For over 80 years, / the recommendation to use the child’s language in schools as the medium of
learning has been consistently rejected. From the 1920s to the present, the pressures exerted by different sectors and advocates in the name of nation building, global participation, regional identity, cultural integrity, or economic progress and overseas employment caused decisions on the language issue to swing from one extreme to another. The pendulum stopped dead center resulting in the Department of Education and Culture (DEC) Order No. 25, series. 1973 or the Bilingual Education Policy. This compromise policy operationally defines the nature of bilingual education in the country. The curriculum was divided according to languages. Pilipino, changed to Filipino in 1987, was designated the medium of instruction for social studies, music, arts, physical education, home economics, practical arts and character education. The English language domains were math, science and technology education.

Where has the Bilingual Education Policy or BEP brought us? This question would be best answered by studying the performance of school children in all the subject areas of the curriculum and correlating these with implementation assessments of the BEP. Unfortunately, longitudinal data based on stable product assessments of language and overall learning are not available.

The fact that achievement in English and Filipino has been low suggests that the BEP implementation has not resulted in improved proficiency in both languages. This policy seems to have grossly failed to support learning of the two languages, much less, learning content through the use of these languages.

Generations of teachers consistently report on the difficulties their students face while learning English and Filipino, and, worse, while trying to learn math and science in English, and social studies in Filipino.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of schools that surpassed 60% on the National Achievement Tests in Math, English, Science and Overall across 3 years. It suggests that performance in English is much lower than performance in Math and Science.

This leads us to an important question: How then can English be the language of learning if it is not strong enough to support learning? The children have obviously not reached the required cognitive academic language proficiency in English to use it for learning Math and Science. BEAM’s Regional Assessment of Math and Science data bolster this observation. Students whose teachers shifted to the vernacular in explaining concepts had better scores on questions that measure higher order thinking skills.

Therefore, it seems that English was not used as the language for teaching Math and Science. Otherwise, performance in these two subjects might have been even lower. Thank goodness for teachers who were sensitive enough to use the language of the children to explain Math and Science. Possibly, the teachers themselves were not proficient in English and thus resorted to expressing their thoughts in the vernacular. The latter inference is consistent with
the frequently lamented English language proficiency of teachers. Could it be / that they themselves are victims / of the implementation of a flawed policy?

The bilingual education policy of DepEd / is not cognizant that language and learning are conditional processes / as evidenced by the division of core subjects according to language.

This was done despite DepEd’s close ties with the UNESCO, / which since the 1950s, has advocated for the use the mother tongue / as the first language of education; / and despite the findings of its own superintendent / Jose V. Aguilar in 1948 / which showed that children schooled for two years in their native language / surpassed the performance of other students in all subjects / by the end of Grade 3. Studies done over the last 50 years / including those done within and by the DepEd / have affirmed and confirmed similar findings. This proves that foundational language learning / is positively related to learning content and additional languages.

Difficulties experienced by children in learning the languages / as a result of the division of the curriculum according to languages / may have dampened their interest to learn / the content areas. Instead, , English and Filipino could have been learned / using any topic or issue of interest to the learner. The use of storybooks, poetry and song / would have done beautifully in supporting language development / especially in the early years. Furthermore, it would have promoted cultural literacy.

Languages matter in child learning. As a powerful cultural marker, / the child’s language should be respected in schools. Sadly, children are still being penalized / for speaking their own language / in school premises. Long ago, the fine was at 25 centavos / per word. Now, because of inflation, / the going rate is five pesos per word spoken. It is curious where the fine goes.

Language use in schools / impacts on the affective side of learning. Children who are made to read / in a language they do not understand / get into the habit of not thinking about / what they read. / Worse, their self-esteem suffers. On average over 30 years, the Philippines’ highest drop out rate / in the elementary level / is at Grade 2. Maybe, the children’s engagement with school / has been hampered by their inability to cope / with the language requirements exacted by the curriculum. Children experiencing failure / in reading and writing in Filipino and English / lose their motivation to attend school. They feel marginalized in classrooms / that are supposed to liberate their minds.

The challenges that children encounter / due to the lack / of oral language background in the target languages / create multiple layers of difficulty. Students have to learn two unfamiliar languages simultaneously. They have to master the vocabulary and grammar / of these languages to make meaning. While doing that, they have to learn to read. Then, they have to be quick / because they have to learn social studies, math and science / at the same time. Though there is an 8-week induction curriculum for Grade 1, / it is impossible to develop mastery in Filipino and
English / in such a short period of time. If you were a child, would you still want to go to school?

Teachers’ understanding of the relationship / between multilingualism and multiliteracy has direct bearing / on how they teach children / how to read. Teacher education curricula do not explicitly include / training on understanding this relationship. In so doing, the mistaken notion that literacy develops / in the same way / in any language is perpetuated. Yet all Grade 1 teachers will tell you / that it is easier to teach children / to read in Filipino because it has a simpler orthography / and has a more familiar vocabulary / than English. If schools for teachers only paid attention / to the observations of teachers in the field, then the teaching of reading / would have long started from the language children already knew. Instead, the reading comprehension problems so frequently reported / in both public and private schools / prevail.

What has kept the DepEd / from developing bilingual competence / among Filipino children? We offer four points of analysis.

First, it formulated a weak policy / on bilingual education. The BEP does not stand on strong theoretical grounds. It ignored the long-standing / and empirically validated view / of how learning best happens among children / and how new language learning should be built / upon a mastery of the child’s native language. Furthermore, the policy also glossed over / the socio-cultural issues in education / by relegating the local languages as auxiliary media of instruction.

Second, the DepEd relinquished control / over the curriculum decades ago / and handed it over to politicians, most of whom disregard scientific research / and the experiences of teachers / in favor of their own personal anecdotes.

In 1939, the Education secretary / decided on the language issue precisely because / of its curricular significance. In our time, the DepEd fence sits / and waits for directives from the Office of the President, legislators / or donors. With the prospect of employment for Filipinos / in the call-center industry and resource management sector, the Arroyo administration / is aggressively championing the use of English / as the medium of instruction in Philippine schools / through Executive Order 210 of 2003. This has been seconded / by House Bill 4701 on "Strengthening and Enhancing the Use of English as the Medium of Instruction in Philippine Schools.” This proposed legislation / seeks to make English the medium of instruction / from Grade 3 onwards. Ironically, these are advanced in the context / of findings that teachers’ language proficiency / is at the Grade 3 level. The incongruity between reality and policy directives / by the present administration is disturbingly glaring / in its obvious disregard of scientific evidence.

On the other side / is House Bill 3719, “An Act Establishing a Multi-Lingual Education and Literacy Program” written by Congressman Magtanggol Gunigundo / which espouses the use of the mother tongue / in all grades of elementary education. The Gunigundo bill is backed up by
research / is a breath of fresh air among all the other opinions / emanating from the House of Representatives / about the language issue.

However, whether ill or well-advised, / the two House Bills / will still end up telling the DepEd what to do.

From my point of view, / the DepEd, is the teacher of the nation. The hierarchical obeisance within DepEd / has hindered it / from performing this role to the fullest. Like all teachers, it must advocate / for its students’ best interests. The political motives of those promoting the sole use of English / as medium of instruction / must be thwarted by the DepEd / to protect the Filipino child’s right / to quality and relevant education. The 2006 BESRA reform strategies / for language and literacy education / and their necessary support mechanisms intended to do just that. However, two years hence, the DepEd has yet to herald / the BESRA language recommendations / as its own.

Third, the situation is exacerbated / by the relative absence of serious efforts / on the part of DepEd to educate legislators / and the rest of society. While it is true that many representatives / have not attended the congressional committee hearings / on bills pertaining to language, / it is also true / that those who represented the DepEd / could not articulate the DepEd position / on the matter adequately. Thus, it is not surprising / that legislators have glossed over what the DepEd / may have wanted to communicate. Instead, they focused solely on employment growth paradigms / in deciding on the language of education / while ignoring the widely accepted research on culture, learning / and child development. By keeping learning in the periphery / and targeting overseas employment, / policies may arise that encourage shortcuts to learning / and thus, stunt cognitive development among children.

Finally, the DepEd has been unable / to negotiate a shift from structural learning paradigms / to more socio-constructivist methods of teaching and assessment / of language and literacy. Teachers narrate / that lessons continue to be taught by rote. The emphasis on products / rather than learning processes has been anathema / to the formation of functional, critical and creative thinking. The influence of BEAM and TEEP / has obviously not permeated the entire system / even if together, these two major reform efforts, / spanned about 33% of all Philippine elementary schools.

Another important aspect is the lack of recognition / of the power of teachers to make or break / educational innovation. It is important that teachers believe / in the programs they are implementing. According to the report of Dumatog and Dekker in 2003, / after some years of implementation of the first language component, / “Teachers now realize the potential of their own vernacular and culture / to be a spring-board for enhancing children’s reading comprehension.
“Individual differences” is a simple and fundamental principle in education which means that teaching must start with the students’ strengths. This is based on the view of learning that children will eventually traverse the unknown if they are able to connect this to what they already know.

To be consistent with this principle, education should begin with the child’s language before systematically moving towards our desired additional languages.

**Conclusions**

In the past hour, we have tried to show why education reforms do not transform.

First, it is because of a highly centralized system that does not give teachers and principals the freedom and responsibility to make the best schools for their children and communities.

Second, it is because of the projectized-approach to reform, when key reform thrusts are externally induced and then dropped once the project is over, and where there are weak institutional systems for processing and scaling up successful reform innovations.

Third, it is because reforms have focused on education inputs such as school buildings, textbooks, computers, teacher training, and have mistakenly assumed that these will automatically yield better learning performance and outcomes.

Fourth, it is because learning has been simply assumed. It has actually been taken for granted in the reform processes. Reforms have failed to directly probe into the questions of what students should be learning, how learning becomes relevant, and the ways learning can happen in the context of diversity among children and communities. Amidst all this, we argued that there has been no understanding of learning as an organizing framework for schools and their transformation.

As a result of the confluence of these factors, we now have an educational system that is tireless in its repetition of problems and so-called solutions. We have not actually improved our schools, developed life long learners, and citizens with the competencies to improve their personal circumstances while transforming Philippine society for the better.

We have also suggested the features of reforms that can actually transform.

First, we need to anchor reform in a fine appreciation of the various forms and ways of learning that will be functional and transformative to the individual and to Philippine society.

Second, we need to break away from the one-size-fits-all mindset when formulating solutions to our educational concerns, whether these refer to teaching practices, textbooks, learning activities, assessment procedures or the languages of learning.
Third, we must recognize the importance of formal learning experiences in basic education so that these can serve as scaffolds for subsequent learning requirements and choices. At the same time, we need to value both formal and alternative learning systems as viable venues for building desirable competencies.

Fourth, we need capable and empowered teachers and school heads who would be responsible for making decisions on what educational inputs and learning systems will work best for the learners in their schools and communities.

Fifth, we need to fast-track moves to decentralize the educational system, and support school-based management that is anchored on learning-oriented principles and the aspirations of their immediate and larger communities.

Our lecture put learning at the heart of its recommendations to swing the pendulum away from the unquestioned assumption that it just happens in a black box to which various inputs are thrown. We understand why the pendulum is on the side that relegates learning to the margins. The pressing issues that emanate from an increasing need for education services such as classrooms, learning materials, and teachers, and their inequitable distribution, demand urgent and immediate attention. We are not denigrating the role of inputs in facilitating or mediating the learning process. Indeed, we have seen how the delivery of such inputs to poverty-stricken schools has roused communities to participate in the education of their children. Our appeal, however, is for learning to be the reference point of all our education reform interventions.

On the other hand, we also realize from the experiences of highly effective learning-oriented projects like IMPACT and BEAM that enabling conditions such as decentralization have to be in place. Since these conditions run against prevailing institutional systems and practices, their realization calls for reformist interventions that are integrated rather than disjointed; comprehensive rather than piecemeal; simultaneous rather than sequential. Moreover, these reforms should be adaptive to different socio-cultural terrains; and conducted on a scale that will make a difference. We are saying as well that the decentralization efforts in education ought to be seen as a movement that engages communities on the ground as well as virtual communities of education advocates. In this regard, BESRA is certainly a positive step forward. Our recommendation is to expand it to include all post-secondary education.

But comprehensive frameworks do not make reform. To illustrate, we do not only have the law for decentralization in basic education, we also have well articulated frameworks like BESRA. Reforms do not transform when such laws and frameworks are not implemented with the passion and organization of reformists. We need a roadmap, detailed implementation plans, and the organization to tap into the energies of education reformists inside and outside the bureaucracy and channel these to the schools.
We end our reflection by asking ourselves what UP can do in the service of education reform. Precisely because reform has been conducted as if on crisis mode, UP must find ways for the education system to break free from the tireless repetitions of problems and so-called solutions.

UP can mobilize its multidisciplinary expertise as it did in the past.

UP can provide the much-needed research on all aspects of Philippine education including its own policies.

UP can generate and filter discourses the way national institutes of education in other countries do.

Thus, UP must swiftly bring together the country’s education reformists to work with the public education sector.

If there is one thing that UP must do in the service of the nation, IT IS THIS.

Thank you.