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PRIVILEGE SPEECH

Observations on the Implementation of the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education Program – Theory vs. Implementation

May 31, 2023

Senate of the Philippines

Delivered by the Honorable Win Gatchalian, Senator of the 19th Congress:

Good afternoon Mr. President, distinguished peers.

The passage of the K to 12 Law in 2013 has transformed the Philippine basic education system in a number of ways. Most of the attention, both then and now, has been drawn to the addition of two additional grades to the basic education curriculum. However, the K to 12 Law also marked a seismic policy shift regarding the languages of instruction used from Kindergarten to Grade 3.

Since 1987, Philippine elementary schools had implemented a bilingual education program utilizing the country's two official languages – Filipino and English. However, the Department of Education began developing the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education or MTB-MLE Program under Department Order No. 74, series of 2009. DepEd then declared that the mother tongue policy would begin implementation during the 2012-2013 school year under Department Order No. 16, series of 2012. The shift to mother tongue-based multilingual education was formalized by Section 4 of Republic Act No. 10533, which requires children in kindergarten and



Senate of the Philippines
Office of Senator Win Gatchalian

Grades 1 to 3 to be taught using the regional or native tongue of learners.

The use of mother tongue as the medium of instruction in the early grades of school has long been endorsed by UNESCO and UNICEF as an essential foundation for learning. In simple terms, the theory supposes that children in the initial levels of schooling would be better able to grasp the curriculum if they are taught in the language they are most familiar with – the one they speak at home. It is only in later years of primary education when a *lingua franca* such as English should be introduced as a medium of instruction, once a solid foundation of knowledge and competencies has been built using the mother tongue.

Sabi nga nila, ang wika ay nagsisilbing tulay tungo sa pagkamit ng kolektibong layunin. Sa lente ng edukasyon, malaki ang papel ng wika sa pagkatuto ng mga kabataan. Tiyak na mas magiging epektibo ang pagtuturo ng mga guro at mas mapapadali rin ang pagkatuto ng mga mag-aaral kung sila ay nagkakaintindihan sa kanilang ginagamit na wika.

The late President Benigno Aquino III, a staunch advocate of the mother tongue policy, framed it within the Philippine context in this way:



Senate of the Philippines
Office of Senator Win Gatchalian

"We should become trilingual as a country. Learn English well and connect to the world. Learn Filipino well and connect to our country. Retain your dialect and connect to your heritage."

However, the mother tongue policy has come under scrutiny over the past decade of implementation. In fact, the House of Representatives even passed a bill this February calling for the suspension of the MTB-MLE. Public sentiment on the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction appears to have soured as well.

Our office commissioned the following question on the September 17-21, 2022 survey conducted by Pulse Asia:

"Sa inyong opinyon, ano ang dapat gamiting pangunahing wika ng pagtuturo sa mga estudyante sa PRIMARYA O GRADE 1 HANGGANG 3?" Respondents were provided three choices, of which they could choose one or more: Filipino, English, or "vernacular or language or dialect spoken by the ordinary people in a particular region".

88% of respondents said Filipino should be a primary language of instruction for grade 1 to 3 students, while 71% chose English. Only 38% of respondents chose the vernacular or mother tongue.



Senate of the Philippines
Office of Senator Win Gatchalian

Considering the fundamental importance of the language of instruction in a country like the Philippines, where 183 languages are spoken among our ethnically diverse population, the merits of the mother tongue policy and the effectiveness of its implementation are vital topics of study for legislators, policymakers, and education stakeholders.

To learn more about the issues surrounding the implementation of MTB-MLE, the Committee on Basic Education conducted a series of localized focus group discussions with teachers and administrators, and classroom observations at sites spread across Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao, namely:

Lingayen I Central School and Mangatarem I Central School
in Pangasinan;

Minglanilla Central School in Cebu;

Marahan West Elementary School in Davao City;

Pursuant to Proposed Senate Resolution No. 5, authored by this representation, the Committee on Basic Education then conducted an inquiry in aid of legislation on October 17, 2022 to validate our findings in the field. After the public hearing, we then revalidated our findings with a classroom observation and post-



Senate of the Philippines
Office of Senator Win Gatchalian

conference with stakeholders at the Poblacion Elementary School in Muntinlupa City.

I will present some of the important findings gleaned from the case studies we conducted.

For one, we observed some difficulties in the implementation of the MTB-MLE in linguistically diverse areas.

For example, the mother tongue used as medium of instruction in Lingayen I Central School is Pangasinan. However, only 75% of learners enrolled at the school declared Pangasinan as their mother tongue. In other words, one out of four Key Stage 1 students at the school is not fluent in the language in which their textbooks are printed and in which lessons are conducted by teachers.

The situation is even worse at Marahan West Elementary School in Davao City, where around 40% of Key Stage 1 learners declared Davao Bisaya as their mother tongue, while the rest of the learners declared Matigsalug, Manobo, Ubo Manuvu, Diangan, Bagobo, English, Ilonggo and Tausug as their mother tongue. In other words, there was *not a single learner enrolled at the school whose mother tongue is Sinugbuanong Binisaya which is the language of instruction used in the school.*



Senate of the Philippines
Office of Senator Win Gatchalian

Likely a result of this conundrum, we observed limited levels of class participation in the linguistically heterogenous Grade 1 class at Marahan West. However, in more linguistically homogenous classes, such as Grade 2, there was a markedly higher level of class participation among learners.

Based on the data, we can see that the implementation of the mother tongue policy in linguistically diverse areas may be discriminatory against learners who are not fluent in the regional language chosen as the mother tongue medium of instruction. Speakers of the mother tongue hold a significant advantage over those who do not speak it – a situation that is unlikely to arise under the previous bilingual program of education.

In Pangasinan, the DepEd District Supervisor of the Municipality of Bolinao also reported difficulties in the implementation of the MTB-MLE due to the linguistic diversity of the area. While the mother tongue medium of instruction is Bolinao, Iloko and Pangasinan are also spoken in the area. Even some of the teachers, who hail from municipalities outside of Bolinao, are not fluent in the medium of instruction. As a result of these factors, teachers in the area often resort to the *lingua franca* of Filipino to conduct lessons, as this is the language spoken and understood by all learners.



Senate of the Philippines
Office of Senator Win Gatchalian

Kung ang mga guro mismo – na silang nangunguna sa mga talakayan – ay hindi bihasa sa ginagamit nilang wika, paano pa kaya ang mga bata? Paano sila matututo?

Again, we must remember that one of the strongest theoretical selling points of the mother tongue policy is that it is better to teach learners in the language they already know and understand. However, as we can see, this theory does not hold in practice among linguistically diverse learner populations – and in the Philippines, this is a common circumstance. Instead, we are left with situations in which large proportions of learners are forced to study materials and participate in class discussions using languages with which they are not familiar. These are learners being left behind.

Another issue observed in the implementation of the MTB-MLE is problems in bridging between Key Stage 1, or kindergarten to Grade 3, and Key Stage 2, or Grade 4 to Grade 6.

In Key Stage 1, the mother tongue is the medium of instruction for math and science. However, in Key Stage 2 the medium of instruction abruptly switches to English. Bridging refers to when the teacher switches between the mother tongue and English during instruction to ensure that the learner is able to understand the corresponding terms in English.



Senate of the Philippines
Office of Senator Win Gatchalian

In Pangasinan, Cebu, and Muntinlupa, teachers reported significant difficulties for Grade 4 learners, who are suddenly forced to take up math and science classes in English after four years of schooling in the mother tongue. During the Muntinlupa classroom observation, we observed that learners in Key Stage 1 were significantly more participative in math and science lessons compared to Grade 4 students. Their lack of engagement may be partially attributed to their lack of competency in English.

Kung tutuusin, sadyang mahirap na ngang aralin ang mga asignaturang tulad ng Math at Science, dadagdagan pa ba natin ang pasanin ng mga mag-aaral sa biglaang pagpapalit ng wika sa pagtuturo?

A veteran teacher in Pangasinan also identified bridging as a problem because of the extra time it takes to get through lessons. Explaining the same lesson twice, in two different languages, takes away significant time which could have been spent delving deeper into the lesson plan for the day.

Yet another significant issue observed in the implementation of the MTB-MLE is the language used in textbooks.



Senate of the Philippines Office of Senator Win Gatchalian

The form of Bisaya used in Cebu region DepEd textbooks is formal and academic. In contrast, teachers and parents are more familiar with the conversational form of Bisaya. Because of this, even the teachers themselves have a difficult time understanding the terms used in the textbooks. When learners are given homework wherein the textbooks are to be used as reference materials, the parents would get in touch with teachers to request help as they too do not understand the terms used in the textbook.

An example provided by a teacher is how reference is made to the term one-fourth in Cebu Bisaya. In the mother tongue textbooks, one-fourth is referred to as 'sika-upat,' which even the teachers do not understand.

To make matters worse, there are many variations of Bisaya spoken across the 20 schools division of Cebu. For example, during our focus group discussion a school head from Bantayan Island narrated that the form of Bisaya spoken on her island is different from the Bisaya utilized in the textbooks and the Bisaya spoken on the main island of Cebu. However, all learning materials provided across the entire region use a single form of standardized Bisaya. As such, learners, parents, and teachers face difficulties in relying on these textbooks.



Senate of the Philippines
Office of Senator Win Gatchalian

Ipinapakita lamang ng mga naratibong narinig natin na nahihirapan ang mga magulang, mga guro, lalong lalo na ang mga mag-aaral sa pag-unawa ng wika na ginagamit sa pagtuturo. Ginoong Pangulo, hindi ito ang hinahangad nating kalidad ng edukasyon.

Perhaps the most alarming obstacle observed in the implementation of the MTB-MLE is in Davao, where *the form of the mother tongue chosen as the medium of instruction is not the form of the language actually spoken by learners in the area.*

The prevailing mother tongue of the Davao region is Davao Bisaya, a specific form of the language. However, Davao Bisaya does not have an orthography, a system for writing the language. Because of this, the DepEd central office chose Sinugbuanong Binisaya or Cebu Bisaya as the medium of instruction for mother tongue education in Davao.

Conversational Davao Bisaya is different from the Sinugbuanong Binisaya found in the textbooks and modules used at Marahan West Elementary School and other schools in the Davao region. Hence, the terminologies used are in fact foreign to the learners, parents, and even teachers. This was a major challenge, especially during the pandemic when parents themselves could not understand the modules to guide their



Senate of the Philippines
Office of Senator Win Gatchalian

children. Consequently, the lack of orthography for the Davao Bisaya language affects the availability of training and other resources that would have capacitated the teachers to teach in the mother tongue.

Again, we can see here that the purpose behind the mother-tongue based multilingual education in theory is defeated by its actual implementation on the ground. Learners in Davao are forced to learn in a language that is not actually their mother tongue – a language they do not speak nor understand well.

It is clear that the implementation of MTB-MLE in Davao does not comply with Section 5(f) of the K to 12 Law, which states: "The curriculum shall adhere to the principles and framework of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) which starts from where the learners are and from what they already knew proceeding from the known to the unknown."

The policy decision of the DepEd central office to use Sinugbuanong Binisaya in the Davao Region clearly violates the MTB-MLE mandate because Davao schools are not using the actual prevalent mother tongue in the region – Davao Bisaya – but rather the mother tongue of Cebu.



Senate of the Philippines
Office of Senator Win Gatchalian

Mr. President, ten years into the implementation of MTB-MLE, there has not been a national impact evaluation conducted on the effect of the policy on learning outcomes. Three empirical questions remain unanswered:

Did MTB-MLE improve early-grade literacy in the mother tongue, Filipino, and English?

Did use of the mother tongue as medium of instruction improve learner outcomes in other learning areas, particularly in Math and Science?

What is the long-term effect of MTB-MLE on both learning and non-cognitive outcomes, such as learning confidence, from key stages 2 to 4?

To be fair, it should be noted that the anecdotal evidence from the classroom observations does return positive results in some respects. For example, it was clear across the board that learners who speak the mother tongue medium of instruction of their schools were more active participants in lessons conducted in that language. This point is highlighted by the noticeably lower levels of participation in Key Stage 2 math and science, for example, where the medium of instruction shifts from the mother tongue to English.



Senate of the Philippines Office of Senator Win Gatchalian

In the absence of direct empirical evidence on MTB-MLE's impact on learning outcomes, we may look to data extrapolation using validly comparable data. In our case, we use learner scores from the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study or TIMSS in 2003 and 2019.

National performance in Grade 4 Math and Science substantially declined on TIMSS 2019 compared to TIMSS 2003. The absolute decline in Math is 61 points and 83 points in Science.

Controlling for other variables such as the language of assessment, curriculum coverage, socioeconomic status, and teacher quality, it is empirically valid to conclude – based on what we have observed in our focus group discussions and case studies of national scope – that the decline in learner outcomes observed may be partially attributable to the implementation of the mother tongue-based multilingual education program which started during the 2012-2013 school year. Of course, the major caveat here is that this hypothesis must be subjected to further validation after in-depth data collection and analysis.

Ginoong Pangulo, hindi natin maipagkakaila na ang pagpapayabong ng inang wika ay pagpapayabong din ng kultura at kasaysayan. Ngunit kung sa pagpapatupad nito ay nakasalalay ang



Senate of the Philippines
Office of Senator Win Gatchalian

kalidad ng pagkatuto ng mga mag-aaral, marahil ay napapanahon nang masuri natin ang implementasyon nito.

To be sure, the mother tongue policy was set into place with only the best intentions of its architects, who hoped to provide Filipino learners with a linguistic advantage in the critical early years of their education. However, based on what we have discussed here today, it is more than reasonable to conclude that there are serious challenges facing the implementation of MTB-MLE in areas all throughout the Philippines. Considering that MTB-MLE was one of the major reforms instituted by the K to 12 Law, this is a serious topic of discussion for legislators, policymakers, and education stakeholders.

Education policy, like any public policy, is a perpetual work in progress. What may have seemed like a good idea a decade ago may not necessarily be a workable solution today. At the same time, however, it is often the case in the Philippines that while the law itself is sound, its implementation leaves much to be desired.

Bilang isang arkipelagong bansa na kinabibilangan ng iba't ibang komunidad na may kanya-kanyang wika at dayalekto, tiyak na hati ang kinahinatnang epekto ng implementasyon ng MTB-MLE. Saksi ang mga guro at magulang na hindi ito epektibo para sa lahat. Pakinggan natin ang boses nila lalo na't walang teorya ang



Senate of the Philippines
Office of Senator Win Gatchalian

makakapantay sa reyalidad na nararanasan nila. Sa huli, sila mismo ang patunay na hindi “one size fits all” ang pagpapatupad ng MTB-MLE.

Bilang mga mambabatas, panahon na upang pakinggan natin ang boses ng mga guro at magulang na tinaguriang frontliner ng sektor ng edukasyon.

While this representation will not make a definitive conclusion about the propriety or effectiveness of MTB-MLE at this time, it is clear that the policy’s execution on the ground requires serious recalibration to succeed.

At the same time, however, I hope we can somehow maintain the nationalistic spirit behind the mother tongue policy, which promotes the preservation of culture and heritage by imbuing many of our local languages with greater prominence and relevance, which they did not enjoy during the days of bilingual education. However, continuation of the MTB-MLE policy may not be an appropriate method of perpetuating this aim.

All in all, I hope that this speech will be the catalyst for a swift national impact evaluation on the implementation of the MTB-MLE, so that we can craft necessary policy reforms and amend the MTB-MLE provision of the K to 12 Law as may be required.



Senate of the Philippines
Office of Senator Win Gatchalian

Thank you, Mr. President.