
Free, Accessible, and Sustainable Education: Analysis of Legal Basis

Education is defined as the process of learning or teaching (Education, n.d.). According to Arthur, Hisrich, and Cabrera (2012), education is important for it helps us make wise decisions such as who to vote for, etc. and it sparks innovations. It is a critical factor that affects the success in entrepreneurship. It is essential in self development and the development of the country. To get high paying and stable jobs, you have to have a degree. Higher wages are given to those with higher educational attainment (Quinn & Rubb, 2006). Education is important for economic growth, improved health, and reduced fertility and morbidity rates (Kadzamira & Rose, 2003).

Everyone has a right to quality education. According to Article 14, Section 1 of the 1987 Philippine Constitution, every citizen has the right to quality education that is accessible to all (Official Gazette, n.d.).

Republic Act 6655 or the Free Public Secondary Education Act of 1988 provides free public secondary education for its qualifiers. This includes free tuition and other school fees, not including fees for membership like identification cards. This law benefits those who are enrolled in national high schools, public high schools, and other government-administered schools and its priority are the graduates of public elementary schools (Philippine Commission on Women, n.d.).

Republic Act 10931, the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education, states that students who are taking up tertiary and technical vocational education and studying in local universities and colleges (LUCs), state universities and colleges (SUCs), and technical-vocational institutions (TVIs) will be fully subsidized by the government (Northwest Samar State University, n.d.). The free tuition law covers the tuition for the required subjects as well as the miscellaneous fees. It also involves the “minorities” such as Lumads, PWDs, etc. Students are still allowed to avail an education loan. The beneficiaries of this law are students who qualify for the admissions and requirements given. The law also states that students who have educational capacity have the choice to either avail or not avail of this free tuition. For private universities or schools, students may apply for subsidies. Only those who already have a bachelor’s degree from any institution, those who failed to comply with the requirements, or those who failed to complete degree in a year are excluded from this law (Cepeda, 2018).

It has been reported that the net enrolment rate in elementary from 2000 to 2005 had dropped by 84.4%, and the completion rate didn’t exceed 70%. In high school, from 2000 to 2005, the net enrolment rate also dropped by 58.5% (Macha, Mackie, & Magaziner, 2018). According to the Department of Education, there was a decrease in the number of out-of-school youth from 2016 having 3.8 million dropouts to 2017 with 3.6 million dropouts (Tomacruz, 2018).

The recurring reasons of out-of-school youth for dropping out are financial problems and poverty (Tomacruz, 2018). Due to the high cost of education, it becomes harder for them to sustain their educational needs and due to poverty, they have to work to support their families (Porcalla, 2017).

Free and accessible education does not only pertain to free tuition. Based from the laws implemented, it should also include free miscellaneous fees. However, these fees are not the only concerns of students. Other factors such as projects that require a huge amount of money, transportation fare, and food also affect the students financially (Kadzamira & Rose, 2003). Ideally, free education increases the accessibility of education but realistically, free education does not necessarily equate to accessible and sustainable education. Education can be free but not accessible. And just because education is free and accessible, it does not mean that it is sustainable.

A study entitled *Can free primary education meet the needs of the poor?: evidence from Malawi* discussed how free primary education, despite its goal to alleviate poverty, does otherwise. Although helpful, the system of free primary education is not the solution to poverty (Kadzamira & Rose, 2003).

With this current situation, opposing sides appeared. Some agree to the idea of free education while some do not.

Some people believe that education should not be free because they believe that free education would be more of a problem than a solution. People tend to de-value education because they don't have to worry about paying for their tuition, which can be a reason for slacking off in school (Wilkinson, 2017). According to children who have dropped out from school, free education does not address and solve poverty (Kadzamira & Chibwana, 2000). Some argue based on practicality. Free education is not really free because the money used to spend for it comes from the taxpayers' money. Some taxpayers worry about the money, which they have invested on free education, being put to waste and having a low rate of return because of students who take free education for granted (Norton, 2018). Another thing is that it will be a burden to taxpayers if free education is implemented widely since a larger amount of money is needed and the quality of education may be put to risk (Roth, 2019).

On the contrary, some people believe that education should be free for it will provide economic growth and affordability and opportunity for the poor. In the first semester of 2018, 16.1% of the total number of families are beyond the poverty line (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2019). With the increasing rate of tuition fee, an increase of approximately 12.5% per year, it is becoming more impossible for the underprivileged to afford education. In the year 2037, the projected cost of tuition fees range from 3.55 million to 9.7 million pesos for 4 years (Educational Planning, n.d.). In addition, students drop out of school because of poverty. Aside from the tuition fee and other miscellaneous fees, they still have to worry about their food, transportation, clothing, and school supplies. Others even have to work to sustain their needs and support their family. Sometimes, the salary they get is not even enough (Rose, 2002; Kadzamira & Chibwana, 2000; Burchfield & Kadzamira, 1996; Chimombo, 1999). It is also proven that countries with free, accessible, and sustainable education are more successful than those without. Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Iceland, Norway, and Czech Republic are the seven successful countries that implement free higher education (Akhtar, 2019).

Free, accessible, and sustainable education does not only refer to free tuition, but also the other aspects which affect the daily lives of the students like food, clothes, shelter, etc. (Kadzamira & Rose, 2003). An example of the disadvantage is physical accessibility especially in rural areas, where schools are far from residential areas. Because of this, students have to travel far and pay for the transportation fare just to get to school (Casco, 2018).

The most evident issue in this case is the issue on socioeconomic class. Those at the bottom of the hierarchy have the most disadvantages. An example is on entrance examinations for universities and examinations for scholarships. Entrance examinations are necessary to filter those who really deserve it but the system of examination in the Philippines is standardized, which caters only to a part of a population. In addition, those who usually get in are the more privileged because they can afford to pay for review centers and to buy the resources that they need. Although graduates of public schools were given priority, the underprivileged, however, have a disadvantage because they depend only on limited resources.

There are already existing laws addressing this issue but proper implementation is the key. The educational sector, according to the Philippine Constitution, shall receive the biggest budget among all government agencies. 40 billion pesos was allotted to the 1st year of the implementation of the free college education. However, not all state universities were given the funds that they were promised (Cepeda, 2018). Good laws are put to waste because of poor implementation. This just shows that although the government's goal is maybe to serve the poor, its improper implementation leads to the opposite and it becomes anti-poor.

However, wider implementation of the law requires for an increase in the needed budget for implementation. Another thing is that there is no assurance that the drop-out rate and the number of out-of-school youth will decrease with the implementation of the law because other factors should be considered first and free education does not necessarily solve the problem of poverty. It can only be seen as a way of providing equal opportunities and access to a person's right (UNESCO, n.d.).

There is a need for evaluation if our country is ready for a free, accessible, and sustainable education. There is a need for re-evaluation of the implemented laws regarding free education and improvement until the educational system becomes pro-poor. Free education is necessary but there is a need for proper implementation. When talking about access to quality and sustainable education, we should consider the underprivileged and not cater only to the privileged. This may take a long time but what's important is that there is progress and it will be worth it if the goal is achieved in the future.