

## Crossroads of Quality Assurance: The Philippine Basic Education Experience

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### **Abstract:**

*Public elementary and high schools in the Philippines are struggling to cope up with the accreditation standards set by the Department of Education. The questionable stability of the accreditation process in public schools would cause uncertainty among principal to undergo accreditation. Using a phenomenological design, the researcher conducted this study among principals who underwent accreditation. Data collected via interviews with participants who were principals of their respective schools during the pilot implementation of the Department of Education accreditation program. Transcriptions were derived from the videotapes of the interviews. After gaining the holistic view of the participants, significant statements were extracted that serve as essence from where the themes were formulated. In response to the purpose of this study which is to determine the live experiences of the principals who already experienced actual accreditation, this study emerged that principals experienced extreme pressure in understanding the “whats” and “hows” of accreditation. Contributory to their anxieties were the financial constraints, retrieval of documents for three years, and the pressing time. However, despite hardship and difficulties, the principals were all successful in obtaining certain accreditation.*

*Key Words: Accreditation, Crossroads, Excellence, Principal, Quality Assurance*

### **Introduction**

Quality assurance is the widely known acceptable process under which services and operations of an institution or program is evaluated by an external body to determine if applicable standards are met. Quality assurance comes in many form and one of those is accreditation which is a voluntary method of quality assurance developed more than 100 years ago by American universities and secondary schools, and designed primarily to distinguish schools adhering to a set of educational standards. Accreditation is a quality assurance method. Through the accreditation process, schools are recognized for meeting required quality standards in all areas of their work: academic programs, teacher support, student services and more. The accreditation process is also known in terms of its ability to effectively drive student performance and continuous improvement in education.

Concurrently, Philippines is on the way to achieving its target on ensuring that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling. Thus, the timely enactment into law of the K to 12 calls for better standardization through better

accreditation programs for all the Philippine schools. Until this law's enactment, the Philippines was the only country in Asia and one of only three countries worldwide that offers 10 year basic education. The objective of the law is to encourage and at some point, even compel the schools to engage in the accreditation process after the schools have matured in the School-Based Management (SBM) level of practice.

The accreditation experiences of schools principals prompted the researcher to conduct this study since his previous works revolved in the improvement and innovations of the different public elementary schools in the province of Laguna. Result of this study would also give a clearer picture to the principals who intend to apply for accreditation but reluctant because accreditation to them is new.

This study aimed to determine the lived experiences of the public elementary school principals who already experienced actual and real accreditation. More specifically, this study aims to discover themes that describe the experience of principals before, during and after accreditation.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Accreditation in the Philippines**

In 1970, the Presidential Commission to Survey Philippine Education (PCSPE) submitted policy recommendations to improve and strengthen higher education. Among others, it recommended that schools be encouraged to join or organize accrediting associations, and that a Federation of Accrediting Agencies (FAAP) be established. The Commission Report better known as the Integrated Reorganization Plan (IRP), was approved by President Marcos in his PD 201 and subsequently issued Presidential Decree 6-A, otherwise known as the Educational Development Act of 1972, making accreditation one of the means of upgrading standards of education in the Philippines and providing therein a program of financial assistance.

Laws and regulations have been issued to articulate the government's policy on accreditation. BATAS PAMBANSA 232; R.A. 7722, Creating the Commission on Higher Education (CHED): DepEd Order 32, s 2005; CHED Order 1, s 2005 and the 2008 Manual of Regulations for Private Schools, have stipulated voluntary accreditation as means of ensuring quality education. The evolution of accreditation in the Philippines had an early beginning, but was characterized by several aborted starts, and some setbacks caused by protagonists with differing objectives and constraints, along its path to eventual development.

### **Existing Researches and other Literatures on Accreditation**

In October 2002 in United States of America, accrediting agencies found themselves in an uncomfortable position: the subject of congressional hearing about their value and effectiveness. Congressman Howard P. Mckee, chairman of the House Subcommittee on 21<sup>st</sup> Century competitiveness that head the hearing, set the tone for the event when he said, “If a college and its programs are accredited, the assumption by most is that it provides a quality education. The purpose of this hearing is to determine if that assumption is accurate.” Outcome of the report issued by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, on the reliability of **accreditation** as a quality indicator; Key features of **accreditation**; Challenges faced by **accreditation**; Recommendations for the higher education community. Report reveals four challenges faced by accreditation. First, accreditation is not well understood outside of the academy. Policy makers do not understand the difference between regional and specialized accreditation, nor can they draw a distinction between regional and national accrediting agencies. Second, it is limited value to consumers. While accreditors routinely make their final determination of accreditation status available to the public, accreditation reports are not routinely available. Third, accreditation, as with any process that relies on subjective judgments, can easily find itself mired in controversy. When it is quietly successful, as it is 95% of the time, accreditation garners no attention (Hartle, 2003).

In the study on current trends in accreditation for Australia, Canada and United State (Bernasconi, 2006), he presented concerns. First, the standard movement has had a deep impact on accreditation. U.S. regional agencies have elevated student learning to the top of the criteria for judging school success, as is the case also with the Australian state of Victoria and the Canadian province of British Columbia; in some U.S. states, such as Virginia, student performance on tests is the only accreditation criterion. Second, in many cases – the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The states of Idaho and Colorado, and British Columbia – the focus of accreditation has moved from schools to districts or it has at least encompassed districts as well as schools. Third, accreditation seems to surface from a certain frustration among accrediting and government agencies with the planning and management capacities of schools. However, far from quitting the effort to upgrade the dimension of school quality, the agencies have insisted upon the importance of up-to-date management practices and provided schools and districts boards with ever more developed guidelines, manuals, tools, database and software.

In the study conducted by Buzler (2013) teachers find accreditation process to make the programs stronger. The process did clarify and codify information about the methods and materials of the program. In addition, the process helped teachers regularly review the data from the newly codified materials. We are hopeful that the formal survey sent to teachers in science education across the country will help us identify and describe how, and if the accreditation process assisted in causing their science teacher education programs to become stronger or not.

In the article of Zehr (2005), Rev. William F. Maestri, who became the superintendent of schools for the Roman Catholic **Archdiocese** of New Orleans in August, has taken the unusual step of requiring **all** 83 elementary schools in the **archdiocese** to become accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, or SACS.

"We're seeking more accountability, because we believe accountability is a good thing," Father Maestri said. "We are already accountable to the people who send their children to these schools and to the church. We also want to be professionally accountable."

With four years of peace since a 1997 coup, Cambodia is playing catch-up with its neighbors and is ready to consider such matters as **accreditation** (Lin-Liu, 2001).

The World Bank delegation and the Cambodians who have met with it agree on the need to start with the basics. The new laws must define what a university is, and how a university should be governed and managed.

Accreditation of medical education programs is becoming increasingly prevalent worldwide (Zanten, McKinley, Montiel, & Pijano, 2012), but beyond the face validity of these quality assurance methods, data linking accreditation to improved student outcomes are limited. Mexico and the Philippines both have voluntary systems of medical education accreditation and large numbers of students who voluntarily take components of the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE). We investigated the examination performance of Mexican and Philippine citizens who attended medical schools in their home countries by medical school accreditation status. Findings support the value and usefulness of accreditation in Mexico and the Philippines by linking accreditation to improved student outcomes.

According to Hedrick, Kreig, and Wassel (2010), faculty compensation, research productivity, and teaching loads are significantly different at accredited schools than at nonaccredited schools. Second, these represent differences in the circumstances of individual faculty members attributable to accreditation, rather than differences in the types of faculty at accredited versus non-accredited schools.

**According to Prus and Strein (2011), program accreditation** which serves as a designator of quality based on a review by colleagues external to the institution using standards established by the profession, is playing an increasingly important role in the preparation and credentialing of **school** psychologists. Shearman and Seddon (2010) revealed that accreditation is an accepted and rigorous process that commands respect, both in the UK and internationally. It helps students, their parents and advisers choose quality engineering degree program. It also confers a market advantage

to graduates from accredited program, not only when they are seeking employment but also when, in due course, they decide to seek a professional qualification.

In the article of Black Issues in Higher Education (2005) American Indian leaders who tried to save **California's** only **tribal college** say that problems at D-Q University are insurmountable. They realized the school has reached its lowest point and concede it cannot be salvaged by them, 13 members of the new D-Q board of trustees said in a signed statement. D-Q -- which stands for Deganawidah Quetzalcoatl -- has been closed, though 24 students have stayed on campus to fight to keep the school open. "This is very disappointing," says Lynn Brown, D-Q's student body president. "What we need is somebody who will come in and won't break down once they realize how tough it's going to be."

Chronicle of HE (2006) cited the situation of Compton Community **College**, a **two-year** institution in Los Angeles County, has ended its **fight** to keep **accreditation**, and its operations will be taken over next month by a nearby **college**. The move makes Compton the first public institution in California to lose **accreditation**.

### **Bridging the Gaps between the Present Study and the Identified Literatures**

After rigorous attempts in finding related literatures particularly research studies specifically related to the present study that focuses on the elementary school accreditation, I concluded that really there is a need to conduct this research for the reason that there is dearth in studies specific for the target participants which is public elementary schools.

However, to broaden and concretize the foundation of this study, I used the literatures that focus on accreditation of higher education programs locally and internationally. Results and findings of those literatures would be significant in this endeavor particularly on the challenges that every school or university experienced in their quest for excellence. They encountered variety of challenges with some hurdles but others did not. They also presented impacts of accreditation to their programs and universities and most of them are common in saying that accreditation truly helps them improved their system as educational organization. Trying to analyze their responses, I became more interested in conducting this study to validate whether the previous findings would have similarity or difference to the present study.

## **Method**

### ***Research Design***

A qualitative research design was selected to meet the purpose of the present study. The present study lends itself to a qualitative research approach for four primary reasons: first to explore the meanings that people make of their experiences, and to study individuals in their natural environment (i.e., field focused) (Patton, 2002), second, it can be used to discover substantive areas about which there exists a paucity of information, and about which one wishes to gain novel understanding (Stern, 1980), third is to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon being explored through a detailed view, as opposed to a wide, topical view that would result from using a quantitative research approach, and lastly, it is employed in order to best address goals of the study.

### ***Participants of the Study***

The present study used the strategy of criterion sampling to meet certain criterion for inclusion. Such sampling measures are needed due to the narrow population of potential participants. The potential pool of recruits was limited because participants had to be sought among the population principals of accredited public elementary schools in Region-4A (CALABARZON). A further limitation to recruiting participants was that principal interviewees of those elementary schools who were piloted accreditation in every province of Region 4-A.

### ***Validity***

Each of the seven steps in the data analysis process, prescribed by Colaizzi (1980), were followed. Member checking, achieved in step 7, was conducted via telephone with each of the participants. The exhaustive description was read. Uniformly, participants were in agreement that the exhaustive description captured their experiences. Interviewee comments included, “Very well done,” “Strong... good,” and, “That tells my story.”

### ***Data Gathering Procedure***

The participants were solicited via records of Department of Education specifying the goals and terms of the research project. Written consent was obtained, allowing the interviews to be video recorded, and for the data to be published in the form of a research paper. Data were collected through semi-structured, video-taped personal interviews, conducted by the researcher. The initial interview sessions lasted approximately one and one-half hours. The follow-up interview session was conducted by phone, lasting approximately 20 minutes. Prior and after to the actual interview, I had the chance to have a casual interview with some staff, pupils, and teachers. I observed common thing among the schools visited. The pupils were very warm and polite. Teacher, staff and pupils are confident in talking to me as visitor.

### ***Interview settings***

Since phenomenological research depends on participants revealing personal thoughts and feelings, maximizing participant comfort while providing them a sense of privacy and security were important considerations when selecting interview sites. As such, interviewees were offered the option of meeting at a public site of their choice (e.g., office, library, school, or café), or meet at the participant's home. All of the participants opted to have the interview in their respective offices.

### ***Interview format***

Regarding the interview format, three global tour questions, supported by 10 optional prompts, addressed areas of principal experiences in accreditation. The questions were as follows: 1) How did you embrace accreditation? 2) What are the challenges you encountered before and during accreditation and how were you able to address them? and 3) How did accreditation change your school?

### ***Data collection method***

Prior to engaging in the task of analyzing data, according to Giorgi and Giorgi (2003), the researcher is to modulate his attitude towards that which is being studied. More specifically, the phenomenological tradition requires one to engage in what Husserl referred to as reduction, which is attained through the implementation of two practices: bracketing and phenomenological reduction.

In the present study, I achieved bracketing by keeping a personal journal. The journaling, at the outset, served as a means to establish my own experiences, thoughts, and feelings about accreditation experience. I accomplish this first phase through by answering the questions in the interview protocol that was used in this study. The second phase of journal writing involved noting my biases and prejudices as they arise through the data analysis process, and how my awareness of my own attitudes, beliefs, and prejudices with regard to the phenomenon of interest informs my data analysis work in the present, and might alter my approach in the future.

### ***Ethical Consideration***

Risk associated with this study is the breach of confidentiality. If, during the course of this study participant revealed that he/she had fabricated evidences for accreditation purposes, confidentiality would have been considered to have been breached and the appropriate authorities would have been informed. The likelihood of breach of confidentiality occurring was deemed minimal. At the outset of each personal interview, I informed the interviewee of the conditions under which confidentiality may be broken, according to the ethical codes of teachers.



### ***Data Treatment***

Using a method prescribed by Colaizzi (1978), the data was analyzed in seven steps. Colaizzi emphasizes that these steps are not hard and fast and may overlap. Thus, the following seven steps may be modified somewhat, depending on the researcher's needs.

### ***Data Analysis***

There were several procedures followed prior to engaging in the data analysis process, outlined above. Before each interview, a video-tape was labeled with a number that was assigned to each participant. Immediately following each interview, I personally transcribed the information from video recorder through the process of word processing. So as to protect the identities of individuals that might have been named in the participants' responses, as well as the names of the interviewees, I created a pseudonym during the data analysis process for each person, including a pseudonym for each interviewee.

### **Findings**

The principal participants were interviewed in order to gain information according to one overriding research question: What is the live experience of the public elementary school principals in their quest for excellence? Data analysis revealed themes (i.e., essences) that fell into three general categories: (1) knowledge and awareness; (2) experiences pertaining to accreditation; and (3) organizational effects (i.e., significant statements), taken from transcripts, are provided as a means to provide examples of overarching themes. Interviewees are differentiated by the symbols "P-1" (i.e., Principal 1), through "P-10."

Findings of this phenomenological study revealed that the role of principal may be extremely challenging when undergoing accreditation. As reflected in the exhaustive descriptions, the principals are impacted by several challenges they encountered along their journey to accreditation. An important finding was that principals were able to overcome all these challenges and new learning was discovered.

### ***Reflections on Major Findings***

#### ***Theme 1. Living with the strange of Accreditation Process***

Based on the results gleaned from the first area of questioning, the principals agreed that they are duty-bound to ensure that quality education is delivered at its highest quality level. Quality education requires standards and process that principals should adhere based on the standard set by the accrediting agencies. In Hartle (2003) study mentioned Congressman Howard P. Mckeeon,



chairman of the House Subcommittee on 21<sup>st</sup> Century competitiveness said that “If a college and its programs are accredited, the assumption by most is that it provides a quality education.

In the case of the public elementary schools, accreditation has not gone to its maturity level. After the pilot implementation of accreditation for public elementary schools, its accreditation instrument was changed and is not only applicable to public elementary schools but to high school as well for both public and private basic education schools. This is supported by the study conducted by Bernasconi (2006) that agencies have insisted upon the importance of upto-date management practices and provided schools and districts boards with ever more developed guidelines, manuals, tools, database and software for accreditation.

During the interview, when asked why their schools were chosen to be the pilot schools for accreditation, they were unanimous in answering that the Deped Regional Director chose them because of their academic achievements and school performance in government and nongovernment contests and examinations which is almost similar to the article of Zehr (2005), when Rev. William F. Maestri, who became the superintendent of schools for the Roman Catholic **Archdiocese** of New Orleans in August, has taken the unusual step of requiring **all** 83 elementary schools in the **archdiocese** to become accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, or SACS.

### *Theme 2. Adaptability of the School and Community to Accreditation Process*

As revealed in the interview, the principals believed that they are the beginning and the end of accreditation. If the principal would not accept the challenge of accreditation, everything will fall apart. The principal takes the lead role in bringing the school in accreditation.

As mentioned by the principals in the interview, the challenge of encouraging the teachers and other stakeholders to undergo accreditation is intense. They needed to explain the process and the responsibility of everyone in accreditation. Adaptability to the program should emanate from the principal before he can advocate accreditation to others. Meetings and conferences were identified as the major venues for information dissemination.

As described by the principals, working for accreditation with the parents and other members of the community was very fulfilling. The community exuded great concerns and participations in preparing the school for accreditation which is in contrast with study conducted by Hartle (2003) who mentioned that according to Congressman Howard P. Mckeeon, chairman of the House Subcommittee on 21<sup>st</sup> Century competitiveness that head the hearing said that accreditation is not well understood outside of the academy.

The principals' interpersonal skills were tested and proven to be strong and effective by their good working experience with alumni, parents, and other members of the community including government officials. The burden of physical and infrastructure improvements were carefully handled by the concerned people in the community.

### *Theme 3. Constraints on Time, Documents, and Financial Assistance Issues*

In another area, time, documentations, and availability of funds were perceived by the principals to be a major concern which adversely affected the preparation process. When asked how long did it take you to prepare for the accreditation, all of them said that it's less than six (6) months. In the usual accreditation by the accrediting agencies under Federation of Accrediting Agencies in the Philippines (FAAP), the school is given two year to prepare after the consultation visit before the school can undergo preliminary visit to give them ample time to prepare and secure the necessary documents and evidences because accreditation is evidencedbased.

Due to the very limit time, all the principals including the teachers experience cramming. According to them, they needed to report during Saturdays and Sunday just to complete their work preparation which is in support to the finding of Shearman and Seddon (2010) that accreditation is an accepted and rigorous process that commands respect, both in the UK and internationally..

However, reporting during weekends, holidays and staying late after classes were never an issue because of their commitment and dedication to work. But in the aspect of funding, they experienced hard time because we they just sourced it out from the Maintenance and Other Operating Expenses (MOOE) of their school and from their personal money. They spent a lot in photocopying documents and reproducing pictures of activities years back to present but bulk of budget went to infrastructure improvements like repair of comfort rooms, cabinets and shelves for accreditation rooms, offices and classrooms, and other repairs of the buildings. However, some manpower and services were provided by the parents and people of the community. They were all thankful to the Brigada Eskwela program by DepEd because according to them, it truly helps them in improving their schools physical set-up and providing them some of the needs like computers and LCD projectors. Which is in contrast to the finding of Hedrick, Kreig, and Wassel (2010), since faculty compensation, research productivity, and teaching loads are significantly different at accredited schools than at non-accredited schools. Another contrast in the result of this study is in the findings of Lin-Liu (2001), when he found-out that accreditation in Cambodia was made through support from the world bank loan. An **accreditation** committee established through the World Bank loan would require institutions that call themselves universities to offer a broad range of courses, including humanities, foreign languages, sciences, and social sciences. Due to financial struggle, Chronicle of Higher Education (2006) and Black Issues in Higher Education (2005) identified two schools closed due to failure to sustain accreditation.

#### *Theme 4. The Stressful Result*

Waiting for something which is still uncertain is stressful. It took them six months to know the result. While waiting for the results, they still continued to do what they had started particularly in the documentation processes. They kept themselves busy and occupied with school works but every time somebody asks for the result, their hearts started pounding and their stress piles-up. No amount of comfort would calm down the agony of waiting except the results. So when the favorable results came-out, they were all relieved from stress. When announcements were made to the teachers, pupils, parents and community members they were all happy, they all rejoiced because finally they are now accredited.

#### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to determine the lived experiences of the public elementary school principals who already experienced actual and real accreditation. Based on the interview questions, the principal respondents experienced extreme but challenging pressures in their accreditation experience. More specifically, these principals struggled in retrieving necessary documents because of the required three year requirements. They also experienced warm acceptance particularly the teachers and parents who would be directly involved in the accreditation. Furthermore, they also experienced difficulty in managing their finances due to the very limited resources. An especially troublesome aspect of these principals' lives is the agony of waiting for the result.

The final statement belongs to one of the principals of this study, to whom I am deeply amazed:

*“Through accreditation, I am going to conquer not only the public school system but the private education system as well.”*

#### **Recommendations**

Accreditation is a process of identifying the compliance of a particular school to the acceptable quality standard by the accrediting agency. Since this is a process, a school may be given ample time to prepare and make sure that they are ready for actual accreditation at least one year preparation after appropriate orientation had been conducted by DepEd quality assurance personnel. The government may also allot budget specific for school accreditation use and give tangible incentives to the school if one becomes accredited. Six months of waiting for the result of accreditation is long. It may be shortened to a month or two to compliment the enthusiasm of the principals and teachers instead of keep them waiting for six months that becomes an agony to them.

The flame of accreditation may be instilled in the system of every principal in their quest for academic excellence.

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