
Project EASE

Effective and Affordable Secondary Education

Part One: BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

In the Philippines, the problem of student dropping out in the public secondary schools is as serious as ever. Statistics show that out of every 56 students who finish Grade VI, only 43, or 77 percent, enter the first year high school. This indicates a drop-out rate of nearly 24 percent. Research data further show that 43 percent, or 3,194,400 young adults between the ages of 15 to 24, are out of school, and that 53 percent of these are unemployed.

A survey of some schools in Metro Manila and nearby provinces disclosed that the drop-out rate is higher in the first year than in any other year level. The survey also identified several reasons why students leave school. Among these are the inability to defray school expenses because of poverty; distance of home from school; part or full-time job opportunities; the concern to help augment family income; physical disability; boring or slow lessons which do not challenge bright students; elopement or early marriage; and being overage.

These factors, among other things, bring about the inefficiency of the public secondary school system. And the problem is more real than imaginary, especially among the disadvantaged whose pursuit of secondary education conflicts with their family's drive to survive and their personal circumstances.

The Philippine education system has invested a lot of resources and efforts to minimize if not to eliminate inefficiency in delivering quality education to its clientele. Yet, despite the magnitude of the resources committed to improve the quality of education for all, still the drop-out problem coupled with low academic achievement of pupils remain an insurmountable problem as ever.

The poor academic performance and holding power of the secondary school have been attributed to the conventional learning delivery system which lacks the versatility and flexibility to meet the learning needs of its clientele in varied circumstances, and fails to respond creatively to the changing realities of its social and economic environment. It has also been observed that while the existing secondary school system favorably facilitates the learning of students who cannot report to classes regularly is quite arbitrary and unsystematized. In other words, the system does not provide any alternative to those who cannot come to school regularly, or must stay out of school because of personal, physical and socio-economic reasons beyond their control.

It is in this context that Project EASE: Effective and Affordable Secondary Education was developed.

Part Two: THE EASE LEARNING SYSTEM

A. Project Goals and Objectives

Project EASE was a joint undertaking of the Bureau of Secondary Education (BSE), of the Department of Education, Culture and Sports (DECS), and SEAMEO INNOTECH. Its objective was to design and develop an alternative learning for students in socio-economic, geographical, and physical circumstances that are disadvantageous to their completing high school. These circumstances include poverty, employment, family problems, early marriage, and physical disability. Project EASE sought to provide distance learning system to high school students who cannot come to school regularly or must leave school temporarily because of circumstances beyond their control. Additionally, it was envisioned that EASE should also cater to advanced students who find the conventional learning system too slow or boring and would like to study on their own, at their own pace. The innovation intended to complement the existing formal system to make secondary education more accessible to students in disadvantaged or special situations.

More specifically, the following were the objectives of the project:

- ◆ to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the instructional delivery system of the secondary school;
- ◆ to extend the benefits of secondary education to a greater population, including the out-of-school youths and adults, than is presently reached by the conventional school system; and,
- ◆ to develop a competency-based, environment-oriented curriculum that would equip the youths – the secondary school age population – with the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for their active participation as economically productive, service-oriented, law-abiding citizens of the country.

B. Project Activities

The activities to implement the project were divided into three phases.

Phase I of the project was the conceptualization aspect. In this phase, a literature review on current practices, trends and issues in formal and nonformal education was undertaken. Also conducted was a review of existing secondary education programs in the country. The reviews included an inventory of existing alternative delivery systems.

Findings from the reviews served as a valuable input in the design of the EASE alternative program.

Another Phase I activity was the identification of the prospective clientele of EASE, and their learning needs and expectations. This task was achieved through interviews and questionnaire surveys of out-of-school youth, former dropouts, school teachers and administrators, and parents.

Phase II of the project focused on first, the design of the EASE system for first year high school, and second, the development of the learning materials. These involved the conduct of consultative meetings wherein the design of the alternative learning system was prepared and finalized. The final product of the meetings was the EASE design.

It was also in a Phase II consultative meeting that the EASE National Steering Committee decided that the materials to be developed for the EASE system should be textbook-based. The textbooks, it was reasoned, contain all the learning competencies set by the Department of Education, Culture and Sports for first year high school students.

In this phase, the following instructional and administrative materials were developed, field-validated, and mass-printed for use in the pilot schools:

- Student Guides for every lesson in every subject
- Screening tests for student applicants to the EASE program
- an Implementation Manual for the Pilot School

Twenty-nine (29) high school teachers were commissioned to write the Student Guides. Thirteen (13) teachers, supervisors, and officers from the Curriculum Development Division of the Bureau of Secondary Education (BSE-CDD) edited and improved the materials.

Among the instruments developed to screen prospective EASE entrants were five Reading Comprehension Tests in English and Filipino, two Writing Composition Tests, a Coping Scale, and an Interview Guide for Teachers. All these were field-tested using sample groups of students from various schools in Metro Manila. Approximately five hundred eighty (580) students participated in the try-outs.

The screening instruments were also validated using the Quest Program for the Item Response Theory (IRT). Through this method, it is possible to predict whether an individual of a given ability will be able to correctly answer a specific item.

The Manual for the Pilot School was prepared during Phase II of the project to standardize implementation procedures. The Manual specifies the details for the school administration and management of the EASE program. It contains dissemination materials, administrative forms, screening instruments, and monitoring forms.

Phase III of the project was the pilot implementation of the EASE alternative learning system, with the active participation of school superintendents, supervisors, principals and teachers of the Division of Quezon City, Manila, Muntinlupa-Taguig-Pateros, Pampanga, and Angeles City.

The project was pilot tested in three types of schools: urban, suburban, and rural. Initially, twenty (20) candidate high schools were considered. The schools were located in Metro Manila, Pangasinan, Pampanga, and Laguna. The schools were recommended by the DECS regional and division officers based on a given set of criteria for the selection of pilot schools, namely:

- a current first year enrolment of at least 500
- a yearly first year drop-out rate during the last three school years of at least 10 percent
- many first year students who cannot attend classes regularly because of poverty, employment, home-to-school distance, natural calamities and other constraints
- school principal and teachers who are innovative and willing to participate in the project
- a functional guidance and counseling program
- a functional remedial reading program
- a student-textbook ratio of 1:1
- a school that is easily accessible for monitoring purposes

After several exploratory visits to the candidate schools in June 1995, five (5) pilot sites were finally chosen. They were Lagro High School, Maceda HS, Pampanga HS, Angeles City HS, and Pedro Diaz HS.

Lagro, Angeles City, and Pedro Diaz High Schools were selected despite their drop-out rates which were below 10 percent because of reports that these schools had many students who were frequently absent, tardy or cutting classes because they were employed, sickly, needed at home, or lived far from school and could not afford transportation and food allowances. It was also reported that the school administrators and teachers were open to innovative ideas and projects, and eager to try new solutions to help the disadvantaged students in their schools.

The installation of Project EASE in these schools was conducted in July and August 1995. During the installation, the school administrators, teachers, and parents were oriented to the EASE alternative learning system. The orientation included a question-and-answer session, wherein questions about the program were answered and suggestions toward its improvement sought. The EASE Steering Council for every school was also organized. Finally, the materials for the EASE learning and management systems were officially turned over by the SEAMEO INNOTECH Director to the school.

After the installation, the EASE Steering Council in each of the pilot schools conducted the orientation to the program for the students, parents and community

members. In the orientation of students, the class advisers played a major role, while in the orientation of parents, the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) was actively involved. Flyers about EASE program were distributed to the students and parents during the orientation sessions.

After the orientation, the pilot schools began recruiting, accepting, and screening applicants to the EASE learning system. A student who passed the screening process entered into a learning contract which specified what lessons he must complete while he studied out of school, and what the responsibilities of his teachers and parent(s)/guardian(s) were. With the contract negotiated, the EASE coordinator or the class adviser turned over to him and his parent(s)/guardian(s) the Student Guides and other materials he would need.

While the program was being piloted in the selected schools, another school in Metro Manila, namely Teodora Alonzo High School in Sta. Cruz, Manila was strongly recommended by the schools superintendent, Dr. Paraluman Giron, to be another pilot school because of its high drop-out rate (24.90% in the first year in school year 1994-95). EASE was then installed in this school on 22 November 1995.

To strengthen the skills and capabilities of the EASE implementors in the pilot schools, their principals and the EASE coordinators were granted scholarships to relevant training courses and seminars at SEAMEO INNOTECH. These courses were: "Project Monitoring and Evaluation" (conducted on 6-17 November 1995) and "Pitching for Peak Performance" (conducted on 11-12 November 1995). In addition, a workshop was held on 20 January 1996 at SEAMEO INNOTECH to train selected EASE teachers on how to conduct qualitative evaluation, particularly case studies.

SEAMEO INNOTECH also provided other incentives to the pilot schools. It donated refurbished steel cabinets for the storage of Student Guides; and chairs, tables and a white board for each school's EASE office.

Periodic monitoring visits were likewise conducted by members of the EASE Project Team to the six schools to address problems encountered by the program implementors. It was in these visits that teacher-implementors gave the common feedback that the EASE alternative learning system should be expanded to the upper year levels where there are more working students and job seekers, and hence more potential dropouts whom the program can serve. The teachers further aired their belief that EASE was very appropriate for the higher level students, who tended to be better motivated, more disciplined, and more determined to complete their high school education.

Part Three: THE EASE ALTERNATIVE LEARNING SYSTEM

The procedures on how to install and operate the EASE system in a secondary school are as follows:

- Orient teachers, students and parents on the EASE alternative learning program
- Organize the school EASE Steering Committee
- Prepare general EASE implementation plan
- Identify, recruit, screen and admit applicants to EASE
- Negotiate learning contract between student, teachers and parents
- Begin home/self-study by student
- Monitor and evaluate student performance

Part Four: THE EVALUATION STUDY

An evaluation study was conducted to determine the effectiveness of the EASE Alternative Learning System. The findings are as follows:

On the Relevance of the Project Objectives to the Social and Economic Context of the Community Served

EASE is a relevant distance learning system to students whose socio-economic circumstances prevent them from attending classes regularly. Qualitative and quantitative analyses of teachers', students' and parents' perceptions and feelings about EASE showed the significance of its goals and objectives to its context, which is a school with a low attendance rate and high drop-out rate because many of its students are socio-economically distressed.

The relevance of the project is also evidence in the request of teachers, students and parents to expand the program to the upper year levels.

On the Effectiveness of Inputs and Processes

Every activity or process that was conducted required the input of some resources – material, human, financial, time, etc. Hence the analysis of inputs and processes was integrated.

There were eight (8) major processes that were analyzed in terms of their contributions to the project objectives, as perceived by the respondents.

The majority of the teachers perceived as effective all the preparatory activities, namely, (a) orientation of teachers, (b) organization and activation of EASE Steering

Committee, (c) preparation of the EASE Implementation Plan, and (d) orientation of parents and students.

Among the student recruitment activities, those found effective by the majority of the teachers were (a) the identification of habitual absentees by teachers, (b) home visits, (c) surveys, and (d) use of application forms.

Among the screening activities, those perceived to be effective were (a) use of Filipino reading comprehension tests, (b) student interviews, and (c) use of English comprehension tests. The coping scale and composition tests were not perceived to be very effective for screening purposes.

Five of the activities related to contract negotiation were rated effective. These were the following: (a) assignment of responsibilities to class advisers and subject teachers, (b) determining of lessons to be studied, (c) negotiating with parents/guardians, (d) use of form on Study Contract, and (e) scheduling of regular meetings with students. The identification of home/peer tutor was rated to be only barely effective.

Among the activities on the use of the Student Guides and other materials, those found effective were (a) providing complete set of textbooks, (b) providing necessary Student Guides to student, and (c) productive use of Student Guides.

The respondents found effective two of the three Student's Home/Self-Study activities. These were: (a) consulting as scheduled with teachers, and (b) taking of Self-Tests. Home/community tutoring was found effective by only 56% of the respondents.

Of the seven monitoring and evaluation activities, three were found effective, namely: (a) regular monitoring of student performance as stipulated in the Contract, (b) monitoring visits by INNOTECH, and (c) grading of student performance. Home visits, the use of Gantt Chart and formative evaluation forms were not considered effective by the teachers.

The teachers were very pleased with the skills improvement training courses which they attended at INNOTECH. They were encouraged by the transportation allowance and other incentives given for their participation in the project.

On Attitudes Toward EASE

Quantitative and qualitative data indicated clearly the positive attitudes of the majority of the teachers, principals and students toward the program. Interview data confirmed these, and also revealed the positive attitudes of parents.

On Students' Mastery of the Competencies Stipulated in the Learning Contract

In four of the six pilot schools, the percentage of lessons passed ranged from 95.47% to 100%. In the two other schools, the low passing percentages which were 21.00% and 50.46% were caused by some administrative problems, and are inconclusive as yet because not all grades were available at the time of this Report's submission.

On the Effect of the EASE Program on School Drop-Out Rate

Three of the six pilot schools where no force majeure intervened demonstrated significant decreases in the drop-out rate. Pampanga High School, whose students were seriously affected by lahar and flash floods, naturally had an increase in its drop-out rate, but the EASE Student Guides provided continuity to the students' studies during the period when classes were suspended, or could not resume because of destroyed classrooms. In these emergency situations, EASE showed its flexibility in adapting to individualized, peer, or cluster-based learning situations.

The Cost-Benefit Analysis

The Student Guides and other support materials like the assessment instruments are made of durable material and are reusable over a period of six (6) years at least. With a ten-percent (10%) increase of students served each year, the cost per Student Guide would amount to only about P2.35 by year 2000.

Some Insights from the Case Studies

The EASE students are significantly different from the mainstream students. Many EASE learners come from economically depressed families where only one parent is breadwinner. More than half of them work part-or full-time to augment family income, are overage, or suffer from poor health. The average family size is five. More than one-third come from unhappy or broken homes and feel unloved by their parents, most of whom have only elementary and secondary school education.

Despite these odds, most students pass their EASE lessons. They are hard-working, and have positive attitudes toward the program and toward learning in general. Most of them are either average or above average in mental ability, and are able to cope with the demands of the program.

Part Four: PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED IN THE PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

Outlined below are the major problems encountered by the program implementors in the six pilot schools.

1. Administration

Changes in assignments of teachers, as a result of promotion, change of residence etc., posed serious problems in three pilot schools. These caused delay in project implementation, loss of records, and necessitated the training of new appointees.

In one school, project implementation was delayed because three feeder schools which were located in marginal areas had casual teachers and temporary school heads, who would be transferred to other schools during the period. This dampened their enthusiasm for the project.

In two other schools, the project coordinator was changed several months after the start of implementation and this affected the project adversely.

To some extent, EASE is an extra load to a teacher. A Mathematics teacher may find herself having three to four EASE students at a time, whose progress he must monitor and assess. Some teachers have recognized this a part of their duties to provide for varying needs of students, but not the less professional teachers.

Some students, especially the fully employed, could not finish all the lessons by March or April, during which reports on promotions are submitted to the Division Office. Would they be included in the school's report on promotions for the schoolyear or would a separate report on them be submitted? What must be done in the case of students who complete all the lessons required for the first year, not in the conventional ten-month period, but in 15 to 18 months? These problems were discussed with the Director of the Bureau of Secondary Education for possible solutions, which might include a separate policy on the promotion of EASE students.

2. Screening of Students

There had been many applicants to EASE but only few qualified. Many failed the English reading comprehension and writing composition tests, despite the fact that the test selections used were lifted from first year textbooks. Most of the non-qualifiers come from the lower sections, where the pressure to earn was much stronger, and therefore the need for a program such as EASE was more pronounced.

As a remedy, INNOTECH used as an alternative the Cloze type of comprehension tests. Unfortunately, there was not much time to validate these tests although the EASE coordinators were trained by INNOTECH on how to use the tests.

3. Learning Contracts

The difficulty of getting the students' parents or guardians to negotiate the learning contract is common among students of very poor, illiterate parents who are hardpressed to earn the family's daily meals.

There is also the problem of getting all subject teachers and the class adviser to convene in order to identify the lessons for home study by the EASE students.

4. Shortage of Textbooks

EASE is textbook-based instruction inasmuch as all Student Guides are based on the lessons in every subject. Every EASE student then must have a textbook for every subject in his contract. In three of the pilot schools, this requirement was fully met. Hence, teachers and students spent considerable time and effort borrowing books from the regular classes for the EASE system.

5. Home Visitations

Teachers did not have enough time and money to visit students' homes to follow up habitual absentees or to retrieve students who have stopped coming to school, although teachers recognize these home visits as an important part of their tasks. Reaching some of the homes would demand transportation expenses which could not be provided anymore once the project funds are exhausted. Another complicating factor was that many of the recorded addresses of students were incorrect. This particularly applied to students who frequently changed residence, or who came from very poor families living in squatter areas or remote, hardly accessible places.

6. Students' Personal and Domestic Problems

Gainfully employed students do not have enough time to study their lessons. Some work for eight straight hours daily, others work on night shifts, as tricycle drivers, janitors, grocery help, housemaids, and the like. Their free time is usually devoted to much-needed sleep and rest, or to helping out with the chores at home.

Those who come from very poor and/or illiterate families do not have anybody at home to assist them in their studies. In these cases, the parents either finished only the elementary grades, are too busy with their work or too tired because of it to provide the necessary support for their children.

In related cases, students who come from broken or unhappy families have to deal with the emotional turmoil at home that is hardly conducive to studying. Not a few

students have parents who are separated, who do not demonstrate any concern for their children, or who even beat and abuse them.

Part Five: CONCLUSIONS

The evaluation study was conducted to seek answers to questions on the relevance of Project EASE to its context, particularly its target group. It also sought to study and assess the following:

- effectiveness/ineffectiveness of its inputs and processes
- attitudes of students, teachers, principals and parents toward the system
- students' mastery of the competencies in their learning contract
- effect on drop-out rate of schools where the program was piloted
- cost analysis of Project EASE

The evaluation also sought to provide some insights about the project through case studies.

On the basis of the findings, the following conclusions have been made:

1. EASE is a relevant distance learning system for students in disadvantaged situations who can read or comprehend the textbooks for their year level and can cope with the demands of doing independent home study. It can provide an alternative learning mode to students at risk of dropping out to continue their high school education without having to attend classes regularly.

Although the pilot study was conducted only in first year, teachers and principals believe that the system would even be more practicable in the three upper year levels where there are more working students. At the higher levels, students are older, more physically developed, and more easily get part-time jobs.

2. The EASE system, with proper administrative support, especially that of the principal and the superintendent, has the capability of helping reduce the school drop-out rate. Its inputs, particularly its Student Guides, orientation and screening components, assessment tools, and other processes and activities have been found practicable and user-friendly by teachers and students.
3. Despite its limited period of implementation, EASE has demonstrated that it can help reduce drop-out rate and can be used in learning situations where the formal conventional classroom-based instruction would not do.
4. The EASE Student Guides are made of durable material. They are reusable for five more years at least. They can be reprinted and used for other first year classes. In the long term, the money spent for the development of these Guides will benefit thousands of students.

5. The results of quantitative analysis and case studies of thirty-seven (37) students indicate the potential of EASE as a non-traditional alternative to complement the existing conventional system.