

Original Article

Institutional Blindness and Educational Justice: A Critical Pedagogical Reading of Gloc-9's *Upuan* in Light of EDCOM II

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Abstract

The Second Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM II) has documented the persistent learning crisis in Philippine education, drawing sustained attention to governance fragmentation, resource inequities, and accountability gaps across the system. While policy reports have carefully diagnosed these forms of systemic dysfunction through statistical evidence and institutional analysis, fewer studies have examined how cultural texts articulate public perceptions of institutional failure and leadership detachment. This study analyzed Gloc-9's song "*Upuan*" as a form of protest literature to examine how issues such as lack of awareness and educational unfairness are represented and how these ideas connect with the main findings of EDCOM. By closely reading the lyrics and identifying common themes, this study employed qualitative textual analysis grounded in critical pedagogy and sociological criticism to identify recurring themes of power, separation, lack of awareness, and inequality. The findings revealed that the metaphor of the "chair" signifies possessive and contested authority, while the spatial imagery of walls and fences and the poverty imagery of hunger and fragile housing dramatize social stratification and distance in leadership. These symbolic constructions align with EDCOM II's concerns regarding fragmented governance, educational deprivation, and inequitable resource distribution, particularly in marginalized communities. The research argued that the song serves as a cultural reflection of issues within the education system, translating intricate policy matters into

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a comprehensible moral critique. The study found that ethical educational leadership in the Philippines should prioritize fairness and justice over power alone and be attuned to and responsive to the needs of marginalized communities.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, EDCOM II, educational justice, institutional blindness, sociological criticism

1. Introduction

In recent years, policymakers, educators, and development researchers have increasingly recognized that Philippine education is facing a serious learning crisis, in which formal enrollment no longer guarantees the acquisition of foundational skills or equitable outcomes. Empirical evidence and policy diagnostics firmly support this crisis. A report from the Second Congressional Commission on Education indicates that Filipino students continue to perform poorly in basic skills, and the education system has difficulty providing consistent support from early childhood through high school (Philippine Institute for Development Studies, 2023). International large-scale assessments reinforce this picture. Results from PISA 2022 show that a substantial proportion of Filipino learners remain below minimum proficiency levels in reading, mathematics, and science (OECD, 2023). These findings indicate that access to schooling has not translated into strong and durable learning outcomes for many students.

Moreover, structural disadvantages closely intertwine with these achievement gaps. High rates of childhood stunting, unequal access to learning materials and digital resources, and prolonged disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic have intensified learning deficits and widened inequities (Philippine Institute for Development Studies, 2023). Research conducted during modular distance learning indicates that students' engagement and success were affected by factors including insufficient home support, reduced peer interaction, and increased anxiety among learners. These patterns confirm that socioeconomic and institutional conditions, rather than individual effort alone, deeply influence learning outcomes in the Philippines. Consequently, calls for systemic reform have become increasingly urgent in academic, policy, and civil society discussions.

Because these problems are structural, reform debates have expanded beyond classroom instruction to examine leadership, governance, and accountability across the system. Educational leadership scholarship consistently emphasizes that leadership influences teacher performance, school climate, and learner achievement. A recent review found that using transformational, instructional, and distributed leadership styles can improve educational outcomes when implemented effectively; however, sustaining these improvements is difficult in contexts with limited support and unclear

rules (Torres et al., 2024). When preparation is uneven and resources are limited, the impact of leadership becomes inconsistent and constrained.

At the same time, governance arrangements in the Philippine education system complicate accountability. Discussions of decentralization highlight how overlapping mandates among national agencies, local government units, and school stakeholders can blur responsibility and weaken coherence in reform implementation (Asia Foundation, 2025). Research shows that empowering local leaders in the Philippines does not always improve outcomes; the results depend on whether these local groups have the skills, management, and resources needed to perform their roles effectively. Coupled with capacity gaps, governance fragmentation dilutes accountability, potentially leading to uneven reform efforts across regions.

These governance challenges are symptomatic of deeper systemic inequalities within Philippine society. In poorer and remote areas, there are bigger differences in resources, infrastructure, and chances for professional growth, which makes it harder for school leaders to be effective and adapt to changes (Torres et al., 2022). Schools in resource-constrained areas often operate with minimal autonomy, insufficient training, and limited material support, making it difficult to respond innovatively to policy demands. As a result, educational inequality both reflects and reinforces broader socioeconomic disadvantage, limiting the life chances of learners from marginalized communities. In this sense, the Philippine education crisis cannot be understood solely as a pedagogical issue; it is equally a question of distributive justice and institutional accountability.

In this context, cultural texts provide a crucial perspective on the public's perceptions and experiences of institutional dysfunction. Cultural studies suggest that art and literature are not merely beautiful creations but also vehicles for critiquing society, revealing real-life experiences of unfairness and exclusion that formal policies may overlook (Rehfeldt, 2021). Through narrative, symbolism, and affect, cultural texts illuminate power relations, social hierarchies, and ideological tensions embedded within institutions. Empirical research on protest music further demonstrates how musical expression can challenge oppressive structures, mobilize collective consciousness, and sustain socio-political movements across contexts (Woo, 2025). In this regard, protest music translates abstract policy concerns into emotionally resonant narratives that ordinary citizens can grasp, especially when official discourse feels distant or technocratic.

In the Philippine context, rap and hip-hop have become significant platforms for social commentary. Studies on protest music and digital circulation highlight how musical texts can amplify grievances and frame institutional critique within contemporary media environments (Sadler, 2022). Likewise, qualitative analyses of Pinoy battle rap illustrate how lyrical performance can serve as an online form of activism that critiques social and political conditions (Soriano, 2025). Within this tradition, Gloc-9's "Upuan" may be approached as protest literature that dramatizes the distance between those who occupy positions of authority and those who experience systemic neglect. The song's metaphor of being "seated" in power

foregrounds institutional blindness and highlights everyday inequities, making it a compelling cultural text through which to reflect on educational justice and leadership accountability. Although “Upuan” was released in 2009, its critique of power, inequality, and institutional detachment addresses structural conditions that have persisted in Philippine society and education. Cultural texts often function as enduring social commentary rather than time-bound reactions to specific policies. In this sense, the song remains analytically relevant because the governance fragmentation, leadership gaps, and resource inequities it symbolically portrays are precisely the systemic concerns later documented in the EDCOM II reports (2024–2026).

Although there are thorough policy reports highlighting serious issues in the Philippine education system, such as widespread learning poverty, disorganized governance, and inequitable distribution of resources and leadership, few studies link these systemic problems to how cultural expressions critique social conditions. At the same time, research on protest music shows that songs can serve as emotional and symbolic tools in social movements, helping to articulate collective experiences of injustice and power imbalance and sustain public engagement (Woo, 2024). However, in the Philippines, there is a clear lack of analysis linking expressive cultural forms such as hip-hop to formal assessments of governance and institutional dysfunction. This study addresses this gap by focusing on “Upuan” by Gloc-9, a song that many listeners interpret as a critique of political and social power structures.

This study primarily draws on the policy diagnostics presented in the EDCOM II *Turning Point: A Decade of Reforms* (2026) report, while the earlier *Miseducation: The Failed System of Philippine Education* (2024) report provides contextual background on systemic weaknesses in the Philippine education system. Although this study engages the policy concerns raised in EDCOM II, it does not seek to empirically validate policy findings or measure public perceptions of educational governance. Rather, the study adopts an interpretive textual approach that examines how the song *Upuan* symbolically represents themes of institutional power, inequality, and leadership detachment through its narrative and imagery. In this sense, EDCOM II functions as a policy dialogue point that provides a contemporary institutional context for interpreting the song’s critique of systemic issues in Philippine education. The analysis therefore, positions protest music as a cultural lens through which structural concerns—such as governance fragmentation, learning poverty, and resource inequities—can be examined in relation to policy discourse. By placing cultural critique and policy diagnostics in conversation, the study contributes an interpretive bridge between protest literature and educational policy discussions rather than presenting the song as empirical evidence of policy realities.

By examining the song “Upuan” alongside EDCOM II’s policy diagnostics, this research aims to show how the song’s symbolic language reflects public frustrations with leadership and social inequity, giving voice to issues that formal policy documents describe in technical terms. In doing so, it frames “Upuan” not simply as popular music but as a protest text that reflects lived experience and moral critique. This perspective highlights the value of cultural texts in understanding how

ordinary citizens interpret systemic failure and demand accountable leadership. It also demonstrates the importance of integrating cultural critique into discussions about governance and educational reform. Specifically, this study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. How does “*Upuan*” construct institutional power and moral blindness through its symbolic and narrative strategies?
2. How can these representations be interpreted through critical pedagogy and sociological criticism?
3. In what ways do the song’s themes align with the structural and governance issues identified in EDCOM II?
4. What implications do these convergences suggest for ethical leadership and educational justice in the Philippine context?

1.1 Literature Review

Recent scholarship positions critical pedagogy as a framework for examining how power operates within schooling and for restoring learners' and communities' voices through dialogue, problem-posing, and collective action. Rather than limiting oppression to interpersonal prejudice, contemporary work understands it as embedded in institutional arrangements that normalize unequal opportunities and silence marginalized forms of knowledge (Achilleos, 2021; Iheduru-Anderson & Waite, 2024). In this light, critical consciousness is increasingly framed as a practical competency in teacher education. Educators are expected to recognize structural inequities, reflect on their positionality, and design learning experiences that cultivate critical reflection and civic agency (Ward-Seidel & Bentley, 2025). This perspective is especially pertinent in the Philippine context, where subpar educational outcomes and inconsistent access to quality education frequently mirror broader socioeconomic stratification and regional inequalities. In such settings, ensuring “voice” and “visibility” becomes an ethical imperative rather than a rhetorical goal (Chua Reyes et al., 2022).

Building on this foundation, critical pedagogy deepens the long-standing debate on whether education reproduces or transforms social inequality. On one hand, schooling can reproduce hierarchy by privileging dominant cultural norms and distributing resources unevenly. On the other hand, it can become transformative when it nurtures critical literacy, expands participation, and challenges dehumanizing conditions (Achilleos, 2021; Iheduru-Anderson & Waite, 2024). This tension has direct implications for educational leadership. Research on social justice leadership emphasizes that school heads and system leaders are not neutral administrators but moral agents whose decisions influence which learners are supported, protected, and heard (Karakose et al., 2023). Additionally, reviews indicate that leadership focused on fairness often faces challenges due to disconnected policies and mismatches between expectations, leaders' capabilities, and available resources, resulting in inconsistent reform outcomes. In Philippine basic education, these patterns

persistently reflect accountability gaps and unequal support across geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas (Chua Reyes et al., 2022; Saguin & Ramesh, 2025). Thus, leadership responsibility must be understood within broader institutional conditions that either enable or limit transformative action.

Critical pedagogy examines power dynamics in educational practices, whereas sociological criticism expands the perspective by contextualizing texts and institutions within broader social frameworks. From this perspective, class relations, symbolic hierarchies, and institutional power shape cultural texts, not making them isolated artifacts. Contemporary sociology of culture continues to draw on field and capital theories to explain how social hierarchies are reproduced through legitimacy, taste, and access to valued cultural resources (Thomson & Hall, 2022). Recent field-analytic research further demonstrates that cultural production itself is structured by proximity to power, influencing what becomes authoritative or taken as “common sense” in public discourse (Benz et al., 2024). Consequently, literature and music do more than mirror society; they participate in struggles over meaning by naming inequalities, challenging dominant narratives, and offering alternative interpretations of social reality.

Empirical research on protest music strengthens this claim. Studies show that songs can circulate critique, amplify collective grievances, and translate structural injustices into emotionally resonant narratives that wider publics can understand (Sadler, 2022). In the Philippine context, analyses of rap-based cultural expression reveal how lyrical performance can function as activism by framing social problems, disputing institutional accounts, and inviting listeners to evaluate systems of power (Soriano, 2025). For education research, the conclusion suggests that protest texts can serve as valuable data for understanding how communities perceive governance failure, exclusion, and everyday injustice within public institutions.

These strands of scholarship support a conceptual integration that links cultural critique, policy analysis, and leadership ethics. A critical-sociological model allows “Upuan” to be read as a textual representation of institutional distance and classed power, dramatizing how those “seated” in authority may become detached from lived hardship (Sadler, 2022; Soriano, 2025). Through the lens of critical pedagogy, the text foregrounds issues of oppression, voice, and humanization. It is situated within broader systems of institutional power and stratification, as examined through sociological critique (Achilleos, 2021; Benz et al., 2024). This layered interpretation can then be aligned with EDCOM II’s diagnostic claims regarding governance fragmentation, learning poverty, accountability gaps, and resource inequities. In doing so, the song becomes a culturally accessible mirror of systemic dysfunction in Philippine education.

Ultimately, this integration yields important implications for ethical educational leadership. If cultural texts reveal how inequality is experienced and interpreted, then leaders are called not only to manage systems but also to confront injustice directly. Ethical leadership, in this sense, requires making inequity visible, aligning accountability with capacity, and centering marginalized learners as a moral

priority of reform (Chaaban et al., 2025; Karakose et al., 2023; Saguin & Ramesh, 2025). Through this combined framework, cultural analysis and policy reflection converge in a shared concern for educational justice and transformative leadership.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The study conducted a detailed textual analysis to examine how the song *Upuan* represents ideas about power, inequality, and the gap between institutions, and how these ideas relate to ongoing discussions about education reform in the Philippines. Qualitative interpretive research is appropriate for this inquiry because it emphasizes close reading, contextual understanding, and the analysis of socially embedded meanings within texts (Wiesner, 2022). The study employed a critical pedagogical framework to analyze themes of oppression, voice, and humanization, considering the song as a medium for articulating the experiences of marginalized individuals and contesting systems of inequality. At the same time, viewing the text from a sociological perspective situated it within broader issues of class, power, and authority, showing how culture both reflects and challenges social inequalities. The interpretations were then connected to discussions of policies, particularly the outcomes of EDCOM II, to suggest ways to advance responsible educational leadership and accountability within the system.

2.2 Corpus

The selection of the song “*Upuan*” as the corpus of analysis is intentional and theoretically justified. The song occupies a notable position within contemporary Filipino protest music and is widely interpreted as a critique of political authority, class inequality, and institutional detachment. Its lyrical structure combines vernacular accessibility with layered symbolism, allowing complex social realities to be expressed through emotionally resonant imagery. The recurring metaphor of the “chair” functions as a representation of positional power, contested authority, and leadership insulation from marginalized communities. This symbolic density makes the text analytically suitable for examining institutional blindness and educational justice. Rather than treating *Upuan* as representative of all protest music, this study approaches it as a paradigmatic case that condenses broader structural tensions into a coherent narrative of power and exclusion. As a cultural artifact that translates systemic inequality into moral language, the song provides a productive site for aligning cultural critique with contemporary governance concerns, including the leadership and accountability issues identified in EDCOM II.

Upuan by Gloc 9

Kayo po na naka upo
Subukan nyo namang tumayo
At baka matanaw at baka matanaw na nyo
Ang tunay na kalagayan ko

Ganito kasi yan eh
Tao po nandyan po ba kayo sa loob ng
Malaking bahay at malawak na bakuran
Mataas na pader pinapaligiran
At naka pilang mga mamahaling sasakyan
Mga bantay na laging bulong ng bulong
Wala namang kasal pero marami ang naka barong
Lumakas man ang ulan ay walang butas ang bubong
Mga plato't kutsara na hindi kilala ang tutong
At ang kanin ay simputi ng gatas na nasa kahon
At kahit na hindi pasko sa lamesa ay may hamon
Ang sarap sigurong manirahan sa bahay na ganyan
Sabi pa nila ay dito mo rin matatagpuan
Ang tao na nagmamay-ari ng isang upuan
Na pag may pagkakatao'y pinag-aagawan
Kaya naman hindi niya pinakakawalan
Kung makikita ko lamang siya ay aking sisigawan

Kayo po na naka upo
Subukan nyo namang tumayo
At baka matanaw at baka matanaw na nyo
Ang tunay na kalagayan ko

Mawalang galang na po
Sa taong naka upo
Alam niyo bang pantakal ng bigas namin ay di puno
Ang ding-ding ng bahay namin ay pinagtagpi-tagping yero
Sa gabi ay sobrang init na tumutunaw ng yelo
Na di kayang bilhin upang ilagay sa inumin
Pinakulong tubig sa lumang takuring uling-uling
Gamit lang panggatong na inanod lamang sa istero
Na nagsisilbing kusina sa umaga'y aming banyo
Ang aking inay na may kayamanan isang kaldero
Na nagagamit lang pag ang aking ama ay sumweldo
Pero kulang na kulang parin
Ulam na tuyo't asin

Ang singkuenta pesos sa maghapo'y pagkakasyahin
Di ko alam kung talagang maraming harang
O mataas lang ang bakod
O nagbubulag-bulagan lamang po kayo
Kahit sa dami ng pera niyo
Walang doktor na makapagpapalinaw ng mata niyo kaya

Wag kang masyadong halata
Bato-bato sa langit
Ang matamaa'y wag magalit
O bato-bato bato sa langit
Ang matamaan ay
Wag masyadong halata (hehey)
Wag kang masyadong halata
Wag kang masyadong halata (hehey)
Wag kang masyadong halata (hehey hehey)
Hehey hehey

2.3 Analytical Procedure

The analysis began with a close reading of the lyrics to identify recurring symbols, metaphors, and imagery that signal social distance, exclusion, and moral appeal. This interpretive step treated the text as meaning-making work embedded in social realities rather than as isolated artistry (Wiesner, 2022). Next, the study conducted thematic coding by tagging lines and stanzas that expressed power, institutional blindness, inequality, and accountability, following guidance on coherent and reflexive thematic analysis procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Byrne, 2022). The coding process was conducted manually through iterative reading of the lyrics. Lines and stanzas were annotated and grouped into preliminary codes, which were then refined into broader thematic categories through constant comparison across the text.

The emerging themes were then interpreted through a critical pedagogical lens, foregrounding oppression, voice, and humanization, and through sociological criticism, situating the text within class relations and symbolic power (Karakose et al., 2023; Thomson & Hall, 2022; Benz et al., 2024). Subsequently, the interpretive claims were aligned with EDCOM II's core diagnostics of governance fragmentation, learning poverty, and resource inequities to assess how the song's critique resonates with policy realities. Finally, the study derived leadership implications by translating the integrated findings into ethical responsibilities for education leaders, emphasizing visibility of marginalization, capacity-aligned accountability, and justice-centered decision-making (Saguin & Ramesh, 2025).

2.4 Researcher Reflexivity and Trustworthiness

The researcher acknowledges that interpretation in qualitative textual analysis is shaped by intellectual commitments and professional location. As an education scholar engaged in leadership, governance, and reform discourse in the Philippine context, the reading of the song *Upuan* is informed by familiarity with EDCOM II debates and ethical leadership scholarship. This positionality sensitizes the analysis to themes of institutional detachment, inequality, and accountability. However, the study remains grounded in close textual evidence and established theoretical frameworks to minimize overextension. Interpretive claims are presented as analytical resonance rather than definitive representation of authorial intent.

To enhance analytic credibility, themes were generated through iterative reading of the lyrics, allowing patterns of meaning to emerge gradually rather than being imposed prematurely. Textual excerpts were repeatedly compared with key concepts from critical pedagogy and sociological criticism to examine whether interpretations were grounded in the language of the song itself. This constant comparative process reduced the risk of selective interpretation and strengthened alignment between evidence and argument. Moreover, emerging claims were cross-checked against established scholarship in educational leadership and policy studies to ensure conceptual coherence, theoretical consistency, and disciplined analytical reasoning throughout the study.

3. Findings and Analysis

3.1 The Construction of Institutional Power in the Philippine Context

In the Philippine context, the metaphor of the “chair” in *Upuan* acquires deeper political significance because public office is commonly associated with status, privilege, and access to state resources. The line, “*Ang tao na nagmamay-ari ng isang upuan / Na pag may pagkakatao’y pinag-aagawan / Kaya naman hindi niya pinakakawalan,*” presents the chair as something possessed and defended. Authority here is not described as service but as ownership. Organizational scholarship explains that hierarchies distribute authority unevenly and normalize deference to those at the top, making power appear natural and unquestioned (Romme, 2021). In Philippine education, this symbolism aligns with concerns about centralized decision-making and fragmented coordination across agencies, which may distance policymakers from the lived realities of schools (Saguin & Ramesh, 2025). Thus, the chair signifies not only leadership but also control over public goods, including educational opportunities.

Moreover, the song strengthens this critique through spatial imagery that highlights insulation and separation. The description of “*Malaking bahay at malawak na bakuran / Mataas na pader pinapaligiran / At naka pilang mga mamahaling sasakyan*” evokes physical barriers that shield privilege from exposure. Research on gated and exclusionary spaces shows that walls and controlled environments reinforce

class divisions and reduce interaction across social groups (Lata, 2022). Although these studies are situated in broader urban contexts, they illuminate patterns also visible in Philippine society, where economic privilege often translates into spatial separation. Within the education sector, similar insulation can occur when policy design happens far from geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas. Studies of school leadership in crisis contexts reveal that reforms frequently overlook poverty, disaster vulnerability, and resource scarcity at the local level (Chua Reyes et al., 2022). In this light, the “mataas na pader” becomes an allegory for institutional distance, where decision-makers remain protected while marginalized learners face structural hardship.

In addition, the language of confrontation in *Upuan* exposes entitlement and control. The repeated appeal, “*Kayo po na naka upo / Subukan nyo namang tumayo,*” challenges those in authority to reconsider their position. The rhetorical question, “*O nagbulag-bulagan lamang po kayo?*” implies that distance may be sustained not only by structure but also by willful disregard. Discourse studies demonstrate how elite narratives can normalize privilege and frame leadership as command rather than responsibility (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2025). In Philippine governance, patronage networks and power asymmetries often shape who gains access to resources and whose voices are prioritized. Protest music research further shows that lyrical confrontation can expose these asymmetries by translating structural inequality into emotionally powerful critique (Sadler, 2022). In discussions of education reform in the Philippines, this language reflects EDCOM II's concerns about a lack of accountability and poor learning outcomes, indicating that institutions need to focus more on responsiveness and ethical conduct.

The chair as a possession, the imagery of insulation, and the rhetoric of entitlement all work together to make institutional power seem distant and self-protective. In the Philippine setting, this construction speaks directly to public concerns about governance fragmentation, uneven resource allocation, and the need for ethical leadership that bridges the gap between policy and lived experience.

3.2 Moral Blindness and Structural Detachment in the Philippine Context

The metaphor of sight clearly conveys moral blindness in the song “*Upuan.*” The repeated appeal, “*Kayo po na naka upo / Subukan nyo namang tumayo / At baka matanaw na nyo / Ang tunay na kalagayan ko,*” suggests that those in authority are capable of seeing, yet choose not to. The problem, therefore, is not a lack of information but a refusal to recognize suffering. This idea aligns with scholarship explaining how ignorance can function as a form of power. When institutions don't admit to causing harm, they protect themselves from taking moral responsibility and from pressure to change (Offer, 2024). In the Philippine education context, this metaphor reflects the gap between national reform narratives and the daily struggles of schools in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas. Research indicates that school leaders frequently operate under significant constraints stemming from

poverty, disaster susceptibility, and resource limitations; however, these factors are not consistently prioritized in policy formulation (Chua Reyes et al., 2022). In this light, the lyric “*O nagbubulag-bulagan lamang po kayo?*” frames blindness as willful detachment rather than innocent oversight.

Moreover, the song’s confrontational tone highlights how suppressed voices attempt to break institutional silence. The line “*Kung makikita ko lamang siya ay aking sisigawan*” expresses frustration that dialogue has failed, and protest becomes the remaining option. Protest music scholarship shows that lyrical confrontation can amplify grievance and transform social frustration into public critique (Sadler, 2022). In the Philippine setting, where disparities in school funding, teacher deployment, and learning outcomes persist, this tone mirrors public dissatisfaction with slow and uneven reform. At the same time, research on epistemic injustice explains that marginalized groups can be silenced not only economically but also intellectually when their testimonies are dismissed or treated as less credible (Omodan, 2023). When the speaker declares, “*Tao po nandyan po ba kayo sa loob,*” the call is not merely physical but epistemic. It asks whether those inside the walls are willing to listen and acknowledge the truth of lived experience.

Viewed through a critical pedagogical lens, these elements reflect patterns of oppression and domination. Contemporary readings of Freire emphasize that silence can be imposed through exclusion, fear, or repeated neglect, while domination persists when institutions control which voices are legitimate (Misiaszek, 2022; Cavalcanti, 2024). In Philippine education, this aspect raises a pressing ethical question: do leaders interpret community complaints as noise to be contained or as moral testimony that demands a response? By exposing moral blindness and structural detachment, *Upuan* challenges educational leaders to move beyond passive awareness and toward accountable action. The song ultimately calls for leaders to “stand” with communities, to see clearly, and to reduce the distance between policy decisions and the lived realities of marginalized learners.

3.3 Social Stratification and Structural Inequality

In the song, social stratification is constructed through a simple contrast between spaces of privilege and deprivation. The song opens with a direct appeal: “*Kayo po na naka upo / Subukan nyo namang tumayo / At baka matanaw na nyo / Ang tunay na kalagayan ko.*” Here, standing becomes a metaphor for moral awareness. However, the contrast sharpens when the speaker describes the world of the powerful: “*Malaking bahay at malawak na bakuran / Mataas na pader pinapaligiran / At naka pilang mga mamahaling sasakyan.*” The imagery of high walls and expensive cars symbolizes not only wealth but also insulation from hardship. Sociological research demonstrates that access to material and symbolic capital perpetuates class privilege, influencing daily security and opportunities (Thomson & Hall, 2022). In the Philippine context, gated homes and guarded spaces reflect visible markers of class division, reinforcing the distance between elites and marginalized communities.

The contrast intensifies in the description of food and domestic conditions. While the privileged enjoy “*kanin ay simputi ng gatas*” and “*kahit na hindi pasko... may hamon,*” the speaker’s family survives on “*ulam na tuyo’t asin*” and stretches “*ang singkwenta pesos sa maghapo’y pagkakasyahin.*” Food here becomes a class indicator. Empirical studies show that food insecurity is strongly associated with lower academic outcomes because hunger limits cognitive focus and school engagement (Canbolat et al., 2025). Thus, the lyric “*pantakal ng bigas namin ay di puno*” is not merely descriptive; it reflects structural deprivation that affects educational readiness.

Housing imagery further reinforces inequality. The line “*Ang ding-ding ng bahay namin ay pinagtagpi-tagping yero*” evokes precarious living conditions common in urban poor communities. Research on poverty and vulnerability in Metro Manila shows that informal settlements and unstable housing are closely linked to social exclusion and limited state support (Eadie et al., 2025). When the song notes that the same space serves as both a kitchen and a bathroom, it signals a survival economy shaped by scarcity. This phenomenon resonates with policy analyses that note how unequal infrastructure and uneven local capacity can deepen disparities in education delivery (Saguin & Ramesh, 2025).

Moreover, the rhetorical question, “*Di ko alam kung talagang maraming harang/O mataas lang ang bakod/O nagbubulag-bulagan lamang po kayo,*” directly frames inequality as structural and possibly willful. The “*bakod*” (fence) symbolizes systemic barriers, while “*nagbubulag-bulagan*” suggests intentional ignorance. From a sociological perspective, institutions can unintentionally reproduce inequality when they fail to compensate for disadvantage or when reforms are implemented unevenly (Thomson & Hall, 2022). In the Philippine education system, disparities across regions and income groups illustrate how institutional mechanisms can sustain class divisions despite formal commitments to equity.

Ultimately, by juxtaposing privilege and deprivation, *Upuan* portrays poverty not as individual failure but as structured inequality. The song’s imagery of yero walls, insufficient food, and contested “*upuan*” positions institutions as central actors in either sustaining or challenging social stratification. In doing so, it invites educational leaders to confront how systems distribute opportunity and whose realities remain outside the walls of decision-making.

3.4 Convergence with EDCOM II in the Philippine Context

Upuan converges with EDCOM II by framing governance as both fragmented and detached from lived realities. However, the convergence discussed in this section does not suggest that the song directly references EDCOM II or was composed in response to its policy reports. Instead, the analysis highlights an interpretive resonance between the cultural critique articulated in the song “*Upuan*” and the systemic concerns identified in contemporary policy diagnostics. The song functions as a moral narrative that dramatizes inequality, detachment, and gaps in accountability, whereas EDCOM II frames similar issues through technical and institutional language. By

comparing these two discussions, the study shows how cultural works can reveal real-life experiences that policy documents discuss formally, without suggesting that they are directly related or causally linked.

The song's repeated line, "*Kayo po na naka upo / Subukan nyo namang tumayo / At baka matanaw na nyo / Ang tunay na kalagayan ko,*" shows that leaders are physically and morally distant from those who have to deal with the problems. This aligns with EDCOM II's diagnosis that the education sector faces coordination and governance problems that undermine coherent action and accountability across the system (EDCOM II, 2025; EDCOM II, 2026). In Philippine education, such fragmentation often means that responsibility is dispersed across levels and offices, while schools in "last mile" contexts continue to experience limited support. Research on decentralization supports this concern by demonstrating that when power is shared without the necessary skills and resources, policy implementation becomes inconsistent, and local disadvantages can worsen.

In addition, the song's imagery of privilege and scarcity reflects EDCOM II's emphasis on resource inequity and learning poverty. The difference between "*Malaking bahay... Mataas na pader... mga mamahaling sasakyan*" and "*pantakal ng bigas namin ay di puno*" shows how different living conditions affect educational opportunities even before school starts. EDCOM II highlights that many learners struggle with foundational skills and that resource gaps contribute to fragile learning outcomes (EDCOM II, 2025; EDCOM II, 2026). Research shows that learning problems worsen when schools do not align with children's language and social contexts, leading to poor basic reading and writing skills. Additionally, an analysis of Philippine policies shows that unequal access to good basic education continues because of problems in how education is provided and carried out, which mainly impacts marginalized communities. When read together, the song and the policy reports converge on a central point: learning poverty is not merely a classroom issue but a systems- and resources-based issue.

This convergence becomes sharper when the song explicitly names accountability gaps and moral disengagement. The question, "*Di ko alam kung talagang maraming harang / O mataas lang ang bakod / O nagbubulag-bulagan lamang po kayo,*" frames inequality as a product of barriers and deliberate ignoring. EDCOM II likewise identifies accountability weaknesses that allow persistent underperformance and inequity to continue without timely correction (EDCOM II, 2025; EDCOM II, 2026). Leadership research indicates that such gaps persist because decision-makers may avoid taking responsibility for harmful outcomes or view inequality as unchangeable (Ahmad et al., 2024). In practical terms, this means that systems may acknowledge problems in reports while allowing everyday deprivation to remain outside the urgency of decision-making.

Finally, *Upuan* functions as a policy mirror, translating institutional problems into a language that the public can understand and recognize. Protest music scholarship shows that cultural texts can amplify collective grievance and make structural issues emotionally legible, especially when formal policy discourse becomes technical or

remote (Sadler, 2022). In the Philippines, this issue matters because EDCOM II provides a diagnostic vocabulary (fragmentation, learning, poverty, and inequity), whereas the song provides a moral vocabulary (seeing, standing, and listening). They promote an approach to educational leadership that requires being close to the struggles of marginalized people, being responsible in ways that match their abilities, and making changes grounded in fairness rather than ignoring these issues.

4. Discussion

Institutional blindness, a form of ethical failure in the Philippine education system, arises when administrative distance undermines moral responsibility. When leaders rely primarily on reports, indicators, and formal structures, they can gradually lose direct contact with the lived realities of marginalized learners. This distance may make unfairness seem normal over time. Recent studies on moral disengagement show how people in organizations may excuse negative outcomes by shifting blame or viewing inequality as unchangeable (Ahmad et al., 2024). In large public systems, this process may appear procedural rather than intentional; however, its ethical consequences remain serious. In the Philippine context, where learning gaps and resource disparities persist across regions, such detachment can prevent leaders from recognizing how policy decisions affect vulnerable schools. Because of this, studies on ethical leadership emphasize that leadership is not merely a title; it also requires awareness of moral issues, accountability to others, and actions that promote fairness. Seen in this light, institutional blindness is not merely a technical flaw but a failure of ethical attentiveness.)

Precisely because this blindness is structural, educational justice must also be framed in structural terms. Educational inequality in the Philippines is embedded in social, economic, and institutional arrangements; therefore, justice cannot remain merely symbolic. Recent studies on curricular and systemic justice contend that reform must encompass both redistribution and structural inclusion to ensure that marginalized learners attain substantive access to high-quality educational environments (Priestley, 2026). In practical terms, redistribution involves equitable allocation of teachers, facilities, learning materials, and digital access, particularly in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas. At the same time, justice requires recognition of learners' linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic realities. Research on learning poverty underscores that systemic failure to provide inclusive and context-responsive instruction contributes to persistent underachievement (Alkateb-Chami et al., 2024). Consequently, aligning leadership practice with reform requires leaders to evaluate how policies distribute both material and symbolic resources and to intentionally prioritize those who are structurally marginalized.

Within this broader justice-oriented framework, cultural texts can function as catalysts for ethical reflection and reform. While policy documents often present inequality through statistics and technical language, protest music and socially engaged literature translate structural injustice into narratives that are emotionally

accessible and morally compelling. Studies on protest music in digital environments show that such expressions can amplify collective grievances and stimulate civic reflection (Sadler, 2022). In the Philippine setting, where education reform debates are frequently shaped by technical discourse, cultural texts can rehumanize the conversation by foregrounding lived experiences of poverty and exclusion. Moreover, scholarship on leadership and ethics highlights the importance of reflexivity in leadership development, encouraging leaders to confront uncomfortable realities and question normalized practices (Berkovich, 202). Integrating cultural narratives into leadership education and policy dialogue serves as a reflective tool, revealing institutional blind spots and promoting justice-centered decision-making.

Hence, institutional blindness, structural injustice, and cultural critique are deeply interconnected. Administrative detachment can foster moral disengagement; structural inequities can persist without deliberate redistribution and recognition; and reform efforts can remain incomplete without sustained ethical reflection. Therefore, by grounding leadership in justice and engaging critically with cultural narratives that illuminate inequality, Philippine education reform can move toward a system that is more accountable, more responsive, and more human-centered.

5. Implications for Educational Leadership

This textual analysis of *Upuan* is important because it reveals how cultural critique can expose the moral and structural dimensions of educational inequality that formal policy language often obscures. By analyzing the song's depiction of distance, blindness, and social stratification, educational leaders are encouraged to reflect on their ethical obligations in the context of Philippine reform. In this light, leadership must be reframed as moral stewardship rather than mere administrative control. In a system marked by learning poverty, uneven resources, and fragmented governance, leadership cannot be reduced to compliance with policies or performance targets. Instead, leaders are called to act as custodians of public trust, responsible for safeguarding the dignity and learning conditions of the most marginalized learners. Moral stewardship requires attentiveness to how decisions affect vulnerable communities and a willingness to confront inequities rather than normalize them. In practical terms, this means moving beyond positional authority toward relational accountability, where leaders remain closely connected to the realities of schools and communities.

At the same time, educational leaders need to ensure that their schools operate under a governance system grounded in fairness. Governance structures should be evaluated not only for efficiency but also for equity. The distribution of resources, the hiring of teachers, the planning of infrastructure, and the implementation of programs should all be based on the principles of redistribution and recognition. Leaders should prioritize geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas, respect diverse learner identities, and align reforms with inclusive goals. Justice-centered governance also demands transparency and shared responsibility, ensuring that accountability is

distributed without sacrificing support. Furthermore, preparing future leaders requires cultivating critical consciousness. Leadership preparation programs should develop the capacity to recognize structural inequality, question normalized practices, and interpret policy decisions through ethical lenses. This preparation shifts leaders from passive management to reflective and transformative practice.

Finally, integrating cultural texts as reflective tools can strengthen leadership training. Protest songs, narratives, and community stories humanize policy debates and expose blind spots in institutional thinking. When leaders engage critically with such texts, they deepen moral imagination and empathy. In this way, leadership development becomes not only technical but also ethical, supporting a more accountable and justice-oriented education system in the Philippines.

6. Conclusion

This study synthesized text, theory, and policy by reading *Upuan* alongside critical pedagogy, sociological criticism, and the reform agenda articulated in EDCOM II. Through this integration, the song emerged not merely as a cultural expression but as a diagnostic lens that illuminated how power, inequality, and detachment operate within educational institutions. The analysis showed that institutional blindness is both systemic and moral. It is systemic because it is embedded in fragmented governance, uneven resource distribution, and persistent learning poverty. At the same time, it is moral because it reflects failures of attentiveness, responsibility, and ethical response among those entrusted with leadership. When authority becomes insulated from lived realities, injustice risks being normalized. These findings underscore the urgency of justice-oriented educational leadership in the Philippine context. Leaders must move beyond technical compliance toward moral stewardship that embeds equity and recognition within governance structures.

In practical terms, this commitment can be operationalized through concrete institutional practices. University presidents, for instance, may implement equity-focused budgeting that prioritizes scholarships, learning resources, and institutional support for students from geographically isolated and disadvantaged communities. Academic deans may establish participatory consultation mechanisms that regularly gather feedback from students, faculty, and community partners to ensure that administrative decisions remain grounded in lived realities. Institutions may also develop equity monitoring systems that track student retention, access to resources, and academic outcomes across socioeconomic groups, allowing leaders to identify disparities and respond with targeted interventions.

Through such mechanisms, justice-centered leadership moves beyond philosophical commitment and becomes embedded in institutional governance, resource allocation, and everyday administrative decision-making. Only through such ethically grounded and operationalized leadership can reform efforts meaningfully address structural inequality and restore public trust in education.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study. The research was conducted independently, and no financial, institutional, or personal relationships influenced the design, analysis, interpretation, or reporting of the findings.

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