

Ethical Agenda in Philippine Education: Society's Need to Balance the K to 12 Program!

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As time goes on, it is becoming more and more challenging to educate children in a developing country such as the Philippines. This is not because our educational leaders and teachers – from the Department of Education to school district administrative offices to school classrooms -- lack the academic background and experience to handle the job of schooling kindergarten to high school grade children and young adults. I know that our national educational leaders are one of the best in Asia and the Pacific! So, admittedly, it may be the lack of economic resources or national attention to make it a priority, given the political and economic realities in our country. It could be the built-in messiness of how to carry out a consistent and rigorous education to thousands of children living in different regions of the country speaking hundreds of different languages. I somehow agree with Egan (1992) who theorized that in the Western educational tradition, where the Philippines is included given our long-time relationship with the United States as a past commonwealth and a semi-colony, it may be the **incoherence** of our common sense of education that could shed some light to the difficulty of finding the most appropriate, relevant, and meaningful way of educating children and young adults.

What is it that we really want to teach our school-age children? Is our purpose of education to explore and enrich our students' understanding and mastery of subject matter? Is our purpose of education to understand our students' holistic personal development and even differences to create a curriculum that matches their strength and weaknesses? Is our purpose of education to nurture the young for adult cultural norms and practices to become contributing citizens in their communities? Shall we now think about educating young people for social justice and ethical leadership, given the scandalous "pork-barrel" involvement of some of our key educated governmental leaders and the corrupt abusive management practices of many? How would we educate the youth to think and talk about what is wrong and what is right?

I would emphasize in this essay that no matter how much mastery of content we focus on, no matter how much curriculum and instructional match we create for students, and no matter how we socialize our students to the country's common traditions, values, and norms, the most important aspect of schooling that Filipino children and young adults need and must acquire --- is the set of ethical dispositions and critical abilities, skills, and knowledge they need in building a just, equitable, and caring society. How does an ethical agenda for Philippine education look like?

Roles of Schools in the Philippines: My View of Their Implications for an Ethical Agenda

Currently, the Department of Education is committed to the institutionalization of kindergarten and the addition of 2 years of high school to fully implement the K to 12 program. According to this plan, the transformation intends to decongest the curriculum by spreading out

10 years into 12 years to give more time for students to learn the various academic content disciplines, achieve comprehension and mastery of the subject matter, and acquire skills for constructive citizenship. It will also better prepare K to 12 graduates for college as introductory college courses will be included in the high school curriculum and instruction. In addition, K to 12 graduates will have the competencies to join the labor market and will be recognized as professionals and compliant with global standards when they apply to work abroad.

I think that the implicit roles of schools (Egan 1992) in the current K to 12 program as proposed in the Philippines fall into the following 3 categories:

- 1) **Fostering Knowledge Acquisition** – the new K to 12 program highlights the process of learning those forms of academic knowledge, language and math skills, technology, sports and arts, and other academics that will produce Filipino learners who “have 21st century skills and are prepared for higher education, middle-level skills development, employment, and entrepreneurship.” It provides Filipino learners opportunities for a careful study of different disciplines and intellectual cultivation in all kinds of content areas for college and career readiness. The enhanced curriculum will include English, Filipino, mathematics, physical and life sciences, Philippine literature, World literature, and other contemporary philosophical and social issues and other career pathways.
- 2) **Nurturing Individual Development and Recognizing Differences** – the new K to 12 program considers the individual development of the students and the differences across grade levels. For example, the K to 12 Basic Education Program requires the use of the child’s first language as medium of instruction from preschool until Grade 3 and the use of the child’s first language to teach understanding and mastery of all subjects, and as readiness test for junior high school. There are enhanced curriculum guidelines for integrated language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, health, physical education, music and art, and values education that serve as anchors for administrators, teachers, and other school personnel in the holistic development of school-age Filipino learners. There is a conscious effort to know about the nature of a Filipino learner, his or her motivation, learning styles, and other characteristics. Each student’s educational experience is a part of the learning goal not just a means to achieving the acquisition of knowledge or skills.
- 3) **Socialization** – the new K to 12 program intends to initiate the young Filipino learners into the norms and values of adults in their local Filipino communities and the global competitive educational standards of the international communities. It aims for the Philippines to catch up with the rest of the Asian countries and the world. For example, it plans to strengthen science and math education and literacy through a set of common competencies across grade levels by using age-, context-, and culture-appropriate instructional materials.

As you can see from this analysis, the current educational reforms in the Philippines has a remarkable thrust and potential to allowing opportunities for students to accumulate significant knowledge, fulfilling the potential of each child while recognizing each child’s natural development and different characteristics, and initiating the Filipino students to prevailing social

norms, values, and practices in the Philippine society. However, explicitly absent is the attention to developing a Filipino child's view of what is wrong and what is right.

Ethical Education: An Exploratory Thought

Using Kohlberg's stages of moral development (1976), we have to recognize that a child's initial understanding of what is right or wrong originates from his or her exposure to cultural rules and labels of good and bad at home, in the community, and in the society. This understanding is characterized by certain conformity to personal expectations, superior power of authorities, and serving one's own needs or interests. Then, the conception of what is wrong and what is right elevates to relationships with other individuals or groups and orientation toward the maintenance of the social order. At this stage, right behavior could be characterized as doing one's duty and showing respect for authority. The highest level of moral development consists of a sense of obligation to law for the welfare of all and for the protection of all people's rights. At this stage, right is dictated by the decision of one's conscience to commit to universal moral ethical principles which may include such universal principles as justice, equality, and respect for the dignity of human beings as individual persons.

Given the ethical implications of these stages of moral development and the flurries of news about the perceived corruption perpetrated by the country's leaders, it is scary to imagine the "conscience problem" or "sickness in character" that could be reproduced among Filipino school-age children and young adults, if the Philippine educational system does not attempt to balance the transformative K to 12 program with ethical education (Shapiro & Gross, 2008) or justice education (Sandel, 2009; Oliveira, 2013) or the moral work of teaching (Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2013). As the K to 12 program develops a Filipino child's cognitive ability through a well-orchestrated policy implementation and well-planned curriculum and instruction, careful attention must also be given to the child's ethical development to acquire not just the 21st century skills for college and career but to nurture their **grit** or strength of character to do what is right tempered with self-control, optimism, and resiliency to persevere (Tough, 2012). The ethical agenda should also be driven by socially situated perspectives that recognize the influence of a child's home environment, community, and social relationships with school personnel (Hawkins, 2013) and the understanding that children growing up in poverty need caring relationships that builds student character (Jensen, 2009).

In summary, the much-heralded K to 12 program needs an ethical agenda: values and moral education, educational justice, grit or character-building, ethics of care, socially situated views in framing languages and literacies, and teaching with poverty in mind.

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