

Grassroots in Education

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It has been a realization of sorts where the pandemic is concerned. Many aspects have been affected and topping the list is education. Under the new normal, there have been changes so unexpected, leaving little room for adjustment but rather teaching us to be flexible to changes.

In the Philippines, the “Bayanihan heal as one” has been one motto that keeps the country going amidst the many crises it has been facing for more than a year now. Culturally speaking there have been changes and nice changes at that because we were driven to revert to those values we have been used to before the wave of technology came in. We are back to opening our hearts and extending help especially to the people who are in need. There is no demarcation line between rich and poor at present because we are all suffering, yet the process of healing has started but it is a long way to go.

Education has been greatly affected by this pandemic because for one thing there is no face- to- face learning, remote learning has been the main objective of the academic institutions but we cannot guarantee where quality education is concerned.

For those learners who are equipped with technological resources, they are finding ways and means to be able to adjust with the aid of technology but what about those learners who are not fortunate enough to have the technology needed? Those who have to do the modular learning, will they understand the lesson? Can they answer the activities and worksheets? These are the doubts lingering in every educator, every parent, and even the learner himself or herself.

Looking Back at the Past

If we remember and have scanned the pages of the history of our country, formal schooling began in the American period but even before the colonization, the mothers were the first educators of the Malay people, and this is where the alibata now known as the baybayin became the first alphabet of the Filipinos. When the Spaniards came, they set prejudices against the natives thus, calling them “Indios” and depriving them of learning the Spanish language as immortalized in Rizal’s novel, “El Filibusterismo”, wherein the character of Placido Penitente was symbolically displayed as the ignorant Filipino and who had glamourized Rizal as the Renaissance Man because of his education abroad.

When the Americans came, they had military personnel as teachers and had enforced the 3Rs (reading, writing, and arithmetic) which became the foundation of education. Literacy had been promoted through reading and writing, thus still adopted, until at present through the Deped Program, “No Child Left Behind”-- which means every child needs to enroll in school and learn to read and write. Thus, literary rate became one of the key performance indicators of every school and helping to promote the ECARP program which stands for “Every Child A Reader Program”.

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The Cycle of Education

Just like common patterns in History, Education also undergoes a cycle which at first glance seems infinite and endless but still when analyzing deeply, we can see that it keeps on repeating in another form or another manner but certainly it undergoes a revolution of change. One thing that matters here is the fundamental need to know and learn the basics and that of which is reading and writing.

Education has been changing ever since Literacy or being literate is needed for survival. People learn to read and write not just because of having a high-powered career but more for survival. I remember one Filipino movie which starred Lorna Tolentino, who was illiterate and had to go to kindergarten together with her youngest daughter to be able to know how to read and write. The movie had been a perfect example of not needing to go to the best schools but just to learn the fundamentals which are needed in everyday life. The moment you wake up in the morning and have to do your hygiene rituals, learning to read comes in handy. From the brand of toothpaste used to instructions in minor house repairs, some words need to be read out and understood. The very basic moment when you have to spell out your name and write your name on any form, can either make you or destroy you in the process. The degrees you earned in college or post-graduate studies are just garnishing to your educational life-- what matters most is the ability to read and write from your name to the most basic words. Recognizing and understanding the alphabet which is composed of twenty -six letters and forming words out of the letters, understanding how these words are formed and how to use them, have been a part of every individual's life. The key here is survival, out of necessity and urgency rather than a matter of luxury.

During the Martial Law years, education had suffered. Those students belonging to the elite group were recruited to become subversives because of their intelligence, they were brainwashed by Marxist concepts on how to convert the country to a classless one. It was no longer a matter of survival but rather, a high level of intelligence became an asset for intellectual revolution gearing towards the left in the political spectrum. Several intelligent people had suffered death due to political detention and torture such as Lean Alejandro, who was a University of the Philippines scholar then. Education for him was more on what was being learned in the four corners of a classroom that on doing what is right and beneficial to the society, but Marxist idealism had been ingrained deeply and the antagonism towards the government was so transparent that it had earned the ire of the people in power. He was detained and killed just because of his idealism which perhaps it is not a utopian dream after all.

After the uplift of Martial Law, there were changes in the educational system but still, the fundamental goal was literacy. There was the problem of dropouts and out of school youth which prompted the government to promote technical and vocational courses to resolve the problems of the loss of interest of students in attending formal schools, which was not because of Marxist idealism and subversion but because of the difficulty in adapting to the changes taking place in the educational system. There were higher expectations and standards which discouraged the students from studying but rather leading them to a laid-back lifestyle. There were also the political unrest and instability being experienced during the transition from Marcos towards Corazon Aquino which became a problem in the status quo and greatly affected the education of the youth.,

When Corazon Aquino was already in power through the 1987 Constitution, Article- XIV stating that education is a right and not a privilege, had now people realizing the value of education, thus encouraging the youth to go back to school and start learning once again. There were alternatives to other youngsters such as technical or vocational courses, home-schooling and the like. What counts more is the continuing promotion of literacy

to help in the progress of the Philippine society. Then came the Republic Act No. 9165 - known as the K-12 program, wherein there is an additional two years of the high school known as the Senior High School program to help the Filipinos adapt and compete in the global market and become productive citizens in the future. It has been enacted into law because from of an international survey, it was found out that among the Southeast Asian countries, only two remaining countries namely the Philippines and Republic of Lao had lacked the additional two years in secondary or high school program which can be a detriment to global opportunities for the students. The additional two years serve as a preparation for tertiary education of the students thus easing the burden of the parents in terms of matriculation fees through voucher programs for both public and private schools.

Through the K12 curriculum, each student has the right to choose which strand is in line with his/her interest. There is Accountancy and Business Management (ABM), for those who want to be future CEOs and CFOs or simply entrepreneurs. Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) for those who want to be scientists, mathematicians, engineers, or those in the medical field. Humanities and Social Sciences (HUSS), for those who want to be researchers, educators, psychologists and the like. General Academic Strand (GAS) for those who are still in the midst of deciding what career track to pursue. Arts and Design for those creative minds who want to pursue careers in graphics and animation. Sports Studies for those who want to have careers in the field of sports and there are also non-academic strands such as Technology and Livelihood (TVL) which has sub-specializations like hairdressing, food and beverage service, agriculture, computer technology and others which can be promoted to a ladderized program depending on the school chosen.

The idea of having this K12 program for the students is one way to be globally competitive in the future producing the best of the best where the skills are concerned, turning them into the 21st -century learners. As the year 2000, dubbed as the new millennium carrying over the 21st -century skills a student must possess, has made technology a necessity. A student must be technologically savvy to blend well with the expectations of the 21st century, where information, media, and technology literacy has been part of the skills needed to attain the goal of being a 21st- century learner. Information Technology had been included in the curriculum from the basics of computer learning to the different applications. Students had a grand time registering in different social media accounts. Research became fun and challenging because of the different search engines, there are the applications for writing, graphics, and others which provided comfort and easy access for every student. For every need, there is a technological application appropriate and earning the moniker of being digital natives even up to socialization and interaction processes, everything was done through digital or virtual means. Gone were the days of writing a short letter to a crush or someone whom you admired for quite some time, indulging in long conversations using a telephone which is a sign of gratitude to Alexander Graham Bell, but now every android or smartphone became a common commodity in markets internationally so that a person cannot be ignorant in using an analog telephone. Even the lingo used in texting as opposed to the spelling of English words, using short-cut methods to save space. Nobody uses a typewriter anymore in doing forms or reports, there is a computer that makes encoding easier and has all the requirements. Abacus and calculators are set aside because, in every smartphone, there is already a calculator included.

There are advantages and disadvantages of technology in education but still, it is a far cry from what had happened the past year when COVID19 struck. People were caught unprepared and too many daunting questions poured in but without exact answers. People were forced to stay at home because of safety and health protocols. Technology came in handy because it is something to do to ease boredom through games, social media, and other applications.

But still, even with technology at hand, there have been reports of mental issues such as depression, bipolar stress disorder, and others. Some even committed suicide because of the changes that took place and one field which has been greatly affected by this is the educational system.

Education Amidst the Pandemic

The transition has been so fast that a lot of people were caught unprepared, frazzled by the demands and expectations. The educational system has been compared to a roller coaster ride because the primary focus is the welfare of the students. After many years of having face to face learning, where teachers occupy the front part of the room, that there is an interaction between teacher and her students or students with their classmates, now everything has to be done through virtual learning or, in a nutshell, a part of remote or distance learning. There have been many learning management platforms being promoted or advocated such as google classroom, Schoology, zoom, and others but still the word here is ONLINE which means interaction, teaching and discussion are done virtually where you can see your classmates but you can't touch them or hug them or play with them. Everything has to be done with internet connectivity, even presentations and lessons.

It is fortunate for those families with internet connectivity, they can enroll in online courses or engage in virtual or digital learning but what about those families which cannot afford digital resources. The Department of Education provided an answer for that through the modular in print modality wherein parents go to schools to retrieve printed modules for their children to answer weekly. The basis for the grades will be on the scores of the corrected modules and the summative examinations given before the end of each grading period. Additional modalities which can serve as supplementary learning are TV-Based Instruction (TVBI) and Radio Based Instruction (RBI). There are also asynchronous materials given to students wherein they can send their answers to assignments and activities through social media or emails.

Even with these different modalities, a blending or a mixture of two or more modalities cannot equate with the active learning done face-face not only because of the strategies implemented by the teacher but by the interaction of students which promotes a more holistic type of learning. With the question of the duration of this distance learning now comes the doubt on how quality education is being promoted.

Two Sides to the Coin

With distance learning being implemented, the parents have bigger roles in motivating their children to this type of learning. It does not begin and end with a parent operating the laptop or desktop for his child to start learning digitally neither does it start and end with a parent going to school to retrieve and return the answered modules but what happens inside the house on how the parent guides and helps the child to adjust to this mode of learning is what counts.

Remembering the pre-colonial times where there were no printed materials to teach the children, it looked to the mother as the first teacher, as what Rizal had attested that his mother Teodora Alonzo was his teacher, the person who taught him how to read and write and even share the values of hard work, being diligent and industrious as what the story behind the moth and the flame emphasized. There were no printed materials to depend on but the simple teachings of mothers to children which were handed from one generation to another. It does not necessarily be a bulk of printed materials and digital resources to measure an educated person, there is also the need to imbibe good and moral values to make him an educated one.

The ability to read, write and count was needed and fundamental, even a farmer's son can learn these abilities without formal schooling just like what our ancestors did, they had makeshift classes under the mango tree as symbolically represented by Rizal during his Dapitan exile. The use of his senses became the first encouragement needed to learn. Common sense and critical thinking are not gotten from any books printed or otherwise, they are inherent in a person. How he thinks, forms words, concepts or perceptions are all parts of learning.

This is what the pandemic has brought us to, the going back to the grassroots, or to the basics of what is fundamental and what is important. The different activities students indulge in within the confines of their homes can be considered learning, such as growing plants or doing backyard gardening, recycling waste materials, doing artwork and other creative projects, cooking, and baking to their hearts' desire, are all part of learning.

Learning does not confine to technological use of either reading printed or digital materials. It can be in different forms with various structures or patterns. In these trying times, there is no room for limitations on what or how a person must learn, what counts more is the continuing desire to discover and learn new things which can be helpful in the future and with the collaborative skills being part of the 21st -century skills being ingrained in a student, come closer and binding ties with the family which indeed have become the biggest advantage of this pandemic.

Conclusion

Back to the basics has been one lesson in this time, there is no room for complaints or whining, this is a period wherein we need to assess our strengths and improve on our weaknesses. The pandemic has been a big challenge for every individual, but it does not mean that we have to be pessimistic about it, but should rather look on the bright side, that despite the tribulations, we are all functioning the best way we can, we have opened our hearts and minds to our fellowmen. We have been flexible on how to adapt to the changes going around us.

We have gone back to simple lifestyles appreciating what we have, and not necessarily on what we want but more on what we need. We have found allies in God, the Department of Education, our family, and our friends (offline or online). God has been telling us for some time to be contented with our lot but still, we find happiness in material things rather than with the love surrounding us.

As of the present time, the lesson we continue to live on is how to survive beautifully in these trying times and we all know the answer to that, but we remain hardened by it and refuse to listen but then just like any challenges that come our way, this too will pass and, hopefully, the realization will come sooner.

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