

“Schools of the People” as a Philosophy of Education for the 21st Century

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The first Karunungan Festival, held at Ateneo de Manila University last July 7-8, 2007, celebrated the educational aspirations of our people for the 21st Century. Our post-conference evaluation showed that the most well received presentations were the success stories of the least endowed places like Payatas, Quezon City, Barbaza, Antique, Sta. Catalina, Negros Oriental, and Kiangán, Ifugao where people defied the odds stacked against them and even surpassed our expectations by dramatically improving the performance ratings of their students.

Lupang Pangako Elementary School, for example, emerged among the top ten Quezon City Schools this year after being second lowest among 96 schools within 4 years. Bahoyan-Yapo Multigrade School in Antique ranked number 1 in their division after having a large student population of non-readers and non-numerates within 3 years. Avocado Elementary School now offers high school and vocational degree courses after its humble beginnings of two roofless classrooms in a matter of ten years. Finally, Kiangán Central School is proud to be one of the top five performing schools in the country from their dismal below fifty percentage scores in 2002-2003.

The secrets to their success seem to depend on the ingenious strategies of their principals, the creative approaches of their teachers, and the dynamic support of their communities. The heroic acts rendered by their school heads awakened the dormant social capital among our people.

The enactment of Republic Act 9155, the Governance of Basic Education Act of 2001, along with the Local Government Code, provided the protective shield that empowered school heads to overcome the many challenges they had to face such as the psychological after-effects of an insurgency, the stench of garbage, and the lack of learning materials and facilities.

At the heart of these success stories is the critical role played by Principals who were emboldened by these new laws to solve local problems at the school level. At the end of the conference, many of the participants, including a Barangay Captain and a University Professor, expressed their desire to also become principals because of the tremendous effect that they have made not only on their schools but also on their surrounding communities.

Community-based initiatives, as shown by the presentations made by indigenous communities and civil society organizations, further demonstrate the dormant social capital inherent in social communities that can be tapped as a resource for the educational development and reform of local schools that will eventually impact on the future of our nation.

The indigenous approaches demonstrated by the conference speakers, like rare medicines that have been discovered and extracted from endangered species, offer creative solutions to our ailing social system. A more promising electorate and a more skilled population will certainly

emerge from the Philippines in the 21st Century if we do succeed in improving the performance ratings of the current generation of pupils. The variety of solutions to our educational problems must be preserved, like the biodiversity of an ecological niche, because they ensure the stability of the social fabric that constitutes our nation. Such diversity can be preserved if we continue to support the unique initiatives from the many contexts that our people find themselves in. Local autonomy and people's participation is a necessary condition for building our nation from the ground.

The Schools of the People, as a Philosophy of Education, was a creative response to the necessity of transforming our educational institutions through the collective will of the stakeholders that constitute our schools. I believe that this philosophy of education can unlock a national development strategy that will eventually improve the living conditions of our people while enhancing our political culture for the 21st Century. "Schools of the People" can then serve as a normative principle to anticipate, evaluate and criticize the success potentials of our educational institutions.