

Big Brother (*Kuya*)/Big Sister (*Ate*) Culture: A Proactive and Responsible Way of Alleviating the Philippine Educational System

Introduction

I wouldn't forget how tough my grade school years were. I belonged to a class of 65 kids who swarmed together in a small *nipa* hut, which served as a makeshift classroom in our overcrowded school. How could students pay attention in class if we had no choice but to sit stiffly for we couldn't even stretch our legs because the chairs were situated very close to each other. With only one 20-year old electric fan that hardly ventilated the room, imagine how the tropical heat competed with our willingness to learn. Then during rainy days, water would just drip straight to our desks. Imagine how our teachers shouted at the top of their lungs just to make sure that everyone listened to them. No matter how we tried to simulate a normal learning environment, how do you think a single aged microscope could educate not only the 65 of us, but more than a thousand kids who shared the same apparatus?

It was indeed a very difficult situation, but I couldn't help but appreciate the least of what we had. I was actually fortunate enough that I had been enrolled in a private school. What more for those who went to public elementary schools who depended on a tree's shade for their classroom and had nothing but a faded photo of a microscope for their "experiments".

On one hand, a jam-packed room is good for students because it is definitely easy to cheat during exams. But on the other hand, this unwanted phenomenon probably explains why in the last aptitude exam for elementary students, only an average score of 58.73% was reached. Worse, the high school students received a much lower average aptitude mark of 46.80% (Philippine's Basic Education Statistics, 2005).

These statistics are very alarming. They show how much the Philippine educational system has degraded. No wonder, the 2003 Functional Literacy, Education and Mass Media Survey (FLEMMS) reveals that about three out of 10 Filipinos cannot compute or lack numerical skill.

The Philippine Educational System

Understanding the Past

Looking at the historical perspective of the Philippine educational system can give us a bigger picture of why students today are greatly suffering from tons of educational crises. By

reviewing what has happened, we can further understand the current scenario and be able to come up with a more concrete and practical method of alleviating such system.

Before the Spaniards came to the Philippines, tribal tutors were well respected in their communities. They had the right as well as the responsibility to transfer skills to the next generation. This basic system was drastically changed when religion-oriented education was introduced. Suddenly, the Spanish missionaries replaced the tribal tutors. They easily gained the respect of the people. However, only the elite had the resources to send their children to schools. It created a gap between those who attended formal schools and those who did not.

Finally, an educational decree was enacted in 1863. This led to the establishment of at least one primary school, open for both boys and girls, in each town. However, it was said that the education during that period was inadequate since there were only few qualified teachers.

The severe shortage of teachers continued when the Americans installed a centralized public school system. To solve this problem, 600 teachers from the U.S.A., known as “Thomasites” came to the country to fill in the gap (*Historical...*, 2006). While they have contributed much through teaching intensive English, it had further created a disparity between the rich and the poor.

It was good however that many high school graduates turned out to be excellent in English. Their willingness to teach fellow Filipinos made them the country’s assets. They had the potentials of making significant changes in the educational system but unfortunately, many of them died during the World War II.

After the war, the economic situation forced the schools to cut down the usual 7-year grade school system to a 6-year program. While it was good for parents since they could send their children to school at a shorter period, it was like stealing a year worth of knowledge from the students. Many were able to get into high school without the basic tools they need. Thus, it again resulted to the lowering of the quality of education in the country.

In the 1970s, many teachers migrated to the Middle East to serve as domestic helpers. They had no choice but to give up their profession for a more lucrative job that could sustain their families’ basic needs. Those teachers who decided to stay in the country had carried much burden. They had very low salaries and worse, they even faced the dangers and controversies in serving as election officers. As a result, the teaching profession was never treated as an attractive option for the young. From 1975 to 1985, those who took education as their majors were those who were not able to pass the priority courses like banking, accountancy and nursing (Gonzalez, 1997). This indicated what kind of teachers were left out for the future generations.

Up to this day, the country is experiencing a shortage of quality teachers because the best graduates prefer to teach in other countries like America. But no one could blame them. They need the money to live. Their salaries feed more than just their egos. They feed their families that they have left behind.

Diagnosing the Present

The dramatic turn of events in the history of Philippine education resulted to a more complex set of problems that need to be addressed.

Lack of physical resources: President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo admitted in one of her speeches that the country has a backlog of 18,000 classrooms (Morella, 2004). It is her objective to build at least 3,000 a year during her term. Whether she achieves this or not, you can just imagine how many children are either crowding the available rooms or worse, not attending classes at all.

Low salaries of teachers: On the average, a new teacher receives Php9, 939 a month. Compare this with the entry level salary of at least P159,000 in the public schools in California (Lontoc, 2005). No wonder, many teachers are continuously tempted to leave the Philippines in search for a greener pasture.

Lack of competent teachers: From 1992 to 2002, there were 2,289 teachers who were deployed abroad. It was more surprising to learn that about 160,000 Filipinos working as domestics in Hong Kong, Singapore, and the Middle East were teachers or at least had some background in teaching before going abroad (Lontoc, 2005). Because of this massive migration, teachers' competence has become a glaring problem. Most of those who are left in the country are not competent enough to hand-in the best knowledge to the younger generation. This brain drain problem is becoming more intense and in the end, the Filipino children are the biggest losers.

Low student motivation: This intellectual drainage leads to more and more problems. For instance, since English teachers are leaving the country, the language capacity of the students are also decreasing. How could they possibly understand math and science, which are also thought in English? Thus, student motivation is now affected by the educational crisis. This is what we are most afraid of, that one day, children would just loose the energy and enthusiasm of going to school.

Increasing cost of education: Although the public elementary and high schools are for free, not all families can afford other expenses like uniforms, books, foods and transportation allowances. In fact, a recent survey reveals that one out of every four Filipino children cannot go

to school because of high tuition fees (School Attendance, 2003). Thus, some parents encourage their children that instead of going to school, they should work in the farms to contribute to their basic needs. This may be unlawful because children have the right to education. But isn't it that they also have the right to live? What else they could do if at young age they need to work so they could live?

Intensifying dichotomy between private and public schools: Because quality incurs costs, there is an intensifying dichotomy between private and public schools. Private schools can charge their students with very high tuition fees while providing them with better facilities and the best of those teachers who decided to stay in the country. On the other hand, public schools, which have more students, are known for decreasing quality of education brought by restricted budget allocation.

Proposed Remedy: Big Brother/ Big Sister Culture

The problems being faced by my country today is truly overwhelming. I must say that the Filipino youth are not superheroes that can cease this enormous flame at an instant. But through our own little ways, I believe that we can lessen this fire through capitalizing on our big brother/ big sister culture, a proactive and responsible way of alleviating the Philippine educational system.

The Role of *Kuya/ Ate*

Kuya (big brother) and *ate* (big sister) play a very important role in a Filipino family. While parents are busy, the elder siblings have the responsibility of looking after their younger siblings. They must see to it that the younger ones learn the skills thought to them by their parents. If parents are treated as "first teachers", big brothers and big sisters are treated as "second teachers".

According to Prof. Virgilio Enriquez (2002), a respected Filipino psychologist, among the important and glaring Filipino values are respect, concern, volunteerism, rapport and acceptance. All of these are very evident in a big brother/ big sister culture. No wonder, the word *kuya* or *ate* is always attached to the first names of older siblings to constantly remind them of their responsibilities and to denote respect from the young ones.

How can these values help in alleviating the Philippine education?

When I was in high school, my classmates and I felt that we were fortunate to have been enrolled in an exclusive school. Our school had the best facilities in the city. We had a huge

gymnasium, individual computer access, a three-story library, regular laboratory sessions and the best teachers in the region. But whenever we peeped and looked down from our classroom's window, it was ironic to see a small public grade school, which was so different from the world we lived in. Coming from an overcrowded elementary school too, I knew how difficult it was to catch up with lessons when a teacher tried to divide his/her attention among 70 students at a given time.

We were comfortable in our own private spaces. But the real life was beyond the four walls of our classroom. We had realized that in some way, we were responsible over these children. We lived in one community. We were like brothers and sisters. And being the older brothers, we were like a *kuya* who had the responsibility of making sure that their school's poor conditions did not hinder their learning process. From then on, the concept of *kuya* was not only contained in our families, it had become a common term in our community through the program we called "Tulong- Dunong".

"Tulong-Dunong", which literally means "Knowledge Aid", is a program conceived at Ateneo de Naga High School, a catholic school for boys. With our motto, "men for others", we adopted a public elementary school in our community. After class hours, me and my classmates used to visit the nearby grade school to serve as tutors to grades five and six students.

Primarily, our objective was to assist these younger students with their studies. We made sure that they understand their lessons through creative activities like exercises, games, and more personal approaches. It was our mission to help them pass the entrance exams for good high schools.

What have we accomplished?

After one school year of conducting this program, it was really impressive to see our younger siblings marching to receive their grade school diploma. It was even more pleasing to learn that most of them passed in good high schools. Some of them were even offered scholarships. However, more than these achievements, our greatest accomplishment I must say is the process that we went through. High school students like me were able to realize our community responsibilities at such a young age while our tutees were honed to be the next big brothers/ big sisters in the community.

How it was achieved?

We achieved our objectives through working on the same values where the *kuya* and *ate* culture is grounded.

Respect: Each high school volunteer was assigned to two or three grade school students. They are called *kuya*, thus the older students gained the respect of the young ones. In the same manner, the *kuya* respected his new found younger “siblings” through assuming some responsibilities.

Concern: As a big brother, a *kuya* must see to it that his younger siblings do well in school. It was not enough to go to our adopted school after classes to tutor the kids. It was our responsibility to know how well they perform in class.

Volunteerism: A *kuya* must do everything for the sake of his younger siblings without expecting something in return. Thus, we tutored English, Math and Science at our own will. It was the passion deep within us that kept us moving. A simple smile from the students was more than enough food to nourish our hearts.

Rapport and acceptance: One must never let academics interfere with education. For us, academics or formal school system is just one way to be educated. More than the four walls of the classroom, one should be immersed in the realities happening around him. Through a good rapport with the people of our community, both the tutors and the tutees were able to learn and accept the Philippine educational situation, thus motivating us more to do something in overcoming this problem.

Innovation in Education

Promoting the big brother/ big sister culture is such an innovation in the educational system. It may not directly resolve any of the crises mentioned earlier, but in one way or another, it alleviates these by simply going back to the old days when the tribal tutors or the elders in each communities develop a sense of responsibility to teach the young. It may be inevitable for good teachers to leave the country, but we should not let this happen at the risk of the students. As good and responsible citizens, being proactive to the needs of the country is a big contribution.

Moreover, this serves as a step in resolving the issue of lack of competent teachers. The late Education Secretary, Bro. Andrew Gonzales (1997) once said that “if we are to improve Philippine education, we must attract and recruit the best and the brightest among our young citizens to become teachers”. This is one way of doing it. Through exposing outstanding high school students to the responsibilities of teaching younger students, they are able to appreciate the fulfillment brought by teaching at a very young age. After all, tutoring is a learning situation for both the tutors and the tutees.

Ultimately, this program is not just about tutoring, it is a practical way of imparting Filipino values among the young, an essential factor in honing the future leaders of our country.

How have you measured the results?

Just before the grade school teachers would give quarterly exams, we had also conducted short quizzes that measured improvements. From the first quiz that we had given, it was really impressive how the students improved throughout the year. I remember, one teacher even noticed that since the program had started, their students became more eager to attend classes. Their learning motivation level had indeed increased.

The best measure if our objective was the results of their entrance exams to good high schools. Not everyone did really well, but the fact that their school had observed the development in their performance and there were even a number of them who were offered scholarships for their high school, we believe that it was a great start of an educational revolution.

How to improve this program?

During the conduct of the said project, we noticed that some teachers of the grade school students preferred not to discuss some topics in class, which they knew that the big brothers would be teaching them anyway. This experience suggests that conditions between the adopted school and the big brothers should be clearly set. The tutors are there to support the educational needs of the kids and not to replace the faculty who are still considered as the main resource persons in the school.

Replicability and Adaptability in Other Communities

It was sad that after I had finished high school, I also needed to leave our community to pursue my dreams of studying in the premiere state university. I would like to see my tutees going to the same high school I attended, but it was depressing that I needed to go on with my college life. Little did I know that there were more in store when I transferred to the University of the Philippines.

Replicability: The Founding of U.P. SIBOL

In college, I was so fortunate to meet fellow scholars who are also advocating for Filipino youth empowerment. Living up with the core values we wanted to share with our fellow youth, the U.P. **S**ervice, **I**ntegrity, **B**enevolence, **O**bjectivity, and **L**eadership (U.P. SIBOL) was born.

With our slogan, "Grow with us", U.P. SIBOL has started to spring. But more than growing in numbers, U.P. SIBOL has reached many young people through its tutorial activities that are based on the big brother/ big sister culture. This time, it is more bigger and more sustainable than *Tulong-Dunong*. For instance, there are tutorial sessions dubbed as "*Final Take*". This has helped fellow college students in basic subjects like math, economics, physics and chemistry through collaborating with other academic organizations. We have also instituted review classes for public high school students. Volunteers have had to give up their weekend gimmicks yet all of these sacrifices pay off when we see youngsters pass the University of the Philippines' entrance exam. Moreover, we have been conducting monthly "*Kids' Treat*" for grade school students. All of these activities prove that indeed, the *kuya/ate* culture of the Filipinos are important in promoting a proactive and responsible way of alleviating the Philippine educational system.

Adaptability in Southeast Asia and UK

Last January 2006, I attended the Young Global Citizens Camp (YGCC), which was participated in by 50 youths from 5 countries – Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, United Kingdom and Vietnam. In one of our sessions, we discussed about the global issues on education. It was surprising to learn that though at different levels, we have cited almost the same problems we are experiencing in our respective countries.

More interesting however is that my new friends are open to the idea of promoting the *kuya/ate* culture for a more active and responsible way of approaching this crisis. For example, Indonesians have the concept of *kakak tertua*, the eldest brother/ sister who are entrusted with some responsibilities over his/her younger siblings. In Vietnam, they call them *anh* (older brother) and *chi* (older sister). Though UK has definitely better quality education compared to Southeast Asian countries, the concept is still useful in encouraging the youth to get serious with their studies and never take for granted the quality education their government can provide them.

Conclusion

The problems in the Philippine educational system are complex. It would take so much time to cope with the lack of physical resources, low salaries of teachers, lack of competent teachers, low student motivation, increasing cost of education and intensifying dichotomy between private and public schools. It would definitely take not only the education sector to

solve this crisis. It calls for total economic development of the country. However, as youths, we can do something to lessen this heavy burden by being proactive and responsible citizens.

Through the big brother/ big sister culture, we develop a sense of respect, concern, volunteerism, rapport and acceptance – the values essential in building a community. The experience of “Tulong-Dunong” proved that by serving as *kuyas* of younger students in the community, high school students are able to assist grade school students in their academic needs. Moreso, they are able to proactively partake in the responsibility that must not be shouldered by teachers alone, but by each and every citizen.

U.P. SIBOL has proven the replicability of this program through its regular tutorial activities for grade school, high school, and even college students. Moreover, youth leaders from Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam and UK agree on the adaptability of this program. I therefore conclude that the solution to our educational crisis should begin in each of us. Through initiatively taking our individual roles, we collectively alleviate the educational systems worldwide. Ideal as it may sound, but through the big brother/ big sister culture, it is indeed possible and practical.

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