

That Elusive Quality Higher Education

■ By Ramil Andag, with interview by Pepito Frias

“SANA makaya naming mapatapos ng pag-aaral ang aming mga anak...hindi ko alam. Harinawa.” (“I hope that we could afford to send our children to school until they graduate. I’m not sure, though. I just keep hoping.”) As schools opened this June, this uncertainty over their financial capability to see all their children finish college was expressed by Ruth Damasco of Leveriza, Malate.

Her dream of getting a college degree brought Damasco, a 49-year-old native of Tolosa, Leyte, to Metro Manila at an early age. However, hard times and financial constraints made her stop after high school and work in a printing press where she met Efren, who would become her

husband. Efren has been out of work for the past four years, after he was laid off from his last job in a hotel in Manila. Presently, Ruth single-handedly sustains their family by working in a candle-making project of their community



White picket fence: for the vast majority of school-age Filipino children, school remains off-limits.

organization, Alay Kapwa. She earns roughly P500.00 a week.

Ruth and Efren’s unremitting pursuit of that elusive college education is being continued through their 7 children. With a modest subsidy from their community organization, Ruth’s eldest child was able to graduate from college and now works

in a fast food chain. Another daughter is working so she could send herself to school. One child has stopped working due to ill health, but Ruth and Efren still face the daunting challenge of sending four other children to school.

The plight of Ruth and Efren is not unique, for this is also the story of millions of other Filipino families who dream of a future free from want. Theirs are the dreams, aspirations and uncertainties of a multitude of



More difficult than the 3 Rs: young boys, forced by extreme poverty to live off garbage, learn life’s bitter lessons from the dumps.

families battling hard times.

In a country where poverty incidence of families stands at 24.7% (2003), and where most families live below the poverty line, education is given much premium. It is viewed as the road to a better lot in life. Indeed, education is valued not only as an empowerment right, but as a ticket out of poverty.

Despite this, education remains forbidden to most Filipinos. Some families just like Ruth and Efren's can only dream of a college degree against a backdrop of an ever-increasing cost of education, the feeble purchasing power of the peso, and bleak employment opportunities for family members of working age. Even for those lucky enough to have jobs, security of tenure, as shown by the retrenchment of Efren, is not assured.

This is validated by Ruth when she intimated, "*Malaki ang kaibahan noon sa ngayon. Noon, medyo mas malaki ang kinikita, samantalang ngayon, lumiit na nga ang kita tumaas pa ang gastusin sa eskwelahan ng mga bata.*" (Times have changed. We used to earn more; but now, not only has our income shrunk, the cost of education has also spiraled.)

Ruth used to work for their community-based organization seven days a week, taking home P250.00 a day. But at the moment, she only works two days a week at the same rate. Meanwhile, the school expenses of her children have increased way beyond her means.

That getting an education remains impossible for the majority is borne out by the low classroom survival rate. *Human Rights Agenda*, a publication by the U.P. Institute of Human Rights, reports that out of 100 children who enter grade school, only 67 are able to finish elementary. Of this number, only 50 finish high school. Eventually, only 20 obtain a college degree.

These figures belie the promise made by President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo during the early part of her term as the 14th President of the country, when she pledged that "*Everyone of school age will be in school in an uncrowded classroom, in surroundings conducive to learning.*"

Not only is education out of



When school facilities are non-existent: this grade-schooler is obliged to haul his own chair to class.

"Noon umuupo kami sa semento dahil kulang sa upuan." "Ngayon, ang anak kong si Lovely, maiinit daw ang classroom tapos madami sila, 40 ata sa isang klase kaya kulang din sa mga kagamitan," she added.

bounds to a lot of Filipinos, it is also rapidly deteriorating.

The execrable quality of Philippine education is mainly a result of the minuscule budget allocated to the education sector, resulting in shortages in teachers, school facilities and vital infrastructures. Teachers are overworked, facilities, if provided, are substandard, and infrastructures are not enough. With inferior education, it is not surprising that Filipino students hardly learn anything, as made plain by the alarmingly high percentage of students who fail



in high school and college achievement and readiness tests. Figures reveal that an appalling 97.9% of students who took the National Achievement Test (NAT) in 2004 failed the examination. Similarly, 92% of those who took the High School Readiness Test (HSRT) in the same year failed the said exam.

The scarcity of school materials and necessary structures which was experienced by Ruth at the Emmanuel Roxas High School during her time are still the same wretched conditions being experienced by one of her daughters, Lovely, now a Sixth grader.

"Noon umuupo kami sa semento dahil kulang sa upuan," Ruth reminisced. "Ngayon, ang anak kong si Lovely, maiinit daw

ang classroom tapos madami sila, 40 ata sa isang klase kaya kulang din sa mga kagamitan," she added. (In my time, we used to sit on cement floors because there were not enough chairs. Now my daughter complains that they are packed in poorly-ventilated rooms. And there are not enough educational facilities.)

That the age-old woes facing the educational system in the country continue to hound the present generation of students is a testament to the fact that education, as a sector, has never been prioritized by the Philippine government.

Even as some measures are adopted and policies are enacted to address these perennial issues, these are, at best, stop-gap. They are not designed to address the core of the problem. If the government wants to seriously solve the problems of the education sector, then it should shift expenditures and prioritize education, instead of allocating the bulk of its budget to debt servicing.

For a lot of Filipinos, education may be the only way out of grinding penury. If the government seriously wants the millions of Filipinos to escape the mires of poverty, then it must open up access to education for the poor majority – an education that must be, first of all, way above the quality of what it offers at present. Unless the government rescues the education sector, college degrees for Ruth and Efren's children, and for millions of children from destitute families, will remain an elusive dream.

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