

Transcription

Bro. Armin A. Luistro, FSC's transcribed speech at the 14th Conference of Philippine Schools Overseas

Magandang Umaga po sa inyong lahat. Assalam Alaikum. (At) Good morning to everyone.

I have forty-four days, including my beloved Usec. Mary Grace Tirona, Usec. Aco (Ciriaco) Lagunsad. Forty-four days remaining in this administration. And that is why, with an exclamation point, I can say the Best is Yet to Come! I look forward to a year of Sabbatical. After serving six years in government, levity aside; I think this gathering is a wonderful way of transitioning both for you, for us, and for the administration. And the clarion call is for us to look at where we are today. More than envision where we want to go in the next few years.

I'd like to put myself in the shoes of Filipinos who go abroad or overseas and begin to understand for myself the big struggle of somebody who has left from major soils, shores; and go to a land that is at least, initially foreign, if not, different. I think there are two big struggles that is (sic) part of the journey of anyone who finds himself or herself as a refugee or a migrant; whether that's by choice, or because of circumstances that push one to be away from home.

Some cultures easily assimilate the new culture where they find themselves in, like seed that's planted in the desert. A new seed may wish to just take on the survival skills that will allow it to adjust to that harsh environment. And by doing so, leave(s) behind those that it carries within its DNA; things that would rather come naturally; in another environment.

The other big temptation for a cultural community that finds itself in a different environment is to create a ghetto. And there are many examples of such cultural communities that did one or the other. Groups that have moved to another land and have, over the years, (sometimes as early as the second generation) lost everything except maybe their names, have lost their roots, and have sought to become forever implanted in the new culture. Other groups just simply insulate themselves; build residences that are close to each other, their own restaurants that are exclusive, their own schools that teach only their language and culture and create that ghetto where the larger community, that hosts them, are (sic) unable to penetrate.

At the end of the day, I think this is what you all face but this also what every Filipino, even in one's homeland, faces with: one moves from one's home city or province to another. I dare say that both

extremes are fatal to the identity, the soul, of the person moving. But also, I think, fatal to the interaction that should normally happen between the host community and the new visitor.

The K to 12 reform can be contextualized in a similar fashion. And I suppose, one of the best groups that I imagine understands so much better the challenge of K to 12: it should be the Philippine Schools Overseas.

As you've ran these schools for Filipinos in a foreign land, you know more than we do here in the Philippines, that we remain among the three countries in the world with less than twelve years of basic education before university. The other two remaining countries are in Africa. I will not name them for diplomatic reasons.

But the K to 12 reform is not about adding two years only. If it were, it would have been the easiest reform for government 'cos the only thing(s) you need to do is to add a budget, hire more teachers and build more classrooms. While those remain as critical components of the reform, the heart of the reform is so much deeper and takes on a longer process. Someone asked me "*how long will this reform take?*" I said "at least one generation." Because educators like you and me know that maybe in other aspects of governance, you can do quick fixes, traffic, taxes, and infrastructure. But teachers also know that the heart of education is actually planting seeds. The good news is the seed will grow on its own. The bad news is you will not grow to see the fruits and taste and harvest what will they grow in the next generation. But that's the best that will come. IT will surely come. But for time being, that seed will have to dig itself under fertile soil before you can harvest its fruits.

Aside from the two years in the K to 12 reform, I have a secret: It's actually three years; because aside from the two years of eleven and twelve in senior high school, we've actually added a kinder in the whole program. And that makes the Philippine Basic Education a thirteen-year program beginning with five-year olds ending at eighteen. It just so happened that eighteen is just the right age for person to be employed in most countries. So that weaning period allows us to put in our most important investment on our learners who, in the next two decades, three decades, will be enjoying this--the favored sweet spot, the demographic sweet spot and will allow the country to actually be at par with the rest of the world.

But aside from with the two years--three years of additional educational experience in Basic Ed., part of the reform is about the curriculum. And this will involve your schools, your principals, your administrators and your teachers as part of that cascading in the paradigm shift of a curriculum that

moves from the teacher-as-center and the teacher-on-the-stage to a (sic) an educational experience and a (sic) learning where the learner now is at the center.

You talk about 21st century skills and that is what the reform is all about. It's not just about a phenomenon and a reform that's in the Philippines. It's a worldwide phenomenon that's partly pushed because of technology that allows us to discover the unlimited possibilities that you find in the World Wide Web. I'm happy, for example, that the Philippine schools overseas which applied for the senior high school program. Because of human and time limitations, we had to innovate. We could not send teams to send ocular visits to your schools. But given this challenge, with your help, we were able to develop an ocular inspection of Philippine Schools Overseas using Skype™ and FaceTime®. And have found it too successful that we figured we would wish to pursue this as a normal way where by Philippine Schools Overseas can have FaceTime® with the Department of Education in Manila.

We have experienced and we have documented the schools that have applied and that have received permits for the senior high school. And we will be using this perhaps as our normal way of engaging you.

But the curriculum talks about 21st century skills where we don't deal anymore with too much memorization, and content that's packed. More than ensuring that our students know how to solve problems on their own, coming up with assessments where they're able to put together, integrate their knowledge and apply it to something real and updated. Opening up the rigid boxes of our assessment so that we move from a test question that has only one correct answer, to one that challenges students and teachers to be creative and innovative and explore beyond the box. And as in, as discovered by our millennials, the real challenge is not only to keep our students competing with each other for the top ranked grade; but in real life, the successful ones are not those that are just academically on top. One of the most important skills in the 21st century is really *teamwork*. And how students can come up with the projects, solve problems, do critical thinking by pulling together all of their ideas so that it's not just the product of one-man-one-woman's thinking.

I will push the ante further and say something that's contentious; if not, sensitive to you.

Sometimes, schools do exactly the same. Schools tend to assimilate the same competition and rivalry that we teach our students and we have cases of Philippine Schools Overseas fighting with each other rather than learning to work together. That's not only through our schools that the same reality with Philippine associations in different countries; it's the same thing with politics and as USec. Mary Grace commented "*we should allow that dust to clear.*"

At the end of the day, (schools) no one's school can survive in this dog-eat-dog world of the global community. Believe you, me, you can fight with each other; you will not survive. The best examples of successful schools, even the top-ranked schools come from the experience of best practice of consortiums, of working together and collaboration. If these are skills that we wish to pass on to our students, I think that is one challenge that I wish to leave with you in the communities where you find each other.

Yes, we don't have to keep agreeing with each other; but your schools, our schools, will be so much better, can be more successful if we learn to look for those that bind rather than divide. And yes, you will find areas where you disagree but with just a little more effort you can still look for that hidden Filipino trait that will allow us to still come together.

At the end of the day, we can bicker and fight but in our heart of hearts we still remain Filipinos.

In K to 12, because we are serious about the learner at the center of this educational process, we have created the tracks, and the streams, and the specializations that will allow every learner to discover for himself or herself what is a good match with my interests, with my natural abilities and with what industry in the world needs today. That's not an easy match. There has to be some guidance, some research about what's available as well as a judgement call and aimed decision on the part of the student; hopefully concurred by the parent and the teacher.

But at the end of the day, the learner will have to make that choice. And those are difficult choices. But by age sixteen, the student will have to be guided so that (that) life choice, though not rigid, will at least be made and initiated (*na*).

The Aquino Administration will step down in forty-four days and in which time here in the Philippines, at least, the Grade 11 would have started and will be on its second week like a mother that just gave birth. *"I will have to be weaned away from the little baby."* But such is life.

And some people ask me *"will it continue?"* All reforms will have to be based not on a person but on the collective effort in the conviction of those who are the actual players on the ground. The choice of whether this reform will be adopted, will be enhanced or strengthened is really in your hands. Those of you who work with the bigger and global community outside the country know the challenges of what it means to run a school where students are mobile, where teachers are mobile, and where you have to adapt standards and benchmarks that are understood by the rest of the world. So I have no doubt that

this is at the very least a seed that we have planted a possibility and an opportunity and it is up to you to take that on or say, let somebody else make that decision for us. But I will be remised in my duty if I just stuck with the K to 12 reform as a policy reform in education. I think at the end of the day, you will have to discover the very, very, heart of the K to 12 reform. And I've shared this with you in another PSO gathering somewhere in Palawan.

I can't get out of that imagery of the *manananggal*; that wonderful, feared creature. (I think, I don't know in which other culture you'd find the *manananggal*.) It could be a man or a woman that in Filipino, the root word is "*tanggal*". The lower torso can separate itself from the upper torso. And by doing so, the *manananggal* can fly away from its roots seeking another persons (sic), in other cases, a baby, to suck its life-blood. I told you in that conference that (sic) mythological creatures speak about what is at the heart of who we are as Filipinos. And I thought that's what Filipinos overseas may find themselves in unwittingly, a soul that is separated from itself. One part of me says that I'm a Filipino, another part of me says I am not there. I am in another culture. And whether it is by choice or because you are forced to do it; in our mythical story, the way to kill a *manananggal* is to disallow the separated body from reattaching. So you bring with you salt and sprinkle it on the lower torso (or I think in some provinces, *bawang*.) It's fatal for someone to find himself in a situation where "part of me is separate from who I really am."

Part of the K to 12 reform is an attempt to bring together what is at the core of our culture, our history, our tradition as Filipinos; and find its niche in the reform and in the knowledge and the competencies that we pass onto the next generation. It's not a matter of just absorbing content and pedagogies that are foreign whether that's in Calculus, Algebra, Chemistry, Botany. Isn't it part of who we are, part of our DNA, to understand concepts from a Filipino perspective? And whether you're teaching a Filipino in Cotabato City, or in Davao or in Manila—or in Riyadh, isn't that DNA of how we understand the world, part of that educational reform? So part of the continuing search and challenge for curriculum writers and teachers is to localize and bring the content to a level where we begin to understand also the Filipino psyche and how we're able to connect modern knowledge and global knowledge with what is truly Filipino.

I've already said that part of the challenge of education is to have roots and wings. To be a *manananggal*, yes, but to keep that freedom to fly when we need to but also the freedom to return home and reattach oneself with our own identity as Filipinos. In one sense, Philippine Schools Overseas take on a very important challenge. No school in the Philippines can do this. You're the only group of

schools that can actually lead the way to showing us educators how Filipinos can be global citizens. As you develop your curriculum, push for reform in your respective areas, think of your contribution not only to the thirty-two thousand students that are in Philippine Schools Overseas, but think of the model of education that you are creating that will allow even teachers and students here in the country to think of education as a way of bringing our citizens, not only to understand their role and their contribution as Filipino citizens but in this new reality where we find Filipinos as citizens of the world. And no other time in the history of the Republic has overseas Filipinos participated so well in the elections. If that is a sign that we are coming of age (in terms of understanding the old model is “I’m a Filipino either born here somewhere with a Filipino lineage; and if I’m in the Philippines I’m a full Filipino. If I’m somewhere else, I’m a *manananggal*.) I’d like to disabuse that and say that is when somebody drew the geographical boundaries and said “You can only be a FULL Filipino if you are physically here.”

The world has changed. Transportation facilities have changed. Communication lines have changed. But our own schools, your schools overseas, will have to lead the way in teaching us here in the Philippines that the Filipino is now meant to be part of that global village. How do we go about it? Philippine Schools Overseas will have the experience and the best practice to share that even back home. It’s not about educational reform only; it’s about who we are. It’s about that hunger for what is Filipino even when you are in foreign land. It is that heart-throbbing desire and homesickness that bids us to come home—that will have to be part of the challenge of every teacher, administrator, as we pass on our DNA to the next generation. It cannot be but the best for them, and for us.

Usec. Mary Grace, I am so sure our theme has an exclamation point.

Maraming salamat, see you somewhere!