

The Current State of Education in the Philippines: Traces and Glimmers of Hope amid the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Alexis Deodato Itao, Cebu Normal University

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Pre-Pandemic Context

In its current structure, the education sector in the Philippines is overseen by three government agencies: the Department of Education (DepEd) for basic education (from kinder up to senior high school), the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) for tertiary and graduate education (college and graduate school), and the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) for various technical-vocational education and trainings.

As in the rest of the world, the Philippine education sector is among those that have taken the hardest blows since the Covid-19 pandemic began to wreak havoc in the country in March. It is an understatement to say that everyone was caught unprepared; the enormity of the impact that Covid-19 is having on the lives of many is of epic proportions, far outweighing the effects of the most disastrous typhoons that have ravaged the archipelago. However, to immediately jump into the scene and describe the scenario on the ground without regard for its history would not yield us a complete picture of what is really happening. To fully appreciate the educational panorama in the Philippines at present, it is necessary to take a few steps backward and set off from the time prior to the Covid-19 ruckus.

Even before Covid-19 started to make waves across the globe this year, the country's education sector was already a boiling pot of issues. We do not have to look that far to see what some of these issues are. We can begin from the basic education level.

Just last year, the DepEd had to cope with a staggering classroom shortage of 34,000 (Quismorio 2019). This compelled many schools to fall back on congested classrooms, a perennial quandary that has never been fully addressed until the present. Last year, too, like in the previous years, the country also lacked elementary and high school teachers, and such shortage "is even larger when teacher credentials are factored in" (García & Weiss 2019). These two issues alone bring about humongous negative consequences, especially affecting the quality of basic education across the nation. As UNICEF Philippines aptly states, "many Filipino children miss out on opportunities to learn. The number of children accessing education, the quality of education they receive, and the condition of their learning environment are causes for concern" (UNICEF Philippines n.d.).

While we can still say that the lack of classrooms and teachers does not yet spell total debacle, the biggest slap in the face for Philippine basic education likewise came last year – an added insult to injury. The 2018 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) results, released on 3 December 2019, revealed that out of 79 countries, the Philippines ranked last (79th) in the area of reading comprehension and second to the last (78th) in the areas of mathematics and science (Schleicher 2019). This embarrassing and shoddy showing in the 2018 PISA – which tested mostly 15-year old students from different high schools in the country – seemed to open a can of worms; previously ignored issues and problems that have been running through the entire Philippine educational system came out into the open once more. Suddenly, the whole nation began to make sense what a Jesuit educator had decried just months before the release of the 2018 PISA results: the education field in the country is in a sorry state due to miseducation being systemic on one hand, and because, on the other, quite a number of educational institutions "are weak and they can be bought" (Lucenio 2018).

As if it were not enough humiliation that the Philippines fared quite badly in the 2018 PISA, the country finished low as well in the 2018 World Competitiveness Ranking conducted by the International Institute for Management Development (IMD), a Swiss-based business school. As The ASEAN Post Team (2018) reports, "While countries like Malaysia and Indonesia managed to move up in the [said ranking] ... several countries in Asia also dropped a few places. The most significant drop, however, was in the Philippines." The main reason is that the quality of education in the nation has slumped.

As plain as a pikestaff, higher education in the country has also suffered a quality downtrend. According to former CHED Chairperson Dr. Patricia Licuanan (2017), "deteriorating quality that has led to skills-jobs mismatch, low productivity in research and development, and a deficient science and innovation culture" is among the persistent issues in many colleges and universities. Worse yet, the higher education system is like a quagmire of mess, having "questionable and corrupt practices" that continue to prevail until today (Licuanan 2017). The country's technical-vocational subsector, meanwhile, has likewise its own share of controversies, anomalies, and issues (Manila Standard 2019).

With all its ignominies, the music at play in the country's education sector may understandably be lugubrious, but its spirit is certainly not crushed and defeated. Things may be bleak, but everything is not hopeless. While 2018 may have been a disappointing year, it also marked the first implementation of *The Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act*, a law signed just the previous year and primarily meant to institutionalise free tuition and exemption from other fees in state universities and colleges (SUCs) and in local universities and colleges (LUCs) in the Philippines. That, however, is just one side of the coin. On the other side, the law is also meant to ensure that college students throughout the country receive quality tertiary education.

Of course, we are not there yet and we are not denying that quality education at all levels is still a work in progress nationwide. Notwithstanding its unfortunate series of downturns, on the whole, Philippine education is not really regressing backward; it is slowly moving forward, taking small baby steps, but always onward. In fact, something good came out of the lamentable 2018 PISA performance: a new and firmer resolve to do better. The DepEd vowed to improve the quality of basic education through “aggressive reforms” that will be orchestrated as a national collective effort (Mocon-Ciriaco 2019). And it's not just the DepEd; the CHED and the TESDA are also each on track in finding ways to reform for the better. For example, the CHED finally got to implement the New General Education core courses in all private and public Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) starting in academic year 2018-2019 after several years of planning. The good news is that to realize and sustain various educational reforms, the Philippine government has allocated the largest portion of its 2020 budget to the education sector (Department of Budget and Management 2020).

So this was the actual predicament of Philippine education before and when Covid-19 arrived: it was already starting to rise on its feet when it was brought down to its knees again. But like a nine-lived cat that quickly bounces back from a fall, Philippine education is now slowly getting back on its feet. Amid the Covid-19 pandemic, traces and glimmers of hope abound; the general morale of the whole education workforce is not one of despondency but of resiliency. And just as we can only better appreciate the stars in the darkness of the night, in the same way, we can also better appreciate the scattered flickers of light in Philippine education if we view them against the backdrop of the present pandemic.

Philippine Education in the Time of Pandemic

The Philippines had its first confirmed Covid-19 case as early as January 30, when a 38-year old Chinese woman from Wuhan, where the coronavirus is widely believed to have originated, tested positive (Sabillo 2020). A little over a month later, with already close to 150 confirmed Covid-19 cases and a dozen fatalities, lockdown became inevitable. And that was exactly what happened: by mid-March, most cities and provinces were placed under community quarantines, effectively locking down the whole country (Overseas Security Advisory Council 2020).

Thus from mid- to late March, face-to-face classes began to be suspended and schools closed in practically the entire Philippines. But in no way did this mean that all scholastic activities had ceased,

especially in schools that already adopted the August-May academic calendar. Toquero (2020) succinctly described what happened in the higher education subsector:

The country immediately opted for online learning. Some teachers recorded and uploaded their lessons online for the students to access and some were even more innovative ... but a greater majority of teachers are not prepared to deal with online education. After three days of the national memorandum for alternative delivery, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) suspended the online form of instruction since there was an increase in the number of the students, including teachers who clamoured against the online mode of learning due to different factors. The truth is, numerous higher education institutions, both private and state colleges and universities in the Philippines are not prepared to implement this online system.

In short, the rather hasty and aggressive implementation of online education in the early days of the countrywide lockdown was a fiasco. In spite of this reality, teachers and students were hardly given any respite. Instead, most HEIs in the country continued to demand for the submission or fulfilment of academic requirements, adamantly refusing to confer passing grades to students who could not submit or fulfill them. The lone wolf during this period was Ateneo de Manila University (ADMU). In an unprecedented move, ADMU cut short the ongoing semester because of the threat of Covid-19 and gave passing marks to all its eligible non-graduating students, including those on probation, without anymore encumbering them with petty requirements, thus automatically promoting them to the next academic level (Magsambol 2020a). Additionally, “ADMU also announced that students will receive a refund amounting to P20,000 from tuition fees and 60% from lab fees” (Magsambol 2020a).

Still, majority of the country’s HEIs could not and did not want to duplicate ADMU’s audacious decision. “We are against the mass promotion, which means the semester will not be finished, everybody will just pass,” said Albert Madrigal, the director of the Association of Local Colleges and Universities (Mercado 2020). For this, “only six state universities and colleges (SUCs) have opted to give their students a mass promotion ... [although] 79 SUCs also adopted a no failing grade policy, giving students remedial classes or one year to complete their course requirements” (Aurelio 2020). Accordingly, academic integrity, quality, and content could get compromised in mass promotion; but that’s not how many teachers and students see it, especially in a unique and special time like we are in at the moment. For them, effecting mass promotion would be the epitome of “education with compassion” since it “entails a universal pass that will allow students to proceed to the next academic year regardless of their academic status throughout the second semester” (Bagayas 2020).

To the dismay and disappointment of many, mass promotion did not get the stamp of approval of most HEIs across the country. As a consequence, numerous college and even graduate students were left with no choice but to comply with the academic requirements that they needed to submit in order to get passing grades. But then, even if the submissions of these requirements were all online, one of the biggest hurdles that remain is that many students lack internet access for either of these two reasons: financial constraint or geographical location. Poor students do not have the money to constantly have access to the internet, while there are also those who, aside from their economic poverty, live in remote places where the internet signal is way too weak or completely absent. One

student, for example, had to climb a mountain just to send her class requirement to her professor (Magsambol 2020b). And there could be many more students like her in other places of the country. One particular student, regrettably, “died after looking for signal to submit her report online. She was Kristelyn Villance, a sophomore criminology student from Capiz State University – Dumarao Campus” (Losa 2020). On the part of many college and graduate students, then, the resulting aftermath of having to accomplish a ton of work and of trying to beat deadlines in the time of pandemic was undue stress and pressure, and even death to one unfortunate young soul.

The general experience of most students in schools with June-March calendar was different, be they HEIs or basic education institutions. In their case, the school year was already drawing near its conclusion when the suspension of classes and the closure of schools began. So if there were some tasks to be accomplished, they would never compare to what the August-May students had to get done in terms of volume and scope. To their advantage, most schools under the DepEd still adopted the June-March calendar. Although the DepEd mandated that any remaining 4th Quarter Examinations should still be given, where this was not possible due to imposed lockdowns, schools were permitted and given specific guidelines to compute the final grades of students even without their 4th Quarter Examinations scores (Department of Education 2020a). However, in the few schools that already shifted to the August-May calendar, the experience of their studentry was no different from that of the August-May higher education students. Elementary and high school students alike were bombarded with home-based assignments that were not only taxing but also frustrating. What ensued was that in the elementary level – and this is something one will not easily read anywhere – many parents were the ones who did most, if not all, of their children’s assignments. Ate Vilma Cuneta (not her real name), a full-time mother of two young children enrolled in a small elementary school in a major metropolis, has this to say:

The bulk of assignments was an overkill of some sort. They were too many so that the kids, left on their own, could surely not have managed to finish them on time, let alone accomplish each task satisfactorily. We had an abhorrent feeling that what was going on was no longer quality, but “quantity” education. Almost each subject teacher was asking too much, albeit almost none of them had discussed the remaining lessons on which most of the assignments were based. As a parent, I could not just sit down and watch the kids grapple with their assignments without helping them. Many parents I know even did more: they did their children’s assignments themselves, with very little to zero help from their children; and the teachers were all privy to this.

Like in the case of many college and graduate students, internet connectivity is also a big issue among basic education students. Poor parents cannot afford to always give their children access to the internet; they likewise cannot provide such necessary gadgets as computer/laptop, printer, scanner, external hard drive, etc. Hence, when it became apparent that in the upcoming school year classes would mostly have to utilize online platforms and programs, one tragic incident happened: “A distraught 19-year-old high school student in the Philippines has hanged himself after worrying his family would not be able to afford electronic equipment required for him to study online in the coming academic year” (Calleja 2020).

Internet connectivity is not exclusively the problem of students. To prepare for the “new normal” education setup, a group of teachers from “New Leyte National High School and New Leyte Elementary School in Maco, Davao de Oro braved the rainy weather and traveled to a higher location to get a better internet connection and attend the web seminar of the Department of Education” (Revita 2020). A similar situation happened in the Mountain Province: four public school teachers from Maducayan Elementary School walked nine kilometers and even crossed a river in order to reach Barangay Saliok just for an internet signal (Casilao 2020). And there could still be many more teachers out there facing the same struggle. Since we do not know their exact number, we could only speculate how many they are in reality; but for sure, they must be in the thousands.

The DepEd itself acknowledged that “tens of thousands of teachers lack gadgets and internet connection needed for online classes during the coronavirus pandemic” (ABS-CBN News 2020). And even “among those who have gadgets, only 41 percent have internet connection, 49 have internet signal in their area but no connection of their own, and 10 percent lack both” (ABS-CBN News 2020). This is a pressing issue that continues to afflict the basic education subsector in the Philippines.

Another pressing issue concerns the uncertain fate of “some 400 private schools [that] are at risk of closure due to the lack of enrollees amid the coronavirus pandemic, a survey by the Coordinating Council of Private Educational Associations of the Philippines (COCOPEA) found” (Ornedo 2020). Moreover, the same “survey also showed around 370,000 private school teachers went on no work, no pay status, or have taken pay cuts since the COVID-19 pandemic started” (Fermin 2020). For, as early as May, COCOPEA already foresaw around two million students leaving “private schools as Filipino families struggle with the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic”; or there could even be a drop of up to 50 percent or more in the usual enrolment statistics (Ramos 2020a). It is for this reason that the affected private school teachers have turned and appealed to the government, asking for some monetary subsidy (Ornedo 2020). Whether their appeal will be heeded by the government is another story. “The government will have to spend some P2.4 billion to provide at least P8,000 each to 300,000 private school teachers,” DepEd Undersecretary Tonisito Umali said (Domingo 2020).

To complete the educational panoramic picture, the technical-vocational education subsector in the country was neither spared from the adverse effects of the pandemic. TESDA’s 116,194 scholarship slots “were affected as its funds were realigned for the government’s cash assistance to families affected by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) crisis” (Hallare 2020b).

Traces and Glimmers of Hope amid the Pandemic

If one were solely to view from a distance the educational crises in the Philippines before and during the Covid-19 pandemic, one would likely get the impression that its education sector has come to a standstill, what with its enormous amount of problems preventing it from moving on forward. If one were to take a closer look, however, that is never the case. As surprising as it sounds (because of its mountain of issues and string of letdowns), before the advent of Covid-19, the country’s education

sector was actually taking leaps and bounds in its journey forward. This is not to say it was already ready to fully take flight and soar high above the education sectors of some of its neighboring Asian countries. Nevertheless, the many reforms it has undergone in the last seven years alone are more than enough to reshape its landscape. The pandemic may have greatly slowed down its progress, but the Philippine education sector has never really come to a complete halt – nay, far from it. There are traces and glimmers of hope flickering in many areas in the country’s vast educational field. And of all these scattered sparks and glints, twelve seem to stand out among the rest, forming together an inspiring beacon of light and hope for every Filipino who knows and cherishes the inestimable value of education.

First, despite apprehensions and fears expressed by countless parents and students, as of July 15, some 20,220,507 learners nationwide have already enrolled in different public and private schools for the upcoming school year set to begin in August, the DepEd announced (Hernando- Malipot 2020b). These enrollees are from kindergarten to senior high school, as well as learners with disabilities and those taking the alternative learning system, and all in all, they comprise 72.7 percent of last school year’s 27.7 million enrolment turnout (Hernando-Malipot 2020b). This number shows that the education sector in the Philippines is teeming with promise. The current statistics is even expected to still go up in the coming days and weeks, with many private schools still accepting enrollees until August. And while we do not have the numerical figures yet how many in all will pursue college, graduate, and technical-vocational education, the hopes are high that a significant turnout will be had.

Second, the DepEd and the CHED are each implementing a Learning Continuity Plan (LCP) that not only considers online education as the sole option, but also looks at the possible use of radio and television for students who have no access to either a computer/laptop or the internet (Ramos 2020b). As Education Secretary Leonor Briones explained, the crafted LCP “is not a one-size-fit-all policy ... [but one] responsive to the context and available resources of the schools and the learners” (Hernando-Malipot 2020a). In the DepEd’s LCP, the preferred approach is Blended Learning (BL). Originally, the DepEd’s designed BL approach aimed to combine “face-to-face with any or a mix of online distance learning, modular distance learning, and TV/Radio-based Instruction ... However, while face-to-face classes are not yet allowed, [BL] means the combination of the various distance learning modalities,” Briones clarified (Hernando-Malipot 2020a). Whatever the case, the DepEd is preparing well so that there will be “various learning delivery modalities to suit every learner’s need and capacity” (Hernando-Malipot 2020a). The CHED, for its part, is adopting a Flexible Learning (FL) approach whose main objective is “to provide learners with the most flexibility on the learning content, schedules, access, and innovative assessment, making use of digital and non-digital tools” (Commission on Higher Education 2020). All these plans and approaches are real guarantees that Philippine education will carry on even with the constant threat of Covid-19. The DepEd, as a matter of fact, already presented a recommendation to President Rodrigo Duterte that face-to-face classes be allowed in some schools, particularly in identified low risk areas, though social distancing and regular hand-washing will be enforced (CNN Philippines Staff 2020).

Third, to concretely address the problem of internet connectivity experienced by many teachers and students, the national government, through the DepEd, “is allocating P700 million to provide internet service to 7,000 schools nationwide, in preparation for the country’s shift from basic education system to online learning in view of the coronavirus pandemic” (Ramos 2020b). Aside from this, the DepEd is also bent on providing “475,650 tablets and 634,877 desktop computers for its 21.4 million public school students and 190,574 laptops for its public school teachers” by the end of this year (Bernardo & Domingo 2020). And since there are not enough laptops yet for all its 847,467 public teachers, the DepEd, through a memorandum, is allowing them “to bring home DepEd-bought devices for use in distance learning” (Ramos 2020b).

Fourth, having seen the present predicament in the education sector, a number of national and local government leaders have come to the rescue. The local government of Manila, through the initiative of Mayor Isko Moreno, has allotted a total of P994 million in order for teachers and students to adapt to the proposed BL when classes begin in the upcoming school year (Hallare 2020a). With this amount, “a total of 110,000 tablets will be distributed to the city’s Kinder to Grade 12 public school students, while 11,000 laptops will be given to the city’s 10,300 public school teachers” (Hallare 2020a). In Pasig City, through the leadership of Mayor Vico Sotto, the local government is setting aside P1.2 billion to purchase learning devices like laptops and tablets for its public school students and some teachers (Santos 2020c). In Makati City, Mayor Abby Binay announced on July 13 that its 2,500 school teachers in elementary and junior and senior high school will each receive a brand-new laptop for school year 2020-2021 from the local government (Santos 2020b). Makati City will also be giving away a learner’s package and free five-hour internet load daily for school year 2020-2021 to each of its 85,000 students from preschool to senior high school, with every individual learner’s package containing an On-The-Go (OTG) flash drive, printed modules, and two washable face masks in a pouch (Santos 2020a). In Quezon City, P2.9 billion has been allocated to provide tablets for its 175,000 public high school students and internet allowance for its teachers, Mayor Joy Belmonte shared (Mateo 2020). In Mindanao, the Davao City government led by Mayor Sara Duterte has set aside P50 million to help around 22,000 students whose parents have lost their income due to the pandemic, with 10,000 elementary students to get P1,500 each and some 6,000 high school students to get P3,000 each (Panti 2020). And there could be more similar initiatives by local government units around the country not in the news. On the national scene, two senators “have proposed that teachers be provided with allowance for Internet connection and laptops to unburden them of the extra expense with the shift to online learning” (Newsbytes 2020).

Fifth, since late March the education sector has seen an exponential increase in the number of free and informative webinars for teachers nationwide. Almost every major HEI has its own webinar series for its teachers, and several national professional organizations like the Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines (CEAP) and the Philippine Association for Teachers and Educators (PAFTE), among others, have been hosting high-quality webinars free of charge. These many webinars, with experts from various areas of specialization taking the helm, have been preparing and equipping teachers with fresh and new knowledge, providing them content, pedagogy, and up-to-date technological how-tos such as conducting online classes and utilizing available Learning Management

Systems. Of course, the DepEd and the CHED are each offering free webinars on a wide range of topics that could help and guide teachers to adjust to the “new normal” in the education field. What is more, many of these webinars are uploaded in Youtube; hence, they can be viewed and reviewed by teachers anytime. The TESDA, too, is offering a good number of free online courses, including a course on Covid-19 prevention in the workplace (Damicog 2020).

Sixth, another initiative of the national government, through the Department of Information and Communications Technology (DICT), is to partner with “leading teacher education institutions to develop and conduct a nationwide Digital Teachers Training Program in line with efforts to build digital capabilities for both teachers and students as a response to the new normal” (Ramos 2020b). In addition, “the DICT is [also] piloting the Digital Learners Project in Pinaglabanan Elementary School in San Juan in August 2020, which will provide gadgets, digital literacy training, and internet connectivity to the teachers and students” (Ramos 2020b). This means that more schools in the future will benefit from the Digital Learners Project. Initiatives like this more than indicate that the national government is not turning a blind eye to the needs of the education sector. The DICT on July 17, in fact, announced that it has already “earmarked 7.7 Billion Pesos on its proposed 2021 budget for the implementation of the Free Wi-Fi for All in Public Places and State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) Program” (Department of Information and Communication Technology 2020). With this substantial fund, the DICT targets “to establish 23,100 live sites by the end of 2021 ... [and] plans to deploy the most number of sites in public education institutions. 10,300 sites will be deployed in public schools while 1,804 sites will be deployed in SUCs and [TESDA] institutions” (Department of Information and Communication Technology 2020).

Seventh, even teachers in their 50s and 60s who have hitherto never shown any preference for technological integration in teaching have expressed genuine enthusiasm and interest in doing online classes and facilitating digital learning. Although it can always be said that they really have no other choice and that they are simply forced into adopting technology, it can also be said that the novel situation brought about by the pandemic has opened their eyes and softened their hearts to the new educational exigency; it has enabled them to embrace digital practices in learning and teaching so they could be a blessing and not a burden to the education sector. Here’s a particular case: Mrs. Sharon Santos (not her real name), a 62-year old education veteran who teaches in an elementary school in Cebu City, says that in her more than 40 years in the teaching profession, she has always preferred the traditional method of writing lessons on manila papers and using handmade visual aids that she herself cuts with some artistry. But now, she cannot apply her former teaching style. She does not feel bad, though, since integrating technology is no longer a dispensable option; it is a necessity in these times. Despite her trepidations at the outset, she feels glad that she is now learning new ways in teaching using various digital means. And Mrs. Santos is not alone; there are still teachers who are “allergic” to technology. Not all of them may be too happy about the shift to online education, but the reassuring fact is that they are all cooperating and making no small sacrifices in taking on new educational paradigms.

Eight, the lower house of the Philippine Congress has introduced new measures to strengthen the CHED and modernize HEIs amid the pandemic through three different but related House Bills (HB): HB 1855, HB 6449, and HB 1936. The first two “seek to strengthen the CHED by revising Republic Act (RA) 7722 or the Higher Education Act of 1994” (House of Representatives 2020). The last one, meanwhile, “seeks to provide additional appropriation to the Higher Education Development Fund to advance and strengthen the higher education sector in the country” (House of Representatives 2020). In explaining the rationale for the said bills, the House Committee on Higher and Technical Education “stressed that it has become necessary to harmonize the existing body of laws pertaining to the CHED and provide it with the necessary powers and functions to achieve its expanded mandate” (House of Representatives 2020).

Ninth, in late June, “President Rodrigo Duterte has signed a law institutionalizing Good Manners and Right Conduct (GMRC) and Values Education as core subjects in the K to 12 curriculum both in public and private schools” (Gita-Carlos 2020). The significance of this new law is that it will empower “our youth to contribute to nation-building while protecting their physical, moral, spiritual, intellectual, and social well-being ... [and it will likewise play a role] in strengthening our youth’s decision-making skills, attitude, and behaviors, especially in these critical times” (Department of Education 2020b). GMRC was originally taught in basic education schools for many years, but it got dissolved in 2013 when the K-12 Program of the DepEd started. GMRC’s reintroduction in the basic education level testifies to its value and importance. Parents can heave a sigh of relief that at least one subject will exclusively focus on character-building and values formation, and not on pure knowledge absorption and information acquisition.

Tenth, the suspension of classes and the closure of schools have never hampered the intellectual pursuit and fecundity of Filipino academics. There has been an upsurge of new and forthcoming publications that are particularly responsive and relevant to the present times. To mention a few, in the field of education, there is Toquero’s (2020) article that outlines the challenges and opportunities for higher education in the Philippines amid the Covid-19 pandemic. There is also Inocian’s (forthcoming), which shares some fresh and invaluable ideas on how Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) may be advanced “using culturally responsive methods.” In the field of social and political research, Maboloc’s (2020) asks who is “the most vulnerable during a pandemic” and argues that in such a time, “persons with disabilities are the most neglected sector in society.” Arambala’s (2020) offers a generous account of the political situation in his city of Ozamiz in the time of pandemic. In the medical field, the research article of Ting *et alii* (2020) is an insightful preview of how cancer patients in the Philippines have been treated during the early onslaught of Covid-19 in the country. Another article narrates the concrete steps taken by the Division of Medical Oncology of the Philippine General Hospital “to safeguard the mental health of its faculty and fellows” in the time of Covid-19 (Leones *et alii* 2020). And there are more articles that are worth mentioning, but limitation of space prevents us from including them all here. These intellectual outputs are a solid proof that Filipino academics remain active, though they may be quarantined in their own homes.

Eleventh, the pandemic has not dampened but rather strengthened the spirit of solidarity among Filipino teachers. While many private school teachers are facing an uncertain future, both the DepEd and the CHED have not remained silent and indifferent. They “have appealed for help for thousands of educators in smaller private schools, universities and colleges who could be displaced due to the COVID-19 outbreak and the quarantine restrictions imposed during the national health emergency” (Terrazola & Hernando-Malipot 2020). And by some twist of luck, their woes could soon be over as Deputy Speaker Mikee Romero already “proposed to include financial aid for private school teachers and personnel in the Bayanihan to Recover as One Bill ... [given that] private school teachers would continue to be without income until classes open in August” (Cervantes 2020).

Twelfth, while schools have closed their doors to their students, some have opened their hearts to the public, heroically reaching out to the local communities around them. They may not be in the news, but several Chemistry Departments and teachers in different schools in Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao have produced in their own laboratories alcohol that could kill coronaviruses and distributed them locally, especially to poor families. Several licensed guidance counselors and psychologists have also volunteered to offer free counseling and crisis intervention services not only to the members of the school community where they belong, but even to the wider public. Other schools have also gathered relief goods and donations and sent them to the most affected families near them. One prominent Catholic school in Cebu even lent its old campus to be used as a field center for Covid-19 patients. There are many more charitable and laudable initiatives taken by numerous schools. It is not necessary anymore to mention their names one by one, not really because they are too many, but rather because the motivation behind their action was not to seek publicity; they only wanted to help and be of service.

Despite and Beyond the Pandemic

As of July 16, the Philippines has already reached 61,266 confirmed Covid-19 cases, of which 38,183 are still active. This figure has “surpassed the projection of experts from University of the Philippines that the cases could hit 60,000 by the end of this month” (De Vera 2020). The total number of recoveries is now 21,440, while the death toll is 1,643 (De Vera 2020). In Southeast Asia, the Philippines is second only to Indonesia in all pandemic-related statistics.

The numbers say that the country’s rate of infections has not yet showed any signs of slowing. In spite of what the current situation entails, it is still not reason enough to be totally pessimistic on the future of Philippine education. The traces and glimmers of hope that flicker in its strewn field are not static and lifeless monuments that remind us of our tragic past; they are living testaments that remind us of what we have accomplished so far and what we are doing at present together as one Filipino people and as one educational community.

No, it is not misplaced optimism to rejoice at the tiny sparks and glints of hope in the country’s education sector. The threat of the pandemic may never go, but it would smack of ingratitude if we forego without due recognition the selfless efforts of many who genuinely care about the good of the education sector. It is they who, until today, continue to sacrifice time, energy, talent, and perhaps

personal resources and comfort, just to carry forward the dream of a painstakingly formed, reformed, and transformed Philippine education well into the future. Their dedication is priceless and cannot be praised enough, but their contribution should never be forgotten. To enumerate a few traces and glimmers of hope that subtly characterize the country's education sector is not to romanticize the current state of education in the Philippines, but to simply render appreciation where it is due.

Yes, if Philippine education had a face and only one word could describe it, that one word would be "bloody". Yet despite the countless bludgeonings it has suffered, its head remains unbowed. It continues to journey on, even if difficult challenges and seemingly insurmountable obstacles are on its path. It can be said, then, that Philippine education will not only survive but even thrive, especially when the Covid-19 pandemic will have been a closed chapter in the country's history.

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