

The Community School and Its Relevance to the Present Times

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Abstract

The community school, pioneered among others by Dr. Jose V. Aguilar, a superintendent of schools in Iloilo and later Dean of the U.P. College of Education, is distinguished by elementary schoolchildren tilling little plots of land in front of their countryside schools. The concept left a deep mark on Philippine education, and should become a historical concern of educators, especially in its use for the present times. For the community school did not only mean getting schoolchildren to learn the farming skills of their parents; it also meant a three-way partnership between teachers, parents, and community in the insurance of a practical education both for the nation's children, and the nation's adults as well, using the vernacular as medium of instruction. Can the community school concept be used at present to solve the problems of poverty, unemployment and underemployment, taking into account the possibility that the movement that spawned it was a potentially subversive pursuit?

While the community school may have been distinguished by the disingenuous little vegetable plots tilled by children in front of their schools or homes, the community school movement was something different altogether. I contend that it was a potentially subversive pursuit that finally had to be diffused in the interest of the neo-colonial order. Though both subversion and diffusion took place without the overt or possibly even conscious desire of either party to the endeavor, a review of the literature of the period from the perspective of future events as they unfolded through the decades would bear out such an analysis.

That the desire to subvert was not conscious is proven by the many claimants to the glory of the community school movement, all superintendents in the public school system after the Second World War, some later to become Director of the Bureau of Public Schools or Undersecretary of Education probably because of their work in, if not association with, the community school. Vitaliano Bernardino, writing in 1958 as Director of the Bureau of Public Schools, traces the first "community school" to Rizal's exile in Talisay, Dapitan, Zamboanga del Sur, from 1892 to 1896. It was here that Rizal established a school for both children and adults, teaching "English, Spanish, mathematics, nature study, and industrial arts" without books and stressing "the dignity of labor" at the same time, the educational endeavor resulting in an irrigation system and waterworks for the town, as well as a relief map of the island of Mindanao for the town plaza. (Bernardino 36)

By all appearances, however, the most immediate precedent of the community school as practiced in the Philippines was the province-wide experiment on the cultivation of a second crop of rice for the year through the efforts of 1,200 public school teachers in Capiz, under the leadership of then Capiz Superintendent of Schools Jose V. Aguilar. The objective was to increase the provincial food supply and maximize use of agricultural lands. It was the year after this superbly successful experiment that the term “community school” was mentioned “for the first time in the Philippines in an article in the Philippine Teachers Digest.” (Bernardino 58)

The Second World War, Philippine independence and the economic dislocation and political disorganization brought about by these two events impelled the emergence of the community school movement after 1946. In 1947, faculty members and students of Silliman University established what they called a community center in Malabo, Negros Oriental, for people who had evacuated and found themselves in the area from 1942. Arthur Carson, then president of Silliman University, reported that the center’s program was “based on the needs of the community as a whole...[following] the educational philosophy that school, home, and community should be integrated into the program...[and] young and old have equal opportunities” (quoted in Tupas 215, brackets mine)

However, again it was Dr. Jose V. Aguilar, this time as Superintendent of Schools in Iloilo, who had the audacity to conduct thoroughgoing experiments on the community school, piloting the idea in Sta. Barbara and Tina, Iloilo, in 1948 after getting an official endorsement from the Bureau of Public Schools in Manila. (Tupas 217) It was likely the Sta. Barbara community school report, published in 1949, which spurred the organization of the powerful Philippine Association of School Superintendents, composed of less than ninety educators all over the Philippines with a passion both for community and education. By 1950, when the community school became official policy for the Bureau of Public Schools in Manila (Liesch 1b-1c), quite a few divisions all over the Philippines had already embraced the idea, claiming it as their very own.

What made the Philippine community school radical was that, first of all, it was different from anything else found anywhere in the world. Ironically, despite its popularity and potency for at least a decade after the Second World War in a country that always tries to fit some Western, specifically American, theoretical framework onto its thoughts and actions, the community school idea seemed a misfit. Bernardino, in his 1958 book, strained to prove that the ideas John Dewey, Milosh Muntyan, Joseph K. Hart and Samuel Everett preceded the Philippine experience. Five years later, an American by the name of James Liesch, in a doctoral dissertation for the University of Minnesota, wrenched theory after Western theory to eke out the “philosophic presuppositions of the community school movement in the Philippines.” Liesch, however, found himself acknowledging that “the new movement, spearheaded by energetic superintendents, has had a coherence not to be found in American theory and practice” (Liesch 1c) while Bernardino almost surreptitiously mentioned Willis P. Porter, a Fulbright professor, mentioning in two public speeches that “while the community school movement started much earlier and has been more extensively written about in the United States than in the

Philippines, the latter is probably twenty years ahead in its development.” (Bernardino 20)

Indeed, the Philippines was not only twenty years ahead of the United States with its concept of the community school; it was way off the American tangent, being centuries older. This was the point little understood by most proponents of the community school idea, including the likes of Bernardino, Tupas, Trinidad and Gaffud, who wrote about it and, as schoolmen, themselves implemented it. Liesch, for his part locked in the embrace of his own culture, proclaimed that “the cultural assumption, that there is a particular set of Malayan values, make a deeper assumption that the values of a given culture need not be, and are not always, the same as those of another: it represents a denial of the doctrine that all men have basically the same values.” (Liesch 1k-11)

This universalist/emic approach to culture had in fact been debunked, though unintentionally so, as early as 1953 by a Ph.D. dissertation done for the Ohio State University by a certain Emiliano Castro Ramirez, presumably a Filipino. Observing the “activities and procedures of some community schools in the United States and their implications for the Philippines,” Ramirez describes the “log-cabin days when the early Mayflower pilgrims set foot in the wilderness of Plymouth, Massachusetts” thus:

...The people were primarily agricultural and lived in the open country and in small villages. All the members of each family banded together for meeting life’s needs and for protection against the attacks of the elements, wild beasts, and other enemies. But as time went on, one family united with another family, and so the village of families joined together for protection, for subsistence, for recreation, for education, and for other activities of life. (Ramirez 13)

Though Ramirez himself may not have seen the connection, he thereafter cites “five trends of interaction between school and community” in the U.S. community school, these being: (1) community resources are used by schools; (2) community vocations furnish work experience for pupils; (3) school facilities serve the community; (4) the school offers service to the community; and (5) the school works with other agencies.

This neat division of work was a replication of American culture that started with the Mayflower pilgrims, where basic needs and protection were first assigned by individual families to themselves, until greater needs necessitated their formation into a village of families. The truth is that in the Philippines, quite the opposite occurred: the community *was* family, because the community was clan, and clan was community, until colonization forced the break-up of communities into more basic family units with elite and mass, rich and poor, ruler and ruled contending. It should not be surprising then that, in the period after the Second World War when the political and economic quilt pleated by Americans into the Philippine social fabric had been torn at the seams, school should again become community and community, school, in the fashion of its traditional, deeply embedded culture. As Juan C. Laya aptly put it in 1952, “Go far, far back beyond the nation into the tribe, even into the basic social organization called the family, and you are face to face with the basic school, the Malayan mother’s knee.” (Laya 49)

The discovery of what was Malay through contact with the masses was one of the perquisites as well as prerequisites of the Philippine community school as outlined by Aguilar, conceded by Liesch as “the chief theoretician on community education.” (Liesch

15) Aguilar's plea was "to discover the mainsprings of wide social action anchored on the Malayan-oriented ways of personal, family, and community living." (Aguilar "Appraisal" 34) In professional education, he complained, "there had remained a strong residue of partiality for...practicing imported ideas rather than understanding native ways." (Ibid 35) "Why bother too much about the "oblutiacs": *opinions, beliefs, longings, usages, traditions, idiosyncracies, arts, customs, superstitions?*" he asked ironically in 1962, long after he had been disengaged from the community school by virtue of a professorial assignment at the University of the Philippines College of Education. His own answer was: "They had to permeate, work into, and bring about new, independent forms in what might be called "obpluttiacss," in which belief was raised to a philosophical status, traditional thought to technological concepts, superstition to scientific reasoning, *always in the context of the environment.*" (Aguilar "Sharing" 710, underscoring mine)

The insistence of Aguilar, the "chief theoretician of the community school," on the native, Malayan foundations of that school, in a newly-sprung neo-colonial setting where American tutelage, and its insistence on the universality of its Western framework, was still very much evident, spells the first subversive intent of the community school idea.

Indeed, his analysis of the *raison d'être* of the community school was even more subversive. "The rich are few, and they keep grounding the poor; the poor are many, and they go on hating the rich," he wrote in his definitive book **This is Our Community School**, published in 1951. The "master-serf mentality" keeps twentieth-century Philippines in a vise, he observed presciently. "The master holds the whip in hand, and he will not wield his power without a struggle. The serf, and he is legion, grovels in misery." For this reason the serfs had to be educated, at the soonest possible time, in a community school where the young were to tackle the problems of their community, as well as teach their elders the three Rs. (Aguilar **This** 1-2)

The analysis was to go even further than that. To blast the triangle the base of which was "crowded with casualties that constitute the masses," (Ibid 5) the language of instruction had to be the vernacular, taught syllabically, not in the manner of the English alphabet but in the same manner prescribed much later by the activist Paolo Freire in equally volatile Latin America. The vernacular was the language of instruction only up to Grade II, for the simple reason that resources were limited. Aguilar, in his Sta. Barbara experiment, proved that pupils educated in the vernacular in those grades scored remarkably higher in tests than those who had been taught in English. (Ibid 86-108)

The American attitude to the delayed use of English as a medium of instruction is apparent in Clifford Prator's 1950 report on language teaching in the Philippines. While admitting as "axiomatic that (the) mother tongue is the ideal medium of school instruction," (Prator 13) Prator recommends:

1. Postponing the introduction of National Language for non-Tagalog pupils until the intermediate grades at least.
2. Introducing the vernacular as the medium of instruction in ... Grades I and II.

3. Teaching English as a separate subject in the first two grades, and continuing its use as the medium of instruction beyond that point, (Ibid 35)

thereby effectively but surreptitiously dislodging the possibility of developing a viable national language. He then goes on to dedicate the longer half of his book to discussing ways of improving the teaching of English, including such nitty-gritty as the recommendation that “the Bureau exert all the means at its disposal to *discredit* the twin ideas that a ‘Philippine English’ can be encouraged in the schools, and that it is not quite patriotic to pronounce English correctly.” (Ibid 92, my underscoring) In fact, he coyly discloses:

Naturally the United States government has a deep interest in the teaching of English in the Philippines. The ability to speak the same language is one of the strongest ties left between America and her ex-colony. American authorities would indeed regret any weakening of that tie. (Ibid 37)

But the vernacular idea, though it was subversive enough to American tutelage, was not the most subversive idea of the community school movement, as enunciated by Aguilar and copied all over the Philippines. “Leadership,” he said, “is the hub of the community-school idea.” (Ibid 109) And in his terms, leadership was not to be “confused with the authority of position.” (Ibid) As he defined it, the “authority of position... inheres in the school hierarchy, centralized, closely knit, traditionally bound by orders. It draws its lifeblood from historical culture emanating from outside the life of the people. For centuries the process has been outside in...,” (Ibid 115) invariably referring to the Philippine colonial experience.

At the height of the community school movement, the barrios had only barrio *tenientes*, but no barrio councils. When Aguilar and other superintendents talked about municipal unit to locality (or, in the specific contribution of Juan C. Laya to the community school, *purok*) planning, therefore, with the teacher and the public school hierarchy at its center and the economic, social, health, and eventually political problems of the people as its subject matter, they were getting into a raw nerve ardently reserved for the elite of the country: and the name of that raw nerve was power. Together with Aguilar’s Malayan roots-discovery and vernacular programs, the community school movement, organizationally realized, was a potential powder keg that promised to upset the prevailing social order if left unchecked. Something had to be done, and was.

On January 6, 1956, Ramon Magsaysay, the president who had run on a platform of anti-insurgency on the basis of his performance in quelling the Huk rebellion as defense secretary, signed Executive Order 156 creating the Office of the Presidential Assistant on Community Development, or PACD. (BPS **Leadership** ChV) The PACD organized the first barrio councils that were to wrench the greater part of the word “community” from the community school. In the Bureau of Public Schools book on leadership training for community education published the following year, the “unitary approach” identified with Aguilar and his followers, which it defined as “a product of the concept that the community school is concerned with the education of the children, youth, and adults both in and out of school,” is only number three of thirteen “techniques and methods” it suggests for community education, among which include visitations, film

shows and discussions, and evaluation, and even, humorously, listed as no. 13, “Undesirable Approaches.” In other words, after Magsaysay effectively swept the power rug from under the feet of the community school through the creation of the PACD, the Bureau of Public Schools officially followed suit by trivializing it.

In the articles he wrote between 1956 and 1971, Aguilar tried sincerely, though very obliquely, to determine the reasons for the end of the community school movement. Aside from pinpointing the lack of university links that would have gone into deeper studies of Malayan mores, as well as the undue emphasis of exponents on physical improvements, he refused to identify what had really struck his lifetime endeavor, though in his strained attack-prone heart he most likely suspected what it was. In the last superintendents’ convention “to ever deal with the [community school as] institutionalized program,” held in May 1956, “four months after the creation by law of the Presidential Assistant on Community Development (PACD),” he astutely observes, where, moreover, “the PACD was a tactfully abrasive competitor,” the PASS decided to “move along with even greater intensity in spite of the fatigue consuming its internal human structure.” (Aguilar “Agonies” 269)

Unconscious as he was of the deep-going subversion that the community school was dealing on the Western colonial order in the Philippines, Aguilar, by 1971, knew that the end had come. His last article on the subject matter was entitled “Agonies of the Community School” and came out in the *Philippine Journal of Education* in November of 1971, a few months after Marcos’ suspension of the writ of habeas corpus, though he was to live nine more years, dying at the age of 80 in 1980 after a third heart attack.

His skeletal theoretical assumptions, however, remain with us and have been fleshed out by the day since he stopped writing. In the past thirty years, the “Malay culture” (actually Austro-Polynesian) that he and Laya sought out in their communities have been studied much more thoroughly by academicians – historians, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, linguists and folklorists – as well as by artists and activists. The body of knowledge handed down to us by all these show that our culture is so unique, and so different, from that of the West, or even that of the rest of Asia, or Africa, that our society must now begin to operate, already formally and consciously, on the basis of a theoretical framework derived not from any other part of the world, but from our own. That framework has begun to be worked out, but has not yet been completed. The formation of a Filipino language that draws from all Philippine languages, starting with a workable base, is one peg in that framework. The analysis of our long and ancient history as a people not only through written documents but also through our archeology, folklore, customs and mores is another.

The full synthesis of this framework is the key to our discovery of why we continue to survive, and will survive some more, as a nation, despite centuries of mangling and twisting by colonial powers. Aguilar and his fellow superintendents provided us with the clue to the framework more than fifty years ago: we are a network of integrative communities all over the archipelago, and now all over the world; it is these communities that have provided us the legacy of our undiminished culture through the ages, by building unto itself, on its own knees – the Malayan mother’s knees – the

mechanism of education. The community school lives on in us despite all attempts to end it.

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