

Palengskwela: Bringing the school to the market

Most Filipino kids are in bed by 9:00 p.m. However, for 12-year-old Ian Mejido, his day is just beginning at that hour. At 9:00 p.m., Ian heads to a fish port in Navotas and works as a laborer in the public market in the next eight hours.

On good nights, he gets around P300 (about US\$7) for hauling large buckets of fish from trucks and boats. On typical nights, he usually just gets P100 for eight hours of work.

Poverty has forced Ian to work even though he is just a child, foregoing sleep, play, and school.

However, when the Department of Education (DepEd) widened the scope of its Alternative Learning System (ALS) and brought learning to the market, Ian saw hope that things will eventually be better for him.

On Saturdays, Ian joins other market laborers, both children and adults, in attending classes in a makeshift classroom in the market. "I can study now. The school is just where I work. I really want to finish school so I can help my family rise from poverty," says Ian in Filipino.

From the Filipino words palengke (market) and eskwela (school), the program is dubbed *Palengskwela*. It is part of DepEd's program to reach out to out-of-school children and to adults who missed school when they were young.

In the same class with Ian is 44-year-old Reynaldo Palyolin who stopped schooling after reaching grade 2 in elementary school, due to poverty. With the Saturday classes at the market, Reynaldo has quickly learned how to read and write. "I wish I'd learn more so I can find a better job," he says.

41M Filipinos did not finish basic education

Ian and Reynaldo are among the 41 million Filipinos who have not finished basic education, comprised of the elementary and high school levels.

According to DepEd, early dropouts constitute 45 percent or almost one half of the country's entire population at 92 million. These 41 million Filipinos consist of:

- 14 million dropouts aged 6 to 16 years old, and
- 27 million youth and adults, aged 17 years old and above.

Around 1.27 million of the cited 27 million youth and adults have not completed any grade level at all. Through ALS, Ian and Reynaldo alongside other adults and children are given a second chance at education.

DepEd provides the curriculum and supervises the whole program. The schedule of teaching is organized to match the needs of the students, many of whom struggle to hold down day and night jobs.

Tough and fulfilling

Teaching them is both tough and fulfilling, according to Violy Carampatana, an ALS teacher. With students of different ages together in a class, she has to be creative in delivering lessons to her non-traditional learners.

Through group and individual activities, Carampatana teaches her students communication skills, critical thinking, and problem solving.

"We see in the market a lot of kids who are working and are deprived of their right to education. So, we want to bring them back to school. Same is true with adults who didn't experience being in school," says Carampatana.

Alternative learning

Dr. Carolina Guerrero, director of DepEd's Bureau of Alternative Learning System (BALS) cites poverty as the biggest reason for children dropping out of school. Many children in poor families are forced to work to help augment the income of their families.

Despite the presence of the anti-child labor law, Republic Act 9231, a 2009 survey by the National Statistics Office showed that there were 5 million working children aged 5 to 17 in the Philippines.

The Philippine government, through Executive Order No. 356 issued in 2004, established the ALS as a viable alternative to the existing formal educational structure. "The system is meant for the poorest of the poor, the marginalized learner – those who have no access to proper schooling," Guerrero says.

Community centers

Under the ALS, the teaching setting is not a formal school. Students gather in Community Learning Centers (CLC) — under a tree, in a house, a barangay (village) hall, or in the public market.

Their mentors are called "mobile teachers" who, unlike in formal education, do not need to have a license to teach. A high school graduate can teach the literacy program while a college graduate can teach others. Mobile teachers who receive a salary of only 10,000 pesos (USD 227) a month often roam around remote villages. Some even cross rivers and walk up to mountains so they can reach and teach Filipinos who are less educated. There are now about 10,000 CLCs spread across the country with 1,681 mobile teachers serving around 1.3 million students.

The numbers are actually way too small to affect the 41 million Filipinos who have been failed by the traditional education system.

Individual learning space

The alternative learning system is designed to support each student's individual learning pace. There is no stigma resulting from students forced to repeat a year if they fail to meet certain standards.

If a student is fast enough, he can proceed to the next level until he is allowed to take the Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) test with the DepEd. The test is given for free.

When a student passes an A&E test, they will receive a certificate signed by no less than the Education Secretary. The certificate is equivalent to a diploma that entitles the holder all the

rights and privileges that is accorded to an elementary or high school graduate – crucial for getting a good job.

Boxing icon Pacquiao

This was the same certificate that Philippine boxing icon Manny Pacquiao received after successfully passing the A&E Test in 2007.

Before gaining international superstardom in his boxing career, Pacquiao was a struggling baker who only finished Grade 6. But with the certificate he now has, he can automatically proceed to college if ever he wants to hang up his boxing gloves.

More than 35,000 Filipinos so far have passed the A&E examinations at both the elementary and secondary levels.