Non-Formal Education: The Escape Ladder from Illiteracy

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Resolving illiteracy has been a huge challenge for developing nations. Continuous planning and implementation of programs addressing the issue is a must for the government in order to, maybe not fully but gradually, straighten out and fix this national problem. And that is what the Philippine government is up to—offering an escape ladder from illiteracy through non-formal education.

But how non-formal education differs from other type of education can be confusing to some. Formal, non-formal, and informal education may be the same in the concept of imparting and acquiring knowledge, skills, and attitude to prepare individuals to be responsible and productive citizens but they completely differ in many aspects. Formal education is organized, guided by a formal curriculum; leads to a formally recognized credential such as a high school completion diploma or a degree, and is often guided and recognized by government at some level. Teachers are usually trained as professionals in some way. Non-formal education, on the other hand, is organized (even if it is only loosely organized), may or may not be guided by a formal curriculum. This type of education may be led by a qualified teacher or by a leader with more experience. Though it doesn’t result in a formal degree or diploma, non-formal education is highly enriching and builds an individual’s skills and capacities. Informal education, being the third way to gain knowledge and skills, has No formal curriculum and no credits earned. The teacher is simply someone with more experience such as a parent, grandparent or a friend. A father teaching his child to play catch or a babysitter teaching a child their ABC’s is an example of informal education.

Focusing more on non-formal education, it mainly concentrates on the acquisition of skills necessary for employability and competitiveness in the labor market. Its availability expands educational access to more citizens representing a variety of demographic characteristics, socioeconomic origins, and general interests. In effect, the non-formal subsystem makes education available to a very large number of Filipinos who would otherwise not have an opportunity to participate in any educational opportunities.

The non-formal education programs focus on the following thrusts: (1) the promotion of literacy programs for the attainment of basic skills that include numeracy and functional literacy and which are basic needs for every individual; (2) the development of livelihood skills which manifest in the individual specific competencies that prepare, improve, and enhance employability and economic productivity; and (3) the expansion of certification and equivalency programs, which are administered by the formal education subsystem, into the non-formal sector.
In line with that, on September 13, 2004, the Office of the President of the Republic of the Philippines renamed the DepEd’s Bureau of Non-formal Education to the Bureau of Alternative Learning System (BALS) through this Executive Order signed by Her Excellency President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. Not only does this Order reiterate the Bureau’s mandate to address the learning needs of marginalized learners but it also directs BALS to provide a systematic and flexible approach to reach all types of learners outside the school system.

In addition, the Executive Order spelled out the functions of the BALS. They include the following: (1) To address the learning needs of all marginalized groups including the deprived, depressed and underserved citizens. (2) To coordinate with various agencies for skills development of the learners. (3) To expand access to educational opportunities for citizens of different interests, capabilities, demographic characteristics, and socio-economic origins and status. (4) To promote certification and accreditation for basic education of alternative learning programs both formal and informal in nature.

The Alternative Learning System (ALS) is a free education program implemented by the Department of Education (DepEd) under the Bureau of Alternative Learning System which benefits those who cannot afford formal schooling and follows whatever is their available schedule. The program provides a viable alternative to the existing formal education instruction, encompassing both the non-formal and informal sources of knowledge and skills.

Since ALS is a module-based learning system, students come in on a set time and choose a module to read. A quiz is given after each module to test their learning. Instead of teachers, facilitators are always present to answer any questions and sometimes lecturers would discuss a certain module. After several months, the students will take the Accreditation and Equivalency Test (AET). If they pass the test, they will be given a high school diploma and can now enroll in college. Manny Pacquiao took and passed the (AET) under the ALS program.

Survival of the fittest is term that we can attributed in this kind of life we have. People are in constant struggle name it: power, prestige, recognition and the like. In order for us to compete with billions of people we must then help ourselves to be well educated. Education from now and then is indeed the great leveler of everyone. We should be thankful that the government is making programs so the rest of the Filipino People would have the access to a quality education yet within our reach.

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