THE PHILIPPINE STAR

THURSDAY | JANUARY 4, 2018

8

Finding poverty through lifelong literacy for sustainability

The UNESCO Constitution reflects the true spirit of UNESCO. The preamble states that: *"The government of the state parties to this constitution on behalf of their peoples declare THAT SINCE WARS BEGIN IN THE MINDS OF MEN, IT IS IN THE MINDS OF MEN THAT THE DEFENSES OF PEACE MUST BE CONSTRUCTED;*

"...that war is a denial of the democratic principle of the dignity, equality and mutual respect of men: that war propagates through ignorance and prejudices of the doctrine of the inequality of men; that peace would not be a peace if it could not secure an unanimous and lasting and sincere support of the people of the world;

"...AND THAT PEACE BE FOUNDED, IF IT IS NOT TO FAIL, UPON THE INTELLECTUAL AND MORAL SOLIDARITY OF MEN."

Elected to the 1986 Unesco Executive Board

When the Philippine governance shifted from Ferdinand Marcos' dictatorship to democracy with President Corazon Aquino, Foreign Affairs Minister, Vice President Salvador Laurel appointed me as the country representative to UNESCO. The four Operation Brotherhood Montessori schools I established were then 20 years old. I was officially elected by the 70 member states to become a member of the highest governing body – the UNESCO Executive Board *(Conseil Executif)* in Paris for 1986-1987. During my term of office, UNESCO celebrated the 40th anniversary of its founding in 1946. Huge portraits of the major contributors to education and peace were hung on the walls of the Executive Board leading to the Plenary I, Assembly room. One of them was *Dottoressa* Maria Montessori who was a member of the Italian delegation during the founding of UNESCO in 1946. It was she who introduced Early Childhood Education and Adult Literacy program to the member states. Among the first documents kept in the UNESCO archives include the original Rights of the Child, written by *Dottoressa* Montessori. She is still remembered with affection by elderly members of the board like Wagner de Reyna of Brazil who often commended my interventions, which recalled Dr. Montessori's definitions of Culture, Science and the Child as the constructor of Peace and Civilization. Thus she emphasized the social revolution of education by converting the textbook-dependent classroom to a "prepared environment of work" to condition children for lifelong sustainability from infancy to adolescence.

In 1986, UNESCO, Paris re-intensified the world campaign to eradicate illiteracy. Its 1986-1987 biennium programs were witnessed by me, in the *Conseil Executif*, governed then by the UNESCO Director General Dr. Federico Mayor, a well-known scientist from Barcelona. Africa, Latin America and Asia have the worst illiteracy problems. As of 1993, 60 percent of the population of Africa, 35 percent of Latin America, and 69.4 percent in Asia were illiterates. Thus, they are referred to in UN terminology as the Third World, developing countries or the "southern" economies (versus the "northern" economies). UNESCO points out that this economic division of the world can be healed by effective functional literacy projects. When Asia-Pacific Program to Eradicate Illiteracy (APPEAL) was launched, the UNESCO Asian regional offices in Bangkok, Jakarta and Beijing were busy analyzing how intense the efforts of national governments

* UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION (UNESCO)

THE PHILIPPINE STAR
THURSDAY | JANUARY 9, 2014
8

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were in wiping out ignorance.

Attempts to eradicate illiteracy are overtaken by large population growth

As a participant in both the Indonesia and China deliberations in 1987, I was able to learn firsthand from their ministers how their attempts to eradicate illiteracy were overtaken by their large population growth. The UNESCO think tank noted the interesting phenomenon: the more literate the country, the more controlled the population, hence a better economy.

Five years later when APPEAL was replaced by EFA or "Education for All" to pressure the national governments of the world to intensify the campaign for "functional literacy," Dr. Federico Mayor warned that efforts to develop more and more literacy programs are not enough, they must be QUALITY programs.

In his regular visits to UNESCO member states, he frequently observed that the lack of QUALITY worsened the DROPOUT phenomena. This means that primary school children, out-of-school teenagers and adult learners covered by the national literacy programs, fail the courses.

The Philippines is still considered today "a developing country" together with Indonesia, Cambodia, Thailand, India, Pakistan, Burma and Bangladesh. To lessen the humiliation of Third World countries, there is a strong tendency for their national statistics to record only the school enrollees but omit the percentage of "dropouts."

Evaluating our local governments' campaign to fight ignorance

Since 1995, between July and August every year, the Philippine Literacy Coordinating Council (LCC) has gathered nominees for the National Literacy Awards which would regularly be celebrated in the Literacy month of September. The LCC also identifies the winners of a nationwide search for the Best Literacy Program, the Best Literacy Worker and the Best Town Mayor who dynamically pushed forward the local literacy projects. In 1997, the Notre Dame University Development Literacy program in Cotabato won the Korean-funded UNESCO King Sejong Literacy Prize.

Several LCC teams composed of Bureau of Non-formal Education offices and appointed Literacy specialists visited various provincial projects in the country nominated for the awards. I, together with Jenny Golden of Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) as member of the LCC Technical Committee, assisted by the Operation Brotherhood Montessori Pagsasarili Mothercraft Literacy Center, spot-checked several sites and interviewed literacy workers.

DepEd Sec. Briones can help eradicate poverty with the slogan 'teach a mother, teach the nation'

UNESCO findings reveal that due to lack of culture and continuing literacy program, underprivileged rural and urban mothers have barely an average of Grade I literacy. May we invite Sec. Briones to share our 30-year-old twin OB Montessori literacy projects of the Child and Community Foundation, which has accelerated literacy competence beyond primary school level.

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Dr. Preciosa S. Soliven has made available her book "How Well Do You Know the Wonders of Your Children – Discover the Secrets of Childhood from Infancy to Adolescence" in all O.B. Montessori Schools.