

Education as a Driving Force of Liberty and Prosperity

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A change in one's perspective is not necessarily triggered by extraordinary events. Sometimes, even the most ordinary experience could be a turning point in a person's life. In my case, it was seeing a classmate in tears for not being able to take an examination when we were in fourth grade.

While growing up, one of the things that I find difficult to comprehend is my mother's repeated reminder for me to value my education. Like most kids, all I wanted to do was to go outside and play. I vividly recall instances when my mother would scold me every time my nursery adviser, Teacher Althea, tells her that I miss my classes because I prefer roaming the school grounds.

Back then, I could not really understand why I have to stay inside the classroom when there is a whole world out there to explore.

Over the years, however, my perspective has started to change. It began with little doses of realities, such as when my fourth grade classmate was asked to step out of the room as we were about to take an examination. Our teacher told her to contact her parents to settle her account before she would be allowed to take the test. Teary-eyed, my classmate begged for her to be allowed to take the exam and just call her parents afterwards. She was not allowed to do so.

For most fourth graders, witnessing such an incident would evoke fear of not wanting to experience the same level of humiliation. But for me, it was something more. I started to ask myself how one could be deprived of a right as basic as getting proper education. Although we were not the best of friends, I knew her as one of the most hardworking students in our class. She was consistently among the top students in our class, yet she still had to plead just to be allowed to take an examination.

The experience made me realize how lucky I am to be able to come to class every day and not worry about getting asked to step out because of late payments. Although I did not come from a well-off family, especially after my father died when I was in the second grade, my mother has done her best to make sure that I get access to quality education.

She would always tell me, up to this day, that her greatest legacy would be my education and that it is something that could never be taken away from me.

Social Inequalities

The incident with my fourth grade classmate was just the first of the many social inequalities that I have witnessed, and continue to do so, as I grow older.

In college, despite being in a state university, the social divide and inequalities have become even more apparent. I consider myself lucky for being one of the few who have been given the opportunity to study under a full scholarship, provided by SGV Foundation for students of accountancy. I remember one of my classmates quitting college after second year as she had to work in a call center in order to support her family. There were also those who had to skip meals because their allowances could only afford them one full meal a day.

Fresh off from college and after passing the Certified Public Accountant (CPA) licensure examination, I started my corporate job as an Associate in the country's largest accounting and auditing firm in Makati. It was a major, albeit not a difficult, decision for someone who has spent most his life in Tacloban City.

The move, as expected, signaled a significant shift in my life. From the comfortable commute from my house to the university back when I was a student, my daily work routine suddenly involved riding packed jeepneys and buses to and from Makati and Pasay. I would often queue with other workers in the area, such as the salesclerks from nearby department stores in the Makati Central Business District. On not a few instances, I would overhear them talking about how they are made to work beyond eight-hour shifts and still get paid the daily minimum wage.

The stories would also involve unjust pay deductions for damaged merchandise items, as well as not having their contract renewed in order for the company to evade the payment of workers' statutory benefits.

Time and again, I would hear stories of real problems faced by workers who are the driving force of the country's financial district.

Fifteen months of working in the capital, fifteen months of hearing stories – and even experiencing some – of the inequalities faced by the working class, I started to feel a sense of emptiness. While I enjoyed the knowledge I gained while practicing my profession, I realized that I was unhappy.

It was mainly personal. As an only child, I realized that I missed being with my mother, who has remained by herself in Tacloban City after I left. I had no specific plan at the time, perhaps continue practicing at my hometown?

As fate would have it, I received a message from my college division chairperson asking me if I was interested in taking a full-time teaching position at the University of the Philippines Visayas Tacloban College, my alma mater. Without hesitation and much consideration, I agreed, marking a career shift from the corporate world to the academe.

Liberty and Prosperity

The decision to move to the academe was primarily influenced by my mother's repeated insistence that I value my education. At some point, I realized that it was my education, along with other factors, that shielded me from the worst social inequalities experienced by the people around me.

Education, many would say, has a crucial role in nation-building. It empowers people and, similar to my case, provides opportunities to address inequalities, both on a personal and societal level.

Moreover, I believe that education could strengthen the rule of law and promote the core philosophies of liberty and prosperity.

The rule of law is considered as one of the most fundamental pillars of a democratic society. It is the foundation of a just, sustainable, and peaceful society. It institutionalizes accountability in ensuring the safeguarding of human rights, while empowering citizens' participation in building a better society through respect for the rule of law and enabling a culture of lawfulness.

Within the rule of law are the promotion of two important philosophies: liberty and prosperity. Liberty encompasses civil and political rights or the first generation rights, while prosperity embraces economic, social, and cultural rights or the second generation rights.

In the past, liberty has been granted more priority over prosperity. A survey of our past laws would reveal that laws concerning fundamental civil rights and liberties are given more importance than those that pertain to economic rights. In fact, despite the philosophy of social justice embodied in the declaration of state principles and policies in the Philippine Constitution, the Supreme Court has, in most cases,

declared these provisions as non-self-executing rights as opposed to fundamental civil liberty rights that were declared as self-executing and directly enforceable by judicial action without the need for further legislation by Congress.

In today's modern world, however, it would be hard to separate liberty and prosperity. Prosperity is meaningless without liberty, and safeguarding liberty must go hand in hand with nurturing prosperity. According to Chief Justice Artemio Panganiban, "liberty must include the freedoms that prosperity allows, and in the same manner, prosperity must include liberty, especially the liberty to strive for the 'good life' according to one's conception."¹

This reality is especially glaring in light of the state that our country is in at the moment. The government has been nothing short of proud of the economic progress achieved by the current administration. Press releases about foreign direct investments resulting from our renewed ties with our neighbor, China, are everywhere. The government always boasts about the new jobs that are created from investments of foreign companies in the Philippines, be it through offshore casino gaming operations or business process outsourcing.

In almost any major city that you are in, "Build, Build, Build" posters boasting numerous infrastructure projects of the government may be seen. However, along with that so-called "economic progress" is the erosion of our liberty, with the government appearing to be hell bent on silencing dissent and those who do not agree with its current policies. Legitimate media and news agencies are being attacked while political opponents are being harassed with numerous suits.

Even academic institutions are not spared from the government's efforts to silence dissent. In an attempt to suppress activism, dissent, and critical thinking, a number of top government officials – including the President himself – have resorted to red-tagging and labelling some schools such as the University of the Philippines (UP) and the Polytechnic University of the Philippines (PUP) as breeding ground for communists and the rebels.

More recently, after vetoing the bill that was supposed to grant PUP fiscal autonomy just like UP and the Mindanao State University, the President publicly declared "*Kayo diyay 'yang pwede nating sarahan 'yang PUP. Wala akong pakialam sa*

¹ *Liberty and prosperity should blossom hand in hand* — Chief Justice, The PCIJ Blog, May 18, 2006, last accessed at <https://old.pcij.org/blog/2006/05/18/liberty-and-prosperity-should-blossom-hand-in-hand-chief-justice> on September 17, 2019

kanila. Go ahead.”² This attack goes against the very core principle of academic freedom, the lifeblood of every academic institution.

In these trying times, when our basic liberties are at a risk of being suppressed, there is a need for more vigilance.

Empowering People Through Education

As an educator at UP and a student of the law at the University of San Carlos (USC), I believe that education has great role in ensuring that liberty and prosperity, the twin beacons of justice, would be achieved. Schools should not limit themselves to preparing their students for professional licensure examinations and the workplace, but should also promote social awareness, transformation, and nationalism. The inclusion of a varied range of elective courses under the liberal arts framework, like the offering of a three-unit course on Martial Law by UP in 2020, ensures that this objective is met.

An educated populace is an empowered populace, and those who properly know their rights would be in a better position to ensure that those rights are preserved and protected. An educated individual is not only good at offering answers or solutions, but also knows how to ask the right questions.

Education also helps strengthen one’s abilities to face and overcome difficult real world life situations. While it is essential for one to know his rights and fundamental liberties, one also needs to be well-equipped in order to achieve economic stability. To quote Chief Justice Panganiban, “humans need both justice and jobs; freedom and food; ethics and economics; peace and development; liberty and prosperity,” and education plays a crucial part in achieving that balance.³

An educated citizenry is necessary for any country to overcome poverty and achieve prosperity and economic stability. The old Chinese saying “give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime” is just as important now as it was back then. Education equips one with the right skills and

² Duterte: *I don't care if PUP closes down*, CNN Philippines, September 11, 2019, last accessed at <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2019/9/11/Duterte-Polytechnic-University-of-the-Philippines-PUP.html> on September 17, 2019

³ Panganiban, A., *Unleashing Entrepreneurial Ingenuity*, The Personal Website of Retired Chief Justice Artemio V. Panganiban, February 26, 2015, last accessed at <https://cjpanganiban.com/2015/02/26/unleashing-entrepreneurial-ingenuity/> on September 18, 2019

capabilities to either land a stable job or profession, or to start his own enterprise, both having the effect of enhancing one's livelihood.

In terms of preparing one for employment in the workforce, it provides one with a higher level of skill set that would enable him to get and hold on to jobs that are more secure and with better working conditions. Education can also help spark the entrepreneurial mindset in individuals that would enable them to start their own business and create a trickle effect in the economy. In so doing, education can not only help lift people out of poverty, it can also guard against them falling back into poverty.

Considering its immense importance in promoting liberty and prosperity, the state has the utmost duty to provide adequate support to ensure that every single citizen of the country would be able to obtain quality education. The passage of Republic Act No. 10931 or the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act is a big step towards that direction.

However, the fight for better education does not end there. According to the Education For All Global Monitoring Report of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), expanding access to education alone is not enough.⁴ Equitable learning is necessary to achieve national prosperity for all.

According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), equity in education is two-fold. The first aspect, fairness, means that the personal and social circumstances of a person should not be a hindrance to achieving one's full academic potential. The second, inclusion, stresses that a minimum comprehensive standard for education should be shared by all students in academic institutions regardless of background, personal characteristics, or location.⁵

From the Eyes of a Teacher, Student

Being a teacher and a student provides me with a much wider perspective on the value of education.

⁴ *EFA Global Monitoring Report – 2013–2014 – Teaching and Learning Achieving quality for all*, UNESCO

⁵ *Ten Steps to Equity in Education*, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Policy Brief, January 2008, last accessed at <http://www.oecd.org/education/school/39989494.pdf> on September 20, 2019.

As I pursue my study of the law, I keep in mind that lawyering is a profession imbued with public interest. No matter how brilliant a lawyer is, if he or she lacks the essential values or the proper mindset towards achieving a better world for all of us to live in, he or she would be of no value to society.

As future lawyers, we must always uphold and defend the rights of each and every individual as enshrined in our laws and the Constitution, and champion fairness and equal opportunities in advocating prosperity for all.

Pursuing law, however, does not necessarily mean that I plan on leaving the academe. In fact, I do not think I could ever let go of being an educator. The last six years that I have spent in the academe have been some of the most fulfilling years of my professional life. While the positive response from my students in my teaching evaluation reports are encouraging, thanking me for teaching them things that would help them overcome the CPA licensure examination and life after college, little do they know that I learn more from them than they do from me.

Each class that I handle is a new learning experience for me as an educator. Over the years, I have learned to empathize with my students as not all of them may have the same learning pace as the other students that I've handled in the past, or that some of them might be going through something personal which, in turn, could affect their academic performance.

I learned that there isn't a "one size fits all" approach to teaching as one's personal circumstances may vary.

Every time I assume the role of educator, I am reminded of my fourth grade classmate who was asked to leave the classroom because her parents were not able to pay their dues. I am reminded of my college classmate who had to quit school to work to support her family. I am reminded of the workers who had to work harder than I do, but still not get enough for their families.

Most importantly, I am reminded of my mother's constant reminder for me to value my education, society's ultimate equalizer.