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Theme: Changing the Narrative of Philippine Education by Making Reforms Work

Fourth Senator Edgardo J. Angara Keynote Lecture

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1. Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, let me begin by saying what an honour it is for me to give the Fourth Senator Edgardo J. Angara Keynote Lecture at the 2025 Philippine Education Conference.
2. A few words of thanks and some disclaimers are in order. First, I would like to thank the Chair and Members of the Private Education Assistance Committee for inviting me. In particular, I would like to thank Dr Doris Fernandez Ferrer, Executive Director PEAC, and her team for all their help and guidance in making my being here possible.
3. Second, some disclaimers. I have always had a preference for things on the smaller end of the scale. For classical music, which I enjoy, I gravitate more towards the miniatures such as preludes, etudes, sonatinas, as opposed to the symphony or the concerto. And hence, in terms of engagements and speaking, I am more comfortable in workshops and seminars. My natural habitat is the classroom. I suspect there are many in the audience who feel the same way as me. So please forgive me if my nerves start to show in this large auditorium and I stumble and falter.
4. Another disclaimer I need to make is that I am not an expert on the Philippine condition as far as education goes. What I can do is to share some of my experiences of being in the Singapore education eco-system and working on education policy at the National University of Singapore, and hope that what I say can shed some light on the emerging trends, challenges, and opportunities that confront you all in the Philippines.
5. With that out of the way, let me turn to some themes I would like to address today.
6. I suppose it is conventional wisdom to acknowledge that we are living through some disruptive and confusing changes, in multiple dimensions. I do not dispute that. Domestically and globally, the changes come fast and furious in domains such technology, the planetary condition, socio-political upheavals, geopolitical tensions, job displacements, and the list goes on.

7. What I do dispute are the standard approaches we are always advised to adopt in navigating and tackling these disruptions.
8. In the face of all these emerging complexities, we are told to privilege the fast over the slow. To embrace the new and to discard the old. To favour the big over the small. Or, as they say in the corporate world, go big or go home. And to cleave to the concrete as opposed to the abstract. And that somehow, whatever problem you have, some form of technology will fix it.
9. What I offer today are some counter-intuitive and unfashionable thoughts. They are also highly ironic, because I will appear to be talking a lot about old and traditional things, even though my job title says “Director of the Futures Office.” But more and more, I have come to believe that the road to a vibrant, sustainable, bright, and just future must cut through the past.
10. And so I will argue that sometimes you can only see certain things when you go slow. That to always adopt new things and throw away old stuff is to succumb to the disease of neomania. That we should not neglect the small scale because that is the human scale, and education is, after all, a fundamentally human endeavour. That abstractions like ideas and ethos and values matter, even though we cannot measure them and hang numbers on them.
11. And no, technology cannot be the answer to everything, especially when we do not know what the questions are.
12. At the elevator lobby of my university, engraved on a wall is a quotation by Mr Lee Kong Chian, a local businessman and philanthropist who contributed greatly to Singapore, especially in the field of education.
13. I quote: “A University is not just an object of pride and prestige, nor only an instrument for acquiring knowledge and skills, but also a home in which the human spirit can find freedom and draw inspiration.”
14. Let us not be naïve here. Who wouldn’t want the universities and schools they work for to be objects of pride and prestige? Ranking and performance metrics are a reality for all of us.
15. And of course there is the social mission of universities and schools to imbue in our children and youths knowledge and skills so that they can find jobs, provide for themselves and their families. Bread and butter issues matter a lot. Perhaps more so than ever, given the growing socio-economic risks we all face.
16. But somewhere along the line, we ended up suffering the defects of our technocratic virtues. We focused so much on the instrumentalist aspects of education that we forgot that the institutions we work in were historically seized with the cultivation of the human spirit.

17. The modern university, and school, I might add, familiar to us did not emerge fully formed, but evolved out of earlier ideas of the university. Ron Barnett, Emeritus Professor of Higher Education at the Institute of Education, University of London, points to the earliest incarnation of the university: the metaphysical university. He locates the metaphysical university some two thousand years ago in the Greek, Persian, Indian and Chinese traditions of the “academy”, an “institution through which individuals could come to stand in a new and surer relationship with the world.” The focus of the metaphysical university was to “open up new forms of human being”.
18. Today’s modern universities and schools are places that measure, describe, define, and analyse. They extol rules and performance metrics. They are governed by the assumption, a heroic and optimistic one, that the world is completely amenable to our understanding and control, given enough time and effort.
19. In such a world view, there is no mystery left in the world. Of course it is all well and good to unlock the mysteries of the cosmos. I fear, though, that the solving of mysteries, and the accompanying hubris, has also led to the loss of the sense of mystery, or what Hannah Arendt referred to as *thaumazein*, the ceaseless sense of awe at not knowing.
20. I believe that education needs to revisit its metaphysical roots. Schools and universities need to, once again, emphasise the formation of the whole human being, of equipping its students with different sets of moral and political vocabularies to make sense of themselves and their place in the universe, or at least society. We need to get back to reasoning, rhetoric, and ethics – all of which are the key elements of the so-called “soft skills” we are convinced are essential for a world of digital disruptions, of political contestation, of fake news and AI deep fakes.
21. These traits and meta-level skills – learning for learning’s sake, imagination, authenticity, critical thinking, and resilience – that we should encourage in our schools were standard fare served up by the metaphysical university.
22. Now, let’s fast forward from Ancient Greece and Persia to the present. Let’s take the World Economic Forum Futures of Jobs Report 2025, for example. The insight from their page 34 is distressing to me. It says that “skills like reading, writing, and mathematics; manual dexterity, endurance, and precision; and dependability and attention to detail have seen the largest decline in projected future demand.”
23. Let’s just focus on “reading, writing, and mathematics”. Traditionally and idiomatically referred to as the 3Rs -- reading, (w)riting, and 'rithmatic -- it can actually be mapped onto the trivium of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. They are, in other words, foundational skills.
24. I can understand why, especially among the technophiles, when juxtaposed against all things bright and shiny like AI, coding, and technological literacy, skills like reading, writing, and mathematics are denigrated as, at best, plain vanilla, or at worst, irrelevant.

25. However, I believe the conclusion is a faulty one.
26. Yes, a superficial reading of "reading" would have reduced it to consist in technical skills like spelling, grammar, and so forth. But a sophisticated reading skill endows the reader with the ability to go beyond the denotation of things and to appreciate the connotation of things.
27. It teaches you to appreciate the myriad complex aspects of the human condition and the broader world in which it is inextricably grounded. The great books teach you how to read context and nuance. They teach you how to read a person and how to read the room. Reading, in the higher sense, teaches you how to read the things not written, the silences between the lines. Reading transports you, expands you, relocates and dislocates you in order that you can better appreciate your current location and define your next destination.
28. Same with writing. As we blithely abdicate writing responsibilities to ChatGPT, it is worth pointing out what we risk losing. Even as we save time and gain convenience (apparently), we lose an important way in which we cultivate our minds. Writing teaches us to clarify and articulate our thoughts.
29. The rigour of writing forms in us a certain sensitivity as we articulate arguments or tell our stories. The writer C.S. Lewis once said we read to know we are not alone; perhaps we write to know the same? More than anything else, writing is cathartic. It is a creative release, and a means of identity formation. For better or worse, whatever the quality, what you write is your take on things.
30. And that is different from writing prompts for the giant robot in the clouds to spit something out which you then edit and approve albeit in an uncritical and perhaps deferential fashion. There is a difference between telling your story, and telling ChatGPT to tell the story you would and should and could have told had you the skill and the will.
31. I don't need to say much more about the importance of mathematical reasoning beyond the fact that much of the messiness of fake news and conspiracy theories and fallacious arguments can be traced to the lack of sound and robust mathematical reasoning skills that would otherwise have taught us how to better evaluate the quality of evidence, better counter weak and unsound arguments, and, frankly, to detect bad faith actors.
32. What could we model this on? I thought I would share three insights from my and my three sons' experience of Catholic education.
33. Let me, at the outset, state very clearly that Catholic education claims no monopoly on the insights I am about to share, and these too are found in the other great traditions and practices in education that are faith-based or secular. It is simply that this is the tradition in which I grew up and with which I am most familiar. I think these insights will speak to most of you in the audience.

34. One, the notion of the "vocation". It is typical, perhaps even fashionable, to dismiss Catholic education, and faith-based education in general, as being naïve in its focus on the "soft" touchy-feely ideals at its core. It seems to come across as irrelevant to the many vocations out there.
35. This is especially so, given the hyper-competitiveness of a world that is accelerating in complex and volatile ways. Far better to focus on marketable skills, preferably in some fast-changing and glamorous new sector such as the "digital sector".
36. But the notion of vocation is indeed important in Catholic education, although it is more intimately linked with the Latin root "vocare", which means, "to call". As in, "who am I called to be?" and "what am I called to do?"
37. No tradition of education that has lasted this long is so naïve to dismiss the economic imperative, the bread-and-butter issues of earning a living. Instead, though, such issues are framed in the bigger and more important context of living and life. Before answering the "how" (skills, knowledge, etc.) and the "what" (e.g. lawyer, teacher, artist) questions, grappling with the "why" is important. And there is no short-cut for answering the fundamental albeit inconvenient "why" questions.
38. As Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the Jesuit priest and paleontologist, put it: "...it is the law of all progress that it is made by passing through some stages of instability -- and that may take a very long time...your ideas mature gradually -- let them grow, let them shape themselves, without undue haste. Don't try to force them on, as though you could be today what time (that is to say, grace and circumstances acting on your own good will) will make of you tomorrow."
39. In other words, before we get to the work you will do, let's focus on "you" first, last, and always. And these things take time.
40. Two, the notion of community. Despite the ra-ra of school cheers and fight songs, the lives of students can be extremely lonely. In a system that is (still) focused on credentials and assessments, undergirded by a narrative of competition and meritocracy, it is little wonder that students (and educators, come to that) report higher levels of stress, sleep deprivation, anxiety, anomie, acedia, neuroses, even paranoia.
41. We use comforting rhetoric about schools being a safe space. More often than not, they are experienced as arenas in which scarce prizes and resources are battled over. Perhaps instead of safe space, schools should be sacred spaces. Spaces for growth not just as individuals but as a community, where each is valued, as opposed to being assigned an instrumentalist value. A community centred on relationship as opposed to pragmatic transaction.

42. Henri Nouwen, the Dutch priest and theologian, reminds us that the word "school" derives from the Latin "schola", which means "free time". A time in our children's lives to better understand themselves and how they relate to the world, a time to learn, work, rest, play, fight (yes, that too), and to reconcile and forgive. A time to be with others, in community. Or communion, if you like.

43. Finally, perhaps the biggest gem I unearthed in my experience and exploration of Catholic education is that it is actually extremely progressive, bordering on prophetic. Long before notions like social justice, fairness, pastoral care, holistic development, reducing the emphasis on grades, soft skills, mental wellness, values entered the education policy lexicon – sometimes reluctantly, but almost always in a knee-jerk reaction to some angst or tragedy that can no longer be avoided – these have been the mainstays of Catholic education.

44. It has always made room for the last, the lost, and the least.

45. Finally, as an old teacher of mine put it, we are human beings, not doings. I recall an incident some years back when one of my sons (I have three) first entered secondary school and there was a meet-the-teachers session I attended. In the middle of a conversation with a veteran teacher, I asked her, "I'm sorry, you teach...?", expecting an answer along the lines of Mathematics or Geography or some subject.

46. She paused. And then smiling sweetly, she replied simply but pointedly, "I teach boys."

47. We are talking here of the formation of the whole child, the whole being, and that is not incompatible with the practical concerns of jobs and the economy. At least, it shouldn't.

48. I recently re-read Ernst F Schumacher's 1973 classic "Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered". Although it was published more than 50 years ago, this collection of essays, which focuses on themes such as sustainability and well-being, is now enjoying a resurgence of interest amidst the worsening planetary environmental crisis and the political and socio-economic turmoil around the globe.

49. Riffing off the subtitle of the book, I wondered about an education as if people mattered. How might some of his ideas translate into the education context?

50. For a start, given that Schumacher's main salvo is to challenge the dominant paradigm of endless and unrestrained growth, I would begin by saying that education should not simply be a conveyor belt for economic output. The image that comes to mind is the factory.

51. The factory churns out flesh-and-blood economic agents. Rather, education should be a workshop for human beings. When education becomes an industrial process – even now still largely driven by standard inputs, standardised curricula, standardised tests – then the emphasis is on 8 credentials and (immediately) relevant skills. The trade-off is that notions of formation, character, wisdom, and yes, joy, are sacrificed at the altar of the economic imperative.
52. If we are to have an education as if people mattered, then we must start with this most fundamental question: what kind of people are our schools and universities forming? What kind of person, citizen, friend, partner, spouse, parent, neighbour do we hope our children to be? If we are genuinely concerned for our children's future prospects in a world of growing uncertainty, then the excesses of our long-standing focus on being economically relevant must be balanced by a return to education's original mission of the formation of the individual. And these two things need not be in conflict, like I've already said.
53. Second, we also need to acknowledge that individuals are, after all, enmeshed in the broader community. And this brings me to my next point, which is scale.
54. Scale is not neutral. Bigness in education – as seen in sprawling campuses and megastructures that intimidate – creates distance between people, stifling the development of community. As Nassim Taleb argues in his "Skin in the Game", "a community of fishermen turns from collaborative to adversarial once one moves the scale, that is the number of people involved, a notch."
55. In smaller learning communities, the social fabric is more intimately woven: teachers know students by name, face, and story.
56. And students see how their work – and they as individuals – matter to others. The right scale in education is one that enables relationship and mutual responsibility; too big and we end up with a transactionism shrouded in anonymity.
57. With the right human scale, education as a craft re-emerges: teachers become mentor-artists, and students become apprentices of meaning making, not passive receptacles of information.
58. Third, and this is especially pronounced in my own country, Singapore, is our philosophy on technology. Our default setting is to embrace and adopt new technologies, often uncritically, driven either by a fear of being left behind or simply succumbing to our deep-seated neomania. I joke often that in years to come, there will be a new religion, and its holy book will begin, "In the beginning was the Word Processor."

59. Especially in the emerging era of artificial intelligence, technology should be a tool that enhances the human condition, and certainly not to diminish or, worse still, displace it. Technology in education should be invisible: it should facilitate learning without making you aware that it is there.
60. Technology should be simple to use and more than that, be subordinate to human relationships. In my experience as a workshop facilitator, I find that a shared flipchart with marker pens and post-its invites greater participation and creativity than an array of dashboards that are intimidating to use unless you are a specialist.
61. Does the technology in our classroom invite conversation, incite curiosity, and deepen relationships? If a technology accelerates the process so that you can attain the proverbial learning outcomes in the quickest manner possible, but in so doing has eroded dialogue, dispensed with reflection, and snuffed out the light in the eyes of both students and teachers, then it is the wrong tool for the job.
62. In an education as if people mattered, the teacher's craft – questioning, noticing, mentoring – is never compromised.
63. Finally, teachers are not simply there to deliver content. Their vocation is centred on the relational: building trust, sensing when to slow down, when to challenge, when to allow the silence to instruct. These things take time, and if technology can free up time so that teachers fulfil those tasks, then technology will have done its job.
64. An education as if people mattered is not nostalgic or utopian. Indeed, it is very much the opposite. In a world where established pathways to success that worked previously have been disrupted, where notions of success themselves are being contested, and where our youths seek both the good jobs and the good life, what could be more important than a return to an education that puts human cultivation right back at the centre.
65. I want to tell you a story about a teacher. But before I do that, I need to say some not very nice things. But perhaps they are necessary.
66. Over the years, loath as I am to admit it, I have seen teachers who shouldn't be teaching anymore. Perhaps they shouldn't even have become teachers in the first place. You may even know some teachers like that.
67. Maybe over time, the fatigue set in, the spirit got battered and bruised by the trials and tribulations of teaching – and let's be honest, it is a most challenging vocation – and you started to become cynical.

68. Maybe all that frustration and despair tipped over into resentment or, worse, cruelty. I truly understand that. And I empathise. All the stresses, that insane tempo, the packed days. And parents don't make things easy, either.
69. I hope and pray for this disenchanted and exhausted lot that you, once again, find the light in your eyes. The light that you began your teaching journey with. I hope you remember the sacrality of that call that you answered. We all need you too. We're rooting for you.
70. But if you can't? Then stop. Leave. Do something else. You are doing more harm than good. Your pettiness, bitterness, capriciousness, hypocrisy, and casual cruelties are all scarring and hurting our kids. And you're probably hurting yourselves too.
71. Now, to my story. So in praise of the spirit of smallness, intimacy, of taking one's time, let me share my good friend's story, who was a teacher once upon a time.
72. After making a mid-career switch to teaching, she was first sent to a neighbourhood secondary school.
73. It was the kind of school where you, the rookie (especially female) teacher, are told on your first day when you set foot in class that you will probably be crying by dismissal. Told by the class, that is. Because all the other teachers did.
74. But my sister-in-law is a tough cookie. Nonplussed and hard-nosed, she retorted: "You know what? Let's see who cries first, ok?"
75. Nothing in teacher training really prepares you for this. Before you get to showcase your mastery of pedagogy and content, you have to make a connection. But how do you reach out to kids who are cynical, suspicious, disengaged, and who think they have been given up on already?
76. Absenteeism and discipline issues are par for the course. Quite a few are from dysfunctional families. Some are mixed up with gangs.
77. At this point, you realise that you have to put aside all books, and just get to know them.
78. This is far easier said than done. You do so by yourself first coming from generosity and vulnerability, and baring something of your soul. You share your own failures and mistakes, for example. But you have to take care that it is not condescending and contrived. Many of these kids have come to develop a highly-refined ability to detect token gestures and insincerity.
79. You reach out your hand, get it bitten, and reach it out again anyway. You get past the sneers and the scowls, the cursing and swearing, the posturing and the swagger, and you learn to read their lives.

80. You see who wears his or her hair down sometimes, because they want to hide a black eye. You notice who never ever eats anything during recess, so you can bring sandwiches and snacks from home. You find out quickly who has a change of clothes in their bags because they've got jobs they need to be at after school.
81. Bit by bit, the ice thaws and the masks crack.
82. And the little, hard-won victories come, if they come: those habitually absent start showing up, chronic latecomers show up a little less late, a hint of a smile, a glimmer of understanding. A human connection.
83. This reminded me of the work of Father Greg Boyle, founder and director of Homeboy Industries, a social enterprise right in the heart of the greatest concentration of gangs in Los Angeles.
84. Homeboy Industries provides rehabilitation, counselling, training, jobs and tattoo removals for the most hardened gang members.
85. It then struck me that the heart of teaching, as Father Boyle says, consists of telling our students — all our students — that they are much more than the worst thing they have ever done.
86. And some kids desperately need to hear it. But we need to say it, no matter how tough a slog it might be to get to the point where we can say it authentically.
87. One time, my sister-in-law fell badly ill and was absent from school for weeks. She was completely homebound.
88. One day when she finally felt well enough to take a walk in her neighbourhood, she saw her students skulking around her estate, furtively darting around the courtyards, systematically going around the different carparks.
89. She called out to them and asked, “What are you doing here?”
90. One of them replied, “Teacher, teacher, we came to look for you. You haven’t come to school for so long, we got worried. Are you ok? When are you coming back?”
91. The school office would not tell her students her address. But they knew roughly where she lived, knew her car registration number, and so spent days tracking her down.
92. For a teacher, this is validation, no matter if you seek it or not.
93. For the lives that are touched, this is world changing. Not “the” world, but their world. Now how’s that for a key performance indicator?



94. There is no public policy lesson here, at least not any I intended. Nor any deep philosophical point.
95. Here's just a story I was privileged to hear, one which I think is important to share. And perhaps a clue to what the future of education should look like.
96. Thank you very much.