OPINION & FEATURES

Decades-old problems

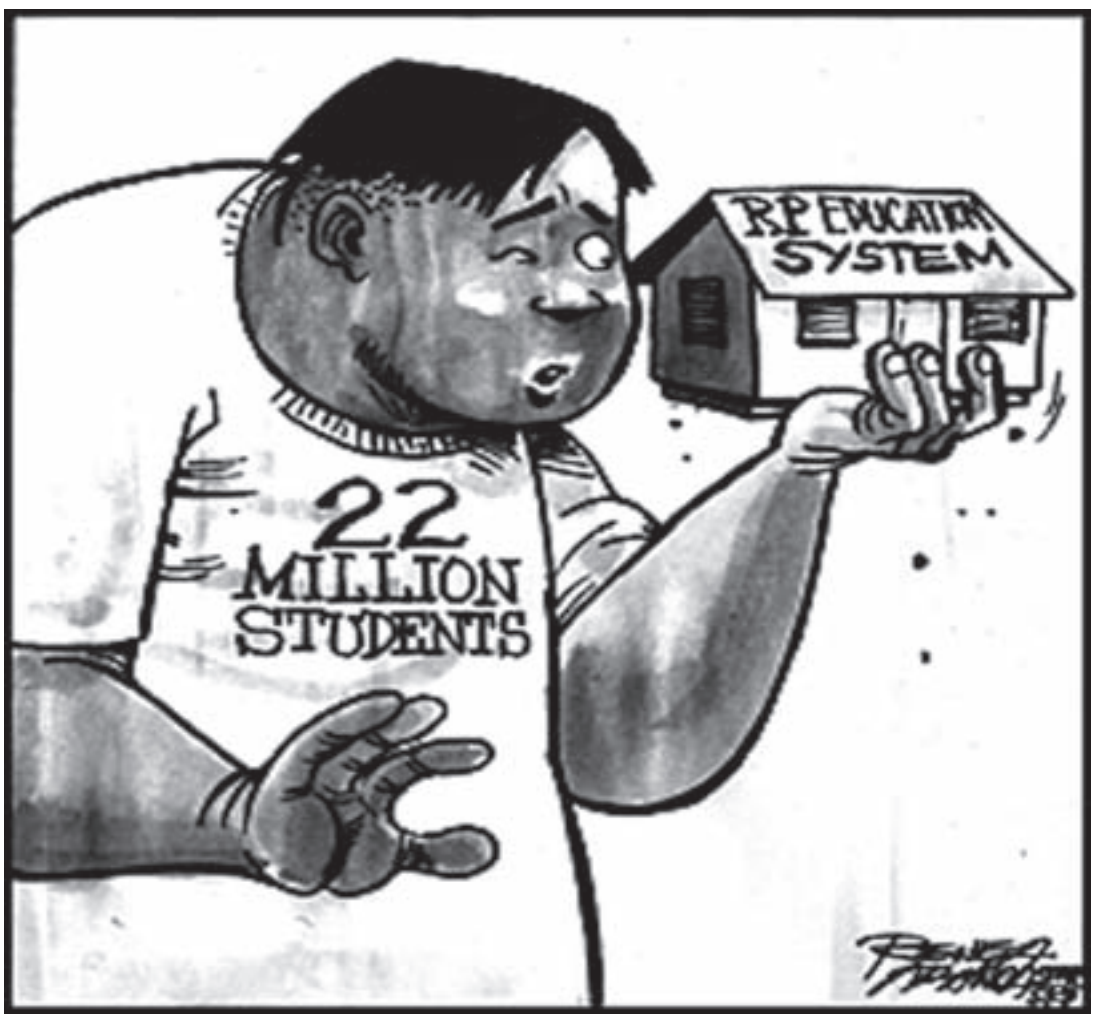
THE school year starts today, June 1, with the same problems that have bedeviled Philippine education for several decades now. No exact measure has been developed to gauge the impact of various education programs. But the results of achievement and competency tests administered in the past years at different levels of the education system give an indication of that impact. The percentages of students who pass the tests for primary and secondary levels are dishearteningly low, even when passing scores are brought down to 50 percent.

GUEST EDITORIAL

The problem starts with the lack of school facilities to accommodate an ever-growing student population. For the past eight years when the government refused to take an active role in population control, it has not provided the commensurate resources to the Department of Education to cope with the boom in the student population. These days the public school system is burdened with class sizes so large teachers sometimes have not memorized the names of all their students even by the end of the first semester. Teachers, already overworked and among the most underpaid in the region, must handle three shifts per day for lack of classrooms.

The low pay and heavy workload have driven away some of the best Philippine educators to higher paying jobs overseas. Filipinos are teaching English from Cambodia to the inner city schools of the United States. Compounding the problem for those left behind is how to teach young children reading, writing and Arithmetic in Tagalog-based Filipino and English—languages that are properly understood mostly by students from Metro Manila and other parts of Luzon where Tagalog, English or both are spoken in households.

When education officials defend their proposed annual budget before Congress, the focus is not on the quality of education services but on the number of school buildings, classrooms, teachers or textbooks that are needed for the next school year. These are legitimate problems, but there are other matters that must be addressed at the same time, including corruption in education projects. Otherwise the education budget, no matter how high the increase, will only go to waste, and the quality of the nation's graduates will continue going downhill. *(Philstar.com)*



CANdidates for President

ROSES & THORNS
Alejandro R. Roces

I can count at least 12 individuals who have signified their intentions of running for the top post of the land one year from now. During the first of a series of leadership fora, *Countdown to 2010: An ANC leadership* forum held at the Ateneo early this month, some of these would-be candidates formally made the first public presentation of their intentions to run for the presidency. It was good and informative to listen to each of their ideas on the political issues confronting the nation, while making a positive impression on the voting public at the same time. Some candidates have, much earlier, resorted to blast advertisements on television and radio which continue up to now, trying to persuade the viewers and listeners and make them remember the good things they have done to help the poor and needy. Some are being tried for their involvement in crime and corruption; the good thing is these are revealed now and we have more basis for screening out the most qualified.

With the announcement of would-be presidential candidates, several lobby groups and organizations of concerned citizens have also introduced their intentions to campaign for change in government. Sadly, it seems that, with all their good intentions, they are getting entangled, knowingly or unknowingly, into the same brand of traditional politics that they are advocating against. With many of these groups coming out, it is becoming more and more like a popularity contest, again.

People are commonly asked before they are hired by the companies where they apply for a job, whether they have been accused before or charged in court. It is a good test of integrity, honesty and sound character and this is a basic question that each Filipino should learn to ask when considering who to vote for in the coming elections. Of the total 90 million Filipinos, the National Statistics Office (NSO) identifies 12 million are poor and hungry; sadly after years of changing governments, poverty persists. We are not putting the blame on anybody, but if we want change, we should at least consider the candidates who have so far done something concrete and tangible to uplift the plight of the poor and disadvantaged.

For all the hope that Obama brings to the American nation, why should his name and personality, his youth and nationality be used to convince the masses that there is such a guy who likewise brings hope for the country based on looks, appearance and popularity? Obama's traits and his policies on resolving the many problems facing the US government won for him the votes and his popularity was a result of those clear cut policies that the Americans unanimously believed can help uplift the economy from the gutter. This is what should be emulated. Each candidate must be evaluated by the public based on the discussion of the current issues besetting the nation and not on popularity. What does each candidate stand for? What are their policies on major concerns such as the fight against worsening corruption, food sufficiency, climate change and its impact on our environment, the long-standing Mindanao conflict and most of all, poverty alleviation.

The new organizations and advocacy groups working for change should, likewise, focus on these important national issues. Those campaigning for honest, orderly and peaceful elections aside from the COMELEC must also focus on educating the masses and the members of the marginalized sectors of society on how to use their votes wisely and honestly. They need to be aware that the perennial practice of selling their votes to the wrong candidate will, in the long run, make them poorer. We are able to prove the mettle of would-be candidates holding incumbent positions in government office who have shown good and honest performance. Aside from, at least a college education, and some experience in public administration, another important consideration is being a good head and family provider (*padre de familia*), having the experience of raising his own children in humility, discipline, intelligence and mostly the fear of God. For how can one lead a nation if he fails in raising a family? The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom and only a God-fearing leader (who is not necessarily a religious), can have the true commitment and genuine heart to successfully lead a nation.

The list of candidates may still become shorter as we wait out next year's elections. In the meantime, not only should we study each one's qualifications, we should also participate in helping educate the poor and disadvantaged at this early stage, so they can participate meaningfully in making the right choice. In the end, it is God who gives and takes power so let us pray that He will favor us with a good government and a good and honest leader who CAN deliver the results. *(Philstar.com)*

Those sex videos and us

HUMMING IN MY UNIVERSE
Jim Paredes

THERE is no escaping it. People are riveted by the new sex videos. Everywhere you go, it is what is being talked about. There is even a certain perverse "ownership" about the issue as people express their opinions and wonder who else may be implicated.

Those involved are analyzed, psychoanalyzed, demonized, and in some strange way, even envied. People even have their own take on whether the women in the videos knew they were being filmed and many take a prurient interest in the possibility that the filming was done with their consent.

After I first heard about the scandal and its lurid details, I admit I tried to look for the videos on the Net but I could not find them. The next day, a friend had it on his laptop and asked me if I wanted to watch. I watched, but after about a minute, I turned away and refused to look anymore.

I just could not feel anything good about watching colleagues in show biz, or other people who are friends of some people I am close to, being humiliated by voyeurism. Sure, there are millions who have probably seen them, and what further damage could my watching the videos do, I asked myself. I couldn't possibly make the situation worse by watching, I thought by way of justification. And yet, something in my gut told me that watching it wasn't right. It simply went against the grain of what I believe in.

I do not want to sound holier-than-thou, or more Christian, or anything like that. I am no saint, that's for sure. But my curiosity was outweighed by the compassion I felt for those people whose lives and reputations have been sullied by all this. It was as if they were being raped in front of a cheering, ogling, leering crowd. I simply put myself in their shoes. If I was in their place, how would I want other people to react to my (admitted) naiveté and trusting innocence that what I did privately would never be shown publicly? If I were in the place of the violated, would I want people to do what they are doing now at my expense?

We live in a time where our lives, because of the Internet and everyone's access to it, can easily be put in the spotlight. Anyone can use the Internet for good or for ill. It's as if, as denizens of cyberspace, we now live in Gotham City where twisted characters not unlike The Joker can hold our attention, our imagination and yes, our morals, hostage. Reputations, carefully nurtured, can come crashing down like a house of cards.

Social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, Multiply and others seem to have created a generation of low-level narcissists, exhibitionists and voyeurs. You can count me as one of them. People broadcast their personal opinions and thoughts on anything, upload pictures of events in their lives, share their biographies, birthdays, convictions, trials and secrets, and presume that everyone else would be interested.

And lo and behold, many times, people are interested, especially when the broadcaster is a celebrity and what is being broadcasted to the world has something to do with taboo subjects such as one's sexual preferences and proclivities, or other deep dark secrets. Everything can be posted—the good, the bad, the ugly. The Internet has provided everyone a venue for their own "reality show."

The Internet has become our cyber body, mind and nervous system. Everyone is now part of everyone else. And this Internet "mind" we all share, just like the human mind described by Freud and Jung, harbors both our good and bad sides and everything in between. Thus, it broadcasts our activities that are for public consumption and also, when you analyze it, the shadows that live within us.

If it is acceptable to post almost everything in our lives on the Net, then why is it a surprise that our sex lives are suddenly included as well? In no way do I mean that posting anything that violates a person's privacy is correct or even understandable. But sadly, I think there is a perverse inevitability to it.

Sexuality just happens to be one of those aspects of human nature that most everyone has an insatiable desire to know about, to discover about themselves and others, and to participate in. It elicits limitless fascination and, sadly, is one of the greatest taboos in our society. It is perhaps one of the most personal and private dimensions in anyone's life. In truth, the latitude of behavior people engage in, sexually speaking, is so wide that society does not or cannot (as of now) acknowledge it fully. Its range of behavior thrives in our shadow world and it will be quite a while before it attains politically correct status or full acceptance, if ever.

Personally, I have more understanding for the "sin" of sex than any other human weakness, because I think sexuality contains one of the greatest forces in our lives, something that expresses who we really are, even as we struggle to tame it.

Much of this prurience that we are witnessing regarding the sex videos is driven by our government officials and their media cohorts who have a distorted sense of "mission" in "investigating" the issue. I take with a ton of salt the media's mantra that it has the duty to peruse anything in the name of "the people's right to know," and the politicians' knee-jerk response to hold a Senate hearing on the matter "in aid of legislation." It's all hogwash. The real reason behind the constant and excessive coverage of the sex video story is simple: ratings, ratings, ratings and for the politicians, exposure, exposure, exposure.

For a different take on the frenzy about the sex videos, I would like to share something I wrote years ago, my take on the Beatitudes:

"Blessed are the strange, the weird, the people we laugh at, especially the socially wretched and despised. By their presence in our lives, they expand our reality—on our part, reluctantly and on theirs, so painfully—by forcing us to look at them in the hope that we see the God in them."

Instead of getting lost in this demeaning circus that tempts us to trivialize and even laugh at other people's suffering, we may want to retain our humanity and spare its victims the inhumanity of all this by simply refusing to watch those blasted sex videos. *(Philstar.com)*

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