

The Global Youth, The Filipino Youth: Choosing Reading Materials Appropriate for the Times*

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We work with them; we live with them. We study them; we make careers out of studying them. We wake up before the sun rises and go home after the sun has set, working for them, being with them, journeying with them in their daily joys and travails, some days going home frustrated, most other days going home serenely joyful in the thought that one has somehow made a significant imprint on their impressionable minds and open hearts.

Still, sometimes, we wonder: are we doing enough? Most importantly, are we doing right by them? Are we teaching them things which will truly prepare them to engage the future that even now already forms them, even as they form it?

Or, are we only teaching them more of the same, improving only on what we have been taught ourselves, but teaching them things that do not truly address their real needs as children today and citizens tomorrow, given the demands of the times?

I am talking about the children and youth in our midst, those that we birth ourselves, and those that we have been tasked to care for and nurture as teachers.

Although most of us deal with young children and early youth, the context of the changing times I will discuss here are taken from sources dealing with youth studies in general, with “youth” defined as those between 15-24 years old, and “children” as those below 15 years old.

The Changing Times -- The Global Youth

A number of studies (United Nations Report on The Global Situation of Young People, 2003; Lanuza, 2003; Cruz, Laguna and Raymundo, 2002), emphasize the fact that the main challenge facing postmodern youth is not only the transition from tradition to modernism (or more accurately, postmodernism) but also, at the same time, dealing with **the multiple challenges of postmodernism** or “late modernity” itself—a condition that ushers in new cultural sensibilities and practices.

As cited by Lanuza (2003) from the studies of Storey (1994), Stirato (1995) and Featherstone (1996), postmodernism is characterized by “the blurring of distinction between low and high art, the celebration of consumerism and consumerist values, the triumph of collage (chaotic combinations of different elements), pastiche (mixing of styles without overarching coherence), parody, and the importance of signs as commodities... (which) heralds the birth of virtual reality and the advent of ‘cybersociety’ and ‘semiurgical society’, where “spatial links of youth and their various cultures become more and more the result of time-space compressing technologies.”

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This is compounded by the fact that the phenomenon of **economic globalization** has resulted in “pervasive socio-economic and cultural transitions”, where, with continuing modernization, increasing levels of urbanization and industrialization, coupled with the worsening poverty in the developing countries like the Philippines, which also has a ballooning debt burden, (Filipino) society has become drastically changed. Because of the growing lack of economic opportunities, there are massive movements from the rural to the urban areas and even abroad, causing changes in traditional family structures, resulting to diminished parental influence and control, even as mass media, more than the family, church, school, and even the peer group, has become the modernizing agent of socialization among youth today. (Cruz, et. al., 2002, Lanuza, 2003)

According to the United Nations Report on the Global Situation of Youth (2003), a fifth of the world’s population are youth aged 15-24 years old, 85% of whom live in developing countries, with 60% living in Asia alone. Twelve percent of youth live in countries with high per capita incomes (more than \$10,000/year), while two-thirds of the world’s youth are in countries with per capita incomes below \$1000/year.

Citing a 1996 global poll in the Braungart study of 25000 middle-class high school students aged 15-18 years old in five continents, the said Report found youth found to be more similar than different in their **common desire for personal achievement and “to make something of themselves”** as a pervasive value among 80% of the world’s youth, in addition to having a strong respect for the family. This runs contrary to popular stereotypes of youth as alienated, rebellious and antagonistic towards their families and adults, which the youth respondents did not believe themselves to be. In general, young people expressed the need for opportunities to develop a sense of independence, competence and participation in society, and an eagerness and willingness to connect to the new trends, ideas and technologies which can be threatening to older people who believe that their value systems are being eroded, their authority diminished and knowledge seen as irrelevant.

The case of U.S. youth, though, was cited as unique, in a sense, because unlike many young people in the rest of the world, they often hold part-time jobs after school hours and on weekends, were more involved with dating, spent less time reading and doing homework and had the highest levels of self-reported stress and academic anxiety. In short, they grow older before their time.

Generally, young people in developing nations worried more about crime and the environment while those in the industrialized world expressed serious doubts about the future of the world and tended to reject “the old ways of doing things”. Still, studies of **youth in developing countries also report that young people place more emphasis on family and tradition rather than personal achievement.**

Also, as societies become more complex, **family and religion are no longer the primary socialization agents for global youth.** Instead, schools, teachers and mass media have increasingly taken on the role. Especially with MTV and the Internet, marketing and mass consumption are seen as important elements of the global youth culture.

In all regions, **depression** is an emerging problem for young people, and the Report suggested harnessing the youth's desire to make something of themselves and contributing to society at large as a means to address this challenge, by getting youth more and more actively involved in programming for their own development and futures.

The Changing Times – The Filipino Youth

According to the World Program of Action for Youth Implementation in the Philippines as submitted to the United Nations, **of the Philippines' population of 85.2 million people, 40% are young.** Twenty-one percent (21%) are in high school, tertiary and vocational schools, 22% are young peasants, 21% are contracted young workers, 36% are unemployed and out of school, and only 4% are working.

Although the United Nations Educational, Scientific, Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recommendation for youth development is to set aside at least 6% of a nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for education, historically in the Philippines, **only 2.2% to 2.6% are budgeted for education.**

The **dropout rate** in the country is a cause for concern: for every 100 children born, 67 finish primary school; of these 67, only 45 get to finish secondary school; and of these 45, only 7 get to finish college. So a basic challenge in the country is how to educate and prepare the Filipino youth, who comprise almost half of the Philippine population, for the challenges of surviving and thriving in a postmodern world, within and without the formal educational system.

The National Youth Commission, which was established through R.A. 8044, categorizes the nation's **youth into four (4) groups:** the in-school youth (ISY), the out-of-school youth (OSY), the working youth (WY) and the youth with special needs (YSN). It has identified the following as its main areas of concern-- education, employment, values and social participation, health and the environment-- in terms of its work for the youth.

In his review of literature on youth studies conducted in the country, particularly in terms of the influences of mass media on youth culture, Lanuza (2003) reveals that, generally, **Filipino youth today are more the products of mass media rather than their genes or school, or least of all, their homes.** However, numerous studies he has reviewed reveal that the youth are actually **not hapless victims of consumption**, as they are in fact the most sophisticated readers of images and media, more than any group in society (citing Willis, 1990: 30; Crisostomo, 1982; Nava, 1996; and Bennet, 2000).

Also, according to Lanuza, "mass media exhibits an ambivalent character in relation to the formation of youth culture". While it carries modernizing elements, it also, at the same time, promotes traditional Filipino values. Studies on youth and values promoted by television show the propagation of values such as respect for elders, family solidarity and reverence for authorities (citing Concepcion, 1986; Parungno-Adorable, 1982; and Yujuico, 1994). Thus, there is an ongoing debate on the media portrayal of youth as adventurous, full of insecurities and susceptible to foreign cultural influences, because the young people

themselves do not see their selves as such, especially those from the provinces, who still profess a **high valuation for traditional family values** (citing Natividad, 1996). For instance, although the McCann-Erikson Studies (1996, 2000; as cited in Lanuza, 2003)) showed that the Filipino youth today **live amidst a highly sexualized environment** as brought about by media, especially television, the youth are also not just imitators of what they see; they still watch these images with preconceived notions about sex (Panabi, 1994 and Olaer, 1985, as cited in Lanuza, 2003).

What appears to be clear, though, is that given the **absence of parental guidance**, mass media may easily become an alternative expert system for youth, even as the youth culture itself largely influences the direction and trends of mass media development, especially in terms of advertising and information technology, which promote alternative value systems like individualism and transcending time and space in a globalizing culture.

This is supported by another study (Cruz, et. al., 2002) on family influences on the lifestyle of Filipino youth, which revealed that adolescents proved to be major consumers of mass media, with patterns of preference varying across media types. The study also noted that mass media exposure tended to be more of an urban phenomenon, naturally explained by the fact that mass media resources are typically concentrated in urban centers in the country. The study likewise revealed that only two-thirds of youth live have been living with their parents from childhood to adolescence, while the rest do not, either through changes in the family structure, or the urban migration of youth themselves (urban migrants were typically young female migrants).

An interesting finding of the said study, though, is that **family values and parental guidance continue to show significant influence** in trying to neutralize the effects of media and peers, despite initial traces of stress (substantial levels of absentee parenting and unstable marital union of parents).

Unmet Needs

Amidst these many challenges facing children and youth today, certain unmet needs are becoming apparent.

On the one hand, there is massive, worldwide fast-paced change technologically, economically and even environmentally- speaking. On the other hand, education and culture are barely catching up in terms of addressing the demands posed by these rapid changes. Futurist Dr. Frank Hutchinson describes it as “driving into the future by looking into the rearview mirror”, and thus, “crashing into future shock”.

Young people today still affirm the importance of family and parental guidance, yet families are increasingly being dislocated and broken up, with parental guidance increasingly absent. Schools and religion are supposed to be the traditional alternative means of support, information and guidance, but in reality, media is taking that place, although young people are the most savvy media consumers, too.

Young people want to make something of themselves still, but with everything around them constantly fast-changing, breaking down, and birthing new changes, without the solid core of family and parental guidance to rely on, they are left to fend for themselves, even parent themselves, as best as they know how, mostly using ideas from peers and media.

Dr. Lourdes “Honey” Carandang, in her talk delivered at the 5th Barlaya Writing for Children Workshop at the Ateneo de Manila University in 2006, and basing from her book, “Filipino Children Under Stress” (2001), emphasized that the most basic and pressing needs children and young people have today are the opportunities to develop **resiliency, wisdom, hopefulness and transcendence** despite cruelty, violence, confusing changes, and the other stresses of life. She emphasized further that there is a “need to teach (young) people, not just how to soar, but also how to land”, which means facing failure and all the other upsets of life with as much dignity and grace as one can.

“The child is our truth-teller: he/she has an innate capacity to perceive and discern the truth”, Carandang explains, and this implies that we adults must know how to guide the child along in engaging these truths.

However, what do we adults normally do when children come to us with their questions? Usually, we either brush them away because we are too busy to reflect on the answers to their questions, even scold them if the questions are threatening to us, or we try to distract them with hastily-concocted fantastic answers, half-truths, evasions, or perpetuated self-defeating myths about who we are and how the world and life is like.

Rarely do we have the good sense and sensibility to carefully think through their questions and our own answers to those questions, and then to sit down with them and, with as much truthfulness, respect and compassion as we can, try to answer their questions, or at the very least, journey with them in finding their own answers to those questions.

These are the magical moments that come to us unbidden every day, but sadly, we do not recognize and appreciate them as such, and so we gradually lose, not only these moments, but also even our children, and ultimately, the more positively transforming future for all of us that could have been.

How Good Children’s Literature Can Fill the Gap

Yet, these magical moments can still be reclaimed, through our investment of time and attention to our children and young people, and with the help of good children’s literature, whether they be in printed, spoken, performed or even electronically-presented form through the various mass media.

There are always stories, and there are good stories.

For me, good stories are always those which not only entertain and engage the reader’s/listener’s attention, but also vicariously initiate and guide into the universal mysteries and lessons of life, and what it means to be a fine human being.

Mary Hill Arbuthnot (1964), in her classic essay, “The Child and His Books” identified specific stories that effectively addressed specific needs among children and young people. These needs are: material security/ physical wellbeing; intellectual security/ the need to know; emotional security/ the need to be loved; acceptance/ the need to belong; play/ the need for exploration and change; and aesthetic satisfaction/ the need for beauty and order. In summary, though, she points out that all these needs point to a more basic and bigger need for a sense of competence, which is “an organism’s capacity to interact effectively with its environment” (citing Robert W. White in his study, “Motivation Reconsidered: The Concept of Competence”).

Carandang essentially describes this as conveying the main message that: “Life is hard, and we will make it.”

These are the guiding concepts that I have relied on in creating the PBBY (Philippine Board on Books for Young People) Alfredo Salanga Prize-winning stories, *Papa’s House, Mama’s House* (2004), which deals with parents’ marital separation; and *Tight Times* (2007), which deals with a family’s economic difficulties because of the father’s job loss.

These are the same guiding principles I am using in further fine-crafting my current as well as future stories. I have two more current stories I am polishing, *Billie the Bully*, about what happens to a bully when her violence is met with compassion from an unlikely source, and *My One-Boob Mamma*, about what a daughter learns about health, about facing life’s challenges and about being a real woman from her mother who has breast cancer. This latter story is currently with the National Book Development Board for its Illustrators’ Contest.

Choosing Good Literature

It is obvious then, that in choosing good literature for children and young people to read and appreciate, these basic needs and message must be primarily considered.

What is the story about? Does it talk about things that the child can relate to and may even be currently wrestling with? What is the story’s main message, whether explicitly or implicitly conveyed? Does it promote a sense of helping a child see alternative, more positive and more creatively transformative way of looking at the world and in dealing with life’s inevitable conflicts and challenges, or does it only perpetuate a status quo that limits the full blossoming of human potential?

How is the story delivered? This does not mean only paying attention to considerations of form, illustrations, language and other methodological expressions; more importantly, this includes the story’s underlying tone—what is said, as well as what is not said.

How does the story make you feel, and how do you think it would make the child feel? Does it encourage exploration of one’s own truths, or does it only conveniently dish

out time-worn clichés which are not really personally meaningful? Does the story emphasize a sense of resilience amidst challenges, lead to certain wisdoms, encourage hope still, and an empowered sense of transcendence over life's struggles and conflicts?

Creating Our Futures

All these questions and more, one has to carefully reflect on then, in choosing stories for children and young people.

Ultimately and always, we must not lose sight of the bigger vision--

We are not just choosing stories here for reading to/with children and young people, we are choosing ideas and values for how we want our children and young people to see and engage life with.

We are not just creating opportunities for children and young people to read and learn concepts and skills, we are creating our collective futures.*

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