



MANY HANDS. Raya students get their handprints displayed on the wall mural.

The Raya School

BREAKING THE BOUNDS OF TRADITION

BY ANDREW ILAGAN

Tucked somewhere in the heart of Quezon City is a not-so-usual school. Its exteriors may look fairly typical, resembling any other school in a suburban middle-class neighborhood. But as you amble along and enter the building, you find that it's far from typical. The illusion shatters, a mere trick of the eye.

The interiors of Raya School look a lot like a house. There's a wooden front-door, obviously from the '60s, and a wide stairway leading to the upper floors. You also notice portraits of happy students tacked on walls. At 4 p.m.—already dismissal time—there's a kind of warmth

and effortless charm in the place. Kids stroll about hallways, while teachers guide them along and smile.

Ani Rosa "Ani" Almario, co-founder of The Raya School, believes that schools should make kids feel comfortable and at home. That's the rationale behind Raya's design. Ani says they wanted a space that promotes "openness and a sense of belonging." She believes that Raya is an extension of the home, with the teachers serving as second parents.

Based on the design standpoint alone, it's evident that Raya (the name comes from the Malay word *raja* which connotes nobility) aims to bring out the best in

students. Just like all progressive schools, it understands that children learn in various ways and at their own speed. Unlike traditional schools where the approach is teacher-centered, learning in Raya is more personalized—it respects and adapts to the student's individual progress. From spatial design to curriculum design Raya spotlights its students, first and foremost.

OVERSEAS ORIGIN

Of course, Raya began only as a germ of an idea when it was first envisaged more than five years ago. No clear plans for design yet—all that came much later. What was certain, though, was that Ani had a vision in mind: forming an excellent

preschool. So while pursuing an MA in Education at Stanford University, she spent an inordinate amount of time chasing that vision. Shares Ani, "I was really inspired by my studies to start a school of my own. So I started a journal and I wrote down all my ideas on how to provide key experiences for very young children."

It was also during those fruitful months when she met Carlo Primo "CP" David at Stanford (who later became her husband). CP was also enrolled in the university, and expressed similar plans. "Actually, *ang gusto niyang gawin* boarding school," Ani confides. "Iba naman yung view niya. But it was very apparent that we had alternative ideas with regards to education—*hindi talaga yung traditional setting.*"

Upon their return to the country, the two began to work on funding for the school, they found other partners—friends Melvin Rillo and Basil Wuson—but the most active were still Ani and CP. "[CP] became the school science coordinator *kasi* he's a scientist, and I became the school director," Ani explains. Raya School opened in 2005.

After two years, the erstwhile small preschool grew in student number and ventured into adding an elementary level. The decision to expand was largely because of the students' parents. "They said, 'We want you to start an elementary school and we will continue to be enrolled.' So because of that, *parang nagka-confidence kami* to start it," Ani recalls.

CLOSE COLLABORATION

Today, Raya's elementary level reaches Grade 5. And without the collaboration

between the parents and faculty, the whole project would never have been a success. There is a detectable sense of community, and it has helped the school attain great heights.

Raya relies on unwavering parental support, a hallmark of highly progressive schools. Parents participate in events and attend quarterly Parent-Teacher Conferences, as well as special meetings where they discuss curricular changes and other pressing topics. They are deeply involved in the process, and have an active say in their children's learning.

As administrator, Ani also makes sure that their parents support Raya's vision. "*Gusto ko talaga kilala ko yung mga pamilya nila...* So I still do all the parent interviews. I don't give it to my coordinators. *Kasi* I want to know the philosophy of that family, and if they fit our educational philosophy. Because, if it's not the same, then chances are they won't stay in Raya for the long term... *At sayang naman yung curricular foundations naise-set namin kung pupunta sila* somewhere else. Although, *mayroon ring mga bata na nagpe-preschool lang sa amin...* Pero I want the parents to be honest with me *'pag ganoon...* Very important *sa amin yung fit kasi* not all kids are for progressive schools, or progressive small schools."

At the same time, Ani also collaborates with her faculty members, not just parents. They function as one team, actively participating and offering input. "*Kailangan participatory lagi yung curriculum design and structuring a school...* The school benefits so much from having the whole faculty think about the curriculum, propose curriculum changes,

discuss the school rules... *Kasi* very democratic *kami sa Raya*. So *hindi naman laging say ko lang yung nasusunod; lagi kong hinihingi yung mga suwestiyon ng faculty.*"

CURRICULAR EMPHASIS

One example of this collaborative effort is curriculum design. It has been constantly evolving since Raya started. Ani takes the lead in revising it, but also solicits help from parents and faculty.

"*Sinasabi ko sa kanila na trait yun ng progressive school,*" Ani shares. "*Hindi ka pwede na sitting on your curriculum; you should be responsive to society. You should be responsive to the changing phase of children. Kasi sila din nagbabago sila,* so what we did on 2005 cannot apply to 2011. *So lagi siyang nagbabago, lagi siyang nag-i-improve.*"

What remains unchanged, however, is the school's overriding thrusts. Raya focuses on Reading and Science, among other core subjects. The students develop a healthy appetite for reading, and also master language structures both in English and Filipino. As a matter of fact, Raya also serves as lab school for Adarna House, the largest publisher of Filipino children's books.

"We really value the role of literature in the development of children," Ani says. "*Tsaka* I believe that reading can really change your lives, *'di ba?* Understanding literature and being exposed to literature in both languages, especially literature in Filipino written by Filipinos—I think it makes a difference."

The school's emphasis on Science, on the other hand, promotes inquisitiveness and



LEARNING SPACES. School director Ani Alamario knows the value of having well-designed spaces for effective learning. Despite their limited budget, Raya manages to provide conducive learning environment for their preschool and elementary classes.

critical thinking. “*Di ba may kasabihan na parang sponge ang kids? Totoo yun eh. Talagang they learn or they imbibe so much things from the environment and from our lessons, na parang mabilis lang. Kasi gano’n yung mga utak nila.* Even two-year-olds like animals and plants, like looking at flowers and looking at pictures of animals. So why not mine that? Mine that characteristic of kids and really teach them scientific concepts.”

In fact, Raya’s science teachers, together with CP, have come up with their own guides for investigatory projects. “I don’t remember my Science being like that—*yung mayroon ka munang babasahin na article that’s in their language, that has humor and that’s fun enough to read. And after that, you do an experiment about that particular scientific concept. So [ang] tawag namin Science Reader,*” Ani shares.

PROUD PINOYS

Aside from Science and Reading, the third thrust—and also the school’s claim to

fame—is building a fundamental sense of love for country among kids. This is particularly unique to Raya, “a novel thing that we continue to do and continue to improve,” Ani declares. “*Importante siya kasi doon na dapat icha-channel yung talent nila—tsaka intellect nila—towards serving the country. So actually, yung talagang goal mo ma-develop... maging magaling tayo na bayan. Magiging magaling lang tayo na bayan kung magagaling yung mamamayan natin... kaya importante na ini-inculcate sa kanila habang bata sila na kung maging magaling man kayo o mahusay kayo sa anumang larang... sana ibalik ninyo sa bayan.*”

Not surprisingly, Raya integrates this value in very concrete ways. “We don’t teach the same national symbols and cultural and all the fiestas. *Nag-iiba din. May mga focus kami. ‘O, ngayon naman Mindanao; o, ngayon naman focus tayo on Visayan festivals; or heto naman ethnic patterns ang gawin natin sa art.’ Parang ang saya niya kasi nakaka-experiment yung faculty;*

tapos yung faculty din, nadi-discover nila how rich our culture is.”

Raya’s interiors also showcase this rich Filipino vibe. On the building’s second floor is a row of ethnic fabrics that students can ogle and touch. Also on display is a *kulintang* set propped near the wall.

So far, the students seem to imbibe everything well. “Actually, they’re very excited about all things Filipino,” Ani asserts. “*Yung pinakamababaw doon siguro yung sa Azkals [football team] because they know they’re fighting for the Philippines. Pero aside from that, they get excited about Rizal, about his sesquicentennial; parang ikinukwento nila lagi sa akin yung mga events that they go to. They’re proud of being Filipino. So parang hindi nila kinakahiya yun, which I value.*”

Ani, however, is quick to admit that not all kids started out as enthusiastic about being Pinoy. “I think it slowly builds... *Kasi*



OUTSIDE THE CORE CURRICULUM. Raya offers students a broad range of extra-curricular activities, including the performing arts and outdoor sports.

not all families are that enlightened about the importance of culture and heritage in everyday life, or value in being Filipino. So *talagang makikita mo yun—na from wala hanggang 'Ah! mahalaga na sa kanya.'* Ganun. *Interesado na siya sa buhay ng mga bayani. Interesado siya sa ibang probinsiya, hindi lang Metro Manila. So ibig sabihin noon, parang nagwo-work talaga yung ginagawa namin."*

TACKLING CRITICISMS

Of course, in its five-year run, Raya has also received a volley of criticisms. One of them is that some parents find the approach a little too liberal, defying tried-and-tested conventions like homework and numerical grades.

"How do I deal with that?" Ani shares. "Siyempre I get hurt, kasi it's a very personal thing for me. *Hindi naman siya negosyo. Ano siya, parang baby mo yung school. Pero laging mayroong mga parents na magsasalo. Kunyari, may isa na nag-hate-blog siya, hate-post, tapos*

may parents na sumalo na sinabi nila na 'That's not true. In Raya...' ganyanganyan. Parang at the end of the day, okay ka pa rin. And you cannot please everyone, 'di ba? ... Pero nagta-try kami very hard nga to get the fit. Para the parents that we're catering to really believe in what we do and really like the non-traditional approach [and] adhere to it."

In the face of such criticisms, Ani remains focused on giving quality learning. The school's collective passion is unmistakable. "Driven *kami* about sense of country *kasi* the founders are driven [by] sense of country, and the teachers become driven when they enter... *Gusto talaga namin mahusay [yung mga bata] makitungo sa ibang tao at mahal nila yung Pilipinas, tsaka [maging] mahusay din silang mamayang Filipino."*

What began as a dream—a germ of an idea—has come long way. That little school called Raya stands quite unlike anything else within its proximity. On

this particular day, the afternoon light is receding and the hallways are half-empty. Ani smiles as she greets some students.

When asked about her long-term plans for the school, Ani radiates optimism. "My dream is really to have branches or a branch, but I don't want it to be in Luzon... So *kunwari sa Davao kami, Davaoño yung perspective ng school para ma-promote yung local culture and literacies... Sana gano'n. But I don't know where we'll be. Kasi hindi ko rin naisip na magtatayo kami ng elem when we started eh. I just wanted to have a really good preschool. But now, parang no regrets ako kasi I can see [kids] develop."* **E**

Editor's Note: Educator Magazine thanks Ani Alamario for providing invaluable time and assistance for the production of this article. Some photos courtesy of Raya School's Facebook page.

Learning From Raya

Although the beginnings of Raya can be traced to the sprawling Northern California campus of Stanford University, Filipino teachers can duly follow its ways. Of course, you don't need to pack up and fly to the Golden State. All you need is a little imagination to integrate these innovative ideas into your system. Raya's goal is to let kids value their youth, and in the process, become ideal Filipinos. And isn't that what we all dream for our students?

Even if Raya is far from the usual school, teachers and school heads would do well to adopt its non-traditional style. Listen and learn—

FIND A COMMON PASSION. This way, parents and the entire faculty are driven by something they believe in. If you find

it, then it would be easy for your school to reflect it. In Raya, for example, it's about having a bold sense of country. What is your school passionate about?

BE SUSTAINABLE. Find ways on how you can pinch pennies, but without scrimping on quality and compromising your school's standard of education. Use indigenous materials for simple science experiments. Hang your student's artworks in the halls as decoration. You'll be surprised at how creative you can get when thinking of sustainable solutions.

SELECT TEACHERS WITH A GREATER GOAL. When conducting an application interview, you should be perceptive and only get teachers who show depth and passion. Hire people who don't just want to earn a living, but who will sincerely care for the students through and through.

SPEND TIME WITH STUDENTS. Go beyond the teacher-student relationship and bond with kids outside class hours. Get to know them and develop empathy for them. Trust us, they'll respond to you better in class if you forge a warm relationship with them.

TEACH KIDS THROUGH PLAY. Play is important because it shapes the students' imagination. And for early learners, that's what they're interested in, so why not dish out your lessons through play? Play brings out different

aspects of self-expression—dramatic, artistic, athletic and so on. Exploit it.

TEACH KIDS IN BOTH LANGUAGES. Our students should be proficient not just in English, but also in Filipino. Consider teaching subjects like Science and Math, by turns, in English and Filipino. Let them read local literature and converse in both tongues. Dual mastery of language helps them become smarter and more open-minded.

REDUCE HOMEWORK. Kids already spend a huge chunk of their time in school, so avoid giving out unnecessary homework. At home, kids should be spending precious time with their families and also, learning other things like doing chores (If ever, design homework in such a way that it promotes bonding between the kids and their respective parents.).

DE-EMPHASIZE THE VALUE OF GRADES. Too much concern over getting good grades shouldn't get in the way of children learning. As a teacher, you can motivate students through other methods, like positive reinforcement and heartfelt praise. And yes, fun classroom activities.

PURSUE NEW STYLES OF TEACHING. Even if you're a seasoned teacher, you should challenge yourself by seeking new and better approaches. Take the time to study innovative pedagogical methods, or explore the latest tools that can help you in the classroom. Just because you're a teacher doesn't mean you can't also be learner! **E**

Ani Almarrio
Raya School Director



MANAGING TRAINING, from p. 9

understand that active and nonconforming children learn differently from the way passive, conforming children do. Parents allow their active children to be drugged because they are unaware that their children can learn; that the problem is really about traditional instructional approaches not being responsive to how their children learn.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND IMMIGRANT POPULATIONS.

In a study of diverse cultures, the lack of opportunities hinders an individual's ability to develop specific areas of talent that may eventually lead to giftedness. In cultures that respected art, higher percentages of artistically gifted students were found; and so too with other domains. If culture so influences academic achievement, why not train teachers to teach lessons through students' talents and interests?

INABILITY TO SEE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE ACADEMICALLY ABLE AND THE ACADEMICALLY AT-RISK.

Underachievers tend to show the following characteristics: a) have poor auditory memory; b) learn visually through pictures, drawings, graphs, symbols, etc.; and c) are unable to remember facts through lecture, discussion or reading. A majority of low achievers and dropouts need the following: a) frequent opportunities for mobility while concentrating; b) ability to learn during late morning, afternoon or evening hours; c) soft illumination; d) informal and comfortable seating; and e) tactual or visual resources reinforced with kinesthetic or visual resources. **E**

WHAT'S NEW?, from p. 11

Rodolfo B. says—

Priority should be given to upgrading the current state of Philippine education not by adding two more years but by providing the necessary resources for the current set up. More classrooms, more teachers, higher pay, more stringent screening of teachers, better text books, better facilities/equipment, continuing teaching skills upgrading programs, more post-graduate scholarships, ad infinitum.

And I tell myself that Rodolfo may be a reader of *Educator Magazine!*

However, what struck me the most was a comment from an elementary school student. Adriel C. says—

if K+12 will be implemented, i'll better get out of this country ... i'm Grade 6. First Year High School na sana ako.

With what he said, I tell myself that perhaps we're hitting two birds with one stone here—with kids contemplating on leaving the country altogether because of K-12, we may actually also solve the overpopulation problem in no time (*Bravo!*).

Levity aside, I honestly think we should in fact get serious about K-12. I hope that our leaders take this matter seriously, too. I hope that they do not brush these criticisms aside and bulldoze their way forward just to ensure the program's implementation. At the very least, I hope they can wait for my next

commentary, since this will be where I plan to finally present my arguments against K-12 (Yes, if you haven't noticed, I haven't even presented my own arguments against it, at this juncture.).

The gloom I see and feel in this North American winter pales in comparison to the gloom our country will experience if and when we start that long harsh winter of K-12. And yes, I'd be the first to tell young Adriel C. and all other students—

Bon voyage and Godspeed.

Notwithstanding, I must stress that I still remain optimistic about our future. Most certainly, I am still counting on the wisdom and better judgment of those in power—people whose integrity and sense of patriotism I will not question—that they will sooner or later see the light. I am still hopeful that they will not force this mishap upon us.

For this coming year, therefore, I pray for everyone's enlightenment on the matter. A joyous new year to all. **E**

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