01 Revitalizing Teacher Education

Piniti Ratananukul

Chairman of Uttaradit Rajabhat University Council

(I)

We are now facing what we generally refer to as the challenges of the twenty-first century. These challenges arise from the fact that this century is a period of intense and unprecedented transformations. In particular, unprecedented rapid technological innovations are already transforming practically all aspects of life. We can easily appreciate the significance of these innovations by just looking around to see that the essential daily appliances can change in just a few years. Who would imagine, only not many years back, that the essential tools such as landline telephones and television would be displaced by cell phones and the Internet? Moreover, also as a result of the rapid technological advancements, human activities ranging from business operations to cultural events such as sports have become globalised. We are living in a world being increasingly characterized by mobility and transnational activities.

The current trend is unmistakable that the demands of work and life have significantly changed. To survive and thrive in the contemporary and future world, one needs to acquire “the twenty-first century skills”. It is now also argued that further advancement of our society would not be possible without major adjustments in its various aspects. In view of such changing demands, one such adjustment that is being initiated and debated involves the reform of our educational system. It is the schools and universities that are expected to provide our students with the essential skills to survive and succeed in this rapidly evolving and increasingly technology-directed world. It is the schools and universities that are expected to produce qualified experts and specialists, without whose creative knowledge

further advancement of our society would be almost unthinkable. The question, naturally, is whether our educational system is well equipped to fulfill these expectations.

This is a big question. Still, our educational system faces another crucial expectation. Many countries now attach particular importance to educational achievements in the form of scores of international tests such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) developed by the OECD. As we all know, this programme is an assessment of the scholastic performance in mathematics, science, and reading of 15-year old pupils in the member as well as non-member states of the OECD. The idea of comparing the educational outcomes of different educational systems is not new. Programmes for such comparisons were already available in the mid-1950s. However, the point now about PISA and other international tests in use today is that their outcomes are often used in rating the educational achievements of different countries.

Despite lingering misgivings about such ratings and rankings of educational achievements, they are more or less indicative of the levels of competitiveness of the countries being rated in this way. The countries that have achieved relatively low ratings are naturally concerned about their competitiveness in the world today. Moreover, the outcomes of international comparisons of educational assessments have also raised the issue of accountability in terms of the cost-effectiveness of investment in education. We can now say that a new culture of accountability has emerged all over the world: those responsible for educational policy of their country are held accountable for its educational achievement. In Thailand, we have invested enormously in education; our educational budget has been proportionally bigger than those of most of the neighbouring countries. However, our educational achievements, as evinced in the outcomes of national as well as international tests, remain relatively low. How can we account for this poor performance of our educational system?

This, again, is a big question. In considering this issue, the tendency now is to look at the teacher education infrastructure. This is quite understandable, as the teachers still assume a central role in the provision of education. Moreover, the countries with outstanding educational performance, as evident especially in international tests like PISA, such as Finland and Singapore, have been found to have relative strengths in their overall educational systems and their teacher education in particular. Therefore, if a reform of our educational system is to be undertaken as a major part of the effort to reinvigorate our country, so that it could survive and thrive in the twenty-first century, teacher education is the one area we need to pay close attention to. That is, how could we revitalize our teacher education?

I am not an education specialist; therefore, I cannot discuss this question as a professional educator. What I will do here is simply to offer some personal observations that represent the view of a non-specialist who is keenly interested in, and profoundly concerned about, the present state of our educational system – and especially its teacher education set-up. Anyway, before I offer any idea about the need to revitalize teacher education, I would like to take a brief look at some challenges of the twenty-first century.

(II)

To begin with, I would like to emphasize that education still has an essential role in the world today. I need to raise this issue because at the time when anybody can engage in his or her own independent pursuit of knowledge, we may question the relevance of schooling – and particularly the teacher's role. We are all now familiar with the idea of a learner-centred classroom. Now given the students' access to any information or knowledge they want, does the classroom really remain relevant? Can the classroom, and especially the teacher, satisfy the different goals and needs of the individual students? Are what may be called personalized instructions possible in class? Indeed, learning is already expected to be a life-long activity – going on all the time and in any place, and involving any subject-matter. So is the teacher expected to cater for this kind of life-long learning?

As I have pointed out above, now in the educational circle, there has been much talk about the twenty-first century skills. A quick search in the Internet will yield long lists of such skills, which range from critical thinking, problem-solving and research skills and the like, to "literacy" in numerous areas – for example, civic, ethical, and social justice literacy; economic and financial literacy; scientific literacy and reasoning; ICT, media and Internet literacy; environmental and conservation literacy; health and wellness literacy; and many others. Other sets of skills can also be found – such as applied skills, cross-curricular skills, cross-disciplinary skills, interdisciplinary skills, transferable skills, transversal skills, non-cognitive skills, and soft skills. Are we expecting the teacher to provide students with all or any set of such skills?

There is still another expectation, which involves the need to "go global". This expectation is natural – going global has actually become a way of life now. And in this digital age, students have available to them the tools that would enable them to learn about the wider world first hand. Students now have access to learning from the Internet, among other possible digital sources, the languages and cultures of other people, or even to interacting with them. What role, then, are we expecting the classroom and the teacher to assume in "educating" present-day students?

The foregoing are only a few indications of how the world has rapidly been changing today, and only some of the crucial implications this change has for schooling. In particular, I have raised the issue relating to the continuing relevance of both the classroom and the teacher. Now I would like to reaffirm my confidence that in this rapidly changing world, schooling is still essential, and that the teacher still assumes the central education provider's role. Anyway, in considering this issue, I will focus on the teacher's role as an education provider. And if I may again emphasize, I am looking at this issue from a non-specialist perspective, simply highlighting some ideas which are not altogether new or original.

To begin with, we should effectively do away with spoon-feeding knowledge and skills. It has always been accepted that "educating" is not equivalent to spoon-feeding. However, the practice persists in some form or another. It is certainly not the classroom or the teacher that is now no longer relevant; it is rather this type of schooling orientation that should now be effectively done away with. Given that the students now have in their possession the latest and most advanced tools, a conceivable role for the teacher is that of an "orchestrator of information". The use of those great tools by many students now admittedly hardly goes beyond personal communication – with their family and friends, especially via chat, texts or calls. The teacher thus has a great role today in guiding the students towards relevant sources or types of information. In this respect, the teacher's role is not simply to guide but perhaps more significantly to promote the students' independent enquiry. The students will thus acquire, rather than be given, knowledge.

The crucial difference between the knowledge thus acquired and the knowledge that is given or fed by the teacher lies in the fact that the students "produce" their own knowledge – or, more precisely, their learning outcomes, which are understandably different from those of other students. The outcomes result from their own choices in their enquiry – and are thereby their creative products. As learners, the students are also producers. I strongly believe that a good teacher can orchestrate this type of students' learning activities, whereby certain twenty-first century skills may also be developed.

Now, with regard to the "go-global" requirement, I am also confident that the classroom and the teacher still play a crucial role in preparing the students to become global conscious and competent citizens. Instead of, or in addition to, reliance on the media, the students should be similarly guided by their teacher towards using the tools at their disposal for this purpose. Again, the teacher's role is not that of a traditional instructor but rather an orchestrator of information and learning activities, promoting the students to learn about other countries and people, as well as events and developments on the

international scene – all by their own choice. The teacher thus does not provide the students with uniform instructions; he or she takes care of them individually, giving them, in other words, individualized guidance and instruction.

Some might think that by promoting a learner-centred class the teacher's burden becomes lighter. It might seem that now the teacher is no longer an education provider. His or her task consists mainly in providing guidance on, and orchestration of, the students' individualized learning activities. In my view, however, the challenges facing the teacher – and indeed the whole educational system – have become more daunting than ever before. To meet such challenges, adjustments on the part of both the individual teachers and the whole educational system – especially its teacher education infrastructure – need to be urgently made. Today suggestions abound on how the teacher can transform his/herself. Again, a quick search in the Internet serves this purpose. I came across a post recommending "15 characteristics of a 21st century teacher", which range from making efforts to learn new technologies to be digitally smart, to keeping learning. I will not go into detail about this matter but rather look at the central aspect of our educational system – the teacher education infrastructure. How can we revitalize it to meet the twenty-first century challenges?

(III)

The need to revitalize teacher education must perhaps feature as the central aspect of the reform of our educational system. Given my limited knowledge on this subject, I will focus my attention on only teacher education in Thailand. Nonetheless, in suggesting a few measures for its revitalization, I will draw upon the experiences and practices of some other countries.

Teacher education in Thailand has had a long and continuing development. The teachers' training school was among the first specialized institutions to be set up in Siam during the reign of King Chulalongkorn. Only the country's first medical school – the Faculty of Medicine Siriraj Hospital of Mahidol University – has an earlier origin. Following the establishment of this first teachers' training school, schools and colleges of this type were founded in all regions of the country. During this early period of teacher education, a diploma in education was awarded to the graduates of teachers' training schools and colleges. Later, the student teachers could continue their training to qualify for an advanced diploma in education – the equivalent of an associate degree awarded by colleges and universities in the United States.

A major subsequent development began with the appearance of the first batches of university graduates, especially those with a bachelor degree in Arts or Science, who wanted to enter the teaching career. Many of them did this by undergoing further teacher training to earn an advanced diploma in education. I call this a major development because we now had teachers with solid backgrounds in a relevant academic discipline – mostly in the fields of Arts and Science – plus a professional qualification in education. These people were in those days the backbone of our education, particularly at the secondary level.

Another major development of our teacher education started with the establishment of the College of Education – the predecessor of Srinakarinwirote University and those which were formerly the College's provincial or regional branches. The College of Education introduced a new teacher qualification – the bachelor of education or B.Ed. The teaching profession began to be gradually formalized with the introduction of this new professional qualification. The B.Ed., in other words, has become a qualifying degree for teachers of all levels, and now most universities in Thailand offer both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in education. Those without the B.Ed. qualifying degree or its equivalent must supplement their academic or other professional qualifications with further professional training in this field.

I cannot offer any assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the evolution of our teacher education system. However, the learning outcomes, especially as evinced in our students' educational achievement scores at the national level, as well as in comparison with those of most other Asian countries, have raised a serious concern about the health of our educational system – even of the country itself. Needless to say, the relatively poor learning outcomes can be attributed to many factors. But given the fact that the countries that display an outstanding educational performance are those with a good teaching profession, we need to look at our teacher education infrastructure.

This is a really big issue, and I am not qualified to analyze our educational system to see what is wrong with it. All I can do is to point out whether we can, in any way, revitalize or teacher education. In doing this, we cannot simply emulate the countries that are now generally recognized as having a good teacher education system. However, as I have indicated earlier, the experiences and practices of these countries can provide us with valuable insights into our own system. And only a few observations and suggestions will be offered.

I will be looking to two countries for such insights – Finland and Singapore. The two countries represent two major cultures – one European, and the other Asian. However, they

share something in common, which lays the foundation for the relative strengths of their educational systems.

First and foremost, in Finland as well as in Singapore, teachers are, if I may quote a report, "esteemed professionals similar to medical doctors, engineers, or economists". The teaching profession can attract student teachers from among the most able and talented high school graduates. It is my understanding that in Thailand the teaching career was once highly prestigious and thereby capable of recruiting young talents to it. Unfortunately, though today teachers remain more or less respected persons, their professional prestige is, admittedly, relatively low. In particular, the profession has not for decades been able to attract talented high school graduates: this is evident in the fact that it has notably been a less, if not even least, preferable choice for those selecting a career through university education.

This is still the case, despite efforts to upgrade the teaching profession, especially through its standardization: as I have pointed out, teachers now have to be professionally qualified. Moreover, on the educational personnel level, the career paths, salary scales, and welfare incentives have significantly been improved. In short, the teaching profession is no longer a low-paying job, and even personal problems of teachers, such as their debts, have been taken care of by almost every government.

Now I am honestly at a loss to know what has happened to our educational system. Perhaps a new cultural attitude has developed that does not favour the teaching profession. However, in saying this, I am not ignoring any administrative malpractice that must have contributed to our poor educational performance. In any case, the revitalization of our teacher education must start with an urgent effort to redress the current unfavourable situation of the teaching profession.

Moreover, as far as I can understand, teacher education in both Finland and Singapore is subject to a more or less centrally unified administration. In Singapore, the National Institute of Education is the sole provider of teacher education, but it works in close partnership with the Ministry of Education and schools. In Finland, the subject faculties providing study programmes in the various academic disciplines and schools of education closely collaborate. It is impossible for me to delve into detail about all this, and Thailand cannot closely emulate their systems. However, it is my opinion that we will not be able to revitalize our teacher education without a reform of its curriculum, assessment mechanisms, and admission system. The purpose is to make them more rigorous and, if possible, to provide them with some level of greater uniformity. In both Finland and Singapore, the emphasis

is on both the rigorous recruitment requirements, codes of conduct, as well as values – the values of teaching, the values of teachers' identity as teachers, and the values of the teaching community.

Finally, and this is my personal view, I strongly believe that the teacher education requires stronger *subject* contents. In Finland, and I think in Singapore as well, a strong focus is placed on mathematics, science and technology. Other subjects of course remain relevant, but in these two countries, as well as many other countries, certain pedagogical contents, such as philosophy, have been de-emphasized.