Thoughts on Good Teachers and Good Teaching: 40 Years Later

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My first real job – and my best one ever – was as a teacher. Having just turned 22, just out of college with three months of training, I appeared at a small junior secondary school in the middle of the jungle of Sarawak in East Malaysia, assigned to be – as my work permit said – a "mother tongue speaker". The school had four classes and after I arrived – unannounced by the Department of Education, it seems -- five teachers. Because I was not expected, and a 19-year old New Zealander had arrived a few days before me, he had been assigned science and English courses while I was left with the history of Sarawak and Asia and the geography of the southern hemisphere, none of which I had ever studied, of course, and music. I also was assigned to train the girls' softball team (we never won a game) and teach the shot put (although the school never owned one). Within two weeks, music had been taken from me (I proved I could not sing), and English, given to me, it having been determined that Daay-vid did not speak a comprehensible (or replicable) version of the English language...my apologies to any New Zealanders in the audience.

Thus began my career in teaching. Students stood up when teachers entered the room and when they answered questions, were respectful, friendly, and mostly eager to learn. At that time in Sarawak, there was nowhere near universal enrolment in primary school, and entrance to secondary school depended on a state examination – so ambitious students had to work hard. At the end of two years, although very unhappy on leaving Sarawak, I thought that teaching might be my chosen career. But then I started work as a substitute teacher in my former junior high school in North America which, by that time – still in the early 1970s – already had students who smoked, swore at their teachers, and were not at all eager to learn. I did a bit more teaching – a summer job in an exclusive private school for learning-disabled children, a year teaching English at a university on a small island in eastern Indonesia -- but finally decided that my real career was as a student of education, especially from an anthropological perspective, and so began a lifetime of interest in analysing and supporting – rather than directly doing – things educational.

The rest is history, as they say...managing education and culture programmes for the Ford Foundation in Indonesia, funding research on education from Canada, training educational planners in Paris (including crafting the first framework for analysing the impact of HIV/AIDS on education systems), implementing UNICEF education policies in Bangkok and eventually helping to develop them in New York (for example, on child-friendly schools), working to draft the Jomtien and Dakar EFA declarations, and, finally, managing the large group of educators in UNESCO Bangkok as they promote UNESCO's ideals and policies throughout the large and extremely diverse region called Asia and the Pacific.

And where, after 40 years of trying to "do good", do I find myself now? Not, I fear, terribly optimistic about the state of the world today faced as it is by a list of challenges and dangers which grows longer every day. The list used to include the vague and rather distant threat (or promise?) of globalisation and the rather more prosaic and immediate threat of bird flu. Now, growing longer more quickly than expected, it includes end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it scenarios of financial meltdown, climate change and global warming, terrorism, and violent wars waged over dwindling, but life-giving resources such as water, food, and energy. It's a good time to retire to my garden in Pattaya.

The problem is that with this growing list of challenges and risks grows as well the expectation that "education" will somehow come to the rescue and save the world from itself – an expectation that we, as educators -- especially those depending on funding from external donors -- often seek to encourage.

But the challenges to education are equally daunting:

- the decentralization of its governance, occurring (for good or bad, and well or badly) around the world;
- increasing evidence of corruption in the education system, including, among other things, teachers providing the full curriculum to their students only through private, paid tuition;
- a rapidly expanding diversification of programmes and options at all levels of the system, each demanding better and more teachers and materials;
- the contentious debate over whether education should serve to promote globalisation and the standardisation that goes with it or localisation and its necessary preservation of cultural identity and diversity;

- the need to move from an *instrumental* view of education -- training for skills for greater productivity -- to a more *humanistic* view of learning -- for the development of a complete person;
- the need to teach for creativity and adaptability to change in an uncertain future, for continued learning throughout life in a learning society, and for living together in peace and harmony in an increasingly conflicted world;
- the challenge of facing learners of ever more diverse backgrounds and identities, with different values and with different ways of thinking, reacting, and being motivated; with new traits of independence, creativity, and open-mindedness and more enterprising minds; and with skills and competencies often better than their teachers in using new information and communication technologies; and
- the increasing evidence that despite the best intentions, higher enrolments, greater investment, and steady progress towards quantitative global targets, more and more education systems and schools are simply failing to teach their learners what they need to – and want to – learn.

Many educators and education systems are trying to face these challenges. Innovative school- and community-based management mechanisms, with clearer lines of responsibility and accountability in regard to the central State, are being implemented. School subjects, old and new, and most of which are values-based – education for citizenship, human rights, peace, and democracy; education for sustainable development; global and inter-cultural education – each considered essential by its proponents -- are more and more finding their place in the core curriculum. Education's role in preserving and even revitalising endangered languages and cultures – though still a hard sell in many parts of the world – is expanding. Child-centered, interactive, inquiry-oriented teaching-learning methods are now standard rhetoric (if not practice) in education systems around the world. New information and communication technologies are promising a huge impact on educational access and quality, and a host of innovative approaches to education – home schooling, "green" schools, "schools for life" -- are becoming more and more acceptable as recognised alternatives to traditional schools and classrooms.

Teachers – of one kind or another – are the necessary core of these varied attempts to reform education -- and to rescue the world through education; one doesn't hear much anymore about "teacher-proof curricula" and the

"computer as teacher". The teacher, in other words – as educator, mentor, and guide -- is here to stay.

So what have I learned about teachers and teaching in the 40 years since I was one myself, and what would be my suggestions for the future`? I'll try to be clear and to the point, starting from the beginning of the teacher development cycle to the end.

Let me start by saying that the Dakar Framework for Action for EFA puts it very well. In its words, teachers should:

- be respected and adequately remunerated
- have access to training and ongoing professional development and support
- be able to participate in decisions affecting their professional lives and teaching environments
- be able to understand diversity in learning styles and in the physical and intellectual development of students
- create stimulating, participatory learning environments, and
- accept their professional responsibilities and be accountable to both learners and communities

But let's move first to **recruitment – to attracting better candidates for the teaching profession.** And we need to do so; UNESCO estimates that 4 million new teachers will be needed in Asia by 2015 just to achieve the Education for All goals. Thus, **we must make teaching once again a vocation of choice, and not of last resort, and make good students want to be good teachers.** When I first worked in Sarawak those many years ago, my students – the best and the brightest -- actually wanted to be teachers – and their families pushed them to do so.

In those days, teachers were the most educated and best paid members of the community, had important and secure government positions where few other such employment opportunities existed, and commanded respect and attention. Now, in a typical rural community in Asia, many villagers have more education, higher pay, and better jobs than teachers do and, consequently, gain more respect. Graduating secondary school students enter teacher training faculties only if no other options are open to them, take foreign language education (and become tour guides) or commerce education (and

become businessmen) or science education (and become technicians) – and don't become teachers. And many that do – posted to remote locations, badly supported in their profession, and finding the rigors of the classroom more difficult than expected – soon leave. And their contribution to education – and the investment made in their training – are lost to the system forever.

So what can be done? **Financial and career incentives** would probably work best – free training and a guaranteed job on graduation, a pay scale different from the rest of the civil service, bonuses for good performance, and a visible and workable career path from teacher, to master teacher, to headteacher, to supervisor, and beyond, with professional development at every step....so that students thinking of becoming teachers know that there is some real profit in doing so and some real prospect of career advancement.

Clear political and moral support from the top leadership of a country to the bottom – for education in general and teachers specifically -- would also help. Politicians and local government officials should not see teachers as local political canvassers or tools of the ruling party, but rather surround them with an aura of importance and distinctiveness with, for example, local and national recognition through teachers' awards and days (e.g., Teachers' Days!)

And recruitment based on qualitative assessments of motivation rather than only entrance examinations would be a good idea. Exposing new teacher trainees to the realities and challenges of classrooms early in their training might also be a way to weed out the less motivated.

Next, to teacher education and professional development: we must create teacher education systems which are not divorced from the realities of the classroom; which provide new teachers with the knowledge, skills, and values needed for their core task of teaching; and which "push out" those who don't really want to teach and inspire those who do. (We don't like schools that push out students who are not interested in learning, and applaud those which find ways to keep them interested, but we should develop teacher education systems which discourage the uncommitted and the incompetent from teaching.)

Pre-service teacher education **should** be the crucial component of the lifelong process of the professional development of teachers. It should equip

prospective teachers with the necessary subject knowledge and professional skills and attitudes for effective teaching. If done well, it can both motivate and retain teachers in the profession.

But in most countries of the world, candidate teachers unfortunately face several boring years sitting in a classroom, learning pedagogical theory and mastering their preferred subject or subjects (which they later may not be assigned to teach) divorced from the realities of the classroom. This is the problem with initial, pre-service education in general which, I would argue, is the most conservative, least innovative, and most difficult to reform entity of a Ministry of Education – with apologies to teacher educators in the audience!

The staff of pre-service teacher education institutions often have little practical experience in the levels of schooling for which they are training their trainees; the curricula they are teaching often lag behind the curriculum changes mandated for the nation's classrooms; the environment of the training institution may little resemble that of the school; and while the latest Ministry reforms – e.g., inclusive or child-centered education -- may be included in the teacher education curricula, they are often not genuinely internalised by the entire institution and its staff. (The Director of a large teacher training institution in Indonesia once proudly showed me the lecture room where his trainees did "child-based, student-active learning" -- the innovation of the moment -- but seemed puzzled by my question as to how such an approach to learning was being used in other lecture rooms.)

So it should come of little surprise that many donor and development agencies (and many ministries as well) would rather deal with in-service training – usually short in length, with a specific target group, narrowly focused, with a far simpler message. But this, as we shall see, often has little long-term impact.

So how genuinely to reform the pre-service teacher education system? One problem in doing so, of course, is that every country does it differently – some, as in Thailand, through a Council of Deans of Education; some through a Director General of Teacher Education in the Ministry; others through the initiative of individual teacher education institutions based on loosely formulated curricular objectives. And every country has a different timetable for reform – some, regularly, every ten years for example; others on the whim of the newly installed (and frequently replaced) Minister of Education.

So how to do it?

First, whatever the length of teacher education is, or whether it is at first degree level or added on to degrees in other subjects, it must include a healthy dose of genuine classroom experience – the earlier the better. Candidate teachers must learn quickly the opportunities and challenges, the successes and failures, they will encounter later in their careers.

Next, in terms of the **content of initial education,** we must ensure that young teachers understand well the academic content of what they are meant to be teaching, based on the very latest classroom curriculum, so that children learn what they are meant to learn; this is self-evident.

This is especially so for the crucial basics of fundamental learning – literacy and numeracy. This is where it becomes so important for future teachers of young children to be identified early and given special training in promoting initial literacy – especially in mother tongue -- including the knowledge and skills usually provided to teachers in early childhood education training programmes. In fact, joint training of pre-school and early-grade teachers in the fundamentals of young child development would be a very useful practice.

But it is also true that among the plethora of subjects demanding to be added to already overcrowded curricula around the world, a few must be identified as essential to the future of human kind and thus included in pre-service education programmes. I would argue for education in human rights, gender equality, and inclusive education; education for sustainable development; the integration of ICT in education; and education for skills development – both life skills and living skills. But how many teacher education institutions include these issues systematically in their curriculum?

In terms of specific teaching skills to be learned in pre-service teacher education, there are, of course, the now commonly accepted skills in more child-centred, interactive, inquiry-focused education – education which acts always in the best interests of the child, which works towards the realisation of the child's full potential, and which is concerned with the "whole" child – its health, nutritional status, and well- being. But there are other skills as well.

Teachers must have the skills to develop rights-based, child-friendly classrooms and schools. This means first of all that systems and classrooms must "fit" the needs of their individual learners rather than the learners fitting the needs of the system. This also means classrooms that actually reflect and realise the rights of the children within them – starting with being inclusive of all learners irrespective of age, ability, language and culture, social-economic class, and sex.

In terms of values to be promoted among teacher trainees, an essential one is to see diversity and difference in a classroom as an opportunity, not as a problem. Most teachers, I would argue, want a classroom which is the most homogeneous possible – students of the same socio-economic class and age, using the same language, certainly without disabilities. They welcome children who voluntarily enrol in the school but do not usually actively seek out children not enrolled and get them into school. Or they subtly push children who are "different" out of school – and call them drop-outs. They fail to take preventive action in response to alarm signals from children in the process of failing or dropping out of school. Training teachers not to exclude, discriminate against, or stereotype on the basis of difference but rather to respect and even welcome diversity, especially to be sensitive to issues of equal treatment by sex, and then to meet the differing needs of children such diversity represents, is essential in the achievement of education for all.

I think there are three other essential skills that need to be addressed in pre-service education:

First, they must know how to make schools physically and psycho-socially healthy, safe, and protective places – sanctuaries for children rather than places of risk and ridicule. This means learning and following a code of ethical conduct which governs their relations with their students.

Second, they must learn how to make schools welcoming of the participation of the students themselves, their families, and their communities. This means training in how to approach and work with the local community and encourage its active participation in, and support of, the school. I remember asking an Indonesian mother years ago to describe her relationship with the nearby school. She said that at the age of six, she "surrendered" her son to the school, and at the age of 12 she got him back – and that she was only asked to go to the

school when her child was in trouble or when the school needed money – not a very welcoming approach…

Third, they must gain special skills to fulfill the special, individual needs of their learners. This term is usually limited to the issue of disability, and special needs education is usually seen as education for people with disabilities. But, in fact, there are many special needs which teachers must be trained for – skills in multi-grade teaching for small, remote schools (and estimates are the 30% of children in the developing world learn in some kind of multi-grade setting); skills in mother-tongue teaching for children of ethnic minorities; skills in meeting the needs of girls in societies where they are repressed or ignored – and many more.

But how many teacher trainees are actually taught anything about the ethics of teaching, mobilising community participation and fund-raising, and gender inequality in their own classrooms?

To gain such skills, teachers must be trained to become "reflective practitioners" – self-researchers and then self-regulators – able to analyse their own classroom and students, and especially their own performance in the classroom, reflect on it, and change their behaviour accordingly. For example, teachers must be able to identify children at risk of failing and dropping out – the early warning signs of faltering , be curious and caring enough to find out why these signs have appeared, and then devise means to keep the children in school and learning. I learned recently of a programme in the Philippines which does this by training teachers to focus on STARDO – Students at Risk of Dropping Out.

Now to **deployment**: Let me ask a simple question. What kind of teacher usually gets assigned to the first grade of a primary school? Or to a school in a rural, remote, and disadvantaged area? Older, more experienced teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to serve in such a challenging grade or difficult context? Or the youngest, more recently graduated, and least experienced teacher? I think we all know the answer to that question.

The solution – **we must assign good teachers to where they are needed most** – even if they don't want to go there!

I've already talked about the issue of better teaching in the early grades. It is simply essential that these grades are taught by the best teachers, trained in the

special needs of young children, especially in regard to numeracy and initial literacy (and, as often as possible, in mother tongue), and supported both by some kind of specialist teachers in remediation and by policies that refuse to promote children to higher grades if they do not know how to read and write. Again, there is a new programme in the Philippines called 'No Read, No Pass"; if children cannot read by the end of third grade, they do not advance further until they can.

On the second deployment issue -- how to make good teachers want to go to difficult places -- there are a number of incentives that can be used, including extra pay, more professional development opportunities (e.g., rural teaching experience credited toward a higher degree), guaranteed rotation back to less difficult postings, accelerated career paths, and adequate housing and facilities at the school. Here, of course, the local community also has the responsibility to create conditions which attract good teachers to their school and keep them there – maybe even a house-and-spouse policy…

Finally, to **continuing professional development...**

So, better students enter teacher training, get better training, and get assigned where they are needed most. But they then face a decades-long career from which many will stray – some, like children not ready for grade one, dropping out early on; others doing so only after years of increasing frustration, boredom, and exhaustion – as many, perhaps, who choose to take early retirement in Thailand and elsewhere. What can be done to keep them teaching and to do it better?

The most common answer, of course, and perhaps the worst one, is to provide a long series of short, in-service training courses on specific, often new content or initiatives (e.g., nutrition education or peace education), done in cascade fashion where, as training is moved from national to provincial to district to school level, the time on task grows ever less and the clarity of the message ever more muddied – like the child's game of whispering around a circle, where the words whispered at the beginning are very much different by the end. Such training is supposedly able to transmit the necessary messages from the top to the bottom of the system in an effective and efficient way – only to find out later, of course, that the key messages were terribly distorted in the long cascade to

the school level and that the supplementary materials that went with the messages remained, at best, in the classroom cupboard.

There are better ways to handle such in-service training – for example, through mandatory, periodic, continuing education with concurrent re-certification and better monitored short-duration, school-based training – but let me focus on a few other proposals.

First, we must have strong induction and probation processes for new teachers, mentoring, monitoring, and formally assessing them as needed. This can include exposure to the very best models of teaching available.

Second, from early on in the pre-service process, **we must train young teachers not only to reflect more on their own teaching but also to be willing and able to work with their supervisors and their peers in more collaborative and collegial methods of teaching improvement** – not to see superiors as punitive inspectors and colleagues as career competitors, to be kept out of the classroom as much as possible.

Third, **we must offer teachers two routes to further professional development and higher status, depending on their interests and skills –** either in the administrative/supervisory stream as headteachers, supervisors, and beyond, or in a more academic stream, as master teachers. We should not make the best teachers into non-teaching administrators. This is especially important for women in school systems where they represent the majority of teachers but much small minorities of all of the bureaucratic levels above.

Finally, we must encourage and facilitate professional teacher associations to take seriously their work in professional development – as well as their essential tasks of promoting the teaching profession and social dialogue with the ministries which employ them.

I have just two more points to make, somewhat more general than the issue of teacher development...

First, most Ministries of Education have a unit responsible for finding innovations – and killing them. This is usually called the inspectorate – with apologies to school inspectors in the audience – and the Thai inspectorate system is very unusual in

this regard. But very few ministries have units responsible for finding innovations and nurturing them. And this is exactly what must be done – ministries looking for different approaches and different perspectives and encouraging new ideas and new ways of working.

Second, we must convince ministries of the need to have a true and accurate picture of the state of education in their country – a difficult task when the Minister wants to prove success in order to get a better assignment in the next cabinet re-shuffle. We should get ministers to talk – and worry about -- net **non**-enrolment rates rather than claim credit for often inflated enrolment rates – and even more inflated literacy rates. And we must get rid of an attitude -- which someone recently called the "plague of blame" --- where the blame for failure of children in schools is put on them and their parents – rather than on the education system itself. During the three years I taught at UNESCO's International Institute of Educational Planning in Paris in the area of basic education, I asked the ministry trainees for the major reasons for student failure in their systems. Invariably the first several reasons blamed the students (lazy, absent, stupid) and their parents (poor, ignorant, unaware of the importance of education), and only when pushed did the trainees get around to blaming the system – absent teachers, an irrelevant curriculum, unhealthy and unsafe schools, a incomprehensible language of instruction, etc. The "self-reflection" that this exercise produced was really something to behold – and is something only to be encouraged, at all levels of the system.

Let me conclude with a simple message -- if we believe that each child is unique, valuable, and with great potential, we must ensure that every child in every classroom is guided and taught by the kind of professional worthy of the name **teacher.** Children need and deserve such a mentor and guide to gain the skills they need to face an increasingly uncertain future and to keep learning throughout life. They are too precious to deserve anything less.