

## **Professional Reflections on *Education and Poverty***

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Welcome to our first ‘Professional Reflections’. This is an informal feature of this and future issues of RJES. Our readers are invited to send in their *professional reflections* on the theme or issue of their interest for the next issue.

It has not been easy to decide on a theme. There are so many interesting and important themes in this period of social change in Asia, indeed, worldwide, which add to the many new challenges facing professional educators.

The theme we have chosen for this first issue of the *Rangsit Journal of Educational Studies* concerns children’s early lives. Specifically, we wish to underline the importance of providing early learning experiences for the very young, especially those living in villages and remote, rural areas, many of whom live in poor circumstances.

UNESCO has urged governments everywhere to ensure ‘Education for All’. The ‘ultimate goal was to meet the basic learning needs for all children . . . to develop their full capacities, to live and work in dignity, to improve their daily lives, to make informed decisions, and to continue learning’. (UNESCO, 2009)

There is no argument, we’re sure, that children who have had some sort of pre-school learning experiences will perform noticeably better when they enter formal schooling. They will have had practice in working cooperatively with others and to share with friends. Also they will have gained experience in solving some everyday personal problems, and to develop self-regulatory skills such as sitting, listening, questioning. (Santrock, 2011)

We are not advocating the early introduction of subject matter. But, we do believe that the early years in children’s lives is a time to begin the *process* of learning. Children in more densely populated regions normally have access to pre-schools, such as nurseries and kindergartens. Often these schools are organized as businesses by entrepreneurial educators. Their facilities are community based and often locally staffed.

Children lucky enough to have pre-school experiences are not afraid of learning; they are ready to learn. However, children who have never had any pre-school experiences often feel ‘different’ or ‘out of place’ when they enter their first formal learning class at age 6. Some begin to have self-doubts and lose confidence. And some never ‘catch up’ to those other children who have had some prior basic experiences. Certainly not a good beginning for children who might already be disadvantaged by virtue of their families’ poverty.

Sorry, I mentioned the word ‘poverty’. When we first broached this theme to some colleagues they said, ‘Do you mean you’re going to discuss poverty? I don’t really like thinking about such matters.’ And, that is understandable.

However, as professional educators, responsible for educating the next generation, we must not turn away from reality and the needs of ALL children. Every country has families living (existing) in poverty – insufficient money for the basics. We know that the experiences children have in their early years impact on learning achievement in primary schools. It follows that we must, together with others, urge governments and in some

cases Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to help ensure equality of learning opportunities for all. (UNESCO, 2009)

Young children benefit from some form of pre-school learning activities. Children who come from homes where there is no TV, no books or magazines, where parents are too busy trying to make a living, and who may even lack basic education, can benefit from organized pre-school experiences. Children who do not have such are clearly disadvantaged.

Before going further, let's look at numbers. The reality is that millions of people in South-east Asia are living (surviving) below the poverty line. Children in such circumstances are often deprived of any form of pre-school education. In fact, many will not have access even to the most basic of healthcare facilities. (UNESCO, 2009)

You might well ask 'how to define poverty?' The UN's Economic and Social Council states,

*Human poverty . . . means not having enough to feed and clothe a family, not having a school or clinic to go to, not have the land on which to grow one's food or a job to earn one's living, not having access to credit . . .* (United Nations' Economic and Social Council [ECOSOC] "Statement of commitment for action to eradicate poverty". (May 20, 1998) Retrieved from [www.unsystemceb.org/statements/eco5759](http://www.unsystemceb.org/statements/eco5759)

Individual nations have established their own 'poverty line', taking into account cost of living in specific regions of their countries. (Wikipedia, 2014)

Looking specifically at eight of the member states in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), recent figures show that the percentage of people living below the *nationally* determined poverty line in Malaysia is 3.8 (2009), in Indonesia 12.5 (2011), in Thailand 13.2 (2011), and in Vietnam 17.2 (2012). (These data were compiled by Wikipedia, 2014, using reports from the World Bank and Central Intelligence Agency of the USA) No data were included for Brunei or for Singapore.

The percentages for the remaining four are markedly higher: in the Philippines 25.2 (2012), in Laos 27.6% (2008), in Cambodia 30.1 (2007) and Myanmar 32.7 (2007). These four countries account for almost 30% of all of the people in ASEAN. By any standard, these figures represent a very large number of people: men, women, and children.

Percentages, though, can sometimes minimize what is a serious human problem. They can mask a reality that, in this case, for children, means inequality of opportunity.

Take Thailand, for example. One might say 13.2% is not large – especially when compared to Myanmar's 32.7%. However, 13.2% translates into more than eight million people. Not easy to estimate how many of those eight million include young children most of whom would benefit from some form of pre-school education.

Maybe some of our readers of this first issue of RJES may be able to make some estimates. According to Thailand's National Statistical Office, the 2010 census revealed that there were 5,346,592 children below 6 years of age. (*Sunday Nation*, 2014, November 30)

**Comments** We welcome your comments and also any information that is pertinent to this topic in your region. Also, do you have any suggestions for upcoming ‘Reflections’?

**Address your email to Jamie Wallin at <[rsu.wallin@gmail.com](mailto:rsu.wallin@gmail.com)> or [ruja@rsu.ac.th](mailto:ruja@rsu.ac.th)**

### **References**

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