

Arts Education for Empowerment

*A Report from the 5th International
Conference on Educational Reform (ICER)
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One Vision, One Identity, One Community. This is the motto and the aim for the most important event and process in the contemporary history of South East Asia. In 2015 all South East Asian Countries will become members of the ASEAN Community aiming at close cooperation and coordination of policies and practices in the fields of politics, economy, security and not least culture. Against this backdrop the 5th international conference on educational reforms, arranged by Mahasarakham University, Thailand in cooperation with the National University of Laos, The College of Education of Hue University, Vietnam and the Consortium of 16 Education Deans assembled educators and students from the whole South East Asian region together with international colleagues under the slogan Empower Education, Empower People, Empower the World. This was the first of three yearly conferences aiming at preparing the educational community to lead out in realizing the cultural and social goals of the coming union, the second and third conference to be held in Siam Reap, Cambodia and Hue, Vietnam respectively. Introducing the conference agenda of Equity in Education Professor David M. Fetterman of Stanford University, USA called for the creation of communities of learners where students and teachers alike would have a voice, including a collaborative evaluation of the learning process.

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A number of invited international guest speakers set the discussions in motion: Dr. AJ Thomas of the Benghazi University in Libya in his talk on Peace Education and Multiculturalism warned about the increasing power of the entertainment industry over young minds, reinforcing tendencies to aggressive behavior and offsetting parental and school influence.

Dr. Wajuppa Tossa of Mahasarakham University engagingly informed the participants of the joint program of cultural mapping and community outreach, aiming at the preservation and revitalization of the rich Isaan storytelling traditions.

Dr. Tran Vui of the College of Education, Hue University, Vietnam defined the purpose of the recent reform curriculum in Vietnam as a program to activate the learning of students and develop creative and critical thinking. Teachers encourage their students to invent their own strategies to implement more effective lessons with the aim to:

Promote active, initiative and self-conscious learning. Develop the ability of self-study. Cultivate the characteristics of flexible, independent and creative thinking. Develop and practice logical thinking. Applying problem solving approaches. Applying school knowledge to real life situations.

Preparing for the ASEAN Union of 2015 the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science has given support to a 4 year research project “Comparative Study on Education for ASEANness and Citizenship Education in Ten ASEAN countries” The project led by Professor Toshifumi Hirata of Oita University involves 18 core members of educational experts and 13 overseas membership members in ASEAN countries. The first report on “Education for ASEANness in Cambodia” by Saori Hagai of Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto gives promise of a project that could have lasting effect on educational policy in a united SEA.

Responding to the 1st theme of Educational Administration and Development on Life Long Learning Suchada Bubpha and Prawit Erewan addressed key issues in transforming education in Thailand from a mainstreaming to an inclusive model providing education for children with special needs to learn in an inclusive setting.

Responding to the 2nd theme of Innovation and Information Technology for Education Natawut Puimipuntu, Pachoan Kiodrakarn and Somchock Chetarkarn discussed a development model of web based collaborative training for enhancing human performance on ICT.

The 3rd theme of Curriculum and Learning Innovation called for papers on improving reading skills and English language education, while participants responding to the 4th theme of Teacher Training Programs stressed the need for self learning and self development program for the improvement of teaching skills.

Faculty members and students from the hosting Mahasarakham University, responding to the 5th theme of Peace Education and Multiculturalism. demonstrated how teacher training and research programs aiming at revitalizing local cultural traditions of rituals, dance and story telling can play a vital role in the ever more important task of promoting cultural continuity and diversity.

Dang Van Chuong and Tran Dinh Hung from Hue University School of Education pleaded for a renewed effort to build on the four pillars of learning set forth by UNESCO: "Learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be" pointing to the need to promote the traditional social and religious values of South East Asian Societies such as altruism, compassion, charity and equality. It should be noted that dhamma-vinaya, another name for Buddhism, refers to a system of co-existence in society, the teaching of inter-dependence or inter-being, signifying the need to respect other lives, developing humility and loving-kindness toward everyone.

Lastly in the final theme section on Creativity, Diversity and Gender issues the present author, drawing on the lessons and experiences presented at the recent 10th Forum of the Urban Research Plaza (see report), reminded the community of educators of the need to reclaim for the arts a position in education that would allow the overreaching aim of empowerment to become fully realized. Education needs to overcome and heal the split between learning and life. And building life competence needs a creative component. Empowerment for living means opening up and re-activating our hidden repositories of human basic skills - the ability to play, create, share, dare, explore and grow.

In a special way music opens the road to collaborative learning, training our faculties for positive interdependence, individual accountability, equal participation and simultaneous interaction, all vital elements in citizenship education. Music making builds empathic competence and strengthens our capacity for recognizing solutions, seeing implications, imagining alternative possibilities and develops our imaginative powers, our curiosity and flexibility.

[Kjell Skyllstad: "Promoting Diversity and Inclusion through Music. Roads toward Creating Empathy and Empowerment in the Multicultural School and Community" in the Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Educational Reform 2012, pp. 444 – 453. Copyright 2012 Mahasarakham University, Mahasarakham, Thailand.]

