

Education Policy for the 21st Century

The dawn of a new century has inspired the call for education reform in many Asia-Pacific countries. Many people see the need to improve the education system in order to face the challenges posed by information technology, the global market economy, and “global competitiveness.”¹

Education reform requires close attention to inevitable social changes. What and how to learn in a changing situation are questions that require new answers. Those who find no need to revise the education curriculum and those who see the need for a better and “competitive” education must debate the issues with each other.

The ongoing discussions on education are healthy signs. They provide a critical review of education as both advancing society as well as hindering its progress. However, it is not clear how much they will actually influence education reform.

The Japanese government has been discussing education reform for a number of years now. A prime minister expressed the need for education reform as follows:

Distrust and concern are spreading across the nation concerning the education system, including school bullying and violence. Because of an escalation in competition over entrance examinations, we now face a dearth of creative talent. We have to reconsider the uniform education system that puts so much emphasis on absorbing facts.²

But the public does not necessarily share his views, as another report shows:

Unfortunately, not everyone agrees that reducing the pressure on Japan’s schoolchildren is either necessary or desirable. For ex-

ample, the new curriculum guidelines offer no solution to the problem of “examination hell.” Despite glimmers of hope on the horizon, society here remains intransigent in insisting that academic achievement is of greater consequence than individual ability. In a recent survey by a vernacular newspaper, nearly three fourths of the adult respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the education provided by the nation’s schools, the highest figure since the first of such poll in 1984. Far from calling for any easing up, nearly 70 percent approved of elementary and junior high school students spending extra hours at cram schools in order to be able to pass entrance examinations.³

Two phenomena are cited as consequences of the current education system:

- Discouragement of those who cannot keep up with college classes. Professors are voicing concerns over the lack of “spirit” among a growing number of students.
- Polarization of students into those who study hard and those who do not. This could exacerbate inequality in the education system, which essentially aims at providing equal opportunities to all students.⁴

In Thailand it is reported that

...there’s an effort to lessen rote-learning in favour of “authentic learning”—a concept that gives students hands-on experience to

help them think for themselves. This is ground-breaking in a country where teachers traditionally dictate and students obey. “In Thailand, students learn strictly by remembering from teachers and textbooks. But students get quickly bored and, in the end, are lacking in reasoning skills,” says Kamol Sudprasert, principal adviser to the initiative. “At Ban Non Chan, we are making the curriculum more sensitive to the human-resource needs of the local community and of the students.”⁵

Ban Non Chan, a small village in northern Kamphaeng Phet province, provides an example of school autonomy:

[F]or the first time, the villagers have been given a say in what and how their children are taught. A committee of teachers, administrators, village leaders and parents are discussing ways to ensure students learn skills that are in demand in the local economy, such as through more vocational classes and training in agricultural technology.⁶

The prototype curriculum and administration of Ban Non Chan School may now be tried in other parts of the country.

The 1995 Education Law of the People’s Republic of China states that education is the “basis of socialist modernization, and the State shall ensure priority to the development of education undertakings. The whole society should be concerned with and support the development of educational undertakings” (Article 4). It is further provided that the “State and society shall establish and develop education facilities for minors to receive after school education. Schools and other educational institutions shall coordinate with grassroots autonomous organizations of a mass character, [business] institutions, public organizations and other social organizations to strengthen after school education” (Article 52).

An earlier law (Compulsory Education of 1986) provides that the “State, the community, schools and families shall, in accordance with the law, safeguard the right to compulsory education of school-age children and adolescents” (Article 4).

As reported by Li Zhang, education laws in China require schools to include in their curriculums legal education, which is equated with human rights education.

More and more people in China are calling for quality education to help children develop holistically. Getting the government to work with communities, schools, and families on education matters is thus crucial in raising the quality of education.

The 1986 National Education Policy law of India emphasizes the removal of disparities and equalization of education opportunities.⁷ One provision states the following:

To promote equality, it will be necessary to provide for equal opportunity to all not only in access, but also in conditions for success. Besides, awareness of the inherent equality of all will be created through a core curriculum. The purpose is to remove prejudices and complexes transmitted through the social environment and the accident of birth (Section 3.6).

The National Education Policy law includes “education for equality” provisions by focusing on women’s equality, and education for scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and other disadvantaged sectors such as minorities and the handicapped. On values education, the law provides the following:

In our culturally plural society, education should foster universal and eternal values, oriented towards the unity and integration of our people. Such value education should help eliminate obscurantism, religious fanaticism, violence, superstition and fatalism (Section 8.5).

The usual gap between the literacy rates in urban and rural areas can be seen in India as in any other developing country. One report describes a situation in remote rural schools as follows:

The lessons are fixed and any child who craves some flexibility in the routine is penalised. Corporal punishment is the norm. There is no rapport between the teacher and the children or the community. But then the system doesn't give much freedom to the teachers either.⁸

The observation significantly raises the problem of the teachers. They may have the will to change the situation, but the education system may be working against them.

Education reform consists mainly of adoption of new education thinking. Traditional education systems are considered unable to respond to current societal conditions. But despite considerable efforts, reform may not be achieved after all. A report describing how the education system has largely remained the same despite years of advocacy for change suggests what current efforts will lead to:

Just as we once did, our kids spend most of their time in school with children of their own age. Most high school instruction is still divided into 45- or 50-minute periods. Students still have very little to say about what they will do and how they will learn. Good behavior or meritorious academic performance, as determined unilaterally by adults, is still rewarded; deviations are still punished. Grades are still handed out, award assemblies are still held. Students are still "tracked," particularly in the higher grades, so that some take honors and advanced placement courses while others get "basic" this and "remedial" that. Kids may be permitted to learn in groups periodically, but at the end of the day, eyes still must be kept on one's own paper. In-

deed, even from a purely physical standpoint, schools today look much like they did decades ago.⁹

Will there be changes in the education system beyond legal and policy pronouncements? The answer is most likely a yes. But the real questions are: What will the changes be? How much will the system change?

These are important questions from the perspective of human rights education in schools. The introduction of human rights education is one form of change. But whether or not human rights education will figure prominently in the change is not certain. Some governments declare the importance of learning human rights. But many governments believe that since human rights are already taught in schools (through such subjects as civics, moral education, law), not much change is needed. Consequently, the question is: What form will human rights education take?

A look at some of the key issues in education vis-à-vis government policy will shed some light on this question.

Textbook Development

School textbooks are normally subject to government regulation. Some observers criticize government policies regarding textbook development. In Japan, for example, textbook writers and publishers complain about the way the education ministry screens textbooks (see table).¹⁰

There is a difference between instructions and suggestions issued by the Ministry of Education. "Instruction" has binding force, while "suggestion" does not. "Ministry officials said that publishers have the freedom to decide whether to adhere to the suggestions because, as the ministry's opinions, they are non-binding" according to another report. But it said that "The Yokohama District Court ruled in April last year [1998] that some suggestions

Examples of Screening of Primary School Social Studies Textbooks			
	<i>Prescreening description</i>	<i>Ministry's view</i>	<i>Post-screening description</i>
National flag and anthem	In the Olympic games, the national flags of the winners' countries are raised above the podium and their national anthems are played in many cases.	Instruction The description about the national anthems is insufficient.	In the ceremonies, the national flags of the winners' countries are raised and their national anthems played in many cases. When a Japanese athlete wins, the Hinomaru (national flag) is raised and "Kimigayo" (the national anthem) played.
	The countries of the world respect each other's national flags and anthems as symbolizing their nations.	Suggestion It would be more desirable if this sentence included a phrase to the effect that the countries respect their own national flags and anthems as well.	The countries of the world respect not only their own national flags and anthems, but also other countries' national flags and anthems.
Comfort women	Young (Korean) women were also sent to factories and warring areas.	Instruction This description is difficult to understand and not clear. So please manage to find better expressions. Descriptions, even in indirect references about comfort women, should be avoided.	Young (Korean) women were also forced to work in factories.
War reparations	New problems have emerged (between Japan and South Korea) concerning war reparations.	Instruction The issue of war reparations has been settled between the two countries. Please take into consideration that now the issue is compensation demands based on individuals' right to make such demands.	The issue of Japan's war reparations to South Korea has been settled between the two nations. Recently, some people in South Korea have launched a move to demand compensation.
Global warming	If the level of carbon dioxide increases further, the temperature will rise, melting polar ice and changing global environment drastically.	Instruction The cause-and-effect relationship between the increase in the carbon dioxide and the rise in temperature and melting of polar ice is too definitely described, in light of various academic theories. Please manage to find a more appropriate description	It is said that if the level of carbon dioxide increases, it will change our living environment drastically, for instance, by pushing up the temperature gradually.
Ainu	The Ainu were forced to change their names to Japanese ones, for example. In response they stood up to demand that the government eliminate discrimination against them. They continue this effort even now.	Instruction The law to preserve Ainu culture and to guarantee their human rights has recently been passed. Taking this into consideration, the sentence should be revised so that it will not cause misunderstanding.	The Ainu were forced to change their names to Japanese ones, for example.

constituted government rules, not personal thoughts of screeners, as the government maintained.”¹¹

In improving the textbook screening process, a new guideline is proposed that requires a more transparent system and recognition of the need to create diverse and interesting textbooks that will nurture the “children’s abilities to interpret information and think for themselves.”

Another aspect of textbook development is presented in a case in the Philippines:¹²

In a review of elementary school basic readers used in Cebu Central School and the other public elementary schools in Cebu, women were overwhelmingly portrayed in the traditional roles of mother and housekeeper. Men were pictured as the breadwinners, involved in a multitude of jobs: engineers, taxi drivers, farmers, businessmen, doctors, scientists, soldiers, mechanics, and fishermen.

The “feature story” of the second grade teacher reader begins:

Mother works for the family.
 She goes to the market.
 She cooks the food.
 She cleans the house.
 Mother is very busy.
 She washes the clothes.
 She takes care of the baby.
 She takes care of the other children.
 Mother takes care of Father and Children.

The story then asks, “Does your mother work? What does she do?” To help the children respond six pictures of working women are presented including a secretary, teacher, seamstress, nurse, cook, and beautician.

In the third grade reader, “Mr. Virgilio Roman” is introduced as the head of the family and the breadwinner. Mrs. Roman supplements the family income as a secretary; the household chores are shared by her and a maid. A son, Lito, is shown helping his

mother and father sweep the yard, water the plants, feed the pets, and play with the younger children. Mila, a daughter, helps her mother clean the house, wipe the chairs and the table, and care for the babies. She also sets the table and washes the dishes.

These examples are representative of the role images in basic readers at Cebu Central School. Women are presented as homemakers and, secondarily, as participants in occupations outside the home. Even when the women have jobs, they are shown to have the principal responsibility for the family and the house. Women are portrayed as engaged in “women’s occupations,” such as teacher, nurse, and secretary. Boys have as many chores as girls at home but their jobs are portrayed as more adventurous and varied. Mothers are presented as lovely, calm, weak, feminine, nurturing, and passive, whereas fathers are active, dominant, strong, and intelligent. These images correspond to the self-images of men and women. By the time Filipino children finish elementary education, there are differences in the expectations and aspirations of boys and girls for their future roles. “Femaleness” is seen as synonymous with “domesticity,” while “masculinity” is associated with activities outside the home.

The report was made in 1982. Since then, the government has adopted many new policies on women, and new efforts are being launched to review school textbooks from the perspective of equality for women. But the realities of the education system may pose problems. Zenaida Reyes contends that “[T]he teacher must take note of gendered construction of reality in teaching and in the learning environment.” The gender-typing issue exemplified by the school textbook case in Cebu is linked to the fact that while there are more women in the education system, they do not necessarily address gender typing, nor do they occupy positions of authority to make proper changes in the system. One report says that

“men outnumber women in educational system’s top-level executive positions.” This is explained thus:

In the school year 1993-1994, women comprised 86.3 percent of all teachers in elementary schools, and 58 percent in colleges and universities. Over the years, women have come to gain more second level positions in the public educational system: 51.9 percent of public elementary schools principals in 1993 were females as were 57.3 percent of school division superintendents. But women have yet to gain higher level positions in significant numbers. Of the 83 state university and college presidents in 1993, only 15.7 percent were women, and of some 28 Regional and Assistant Regional Directors of the Department of Education, Culture and Sports, less than a third or only 28.7 percent were women.

Moreover, the highest DECS [Department of Education, Culture and Sports] official has always been a male except in 1986-1989 when a woman Secretary was appointed to the Department.¹³

A study of the key positions in the education system reveals the following statistics:¹⁴

How has education contributed to the perpetuation of gender typing? While the above figures are based on a 1995 survey, there is no indication of significant change since then.

The Japanese and Philippine cases show that education policy has to clearly set principles that will guide not only the education officials but also schools, parents, and society in general. Human rights education in schools will not prosper if education policy does not expect curriculums to deal with human rights, if subjects and materials do not incorporate human rights principles, and if school administrations do not respect human rights.

Some countries’ education policies probably contain provisions that support the development of human rights education in schools. The question is how to best use them to develop human rights education programs.

Trends in Education Reform

Education reform initiatives in several countries in the region emphasize a number of themes:

- **Autonomy.** Schools are now seen as capable of developing curriculums that can be adapted more effectively to the situation of their community. Education ministries can, in turn, provide guidelines as well as technical support to the schools.

Level	Total	Female (%)	Male (%)
1. President of state colleges and universities	83	15.7	84.3
2. Regional directors / assistant regional directors	28	28.6	71.4
3. School division superintendents	124	57.4	42.7
4. Assistant school superintendents	158	63.9	36.1
5. Public school district supervisors	1,090	56.8	43.2
6. Public elementary school principals	5,309	51.9	48.1
7. Division office personnel	11,230	37.5	62.5
8. Regional Office Personnel	1,732	57.4	42.6
9. Elementary-school head teachers	4,710	48.6	51.4
10. Elementary-school teachers	268,830	86.3	13.7
11. High-school teachers*	—	85.0	15.0
12. College or university teachers*	—	58.0	42.0

*Estimates

Source: Department of Education, Culture and Sports.

- Individuality. Students need to develop their creativity and critical thinking in order to cope with an increasingly competitive and knowledge-based society.
- School-society relationship. Since the schools alone cannot provide relevant education, they need the support of society.
- Productivity. Education is needed to be able to face the challenges of fulfilling the needs of society. Students have to learn how to maintain or increase productivity in view of changing technology and people's needs.

Integrating human rights principles into education reform is therefore not just desirable but a necessity. New perspectives on education do not detract from the main goals of education reform or from human rights principles. But the process of adopting human rights principles must be part of the education policy. And the process must continue through the years with the goal of finding the best means of promoting human rights.

Notes

1. The Philippine government education policy during the term of President Fidel V. Ramos (1992-1998), dubbed "Education 2000," had two "linchpin goals": people empowerment and global competitiveness. For comments on this policy see Bienvenido F. Nebres, S.J., "Education 2000—Comments and Recommendations," *INTERSECT*, Quezon City, June 1994.
2. Toshimichi Hironaka, "Changing education means fiddling with pillar of nation," *The Daily Yomiuri*, 27 March 1999.
3. "Easing the schoolchild's burden," Editorial, *The Daily Yomiuri*, 28 June 1998. A news report from China shows the same dilemma. While some advocate decreasing the burden of students by easing entrance examination requirements, parents are worried that doing so will mean that their children will be inadequately prepared for the job market. "Exam system hampers students," *China Daily*, 1 March 2000. See *Schools, Human Rights and Society—Report of the 1998 Asian Workshops on Human Rights Education in Schools* (HURIGHTS OSAKA, 1999) for an Asia-wide observation of the problems caused by competitive education system on the right of children to appropriate education.
4. Hironaka, op. cit. The education ministry conducted a survey in January 1998 on the extent of improvement in middle schools' counseling on selecting high schools. It questioned the staff of 50 middle schools across the country as well as the students, their parents, and graduates of the previous year. They were asked whether they now give more consideration to students' individuality and wishes in guidance counseling. 87.2 percent said they agreed totally or to some extent. 95 percent said that the initiative in deciding on high schools had been transferred from teachers to the students. "In contrast, when the survey asked middle school students what they referred to when selecting high school, school test grades and records were chosen by 41.9 percent, reflecting the fact that most high schools place importance on reviewing candidates' middle school records. Results of examinations taken outside school followed with 22.2 percent, showing students still rely on such grades" ("Students still pick schools for results," *The Daily Yomiuri*, 27 March 1999).
5. Shawn W. Crispin, "Independent Thinking," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 8 October 1998.
6. Ibid.
7. Quoted from *Human Rights—A Source Book* (New Delhi: National Council of Educational Research and Training, 1996).
8. "Dregs of Destiny," *Outlook* 4 (41): 68.
9. Alfie Kohn, "Reading, Writing, 'Rithmetic and Rote," *The Washington Post*, 15 October 1999, reprinted in *The Daily Yomiuri*.
10. "Government screening of textbooks remains rigid," *The Daily Yomiuri*, 29 June 1999.
11. Yukiko Furusawa, "System stifles authors' creativity," *The Daily Yomiuri*, 29 June 1999.
12. Clark D. Neher, "Sex Roles in the Philippines: The Ambiguous Cebuana," in Penny Van Esterik (ed.), *Women of Southeast Asia*, Occasional Paper No. 9, 1982, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University, pages 161-7.
13. *Filipino Women—Issues and Trends* (Manila: National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women and the Asian Development Bank 1995), pp. 51-2.
14. Ibid., p. 52.