

Criticality and Morality as Valuable Assets for Thai Students in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Thailand has attached importance to developing its education to serve changes in the 21st century. Several strategies have been proposed, including integrating criticality and morality into Thailand's education. Nevertheless, although such integration has been advocated by those concerned, the relevant literature shows that Thai students' criticality and morality have not been at a satisfactory level. This paper presents the integration of criticality and morality into subject areas in Thailand's education and discusses potential challenges.

Keywords: Criticality, Morality, Thailand's Education, The 21st Century

Introduction

The 21st century is a challenging era as it is entangled not only with technological advances and influx of information but also with multiple problems, such as social and environmental problems, which are the legacies left by the 20th century (Payutto, 2000). Authorities worldwide concur that people's criticality could be an effective tool to tackle the challenges. This results in critical thinking becoming a key global educational goal (Noddings, 2018; Paul & Elder, 2019). Thailand, as elsewhere, prioritises critical thinking in educational curriculums. This type of thinking is the main area concretely highlighted in the 1999 Thailand National Education Act (Office of the National Education Commission, 2002), which is marked as a significant reform of Thailand's education. Despite it being endorsed, several authorities (e.g., Kunchon, 2012; Sangnapaboworn, 2003; Suvansombut, 2016) have nevertheless expressed their concerns about Thai students' lamentable lack of critical thinking. This indicates that in order for

Thai students to cope with the 21st century challenges, developing critical thinking in them, particularly through education, is urgently needed (Kanokpermpoon, 2019).

However, being critical in this complicated century may not suffice. Paul (1990) argues that students' morality should be developed alongside their criticality. Brookfield (2012) similarly claims that without morality, people may use their criticality to take advantage of others. In Thailand, morality has been included in governmental policies and plans pertinent to human development. For example, in the Twelfth National Economic and Social Development Plan (2017-2021), Thai people are encouraged to have better moral standards (Office of the Prime Minister, 2017). In the sphere of education, the 1999 Thailand National Education Act, which currently oversees Thailand's current education system, stipulates that Thai teachers at all levels should inculcate morality in their students (Office of the National Education Commission, 2002). It can then be claimed that this act promotes both of Thai students' criticality and morality. However, although literature on Thai students' cultivation of critical thinking and morality abounds, literature showing that both types of cultivation can be made compatible is not yet abundant. In other words, each enhancement appears to be undertaken piecemeal. Addressing this gap, this paper proposes an alternative way of conflating the two and puts forward its pedagogic implications.

Thai students' criticality

We understand critical thinking as including two main features: cognitive skills and affective dispositions. The former embrace such skills as interpretation, analysis, inference, evaluation, explanation, and self-regulation (Facione, 1990). The latter involve such dispositions as open-mindedness (Halpern, 1998), inquisitiveness (Paul, 1990), and self-confidence (Facione, 1990). In Thailand, cultivation of critical thinking can be traced back to ancient times when Thai people started learning at Buddhist temples with learning content mainly comprising Buddhist-related knowledge. As Buddhism is claimed to be a religion of causality and criticality (French, 2019; Harvey, 2012), such cultivation arguably commenced since then.

Its importance is pronounced in the reformed Thailand National Education Act 1999, which supervises Thailand's education until now. In the wake of this, attempts have been largely made to incorporate critical thinking into assessments in pre-university

and university education to create a positive washback from critical thinking development. Nevertheless, the literature claims that a large number of Thai students still lack the abilities to think critically. For example, Dumteeb (2009) notes that the Thai traditional teaching approach, which is teacher-centred, hinders Thai students' critical thinking. Buphate and Esteban (2018) used a questionnaire method to glean the data from 200 university students and 20 teachers in a Thai university. Their study showed that most of the students had insufficient understanding of critical thinking. Ploysangwal (2018) assessed the critical thinking of 400 English major students at Thai private universities using a critical reading test. Her study revealed that the critical thinking of the majority of the samples was at a low level.

Thai students' morality

Morality is concerned with a personal or social set of beliefs normally with a binary judgment: either right or wrong. Mulnix (2012) asserts that ones' morality, by its very nature, is fashioned by their cultural and religious connotations. With such contention, it can be argued that Thai morality is shaped not only by Thai culture but also by Thai Buddhism which is the national religion of the country. Thai moral aspects influenced by Thai culture include, for example, obedience, harmony, and seniority. Those affected by Thai Buddhism are primarily related to observing the Five Precepts (Sila 5) in Buddhism: not hurting, destroying or killing lives of others (both humans and animals), not taking others' belongings, not committing sexual misconduct, not producing false speech, and not involving in intoxicants.

Thai students have been nourished with moral development not only through socialisation but also in educational institutes. The Ministry of Education set up its vision: "Focusing on developing learners along with knowledge, morality, decent life quality and happiness in society" (Ministry of Education, 2017), perceiving that intelligent and moral Thai individuals will be able to leverage such qualities to contribute to the society and solve the country's problems. As a consequence of this, "intelligence and morality" becomes part of mottoes in numerous educational institutes. Teachers, as students' role model in educational places, are also expected to personify these attributes. It then seems appropriate to claim that Thai teachers in general are expected not only to teach morality but also to behave in a morally upright manner.

Nevertheless, morality in Thai people appears to have decreased (Bangkok Post, 2012). Many ascribe such a decline to several types of development in Thailand. With the paradox of development, two implications arise. First, education should be geared to a hybrid of external development and humans' moral development. Second, morality taught in the educational sphere should be operationalised in a more meaningful way. That is to say, morality may need to be taught through thinking and doing, as opposed to memorising and reciting (Harris, 2018).

With criticality and morality being considered to be crucial in the 21st century and with the factual situation that Thai students tend to lack them, the following section discusses how these two can be blended in Thai classroom contexts.

Incorporating criticality and morality into the classroom

Incorporating criticality and morality into the classroom may begin with ensuring that teachers themselves understand the conceptions of the two. The critical thinking literature claims that teachers avoid teaching critical thinking likely because of their insufficient understanding of its conceptions and pedagogic practices (e.g., Black, 2005; Brookfield, 2012). This gives rise to the need to gauge teachers' readiness on the said matter. Teaching morality is a different case. Teachers may have certain conceptions of morality in mind. Nevertheless, to reiterate Mulnix's (2012) notion, there can be multiple moralities due to diverse cultures and religions. Therefore, Thai teachers who observe separate religions may have different morality conceptions. How we should articulate moral values to be instilled in Thai students across religions then becomes an issue of interest. However, recently, eight fundamental moral characteristics expected of Thai students were heralded by the Ministry of Education of Thailand; these are diligence, frugality, honesty, self-discipline, politeness, cleanliness, unity, and generosity (Ministry of Education, 2009). As these values appear to be concerned with basic human worth and dignity and therefore applicable to those of all religions, this paper argues that they can be cultivated in students when concurrently encouraging their criticality.

This paper takes a position that criticality and morality need not be taught as a separate course and can be infused in class in tandem given the premise that all subject areas involve students in the process of thinking and decision-making on counterfactual thoughts. For example, maintaining relevancy in content, teachers may raise moral

values emerging while teaching for students to ponder and discuss. This process can involve teachers asking critical questions and encouraging students to form such questions to ask themselves as well as challenging their teacher and peers. The questions should enable students to contemplate their own assumptions as well as those of others and diagnose any bias occurring (Brookfield, 2012). In some cases when students are engaged in the critical thinking process, scrutinising arguments, alternatives or counterfactual thoughts, they can ask themselves whether these are morally acceptable. Teachers continuously bringing critical and moral thinking to students' attention imply that these two fundamental components are important and needed to be applied in any thinking and learning.

The integration of criticality and morality into the classroom can deepen learning and bolster teaching. Regarding learning, students are active agents, making sense of what they have learned critically and morally (Paul, 1990; Paul & Elder, 2019). By this, we can expect that their learning will be meaningful and lasting. Moreover, unlike a traditional teacher-centred approach, students' critical and moral engagement can lessen power asymmetry between teachers and students. Students' increased power is likely to result in their increased motivation for learning, and thereby effective teaching.

Challenges

Despite the pragmatic merits of the integration of criticality and morality in class, two challenges need to be discussed. One is concerning students' perceptions of morality. What is considered to be morally good by others, particularly by adults and authorities, may be viewed as being outdated by students. Moreover, in today's world where some forms of immoral conducts appear acceptable or even admired, some students may perceive morality taught in class as being utopian, living up to it merely in the classroom. Another challenge pertains to teachers' mindset. Teachers may perceive integrating criticality and morality into their classes an undue workload and accordingly feel discouraged to do so (Paul & Elder, 2019). These systemic problems can undermine such integration.



Conclusion

Thailand's education in the 21st century and probably thereafter needs to cater for criticality and morality as these are considered to be powerful tools to tackle increasingly complex changes and problems (Office of the National Education Commission, 2002). Although there is a paucity of literature on developing students' criticality alongside morality in subject areas, this paper argues that such development is feasible, given that criticality and morality both involve alternatives and judgment. However, such cultivation can have challenges concerning students and teachers. Despite this, the enrichment of criticality and morality in Thai students is a major step forward needed to be taken into account.

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