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Education and Unemployment in Developing Countries

by

Pinit Ratanakul
Mahidol University
Bangkok, Thailand

Discussion Paper

on

Professor K. Schleicher's
Modernization and Education for Young People

This is an ambitious paper in which the author seeks to provide both an overview of the problems created for adolescents by the processes of modernization and a programme of educational change to respond to this situation. I found the paper to be highly informative and continuously thought-provoking. I was particularly interested by the author's systematic comparisons between the situations in industrial and developing countries.

My primary reservation about the paper concerns the level of generality adopted by the author. There are broad comparative generalizations to be drawn between the experience of industrialized and developing countries. At the same time, there are also enormous differences between, say, western Europe, the USA and the USSR (all industrial), or again between Southeast Asia, China, and Africa (all "developing"). It is obviously impossible to incorporate a proper study of these differences in a single paper, but more attention to these differences would modify several of the generalizations made in the paper. A glaring example of this is the observation made on p.32 that youth in industrialized countries are not too pessimistic about their vocational opportunities. This may be true for West Germany, but it is certainly not true for the United Kingdom or, I suspect, for a number of other European countries.

The same case may apply to the situation in developing countries. Youth in these countries are not so optimistic about their job opportunities. In Thailand, for example, the problem is caused by the retarded growth of employment opportunities. This is due from the fact that the agriculture sector has already covered about 70% of the work force and thus cannot absorb more labour. Other economic sectors especially industry, seem unable to expand enough to absorb more employment, despite the acceleration of development programmes. As for the government sector, an increase of employment at a high rate in the past resulted in the fact that the government has to pay about one-third of its budget in terms of salaries, fringe benefits and pensions. As a result the government has decided to limit the increase of employment at a low level of less than 2% a year.

The size of the labour force in Thailand was in the order of 26.2 million during August 1984 against a total population of 50.5 million. Of the 26.2 million in the labour force, about 25.7 million were employed and 0.5 million unemployed. However, these figures reflect the situation about open unemployment and those who were available but not looking for work and not of underemployment which may be a bigger problem. Unemployment among the educated youth has been growing in recent years as a result of the increase of colleges and vocational schools throughout the country. At

the time of the Fourth Plan (1977-1981) the amount of unemployment is only a few thousand and increasing to 36,700 persons in 1977 and 83,800 persons in 1982 and increasing to 120,000 in 1983. It is estimated that in 1991, the end of Sixth Plan (1987-1991), the total amount may increase to about 3,000,000 persons. At present, employment opportunities in the modern sector are scarce. There are increasing numbers of dissatisfied educated youths in the urban areas clogging and slowing down the development process.

These youths consist mostly of graduates from secondary schools and vocational and technical schools. One of the main factors responsible for their unemployment is the fact that the formal educational system in Thailand since the time of its inception 1000 years ago, has continued its traditional role of producing elite for traditional bureaucratic work, despite the changing socio-economic realities. Due to the social norms which give high prestige to elitism, there is always pressure on children from parents to achieve in school and pass up into the elite position. Secondary schooling is concentrated so much on preparing students for further education that those who fail are not equipped to play any useful role in society. By emphasizing academic subjects and intellectual effort, the schools seem to transmit the cultural value that physical work is not important, despite the fact that the vast

majority of those who pass through the schools will have to earn their living through physical work. As a result, secondary school graduates deprecate manual work and tend to opt for careers that emphasize desk-work rather than field-work.

Similarly there is considerable unemployment among graduates from vocational and technical schools. This is because these schools, instead of producing skilled and technical manpower needed for the modernization of the economy and industrial development, are under irresistible pressures (eg. to include a large amount of academic instruction in the curriculum so that their students still have a chance to return to the main stream of the educational system ie. elite forming, or to upgrade the schools to degree level institutions) to create a new channel of elite formation and stop or reduce production of the type of manpower most likely to be able to find employment. In addition, because of the outdated curriculum which is irrelevant to present day market needs, vocational and technical graduates are usually just as likely to be unemployed as the secondary school graduates. This situation of unemployment among the educated youth may be different in other developing countries.

There are other problems with some of the author's generalization, but these are not as common as the lack of

attention to differences between countries. Thus, a comment such as "in Western societies the overwhelming majorities of the adolescents are to a certain extent in accord with the traditional values of their societies" (p.31) is either a gross over generalization or a simple truism. In either case it is not adequately supported by the evidence which is cited. Again, to say that industrialized countries try to revitalize the social and private functions of the Family (p.42) is both an unsubstantiated (and questionable) generalization and an anthropomorphism of industrialized countries. There is also a problem caused by the paper's lack of historical depth. Thus, on page 15 date is cited for recent changes in the rates of illegitimacy and suicide. a wider historical and cultural study would almost certainly invalidate the conclusions drawn from this evidence.

Despite these defects, we have to accept that it is a useful and thoughtful paper. Ideally, it should be expanded to monograph length in order that the author may deal adequately with the mass of issues which he raises. If it is to be considered for publication, I would suggest that it be rewritten as several separate papers so as to allow the author to present his various ideas more cogently.