

Education for the Elderly: A New Educational Dimension for the Learning Society of Thailand

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This article analyzes 1) the educational ideology, educational operations and the effects on life of the elderly; 2) the conditions leading to a review and a question about education that has never been available for the elderly making them “the other” in society; and 3) the unfolding that shows a process of constructing and looking at education with a new dimension known as “education for the elderly” that creates a learning Thai society based on a thinking framework for education that recognizes human value. The results of the analysis with critiques based on modernistic paradigm reveal that the perceptions of the elderly are only representations of negative views and because the educational ideology focuses on producing human resources valuable for the economic system and it turns the elderly into “the other”. Consequently, the elderly are looked at as disabled persons who no longer need learning or education. As a result, a question about the lack of learning society in which the elderly is the important part arises. Thus, a new dimension of education for the elderly to construct a learning society in Thailand is proposed with the following implications. 1) A review of the myths about education, knowledge does not occur only in school where the age ranges are specified, 2) A change of status and position of the elderly to being co-creators of knowledge who can utilize knowledge to be self-dependent, and 3) Opening of an area of freedom for the elderly to express the value of self-identity and to contribute to providing others in society with life literacy. In this respect, education for the elderly does not have a fixed meaning as aimed by the state, and it does not refer to any one particular series of knowledge. Rather, it can change according to interaction, criticism, or negotiation to enable people who are made “the other” to remain their existence in society with dignity.

Keywords: education, elderly, learning society

The turning point of social development for Thailand which aims at people development with economy as a development tool is evidenced in the 8th-11th National Economic and Social Development Plan, and each was with more intensity to be compatible with a more complex society faced by Thailand. (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 1997, 2002, 2007 and 2012). Furthermore, even though the direction of the 12th National Economic and Social Development Plan (2017-2021) still attaches importance to the development of people (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2015), the focus has been changed towards aging population as a result of the change in the demographic structure of Thailand.

According to the United Nations (2009), the present society is called an aging society because the number of aging people has drastically increased in quantity and proportion. In 2009, the number of older people was approximately 737 million or 11 percent of the world population. An aging society refers to a society where people aged 60 and older constitutes more than 10 percent of the total population, or people aged 65 and older constitutes more than 7 percent of the total population, and it is estimated by the United Nations that the number of older people in the world will increase to 1,963 million or 22 percent by 2050

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(United Nations, 2009). After that the proportion of older people will still increase, and two thirds of the older people will be in developing countries, especially Asia. According to the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board (2009), Thailand became an aging society in 2005 in which the number of the elderly in Thailand was 10.4 percent of the population while data presented by the National Statistical Office (2008) indicated that in 2007 the number of people aged 60 and over was 10.7 percent of the population. Moreover, the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, Thailand (2013) projected that the aging population will increase to 20.5 percent by 2022. An analysis by Phromphak (2013) indicates that Thailand will become an evidently aging society with 23.5 percent of the population in the age of 60 and over.

It has taken Thailand only slightly over 20 years to become an aging society; hence, there has not been much time for preparation. However, it took developed countries many more years to become an aging society which gave them more time for the transition and preparation. For example, it took France 115 years, Sweden 85 years, Australia 73 years, and the United States of America 73 years, etc. (Phromphak, 2013). Seeing preparations in these countries for entering aging society has prompted Thailand to review its operation concerning the elderly.

Nevertheless, reviewing operational plans concerning aging and aging society is not easy in this modern society because definitions given to aging are that it is time that the body deteriorates because of old age; intelligent ability reduces; poverty occurs as a result of unemployment; and older people have to live alone or in a nursing home (Conklin, 1987). These generally accepted negative viewpoints are due to the knowledge in biology, in which a biomedical paradigm is believed to give importance to the body as biological organs of the body projected on their dark side which is full of diseases, deteriorations, and withering. Such a belief towards aging has, thus, no space for positive images that reflect values of the elderly (Thawisit, 2010).

In the modern world where development focuses on the industrial society, the meaning of aging is based on a biomedical paradigm, and standards of values as needed by capitalism are used to classify people to judge their value. People in the working age are thus classified to be valuable human resources because they are important workforce for the economic system while elderly people aged 60 and over are described as not suitable for industrious production for which efficiency and competition are the heart of production. The meaning and identity of aging is determined by the capitalist economic system and thus there is no space of freedom for older people who can still be useful (Rujisatiensap, 2009; Sookwattana, 2002). This attitude in giving meanings and values to aging not only looks at aging as having no value but also as being limited under a set of demographic vocabulary as a group of dependency burden because they are not needed by the capitalist economic system, and must receive help from the state and society as recipients who cannot depend on themselves. Meanwhile, the concept of individualism in the modern society by Foucault (1996) is a reproduction of beliefs about individualism that all individuals have ability and intelligence. Therefore, the status of the individual regardless of the place, age, or activity, the individual must be responsible for his or her action at the present or in the future. Thus, the status and self-care condition of the elderly after retirement are indicators that show their ability in caring and being responsible for all their own living expenses and to have their own living quarters. However, for those older people who are unable to take care of their living

expenses and have no place to live are judged by the concept of individualism as people who are unable to be responsible for themselves and to make their own living.

There are several effects as a result of the problems in giving the meanings to aging, older people, and aging society that limit to only explanations which give importance to observable physical changes, and the use of biological changes as criteria to judge abilities of the elderly because these criteria are made right by being connected with abilities of the elderly as part of the workforce in the economic system. The negative effects are on not only the elderly or the aging group themselves but also the system of social structure and social values that have been changed from traditional society to modern society. Smelser (1967) found that a modern society is a complex society that has changed from a simple society, and this process of social change is based on structural differentiation from the simple to the complex. Thus, in a modern society which is a complex society, each social unit is assigned more specific duties. Particularly, in a family, the elderly used to be the center of the family in instilling knowledge and culture in family members, giving knowledge, thoughts, and experiences to younger generations, and consolidating family relations. However, the elderly have lost power in controlling family members, especially those in the working age group because they think they can control their own life without having to depend on the elderly for knowledge, occupational skills, and care. As a result, the elderly are abandoned and not given importance, and this situation leads to a new social unit that takes care of the elderly, such as the old age home or the nursing home.

According to thinkers and academics in Thailand as well as other countries, social change, especially the change from traditional to modern society that reduces importance of the elderly is an important condition that leads to ethical and spiritual crises in society including many social problems such as divorces, child and elderly abandonment, drug addiction, all vices, corruption, crime, theft, robbery, etc. Viewing social problems and social and ethical crises as connected with the aging society is called a holistic view (Phra Dhammapitaka (P.A. Payutto), 1997). Thus, to deter and mitigate these social problems, the mechanistic power of the aging society may be needed which means that the elderly must be looked at as humans who have power of their potential and creativity for others to learn various things in society. Faure (1972) in *Learning To Be* proposes a new look at learning and education where all humans must continuously have lifelong education and development. Consequently, the elderly must have participation in creating learning experience and living closely in society with family and other people. At the same time, the elderly must not be a group that has stopped learning but instead, they must learn and develop themselves continuously in the changing social situation. The learning process of many different situations in the aging society can be called education for the elderly which can enable them spend their life equally with others, and keep up with the changing society.

In addition to this, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2002) states that the elderly are actually active aging with potential for learning and developing for themselves and society. However, it is necessary that society must provide them with a space of freedom and support them to be active aging.

Education for the elderly is thus seen as one important way leading to creation of the active aging society. The significant implication of this education is to promote lifelong education among the elderly as they are part of society so that they can have interaction with various parts of the society, construct knowledge from their experience, integrate knowledge

and experience with new situations, and to learn with others so as to be worthwhile for society while being able to live well in society (Ketpitchayawattana, 2006; Prachonpatchanuek, 2007; Rattana-Ubol, Pathumchareonwattana, Supawan, Kimpee, Apinankul, Srimichai, et al., 2009)

Therefore, the process of construction and viewing education in a new dimension called “education for the elderly” is important. Besides, it is challenging to a former belief about the elderly and it questions about the educational system that has never had any space for the elderly’s experience, knowledge and thoughts. However, it is not easy for a review and a new look at education for the elderly in another dimension to break the framework of thought about the elderly and the aging society in the traditional way. This is due to the fact that the elderly are made disabled, dependent, outsiders of the education system, and are not involved in development neither for themselves nor society. The proposal of such attitudes and thoughts needs a thinking method, a viewpoint of education and aging people.

A postmodern thinking method can help reveal mythical images of the elderly that neglect the elderly’s feeling that has changed in accordance with learning circumstances. Therefore, rules and regulations supporting a belief that older people’s learning stops are a barrier for elderly education. Consequently, the elderly’s creativity is limited or under unequal authoritative relationships that makes them unable to live up to their expectations and as a result, they are considered worthless. In addition, it helps reveal that the elderly are judged this way not because of natural reason but a process constructed to meet the country’s development goals (Rujisatiensap, 2009; Usher and Edwards, 1994). Hence, the focus of this article is on revealing potential of the elderly that has been obscured so that they can be seen with dignity. Moreover, this method needs to bring about change in viewing education for the elderly to make the elderly meaningful and valuable for Thai society as the important part of creation of a learning society.

Significance of the Study

This article does not view the elderly as uneducated, backward or not keeping up with social change and thus need to be provided with education, nor does this article view modern education as an important mechanism to bring the elderly back to be useful for the country’s economic development. Regarding the aging society, this article does not view it as a barrier to the country’s economic growth but rather reflects negative images of the elderly and aging society that are not viewed neutrally. This is because once in the traditional Thai society, the elderly were regarded supporters for their children and grandchildren as well as others in society because they gave advice and assistance when others had problems; they were venerable persons who kept their children and grandchildren happy and comforted; they were leaders and advisors when their community organized cultural activities; they were middle persons when people in the community were in conflict; and they transferred knowledge and life experience to family members. Besides, at that time, the elderly in the community and society were viewed as helping people in the community and society to learn, exchanging experience and building knowledge to help people to live in harmony.

However, the meanings given to the elderly and aging society have changed while the aforementioned meanings and values have faded at the same time as development of the country and new education system began to focus on producing people for the workforce in the economic system. The meanings of the elderly and aging society that have changed reflect that the meanings have not changed by themselves but they were changed. If generally looked

at, the complexities of the meanings of the elderly and of the emergence of the aging society cannot be seen because the images are seen on the surface and obscure the complexities, and these images are the meanings of the elderly and aging society that have been changed. Moreover, the changes are seen as having happened naturally and in accordance with the reasoning for country development (Fagerlind & Saha J, 1989; Sookwattana, 2002).

Even though the target of development of the country at present is still on building economic growth, it reflects an important focus on creating a learning society where people of all age groups need to be self-dependent. It is therefore believed that education that does not focus on only building the workforce for the economic system will be an important part that pulls back creative power from all age groups, especially, from the elderly who have had almost no space for self-development and for displaying their ability back to development in the educational process to create a learning society (Brownhill, 2001; Pipatpen, 2015).

Nevertheless, it is not an aim of this article to create readymade education for the elderly to guarantee that it will lead to a learning society. Rather, this article believes that knowledge from this analytical study will help reflect problems in modern education and the academic world that makes it difficult to create a learning society which is a target of development of the country. Therefore, a review of knowledge and education in a new academic dimension is necessary. For this, the concepts of criticism of education and of a view on the elderly based on usefulness of their body for the economic system are needed. This article employs concepts of criticism of postmodern thinkers, especially Foucault (1987) concepts of power and discourse analysis which indicate that academic knowledge and modern education are not free from the economic system. This has produced knowledge that categorizes the elderly as belong to the dependent burden group because they are unwanted by the economic system. Thus, studies with such beliefs do not give meanings and importance to the elderly as knowledgeable or experienced persons who can develop themselves to be part of the creation of a learning society.

Objectives

The objectives of this article are to analyze the following.

- 1) Educational ideology, discursive practices, and effects on the life of the elderly
- 2) Conditions leading to a review and questions about education that has made the elderly “the other”
- 3) A re-construction process and a view on education for the elderly in a new dimension in the framework of creating a learning society for Thailand

Results

The analytical results reveal the ideology behind education and indicate how the present practice of the educational process affects the elderly’s way of life. Furthermore, they disclose conditions imposed on the elderly. Therefore, a review and questions about education as well as a construction process and a viewpoint of a new dimension of education for the elderly are needed as follows.

Educational ideology, educational discursive practices, and effects on the life of the elderly

The traditional Thai society was an agricultural society in which the family and community were important social units because they could do their duties in respond to every dimension of needs of family members and the community (Pipatpen, 2013). The elderly played an important role and were centers of living. The meanings of the elderly at that time were knowledgeable and experienced persons, owners of properties, and competent persons who could solve problems, whose advice was willingly taken by everyone. Moreover, the thoughts and beliefs in the elderly was regarded as Thai governing power called feudalism or patronage system which emphasized social structural relationships focusing on differences between the age or class of people. It was believed that younger people or inferiors and older people or superiors must be interdependent; older or superior people were obliged to look after, protect, and help younger ones or inferiors while younger ones or inferiors must wait on or serve older ones or superiors (Sookwattana, 2002). Education in Thai society at that time taught children to have respect for adults and the elderly, and to learn from the elderly's knowledge and experience. Thus, education for the elderly in Thai society at that time reflected harmonious relationships between the elderly and family members as well as the community. The elderly were important leaders of thought that society needed. Learning freely as wanted by the family and community where the elderly was the core led to freedom for the elderly to learn and to construct knowledge with their family and community. As a result, self-dependency of people in the community and self-dependency among the elderly emerged, and it was regarded as emergence of education for the elderly with an implication of creating a learning society.

The change of meanings of education has changed the focus of education away from the family and community. From the First National Economic and Social Development which began in 1961, there have been changes in the economic, social, and political systems. In particular, the emergence of the education system can be regarded as the practical part of education with schools and educational institutions as centers for knowledge transfer. Knowledge in various subjects and disciplines disseminated by schools and educational institutions is knowledge suitable for working in the industrial system and is technological knowledge that is reasonable scientifically. This knowledge has eliminated the importance of knowledge and experience that the elderly have and thus makes them "the other".

Moreover, their wisdom is knowledge that does not respond to the industrial society. According to gerontology, a multidisciplinary study consisting of biology, medicine and behavioral science (Chootoe, 1980), older people are people with problems in aging including their pathological conditions that happen in society. Most studies at the earlier period presented negative views on the elderly (Kamnuasilpa, Kamolnawin, & Raktaidee, 1980). Such education and knowledge have therefore been constructed to support the capitalist system which tries to produce young people to be reasonable labor force to substitute the elderly, and to make highest profits. Thus, it can be said that the educational ideology is for the growth of the economic system. In this respect, knowledge produced in society does not aim to promote the elderly to learn and to have experience in the modern world, and does not earnestly support the use of the elderly's life experience for the working age group. On the contrary, modern academic knowledge even forces the elderly to accept their conditions that they have are without economic potential and value. Furthermore, they are made powerless and without energy to learn about the world and to do anything at all until they are sent to a

nursing home where they are not given any role suitable for their age but instead they are dominated with rules and regulations of the nursing home, an institution towards with the elderly have negative feeling. Consequently, the elderly are alienated from their family and community and see themselves as only a lonely object and feel tired with the condition because the opportunities for them to learn and to display their creative power are limited (Rizer,1996). Education for the elderly that requires them to use their power and experience in creating knowledge, exchanging experience and ideas with others in society as well as development for them to learn various things according to their interest which implies that education for creating a learning society cannot happen.

Conditions leading to a review and questions about education that has made the elderly “the other”

The educational crisis for the elderly reflects protectionist operations towards the elderly through various institutions to reproduce knowledge about aging. Particularly, educational institutions have made it right to push the elderly out of the social center by reproducing and disseminating knowledge about the elderly as the marginal group of society. Meanwhile, the protectionist operations have created other institutions to support the process of protectionism to put up barriers against the elderly to keep them out of the public space. These institutions include the family institution that supports retired elderly people who can look after themselves without being a burden for their children and grandchildren but the elderly who can no longer look after themselves or those who are poor and are burdens for their families are separated from the family and placed in another specific institution which is an old age home or nursing home (Rujisatiensap, 2009).

Thinkers and academics in Thai society considered it right to deter the elderly from society under the framework of thought which attaches importance to the concept that efficient humans are humans in the working age group who are in the workforce that gives value to the country’s economic system. As a result, the elderly who used to be the main part of the family and society are alienated. There have almost never been questions about social problems related to alienation done to the elderly. This implies partialism that looks at problems concerning the elderly as specific problems without relations to other problems and other social situations.

Thus, in solving the problems, the focus is on the elderly as a problematic group. Viewing problems concerning the elderly with partialism does not help mitigate the problems but emphasizes the beliefs that education is neither necessary for the elderly nor for the elderly’s life. Their experience, knowledge and thoughts are neither recognized for learning nor are they reviewed with the current situation. Hence, experience and knowledge that the elderly have are viewed as out of date and not relevant. Nevertheless, thinkers and academics propose a review on education by highlighting importance of education for the elderly because it can help create a learning society in Thai society.

In education for the elderly, the elderly are considered a group of people with potential, experience, and ability to learn and exchange experience with others in society. Thus, all parts of society must provide a space of freedom for the elderly to learn about the world and the new society with others in society so that they can live in society with dignity (Ath-Um, 2010; Sunanchai, 1986; Sungsi, 2003).

Because the crisis of education of the elderly is not a problem specific to the elderly group but the problem is related to society as a whole. Moreover, the questions asked by thinkers and academics about the education system have never looked and given meanings to the elderly as important creative power suitable for their way of life and never looked that this type of education can help hold family members together and society to learn how to live together. All of the above reasons are conditions prompt a proposal for a review and questions about education that has never truly had any space for the elderly.

The process of creating and viewing education for the elderly in a new dimension in the framework of creating a learning society for Thai society

In Thai society, there have been attempts to change attitudes towards the elderly by attaching importance to education for the elderly, and not narrow-mindedly considering people valuable taking into account only the economic system. The attempts reflect change in policy on education that has been extended to cover formal and non-formal education as well as informal education. Education for the elderly and knowledge they have will be developed in informal education programs of community learning networks that they can participate in learning and utilizing, i.e. community learning centers, village reading centers, sub-district health offices, sub-district agricultural offices, as well as natural learning sources in each community. In addition, bodies of knowledge and the elderly's experiences will be learned and transferred in learning community centers designated by people in each community (Office of the Education Council, 2004, 2008). Destroying the framework of thought about education and education for the elderly is believed to enable changes in relationships of different groups of people in society so that there is equality among them so that they are able to learn about various things in society that help them to exist well in society (Yodpetch, 2006).

Therefore construction and viewpoints on the elderly in a new dimension may begin from changing education to a construction mechanism for joint awareness in differences of humans and for realization of human value which will enable humans to interact with different parts of society equally (Pipatpen, 2015; Sajjasophon, 2013). Meanwhile, education still holds its responsibility for questioning the power that has oppressed the meaning of the elderly along with providing a learning space for construction of self-identity desired by the elderly. Then, the elderly's way of life will include lifelong learning which is called a learning society (Rujisatiensap, 2009).

This article aims to propose a process of constructing and viewing education for the elderly in a new dimension, and to propose a belief that education for the elderly can help create a learning society by analyzing and criticizing data and research reports as well as phenomena about elderly people. Then, the author, with theoretical sensitivity towards the data, arranged and interpreted the data to form concepts concerning education for the elderly, and categorized the concepts. The attitude towards education for the elderly in this article based on a postmodernism paradigm will help the elderly and other people in society to have awareness in knowledge and regulations controlling it while education for the elderly will help them learn freely what they want to know. Moreover, it will open a space for education and learning about the elderly in various dimensions that earnestly consider human value and dignity.

However, the ideas proposed in this article are neither fixed nor readymade for use. On the contrary, they need to be considered and adapted for appropriateness. Besides, there are two significant aspects involved in the process of constructing and viewing education for the elderly as follows.

Firstly, it is dismantling to show that the present education is with narrow-minded beliefs and attitudes towards the elderly that are confined in the mainstream belief and the academic knowledge world where the elderly seem like a problem of the social system as well as the economic system that needs to be solved. The educational ideology that serves the economic system, thus, has no space for the elderly as humans with potential to learn, with ability to develop themselves and to help improve various systems in society. The dismantling can reveal not only beliefs and attitudes towards education for the elderly that are not neutral but also other beliefs and attitudes towards education for the elderly.

Secondly, it is a construction of meanings of a new type of education for the elderly which requires the education system and other systems in society to synergize to provide a space of freedom for the elderly to learn and exchange experience with other groups of people, and to express their needs without having to be under the discourse of the elderly where they are viewed as only old people without value but are burdens. Coordination among various systems in society to create education for the elderly who can rely on themselves at the same time as being useful for others in society is a necessary process.

Discussion

The proposition on the elderly as an important mechanism of the creation of a learning society cannot take place if the thought is still confined in the framework of education and of the elderly based on positivism that views the elderly negatively, and that it is unnecessary for the elderly to have education or to learn anything that is important for development of the country. These beliefs are all from knowledge in society that looks at the elderly as having deteriorating bodies worthless for the country's development process. Meanwhile, institutions such as nursing homes for the elderly are built for the elderly who are regarded as burdens and dependents of society. With such a process done to the elderly, people in society cannot see ability or life experience that the elderly can use to manage situations surrounding them. This is why thinking outside the box or the traditional framework that requires a new perspective based on a postmodernist paradigm is necessary.

Furthermore, interpretations of problems resulting from aging society related to research results, theories, and critiques on education and the elderly by thinkers and academics have been synthesized in three propositions on education for the elderly to create a learning society in Thailand as follows.

Firstly, reviewing the myths about education and knowledge do not happen at schools that specify age ranges. It is a criticism on education and academic knowledge that is tied with educational institutions such as schools and universities that focus on producing people to be in workforce of the industrial system, and learners are classified according to their age to give them knowledge according to levels of the educational institutions. Attaining education at the university level in the fields needed by the labor market is viewed as building human resources valuable to the country's economic system. In this regard, leaving an educational institution is viewed as the end of education even though in the working world, there are

many more situations to learn from. Furthermore, people who are retired from the work system as well as other older people are considered people who need no education and it is not very important for them to learn new things because they have no more opportunities to help the country's economic growth. The aforementioned myths about education are only images made to sustain the goal of development of the economic system using the education system as a tool.

Secondly, changing the status and position of the elderly to be co-creators of knowledge who are self-dependent is challenging for the educational discourse and the mainstream of the elderly by questioning the goal of education. The process of educational management and production of education that focus on only making highest profits for entrepreneurs and the economic system helps reveal educational power that comes with knowledge, and make known that it has been true that education has had no space of freedom for the elderly. Changing the status and position of the elderly is possible if we look behind the goal of education as a discourse. Therefore, the elderly will be co-creators of knowledge and self-dependent, if we believe that power is not centered at any one particular place but decentralized and exist all around. Thus, a change of power relation of the elderly in society can happen if we know and keep up with the educational discourse and are able to challenge it.

Thirdly, another aspect is providing a space of freedom for the elderly to show their self-identity with value and to participate in creating intelligence for others in society. For this to happen, biases need to be eliminated. An educational paradigm shift to allow education for the elderly to exist meaningfully in society is needed at the policy level that regards education as not ending when people leave the educational institution at whichever of the various levels which means that the elderly are not restricted to be only in the framework of their physical characteristics and their ability to work and be useful for the economic system, all of which are biased against the elderly. If we are free from being biased against the elderly, a space of freedom for the elderly to display their identity will take place. Education for the elderly is therefore meaningful for the elderly and meaningful to creation of a learning society where people will be more intelligent and exist in society with knowledge and dignity.

Education for the elderly which implies an educational paradigm shift leading to creation of a learning society can actually happen at the policy and the practical levels to respond to the needs of the increasing number of elderly people as well as to the needs of others in society. This is to have a holistic perspective on the elderly, not to have development that is specifically for the elderly. Then a learning society emerging under a new perspective on the elderly will be a society that attaches importance to unbiased education and learning, without age limit, learning place, and the body of knowledge. Such education for the elderly not only helps people know the dominating process of the beliefs and the main stream knowledge about aging and the elderly that make them marginalized group of society, and an unnecessary part for country development. Besides, it helps a review and change in education to take place so that it includes education for the elderly which will enhance learning. This type of education for the elderly will then be significant power that generates and creates knowledge for all groups in society to be more intelligent and exist with dignity. These can then be called education for the elderly used as a base for creating a true learning society in Thailand.

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