

Cognitive Dissonance and Revised Teacher Qualification Scheme 2017: A Case Study of SWU Education Programs

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Abstract

Teacher education is one of the most essential components in an educational system. However, it seems that effort to equip teachers with knowledge and skills for the Thai teaching profession has been loosened lately. This is applied research which examined cognitive dissonance of English teacher students as well as teachers responsible for the education programs at Srinakharinwirot University (SWU) with regards to the new teacher qualification scheme in Thailand as of 2017 that reduced the former five-year education programs to four. The sampling group comprised 62 students reading the Bachelor of Education Program in English at SWU based on purposive sampling. The research instrument was the cognitive dissonance questionnaire which was validated by three experts. Semi-structured interviews were conducted on three responsible teachers of the program. The findings through descriptive statistics indicated that students demonstrated cognitive dissonance against some aspects of the revised teacher qualification scheme 2017 reporting 45.2% on insecurity about future employment, 30.6% on benefits of their current degree, 74.2% demanding action against the new scheme, 77.4% protection from the new scheme, 51.6% non-necessity of the new scheme and 56.5% unfairness of the new scheme. The interview results by teachers responsible for an education program indicated uncertainty in relation to future employment competitiveness and stability of remaining students of the five-year students.

Keywords: Cognitive Dissonance, English Language Teaching, Education Program, Teacher Education

Introduction

To become a public teacher in Thailand, graduates must possess appropriate teacher qualifications as set by the Ministry of Education. In general, graduates with a Bachelor of Education are eligible to sit the public teacher entry examinations. However, many who do not hold an undergraduate degree in education may also meet this requirement by completing a Graduate Certificate in Education offered by various higher education institutions in across the country predominantly Rajabhat universities. This requirement is also common in other countries. For example, in Australia, a person wishing to become a teacher must meet the requirements by the Teachers Registration Board of each state. The minimum requirements include teacher education and sufficient supervised teaching practice. In Thailand, the most recent form of teacher training has been either a five-year undergraduate's degree in education or a two-year master's degree in education (Faikhamta et al., 2018). Nevertheless, in early 2017, the Thai government issued a new scheme allowing graduates who did not hold teacher qualifications, a Bachelor of Education or a Graduate Certificate in Education, to become entitled to sit the public teacher entry examination (Mala, 2017). This provoked cognitive dissonance among stakeholders particularly those currently undertaking or completing a degree in Education (Boonpen and Aramnet, 2017).

This softer government teacher entry scheme received wide public criticisms in relation to whether or not it was appropriate for the government to let people who may not necessarily be qualified to educate students. The issue became apparent especially among those who graduated with appropriate qualifications as per the old rules. The reason for this was because they feared the already-competitive public teacher entry examination would now become even more challenging for them. These graduates had to complete a five-year degree in order to become eligible for a teacher licence in Thailand, which is the main requirement to become public teachers. The same fear went to those who were currently completing a degree in education. On March 2017, a Thairath news article reported that a group of Thai education students across the country as supported by the Thailand Education Dean Council to lodge a letter objecting this government scheme to the Prime Minister (Objection to Teacher Examination, 2017). Since the introduction of this particular government's scheme and despite the government's reaction in response to the outcry of stakeholders, it left education graduates or graduating students with continuing fear of their future career opportunities. Therefore, to serve as a pilot study, this research aims to study cognitive dissonance of education teachers and students about this particular government scheme.

Objectives

1. To study cognitive dissonance of students studying in an education program as a result of the government teacher qualification scheme.
2. To study directions towards education programs in the future.

Research Questions

1. What are the students' opinions after the launch the government teacher qualification scheme?
2. What are the directions of education programs in the future?

Theoretical Framework

This research was based on the Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957). According to this theory, a person may become dissatisfied with a situation or an action because of an unwanted feeling, attitude or belief referred to as cognitive dissonance. To resolve a cognitive dissonance, the theory suggests that a person has to achieve one of the three basic elements 1) change beliefs, 2) change actions or 3) change perception of action.

To apply the theory in this research, the researcher deemed the government new scheme as a cognitive dissonance that education students intend to resolve. This was because the new scheme goes against the old belief that the competition would only stay among education students upon their graduation. The new government scheme is also against the old action whereby education graduates wishing to become public teachers had exclusive right to a teacher licence but the new rules allow non-education graduates to access such right. Finally, the new government scheme leads the current education students to perceive that a Bachelor of Education is no longer a unique degree for potential teachers.

In order to resolve such cognitive dissonance, the education students have to change the belief that the new government scheme would not jeopardize their opportunities as potential teachers. They also have to continue to pursue a teacher licence as well as adhere to the perception that an education degree is a worthwhile qualification to hold.

Teacher education in Thailand

It has been established that effective curricula and teachers allow better achievement on students (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Schwille, Dembele & Shubert, 2007; Tellez & Waxman, 2006). In Thailand, quality and standards of education programs fall under the framework of the Teacher Qualification Standards of the Teacher Council of Thailand (Faikhamta et al., 2018).

In Thailand, there have been reforms in relation to designing and improving teacher education programs since 1967 (Office of the National Education Commission, 2015). Prior to 2019, the teacher education program in Thailand was a five-year undergraduate degree whereby students spend four years in the classrooms and their final year doing their teaching internship. Faikhanta et al. (2018) explained that the reason behind this curricular design was to prepare graduates for the teaching from primary to secondary education. In addition, an undergraduate degree in education offered by institutions in Thailand must provide a minimum of 30 credits for general education with a minimum of 50 credits for teacher professional courses and at least 80 units of specialised courses. All of the teacher education programs in Thailand must also be certified and approved by the Teachers' Council of Thailand.

Teacher licensing

The two main bodies that are responsible for the issuance of a teacher licence in Thailand are: Teachers' Council of Thailand and Office of the Higher Education Commission. In addition to the requirements in terms of minimum credits for each category of an education program previously mentioned, Thai teachers must also possess meet requirements found in the Regulation of the Teachers' Council of Thailand on Professional Standards and Ethics B.E. 2548.

To relate this part of the review with this research, it seems that the current education programs in Thailand are thoroughly regulated by the main governing body in teacher education-Teachers' Council of Thailand. Nevertheless, the government decided to amend this rule in early 2017. Whether or not the government's decision was beneficial to the teaching profession was debatable.

Conceptual Framework

This research is based on Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957). Essentially, this is an interdisciplinary study combining knowledge of education with communication. Education is the foundation for studies and communication is a supporting field. When there is change in education, behaviour of people may also change. In this case, it is the negative attitudes towards the new scheme of teaching programs which may lead to negative attitudes towards the teaching profession. If Thailand is to promote more effective education programs, it is important to ensure that stakeholders do not hold cognitive dissonance against the education system.

There are other relevant theories in terms of human behaviour. According to the Social Cognitive Theory, to change a person's behaviour, Bandura (1997) stated that two determinants exist – 1) the person must believe the positive outcome (benefits) is greater

than the negative outcome (costs), and 2) the person must have a sense of self-efficacy. To elaborate on this, according to this theory, the tendency that the students will change their behaviour depends on two factors. The students must believe that the benefits such as the new scheme is significantly better than the old scheme. The second fact is the students must believe that they have skills or abilities to accept the new scheme despite being initial disagreement with the new scheme. As a consequence, in practice, for the new scheme to work, these factors will have to be taken into account. The messages or the reasons for implementing the new scheme have to be convincing to people.

The Theory of Reasoned Action lies firstly in the person's attitudes towards changing his or her behaviour and secondly the person's subjective norms of changing the behaviour (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). To refer this theory to the new scheme, the students must hold positive attitudes towards the new scheme, such as seeing real benefits of the new scheme. Furthermore, the students must hold a positive norm over better education programs. This means people around the students must encourage or support them. It is part of a social norm. When these two factors are met, the change of behaviour should occur.

Research Methodology

This research was a mixed method containing both quantitative and qualitative nature. The research comprised 62 samples studying Bachelor of Education Program in English at Srinakharinwirot University based on purposive sampling as these students were deemed directly affected by the new government scheme. A researcher-made instrument based on the three-point Likert Scale was used as a tool to collect the required data. The qualitative method used on three educators involved or responsible in the design and management of a Bachelor of Education Program in English.

The researcher constructed a questionnaire on cognitive dissonance to apply in this research. The Likert Scale format was employed in the questionnaire with three levels of agreement: agree, neutral and disagree.

The questionnaire comprised 10 questions seeking to understand opinions of the samples about the new government scheme. The questions were created based on the framework of the Cognitive Dissonance Theory. Question 1 asked the impact of the new government scheme on the samples in order to avoid bias. Questions 2-3 were based on the belief of the benefits of the English Education Program, which is the belief prior to the new government scheme. Questions 4-10 were based on the cognitive dissonance of the samples resulted from the new government scheme. The questions sought to understand whether the samples agreed or disagreed with some possible ways of resolving cognitive dissonance. The questions in the questionnaire were based strictly on beliefs and perceptions

not actions because the samples in the research were still students and they were unlikely to take any other action other than focusing on completing their degree.

In order to avoid ethical issues in research and ensure voluntary participation, the researcher included statements identifying the nature of completing the questionnaire at the end of the questionnaire.

In order to ensure that the questionnaire was valid, the content validity of the questionnaires was checked by three experts through the use of Index of Congruence (IOC) (Payne, 2003). The original questionnaire comprised 11 questions but Question 8: 'I feel the program should be reduced to 4 years if the scheme persists' was deleted by suggestions of the experts; thus, 10 questions were used. The reliability test was conducted and demonstrated .764 in Chronbach's Alpha.

The research selected three educators involved in the design and management of a Bachelor of Education Program in English at Srinakharinwirot University. A semi-structured interview was conducted to seek their opinions about the directions towards an education program in the future. The choice of this interview type was because it allowed "depth to be achieved by providing the opportunity on the part of the interviewer to probe and expand the interviewee's responses" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005: 88). This meant that the nature of the interview was not as strict as the structured interview while allowing the interviewer to cover the intended areas of investigation. The interview questions were:

1. What do you think about the current education program in Thailand? (i.e. effectiveness and shortfall)
2. What do you think about the revised government scheme that allowed graduates without teacher education to sit the teacher entry exam?
3. What impact, if any, do you think the revised government scheme may have on existing education program?

Since this research served to understand general opinions of current education students post the government new scheme; thus, descriptive statistics including mean, Standard Deviation and percentage were presented.

The researcher electronically distributed the questionnaire to 80 respondents but 62 completed questionnaires were returned.

Findings

The findings of the research indicated that 45.2% of the respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the new government teacher entry examination scheme whereby anyone wishing to become a teacher could apply for the teacher licence regardless of their qualifications. However, 37.1 of the respondents displayed cognitive dissonance against the

new scheme. Only a small number of respondents (17.7%) believed they had not been affected by the new government scheme.

The majority of the respondents (61.3%) reported that they studied education because they wanted to become a teacher. However, there were those who did not state their desire of becoming a teacher although they represented only a small percentage of the participants (8.1%). Those that neither agreed nor disagreed with the desire to becoming a teacher contributed to 30.6%.

With regards to the teacher licence, most of the respondents (83.9%) reported they studied education because it the teacher licence was attached to their degree. However, there were 6.4% of the respondents who did not focus on this privilege whereby 9.7% of them neither agreed nor disagreed with the degree and the teacher licence.

Following the new government scheme, 45.2% of the respondents agreed they became insecure with their future career while 19.4% of them disagreed. Nevertheless, 35.5% of the respondents neither nor disagreed with the insecurity of their future career.

In relation to the benefits of an education program, half of the samples (50%) still believed in the benefits of an education program while many of them (30.6%) lost their faith in an education program. Only a small number of people failed to display any agreement or disagreement to this.

The results of the questionnaires showed that the majority of the respondents (74.2%) stated that the program should take action against the scheme whereas only a small percentage (4.8%) disagreed with it. The rest of the respondents (21%) remained indifferent about this (19.4%).

Most of the respondents (77.4%) would like protection from any effect resulting from the new scheme. However, there were still some respondents (6.5%) who felt they did not require protection. Less than a quarter of the respondents (16.1%) neither agreed nor disagreed with the protection from potential impact resulting from the new scheme.

Opinions of the respondents regarding the necessity of the new scheme varied: 51.6% agreed, 14.5% disagreed and 33.9% were indifferent.

More than half of the respondents (56.5%) stated that the new scheme was unfair but 19.4% of them disagreed with this. The rest of the respondents (24.2%) did not display any agreement or disagreement.

Finally, a little more than half of the respondents (53.2%) felt the new scheme should be cancelled with only a small number of them (12.9%) disagreed with this. Approximately, a little under a quarter of the respondents (33.9%) did not express their agreement or disagreement.

Table 1 Opinions about the government scheme

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Are you affected by the government softer teacher entry examination scheme?	37.1	45.2	17.7	2.27	.750
2. I study education because I want to become a teacher.	61.3	30.6	8.1	2.23	.584
3. I study education because it comes with a teacher licence.	83.9	9.7	6.4	2.03	.404
4. I feel insecure about my future career after the launch of the new government teacher qualification scheme.	45.2	35.5	19.4	2.16	.729
5. I no longer feel an education program is beneficial for a career in teaching.	30.6	19.4	50	1.69	.781
6. I feel the program should take action against the scheme.	74.2	21	4.8	2.16	.486
7. I feel that current students should be protected from the scheme.	77.4	16.1	6.5	2.10	.469
8. I feel the scheme is unnecessary.	51.6	33.9	14.5	2.19	.674
9. I feel the scheme is unfair.	56.5	24.2	19.4	2.05	.664
10. I feel the scheme should be cancelled.	53.2	33.9	12.9	2.21	.656

In relation to the interviews conducted on three interviewees indicated that they had been somewhat confused about the direction of the Ministry of Education. This was because education programs used to run for four years in the past. However, this was changed by adding one extra year to the programs so that all of the education programs in the country were five years. Yet, the most recent change was cutting down one year so that the programs run only for four years.

The interviewees only expressed their opinions about the education program in English at the Faculty of Srinakharinwirot University because they worked there. In essence, the interviewees were satisfied with the programs they were responsible for. The design at Srinakharinwrot University was unique in a sense that specialised faculties worked in collaboration with the Faculty of Education. For example, students under the Bachelor of Education Program in English study education subjects at the Faculty of Education whereas English subjects are taught at the specialised faculty, Faculty of Humanities. The interviewees expressed their pride in the running of the program they were responsible for.

Nevertheless, with the new scheme that reduced all education programs to 4 years, the interviewees stated that they were concerned because they had to remove some of the subjects off the program simply because there would not be enough time for students to do them. Therefore, with the new scheme, the interviewees had the opinion that the content the new program design offers may not be as detailed as the old design of five years. In addition, this created some cognitive dissonance on the part of the five-year-program students whereby the students felt they studied harder with more rigorous contents; yet, they would enter the teaching profession with the same credibility as those who will graduate through the new scheme. Most importantly, the interviewees expressed their concerns in relation to how they would go about retaining competitiveness of their program with other non-education programs. Thus, the direction of future education programs should focus on how to ensure that the theoretical and philosophical contents together with rigorous practical teaching skills the old programs offered could all fit into the future programs.

Discussion

1. Cognitive dissonance of samples

Becoming a teacher is a competitive task in Thailand. There are a number of graduates with a degree in education each year wanting to enter the public school system, but placements are limited. The results of the research indicated that 61.3% study education because they would like to become a teacher. This is an interesting figure that not all of the respondents reported agreement to this question. It means that some of the respondents study education for a different goal. Essentially, this is not always a positive outcome for the teaching industry because people with passion to teaching should ideally come from an education program. For many people, they enter into the teaching profession simply because they do not know what else to do (Teaching is ruining my life, but I don't know what to do instead, 2017). This usually starts from when they choose their degree of study. A number of school leavers in Thailand are pressured by parents to study a culturally prestigious degree such as medicine, pharmacy or engineering. Nevertheless, many do not like mathematics nor do they like science. Often they end up at the faculty of education because of less competition based on university admission results. Upon graduation, these graduates who enter the teaching profession will not do so because of the passion in teaching. Eventually this creates a problem for students and the teaching arena as a whole. Those who do not possess any passion in teaching will not put in sufficient effort to teaching. They will likely do what refers to as a nine-to-five job, which means they turn up to work and leave at the end of the day. However, being a teacher is much more than that. A good teacher should spend time designing and preparing for lessons in order to ensure that the contents

presented to the students are appropriate. For example, the levels of each lesson should be based on relevant theoretical backgrounds. If the teacher intends for the students to be able to apply the knowledge in a language classroom in real life situations, the content of the class should follow specific words as suggested in Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001). Modern teaching requires even more energy on the part of the teacher. Interactive classroom settings can be tiring when the teacher is expected to conduct a lively and interesting class. A wide variety of classroom activities to generate language interests in students are unavoidable (Brown and Lee, 2015). A traditional teaching method like grammar translation whereby the teacher takes all of the authority in the classroom is no longer a popular fashion. Thus, those who do not enjoy teaching will not cope and they will eventually deliver ineffective teaching.

It was clear based on the findings that most of the respondents (83.9%) were satisfied with the fact that their degree comes automatically with a teacher licence. However, it seems that the new scheme had triggered cognitive dissonance (see Festinger, 1957) on the part of almost half of the respondents (45.2%) who expressed their insecurity about their future career following the new scheme. In essence, exclusive privilege to hold a teacher licence no longer lies in the hands of education graduates but rather graduates from all areas. Further, 74.2% of the respondents would appreciate some action by the program and 77.4% protection for they will be graduates under the old program. It was not a surprise because the respondents in the five-year program may see themselves as being disadvantaged when it comes time for them to enter the teaching profession with those who only have to spend four years in their degrees. That one extra year could mean significantly to many in terms of career advancement.

Cognitive dissonance was also found by more than half of the respondents in relation to the new scheme being unnecessary (51.6%), unfair (56.5%) and that it should be cancelled (53.2%). Cognitive dissonance could be seen as a negative factor leading students to being unsatisfied with the program they are taking, which would not constitute to optimal performance on the part of the students. Thus, the students would prefer that the new scheme be cancelled. Only a small number of respondents (30.6%) believed that the education program was no longer beneficial, which indicated that the majority of the respondents had not yet formed cognitive dissonance against the education programs. The interpretation of the findings here could be due to confusion and lack of realization about the impact whether it be positive or negative induced by the new scheme. It is possible that some samples may still believe in the benefits of the education program despite the new scheme.

Cognitive dissonance was not found in students alone because those responsible for the running of the program also displayed their dissatisfaction with the new scheme. With

the reduced length of study, it means the subjects and credit requirements in the old program under the old regulations are no longer applicable (see Faikhamta et al., 2018). To administrators of the program, this could be loosening the strength of their program from what they believed was an effective curriculum (see Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Schwille, Dembele & Shubert, 2007; Tellez & Waxman, 2006). With the confidence of the administrators who were also teachers reduced, it could jeopardize the whole system. In other words, neither the students nor the administrators were satisfied with their own program that they used to be proud of. As a result, the cognitive dissonance may become a contributing factor that decreases the effectiveness of the education program and eventually the overall education system.

2. Directions of education programs in future

To ensure the degree of effectiveness of future education programs in Thailand, administrators would have to take careful consideration with regards to combining the academic contents and teaching practicum that used to take up the whole five-year period in the tight schedule of the new four-year programs. As mentioned in Brown and Lee (2015) that new courses were not usually perfect. There are important considerations that program developers have to take into account. Since change has to happen due to the government policy, discussion on the need for change may be skipped. Regardless of the change, it is essential that the extent of change, engagement in realistic change be considered (Nation and Macalister, 2010). As previously mentioned in the interview results, it was found that there were concerns about how to fit contents of the old program into the shorter new program. Although this may be possible in theory, it may not necessarily be practical in terms of time and competition with other courses. This is because a perfectly designed course in accordance with appropriate theories may be of little use if it is not practical in reality. Most importantly, it must not be forgotten that a newly designed course has to allow principled teaching on the teachers. After all, courses that force the teachers out of their own principled teaching is rarely successful (Brown and Lee, 2015).

Recommendation based on the findings

As previously stated in the article that this research was intended to be a pilot study, the researcher hoped it would stimulate interest of other researchers in relation to the advantages and disadvantages of the new model of teacher education programs in Thailand. Clearly, there have been inconsistencies in the standard of teacher qualifications in Thailand over the past 20 years. Prior to the era of the five-year programs, the degrees used to last four years. With administrative policy, changes were made to extend education programs to five years. Yet; they are now back to what they once were many years ago.

Inconsistency at the policy level makes it difficult for practitioners to follow. As discussed earlier in the article that, for many people, they choose to study education because they do not truly know what they want to study. This means they generally do not have an interest in teaching let alone passion in teaching. With very few incentives to become a teacher in Thailand such as low salary and relatively slow career advancement, the government should work on creating attraction to potential students to want to study education. While reducing the length of study to four years may appeal to a number of people, the fact that it does not stay intact demonstrates instability of the system. For the current discussion, the government decided to reduce all education programs to four years led to cognitive dissonance in students of the former scheme of five years. It is without any doubt that these students should feel dissatisfied. On the assumption these students chose to study education because of the passion in teaching, the new scheme may devalue what they hold dear as the career of their dream. The new scheme extends the privilege of the teacher licence upon those who do not hold a degree in education. Therefore, the specialization vested in an education degree seems somewhat loose. In other words, it is not a special degree for the teaching profession since anyone with any degree can become a teacher. Thus, the value of the teaching profession actually drops by the hands of the policy makers. As a result of this, the government should take into consideration the pros and cons of imposing any change to the education programs. Although the capitalist world aims for profits including for the education sector, teaching continues to be the foundation of knowledge for new generations to gain. If commercial reasons dominate too much in the teaching profession, it is possible that there may not be truly passionate teachers left in years to come.

Recommendation for future research

Research in cognitive dissonance is an interesting start because it can provide an overall picture of psychological emotions of the audience who are directly affected by fluctuating directions in education of the Thai administration. A larger scale research in cognitive dissonance may be required to back up findings of the present research. Studies about change and inconsistency in education programs may also be conducted to explore wider understanding of the issues in relation to effectiveness and standards of education programs. Additional research on credibility of education programs may also be possible.

Since the current research focused on cognitive dissonance which represents the negative dimension of human perspective, research projects focusing on the opposites may be possible as well such as prototypes or advantages of new education programs.

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