

***Finding the Middle Way to the Future of Thai Schools***

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Educational reform has arrived in Thailand. As in other countries, government policymakers have initiated reform as an outcome of economic competition arising from globalization. Now, after a decade of talking about the reform of Thailand's education system, policymakers are finally reaching the point of action – trying to change teaching and learning in the Thai classroom.

There is a national consensus that traditional Thai ways of managing schools and teaching children are unlikely to create students who have the capacity to live productive and satisfying lives in Thailand of the year 2020 (Hallinger, 2000). Not a week goes by without newspapers reporting on new educational trends coming into the Kingdom: parental involvement, school-based management, home schooling, Montessori methods, learning technologies, quality improvement, student-centered learning. This list of educational reforms has traveled the globe and landed on the policy list of the Ministry of Education. The question those interested in Thai education might rightfully ask is, "In what ways are these educational policies and practices relevant to the improvement of learning in Thai schools?"

That is the focus of this article. I will examine the current context of educational reform in Thailand, focusing on two issues. The first concerns the vision and strategy of reform as enacted by the Ministry of Education. The second is the current effort to transform Thai classrooms in learner-centered environments.

I assert that successful school reform in the Thailand will not result from copying policies imported from abroad. Thai society and culture differ in fundamental ways from the nations in which these policies originated. Rather, true reform will entail finding a "middle way" to creating the future of Thai schooling. This article outlines what that "middle way" might look like.<sup>1</sup>

### Approaches to Educational Reform

In all areas of life, globalization is bringing new ideas, products, services, and policies into Thailand from abroad. Thailand's representative government was imported from abroad and 60 years later Thai people are still adjusting to its norms and processes. Despite the fact that change in the political system may seem slow, progress is observable.

Products and services from companies like McDonalds, Seven Eleven, and Pizza Hut first appeared strange to Thai people. They were formulated abroad where people live according to different norms and cultural traditions. Thai people tasting pizza for the first time may have said: "This is so bland! How can foreign people eat this?" Yet, as time passed, the makers of pizza in Thailand began to add chili, shrimp, and other local ingredients that made it more suitable to Thai tastes.

The situation of education in Thailand is no different. Global change forces are interacting with the culture of Thailand to create a new context for education (Hallinger, 2000; Hallinger, Chantarapanya, Sriboonma, & Kantamara, 2000). Increased global economic competition means that for the first time, educational services must not only satisfy the tastes of Thai people but also standards of global society. The 1997 economic crisis made the relationship between education and the economy clear to Thai people. Education is a key to the future not only of Thai children, but also Thai society. Not surprisingly, Thai

policymakers have looked abroad for policies and practices that hold the promise of improving education in Thailand.

When compared with some of its Asian neighbors – Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan – Thailand has been slow off the mark with respect to educational reform (Hallinger et al., 2000). During the 1990's, education never made it onto the center stage of the political arena in Thailand. Although occasional mention was made of its importance for economic and social development, complacent Thai politicians never made reform a high priority. This changed somewhat following the economic crisis when greater urgency was placed on implementing many of the ideas that had been discussed over the prior decade.

Today, Thailand possesses a fairly well-developed policy platform for educational change in the Education Reform Act of 1997. However, the Ministry's vision for educational reform needs better articulation and the current implementation strategy is poorly aligned with its policy goals. At a recent government-sponsored seminar on educational reform officials announced that after one year of implementation the new reform policies had been implemented to a level of 30 percent. While such pronouncements are heartening to policymakers, they hold little meaning for students and teachers in schools.

The reality *in schools throughout the world* is that change is slow. The approach reflected in this article's opening quote from Dr. Rung is consistent with Thailand's tradition of implementation by top-down mandate (Hallinger & Kantamara, 2000a, 2000b). Even most Ministry officials would agree that the past results have been disappointing. Supervisors armed with implementation checklists make "hit and run" visits to schools looking for information to confirm the belief that change has taken place (Hallinger et al., 2000). Yet, little or nothing really changes where it matters, in the classroom.

In the current reform effort, the only thing that has changed is the substance of the reform. This time the policies are designed "empower" principals, teachers and communities. Yet, the same traditional implementation strategy remains in use.

Thai educators must face the truth. Educational reform is only in its earliest stages. The most significant challenges lay ahead. I will argue that both Ministry officials and leading politicians must make a greater effort to develop a shared vision of educational reform. Only a broad-based reform effort that has the support of all stakeholders -- parents, the business community, politicians, educators (and even students) -- holds a chance of success. If this is the case, then the Ministry's implementation strategy will also need to change.

### Visions of Educational Reform

As suggested above, I contend that although Thailand has a policy platform for reform, there is only a cloudy vision of what it will mean for schools and classrooms. The problem of articulating a clear vision for reform at the school level comes from three factors. The first is linguistic; the second and third are institutional.

Discussions about educational reform in Thailand often assume that people are speaking the same "language." Many English terms such as *student-centered learning* or *school-based management* have been imported from abroad. There are no Thai equivalents. So when these terms are translated into Thai, educators are not always sure what the true intentions are behind the word or phrase. This leads to different interpretations and much confusion.

A second problem comes from the fact that institutional leaders in the Ministry of Education have traditionally made all of the major educational decisions in Thailand. The people who implement the decisions – principals and teachers -- have never been viewed as equal partners. Thus, there has never been an emphasis on “sharing a vision” but simply on communicating decisions and orders. Thus, I believe that educators in Thai schools still lack a clear vision of the centerpiece of the current reform agenda: the *learner-centered classroom*.

A third problem in articulating a vision for reform comes from the fact that the Ministry has focused attention primarily on “changing the system.” They have paid less attention to articulating and building support for their vision of what the outcome will look like in schools and classrooms. What do Thai parents want for their children from the education system? I believe they want their children to become capable, good, and happy citizens (khon geng, khon dee, lae mee kwamsook) who are able to lead productive lives as Thai’s in a global culture. Educational reformers must, however, articulate first and foremost a vision of the students who will emerge from this system of education. Only once this vision is clear, can educators select the best methods of teaching, learning and management.

### Strategies for Reform

Once a vision has been articulated, there is an equal need for practical implementation strategies. The current push to create learner-centered classrooms (see opening quotation) must clarify just how teachers can bring these classrooms into reality. It is not enough to simply mandate this and provide handbooks to teachers. Indeed that approach to change is an excellent example of the “old paradigm” that the Ministry is supposedly trying to move away from!

During these early stages of reform, the Ministry must create many ongoing opportunities for educators and the public to talk about what reform of Thai schools and classrooms really means. Therefore, I applaud events such as the Ministry’s seminar on reform after the first year. However, to declare that reform has been implemented to a level of 30 percent after one year gives a false sense of the ease with which change will take place. It promotes a sense of unreality in the eyes of teachers and principals who are well aware of how little has really changed. Instead of giving moral support (*hai gumlung jai*) to the enterprise of reform, it sends a signal that reform is an exercise in public relations.

Our experience working with administrators and teachers in Thailand tells us that there is often a gap in peoples’ understanding between talk about reform and the meaning of the words in reality. For example, I have talked to many educators who tell us that their schools are now using *student-centered learning*. Yet, when I look at the classrooms they appear the same as 10 or 15 years ago. They look, feel and sound the same. Perhaps most importantly, the methods of instruction used by teachers are essentially the same.

Even in the face of pronouncements from administrators in Bangkok, experience in Thailand and abroad teaches us that change in schools will be slow, often painful, and not without conflict (Hallinger & Kantamara, 2000a, 2000b). Change in the behaviors of teachers in the classroom will only occur after they have had a chance to talk about and observe new practices, receive substantial training in how to use them, and obtain hands-on support at the school level.

As is the case with products and services in the private sector, educational practices are likely to appear quite strange to Thai educators. When encountering *student-centered learning* for the first time, I would expect Thai teachers (and students) to react with surprise and even disbelief. They will likely ask many questions:

- How will students learn if the teacher doesn't *teach* them?
- What if the students don't do the work?
- Are Thai children responsible enough to work on their own without a teacher's control and direction?
- If the students work in a group, won't they cheat?
- How will I evaluate their learning?
- How can students set their own goals for learning? And more. . .

These questions will not be answered adequately in a handbook, even if teachers take the time to read it. Thus, I believe that the *strategy* suggested in Dr. Rung's quotation at the outset of this article should be turned around. Rather than threatening teachers with training if they do *not* implement student-centered learning, the Ministry should begin with high quality training and follow-up with handbooks as well as on-site support!

Interestingly, the questions would be surprisingly similar with respect to innovative policies such as school-based management that are designed to provide greater voice for local educators.

- Do teachers want to make these decisions?
- Can I trust people at the school to make the right decision?
- Will they be responsible in taking greater responsibility for money?
- Will the results really improve if I don't tell them what to do?
- These practices may work in foreign countries, but are Thai people ready for this?

I have heard many of these questions and more.

It must be recognized that the assumptions embedded in almost all of these new reforms run completely opposite to the predominant norms of Thai culture. Stated simply, these educational reforms assume that better outcomes will result from people in positions of higher status giving greater voice, respect, and control to persons of lower status. To implement school-based management means that Ministry will give up some of its authority to local leaders. School-based management and parental involvement mean that principals will give up some of their authority and control to teachers and parents. Student-centered learning means that teachers develop new relationships with their students. This is a highly complex set of circumstances even to imagine, never mind to implement, and all at the same time!

#### Change as Mutual Adaptation

There is no question that as in the private sector, a similar process of *mutual adaptation* will occur as Thai educators try to implement these foreign educational practices. I view this type of mutual adaptation as necessary and positive. School-based management and student-centered learning will be implemented in a "Thai style" or they will not be implemented at all (Hallinger & Kantamara, 2000a, 2000b). In the process, these practices will begin to change and take on a Thai character.

Although many will agree that change in Thai schools is desirable, its success will depend on the extent to which Thai teachers, administrators, and parents assume responsibility for reform. Moreover, in order to successfully adapt these global educational practices, Thai educators must first understand clearly the reasoning behind them. Otherwise, during the process of adaptation there will be a tendency to simply keep the features that feel comfortable and throw out the rest. The result may not yield the desired outcomes for teachers and children.

Already this process of mutual adaptation has started in Thailand. As recently as 1999 Thai educators and policymakers were promoting the widespread use of *student-centered learning*. Policymakers used the term *tee nen nuk seuksa pen soon glarnng*, a direct translation of the English term, *student-centered learning*. In its English usage this refers to a specific form of instruction. However, this terminology was not suitable for the Thai classroom. It raised many questions in the minds of Thai teachers, signaled too big a change in classroom practice, and was not really appropriate.

Consequently early in the year 2,000, policymakers initiated the use of a different term: *hong rien tee nen nuk seuksa pen sum kun* or *witeegaan rien tee nen nuk seuksa pen sum kun*. These terms correspond closely to the English term – *the learner-centered classroom*.

The change in terminology signaled the intent to change the focus of the teaching and learning process from the teacher to the student. This is an early example of mutual adaptation in the process of educational reform. Many more will follow as Thai educators seek to find a *middle way* in the implementation of educational reform.

I take the position that creating *learner-centered classrooms* represents a positive vision for Thailand's educational reform effort. The goal of creating *learner-centered* classrooms is ambitious. However, it is achievable, morally defensible, politically supportable, and educationally sound. In the next section, I will elaborate what the creation of *learner-centered classrooms* might mean for the practice of Thai educators.

### Creating Learner-centered Classrooms

When compared with modern societies, classrooms -- in Thailand and abroad -- have undergone surprisingly little change over the past 100 years. Primary, secondary and university classrooms today look remarkably similar to those of the 1920's, 1960's, and 1980's. In some cases whiteboards and markers are replacing blackboards and chalk, and pens have largely replaced pencils. However, the same teacher-centered instructional approaches used 1900 persist in the year 2000.

Although it may come as a surprise to Thai educators, there has been far less change in Western schools in recent years when compared with "talk about change." In this respect, the situation in Thailand is quite similar. The main difference is that the serious effort to reform education started sooner in the industrialized West (e.g., around 1980 in the USA). While there is much to learn from the experience of other countries, Western nations have few ready-made reform solutions for implementation in Thai schools.

Throughout the world there is, however, a growing recognition of the need to focus classrooms and schools on the needs of students: to create *learner-centered classrooms* and

*schools*. Before painting a picture of the *learner-centered* classroom, I will share our view of the Thai classroom as it exists today. The picture I present describes not only the “typical” classroom in Thailand, but also to varying degrees to classrooms around the world. Where differences exist I will note them.

### What Does a Typical Thai Classroom Look Like in the Year 2,000?

From Bangkok to Chiang Mai, Korat and Hat Yai, visits to typical classrooms reveal the following characteristics with surprising regularity:

1. A teacher is standing in the front of the classroom.
2. The teacher spends the largest portion of the day *teaching* to the whole class.
3. The class consists of between 30 and 50 students seated passively in rows of individual desks.
4. Students spend the largest portion of their day *listening* to their teacher, asking relatively few questions.
5. The instructional day consists of six to seven hours broken up into one-hour blocks of instructional time.
6. Instructional periods are allocated to subjects that comprise a curriculum.
7. Students have little into what they will learn or how they will learn it.
8. Students complete their assignments as individuals as opposed to working in groups.
9. Teachers have little input into curriculum content.
10. Assessment of student learning generally emphasizes the recall of facts and definitions on paper and pencil tests.

In Thailand – and most other Asian nations -- this picture of the typical primary or secondary school classroom is even more consistent than in the West. Indeed, Asian educational systems have traditionally worked diligently to ensure that all classrooms fit this picture to the greatest extent possible! Uniformity in the provision of instruction has been viewed both as a national educational goal and as a means of ensuring that students master desired content upon graduation.

While this approach to educational delivery would appear logical to most Thai’s, it contrasts, for example, with the United States. The United States system of education accepts and even seeks to promote diversity among schools and communities in their approaches to educating children. It is not right or wrong, but uniformity in the provision of educational services has never been part of America’s national tradition.

Even so, with the exception of class size, essentially the same picture of a “typical” classroom would fit quite comfortably in many American (as well as Australian and British) schools. Still, the look and feel of “Western” classrooms differ in some respects. Where differences between classrooms in Western nations and Thailand exist, they might include the following. In Western nations:

- There might be greater diversity of teaching practices used by teachers within a school.
- An individual teacher might employ a somewhat greater variety of teaching methods.

- Students might be involved more in cooperative learning<sup>1</sup> groups or other small group activities in which they are working independent of the teacher.
- There might be evidence of more learning technology in use.
- There might be more student-centered learning activities.
- There would be a greater emphasis on students' individual development.

Note, however, that not all Western educators agree that their schools develop creativity and independent thinking. For example, one American writer has noted:

Evidently our society values obedience and passivity very highly at this point in its development. For regardless of what I say about the importance of originality, independence, and responsible self-direction, I do not provide our young people with a schooling environment which allows them to develop such behaviors. (Tye, 1985, p. 335)

Thus, the picture of education in Western nations does differ from Thailand. But, the differences are not quite as dramatic as many Thai's might believe. Indeed, the current global era finds both Western and Asian nations charting new directions for educational reform.

#### New Goals Require New Methods

This basic approach to instruction has undergone relatively little change over the past 100 or more years. Even with advances in technology, smaller class sizes, and better materials, teachers continue to teach in essentially the same ways as in the past. Some teachers and parents rightfully ask: "This teacher-centered approach has stood the test of time. Why change it now?"

In fact, substantial evidence accumulated over the past several decades suggests that East Asian nations have been highly successful in achieving the educational goal of subject matter mastery. Observers of rapid economic and social development in Asia since 1980 have even attributed the region's coherent, highly disciplined educational systems as a key factor. Cross-national comparisons of educational achievement have demonstrated that East Asian students consistently outperform Western peers on numerous measures of educational achievement.

Part of the answer to the question – Why change? -- lies in the evolving goals of schools throughout the world. A broader set of *new millennium educational goals* is increasingly viewed as critical to continued economic growth as well as social, political, and cultural development. These new educational goals include independent thinking, skills in problem-solving, life-long learning, mastery of international languages, and IT literacy.

Indeed, these *new millennium educational goals* have been incorporated into policies passed by Thailand's education ministries. At the policy level, there is no question that Thailand must move rapidly in pursuit of a different educational agenda from a decade ago. Recall, for example, that five years ago the term "Internet" was virtually unknown in Thailand. Even three years ago, pressures to learn English were nowhere near as intense as they are today.

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<sup>1</sup> Cooperative group learning is an instructional approach in which the teacher places the students in specific groups for the purposes of instruction. Students work with and help each other learn tasks assigned by the teacher. In cooperative group learning, students are first taught *how to learn as a group*.



To meet these changing goals will require change in how educational services are provided to Thai youth from primary schools through universities.

In particular, it means that the Thai classroom described above will have to change. At the school level new approaches include practices such as school-based management and parental involvement. At the classroom level, there is a strongly advocated insistence that teachers develop a *learner-centered* focus in the classroom. Moreover, as suggested by the quotation from Dr. Rung at the outset of this article, Thai policymakers view this change towards *student-centered* learning as an urgent and important national priority.

### Defining Our Terms

I find much confusion in Thailand over terms such as *student-centered learning* and *learner-centered classrooms*. While I do not speak for the Ministry of Education, I offer our own perspective on the distinctions.

1. In the West, *student-centered learning* describes specific approaches to instruction in which the student initiates much of the direction (e.g., goals) and carries out most of the activity in the learning process.
2. *Teacher-directed instruction* and *teacher-centered instruction* describe approaches to instruction in which the teacher is primarily responsible for setting instructional goals and directing instructional activities.
3. *Learner-centered instruction* is any approach to instruction – teacher-directed or student-centered – whose primary focus is on the needs and thinking of students individually and collectively.
4. The *learner-centered classroom* is a classroom whose climate, organization and instruction is focused first and foremost on meeting the learning and social developmental needs of students. The teacher in a *learner-centered* classroom may use both teacher-directed and student-centered learning methods.

In our portrait of the “typical classroom” I painted a picture of what I will refer to as *teacher-centered instruction*. In this classroom, the teacher and the curriculum are the “center” of the classroom’s activity. The needs of the teacher and the substance of the curriculum are important. The teacher teaches the curriculum to the class and students are expected to adapt passively, regardless of the circumstances.

This *teacher-centered* approach to instruction has come under justifiable criticism. A short list might include.

- It often fails to develop the thinking capacities of students.
- It does not adapt to the varied learning styles of many students.
- Students do not learn how to work cooperatively with one another.
- Students find the approach boring and are not motivated to succeed.
- It fosters learning in which students look for the right answer – the one provided by the teacher.
- It promotes a memorization approach to learning rather than a meaning-oriented approach.
- It fails to develop attitudes or skills for life-long learning.
- It does not foster the application of learning beyond the classroom.

Thus, even though *teacher-centered* instruction succeeded admirably in helping Thai students to master sets of facts, there are clear limitations to this approach. Educators have

recognized the limitations of teacher-centered instruction for almost 100 years. However, it was an efficient method for teachers with minimal training to manage large groups of students. The limitations of *teacher-centered* instruction have, however, become critical in light of the changing goals of education in the new millennium.

In response, many policymakers are now seeking to “eliminate teacher-centered instruction” (Bunnag, 2000). I disagree strongly with this response. In fact, there are approaches to instruction that are highly effective in which the teacher teaches to the whole class. International research conducted over the past 25 years has led to a much clearer understanding of what constitutes effective whole class instruction. For the purpose of clarity, I will refer to the traditional approach described earlier as *teacher-centered instruction* and the whole class approach validated by research as *teacher-directed instruction*.

In *teacher-directed instruction*, instructors use specific *teacher-directed* strategies and techniques that are intentionally designed to engage students’ active participation and thinking. *Thus, despite its similar appearance to teacher-centered instruction, I refer to teacher-directed instruction as a learner-centered approach.* Research conducted across cultures has found that teachers can achieve powerful results when using *teacher-directed* instructional techniques with these intentions in mind. This even includes impressive results on goals such as higher order thinking and life-long learning.

Therefore, I while I agree that educational reform should focus on creating *learner-centered classrooms*, I would not limit this to a single approach to instruction. Let us next describe our vision of *learner-centered classrooms*.

#### What is a Learner-centered Classroom?

I have already drawn a picture of the traditional Thai classroom. In virtually all aspects, it is teacher-centered. Given new reform policies, it is reasonable to ask: “If Thai classrooms were to become *learner-centered*, just what would this look like?” Let us briefly sketch a picture of the classroom climate and instructional methods that might characterize a *learner-centered classroom*.

Classroom climate. The climate of a learner-centered classroom *invites* them to learn. A learner-centered classroom engages and uses students’ interests as the basis for motivating them to learn. In learner-centered classrooms students feel important and valued. This carries over to the development of learning goals. Students are encouraged to set personal learning goals in addition to those set in the curriculum. They pursue these goals in the context of the curriculum.

In order to be emotionally engaged in school, students must believe that what they are learning there is either interesting or valuable--and preferably, both. This does not mean that they must find every lesson, every assignment, and every bit of information communicated in class absolutely riveting. But in order to become and remain engaged in school, students must have some sense that what they are doing on a daily basis holds some value--that as a result of being engaged and exerting effort, they will acquire some bit of useful knowledge, learn an important skill, or grow in some way that is fulfilling, satisfying, or personally meaningful. (Steinberg, 1996, pp. 72-73)

The learning climate fosters high standards and expectations for students. Teachers believe that students can succeed and model that expectation in their interactions with students.

Finally, [in successful high schools] there was a sense of optimism about students' potential for learning. Throughout our discussions, teachers repeatedly expressed their conviction that, despite many students' discouraging record of failure, the right kind of environment and opportunities could stimulate the innate potential buried within each individual. Action on this belief . . . was best facilitated by the strategy of building on students' strengths rather than focusing too often on their deficits and weaknesses. (Wehlage et al., 1989, pp. 137-138)

A learner center classroom is also a caring classroom. Teachers establish a sense of trust and model caring for others. One highly successful American high school expressed its underlying belief in this type of environment by stating:

A humane, caring, and personalized school--place where all students [are] welcomed, [are] known well, and [are] heard and, consequently, a place where all students [feel] a stake in the institution, not simply in their own success--[is] central to fostering essential academic goals. Students learn to think best, to use their minds well, to try out ideas, to express their views, to interact in teams, and to absorb themselves in a dynamic learning process in an environment where they feel trusted, respected, and encouraged. (Mackin, 1996, p. 11)

Or expressed differently:

Students told us "the way teachers treat you as a student--or a person actually," counted more than any other factor in the school setting in determining their attachment to the school, their commitment to the school's goals and, by extension, the academic future they imagined for themselves. (McLaughlin, 1994, p. 9)

Instructional methods. In learner-centered schools, there is a wide variety of teaching methods in use by teachers. Teachers recognize that some students enjoy it more and learn better when learning actively with peers. Some students like having the opportunity to work independently from the teacher, sometimes alone and sometimes with peers. Teachers vary the approach to instruction based on students' needs and the learning goals of the class and the curriculum.

As one influential American scholar has noted:

The view that underpins the new paradigm for school reform, starts from the assumptions that students are not standardized and teaching is not routine...Far from following standardized instructional packages, teachers must base their judgments on knowledge of learning theory and pedagogy, of child development and cognition and of curriculum and assessment. They must then connect this knowledge to the understandings, dispositions, and conceptions that individual students bring with them to the classroom. (Darling-Hammond, 1997, pp. 46-47)

Thus in developing *learner-centered classrooms*, the Ministry's goal would *not* be to eliminate *teacher-directed instruction*. Rather the goal would be to ensure that all teachers are trained to use both *teacher-directed* and *student-centered* approaches competently.

*Teacher-directed instruction* generally begins with teacher input, often a lecture of some sort. During the input portion of the lesson, the teacher may demonstrate and/or model the relevant concepts and information. This input is followed by teacher-directed questioning of students and various forms of practice. The student role during a teacher-directed lesson is to observe, listen, practice, take notes, answer questions and ask questions.

In a well taught *teacher-directed* lesson, all students are actively engaged and thinking. The teacher uses specific questioning strategies to ensure active participation as well as to check for student understanding. Students are *not* passive.

Despite what I have heard from some teachers who have attended workshops on *student-centered learning*, there are many varieties. These include guided inquiry, experimental inquiry, problem-based learning, project-based learning, peer assisted learning, cooperative group learning and more. What is common to these approaches is the emphasis on students creating meaning out of the material to be learning. These are known as constructivist approaches to teaching and learning. Students assume greater responsibility for actively engaging the material but through a variety of different ways.

Even in a *learner-centered classroom*, the teacher remains the key decision-maker. As the key decision-maker, the teacher must begin by determining first the learning goals and second which teaching approach to use. In this short article I cannot elaborate on this issue at length. I would note, however, that *teacher-directed* approaches to instruction are generally best suited when the goal is for students to acquire an organized body of knowledge and to develop specific intellectual skills. *Student-centered* learning is more effective at developing deeper understanding of ideas and values and at learning how to apply knowledge. Understanding when as well as how to use these instructional approaches is an important part of the teacher's role as an instructional decision-maker.

#### Creating a Learner-centered Educational System

*I support the Ministry of Education's use of the term – the learner-centered instruction – for the very reason that Thai schools are seldom organized with this as a goal.* In making this statement I do not mean to criticize teachers and principals who work hard to provide opportunities for Thai students. Rather I believe strongly that the system of education in which Thai students, teachers, and administrators operate has never been designed with student learning and social development as the primary goal. Consequently, teachers and principals – and especially students – have had to work doubly hard to achieve their learning goals.

Thai educators should ask themselves: "In my school who are considered the most important people?" The answer will undoubtedly be, "The principal, then the teachers, then parents and lastly the students."

Educators throughout the system can ask themselves: "When decisions are made what factors are considered most important?" I believe that in most cases the answer will *not* be the needs of the students. Again, I emphasize that no individuals are to blame for this. It is a

characteristic of the entire educational system to elevate the needs of the system and its administration above the needs of learners.

Thai educators may rightly ask if it is different in other countries? Indeed, it is true that making the needs of students the center of educational decisions is a challenge in all countries. Yet, in Thailand this is a special challenge.

The highly differentiated cultural system of hierarchical status that pervades the educational bureaucracy is a foundation characteristic of Thai society. Norms of *greng jai*, *greng glua*, *hai kiat* are not unique to the educational system. However, when placed in the context of the educational bureaucracy, they create an environment in which satisfying the needs and desires of adults -- *puyai* -- naturally comes before the needs of the children.

Therefore, I find it especially fitting that Thai policymakers have selected *learning where the student* is important (i.e., learner-centered instruction) as a replacement for *student-centered learning* in the latest round of educational reform. There are several reasons why I applaud this decision.

1. If I seek to create *learner-centered classrooms*, this suggests that there is not necessarily one best way to teach. Instead, teaching and learning decisions should be based on the needs of the students.
2. If I seek *learner-centered classrooms*, then I will avoid trying to impose a standard approach to teaching all students in all schools.
3. If I seek *learner-centered classrooms*, not only the teacher but also the principal and system administrators must change their orientation, attitudes and behaviors.
4. This terminology identifies a goal that is worth fighting for and is broad enough that there is the chance of creating a shared vision of the Thai classroom of the future.
5. In contrast, if policymakers simply mandate all teachers to implement *student-centered* learning it works against their goal of creating a more professional teaching staff.

Thus, I do *not* agree with policymakers who would mandate *student-centered* instructional methods. These methods, while useful, comprise only one set of tools that teaching professionals must master. I believe that both *teacher-directed* instruction and *student-centered* learning have their place in classrooms. While *student-centered* learning can assist students in reaching certain “new” educational goals, *teacher-directed* techniques have been proven effective for achieving others. Thus, the issues to consider are when and how to use these approaches in combination to their greatest effect.

Also central to creating *learner-centered* classrooms is the issue of classroom climate. Students learn within a social-cultural setting that I call “the classroom.” The teacher is the most important person in determining the climate of expectations, the standards of behavior and the feeling that students will have when they enter that classroom. However, changing the norms of Thai classrooms will only take place gradually along with the larger cultural norms of the society.

Research confirms that it requires three to five years to change the instructional behaviors of teachers even under the best conditions. Moreover, the misalignment between the cultural assumptions embedded in the current crop of policy reforms and Thai culture, make

implementation here even more complex than usual. As I have emphasized, successful movement towards these types of educational practices will also depend upon changes in the larger society outside of Thai schools.

### Recommendations

Given these beliefs, I assert that a “middle way” strategy for reform makes the most sense in the Thai context. This leads to the following recommendations:

- I recommend that Thai teachers learn to transform their current *teacher-centered* instructional approaches into skillful use of *teacher-directed* instructional strategies that focus on engaging students’ active participation and thinking. This strategy will take less time and yield greater short-term results than trying to move all teachers towards *student-centered learning* all at once. Moreover, in the long term, professionally competent teachers should have proficiency in both general approaches to teaching and learning.
- At the same time, I believe that teachers can be introduced to *student-centered learning* strategies. Indeed teachers who are especially eager to learn these approaches can proceed quickly. However, for the majority of teachers, adaptation to *student-centered learning* approaches will take longer and will need to be introduced more gradually.
- In both instances, the Ministry of Education must make use of its knowledge concerning the conditions necessary to bring about real change. This knowledge about educational change is based on its own model projects (e.g., Ministry of Education, 1997a, 1997b). This means creating a strategy that is based on developing a shared vision of the change among Thai educators and the public, building support among key stakeholders, providing quality training to teachers, and ensuring that teachers have access to follow-up support in their schools.

Thus, I argue for a slower, but more systematic and supportive strategy for reform. *Concerning the third point, I assert that to proceed without providing what the Ministry knows is required to bring about successful change is immoral.* It is asking educators to engage in an effort that I know in advance will not achieve its goals. The Ministry may claim that the necessary funds are not available to engage in a fully-funded reform effort. If that is really the case, then the Ministry has not done its job in marshalling the support of the public and the politicians.

In closing I would note that *learner-centered* classrooms exist within schools and a school system. *Few teachers will be able to create and sustain learner-centered classrooms unless they are working in a school and an educational system that shares and supports this vision.* Therefore, I also wish to emphasize the limits of what any one teacher can do on their own.

Experience abroad finds that successful school reform must include a wide range of stakeholders. Reform must be a societal effort. Ultimately, school reform must reshape the:

- role of school principals (and teachers) in creating *learner-centered* schools,
- role of parents in creating communities that support learning in and out of school;
- corporate sector’s responsibility to collaborate and support learning in and out of schools;
- development of professional communities among Thai educators that provide leadership in educational reform;

- role of system administrators and policymakers in creating a *learner-centered* educational system.

In closing I suggest the value of viewing educational reform as a “quest”. A quest is journey towards a destination whose importance and value is undeniable, but which may or may not be reached in the near future. In the words of the famous song, the Impossible Dream:

You spoke of the dream and of the quest,  
How you must fight, and how it doesn't  
matter if you win or lose if only you follow the quest.

To dream the impossible dream,  
To fight the unbeatable foe,  
To bear with unbearable sorrow,  
To run where the brave dare not go.

To right the unrightable wrong,  
To love pure and chaste from afar,  
To try when your arms are too weary,  
To reach the unreachable star.

To try though you're wayworn and weary,  
Though you know it's impossibly high,  
To live with your heart climbing upward,  
To reach to the unattainable star.

Viewing educational reform as a quest reasserts the moral authority of education and its role in national development. It also reminds the public of the importance of teachers. Finally it places policy reform in a longer-term perspective in which people remain at the heart of the educational enterprise.

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