

The Second International Forum on Education Reform
: Key Factors in Effective Implementation of
Education Standard and Quality Assurance
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Politics are the Art of acquisition, retention and utilization of power. Most societies, Thailand included, are full of professional politicians who are skilled in the first two elements, acquiring and holding on to power, but are clueless or hopelessly inept on how to use power for the benefits of society as a whole—especially how to use power to build foundations for sustainable developments and to enhance the nation’s long term competitive capability.

Every couple of decades or so, some political accidents will bring on some exceptional personalities who because of technical competence, professional integrity and non-partisan implementation of social and economic policies would establish a benchmark of how power could be utilized for the greatest good. Real and meaningful reforms generally happened during those rare occasions.

Education is the linchpin of sustainable developments and competitive capability. No matter how great natural or human resources a nation may possess, without an appropriate system of education, those resources can never be leveraged to lift that nation out of poverty, ignorance and inequity.

Thailand has been blessed by the passage of 2 landmark legislations. The first is the Constitution of 1997, in which all future governments are directed to provide all children in Thailand with free education for 12 years. It was also written that such free education must be of good quality and fairly distributed all over the country. The second is the National Education Act of

1999 which stipulated all kinds of reforms designed to leverage the Thai educational standards to be on par with most middle-income countries. After all, Thailand has been consistently spending more than 4% of her GDP on education- higher than Singapore and only trails Malaysia by a few decimal points. Surely, the parents of 15 million Thai children in our schools and colleges have the right expect a reasonable standard of education for these future leaders and citizens of our nations.

However, there were many disturbing signs from various research results which strongly indicated that we have serious problems with the quality of our education.

For over 10 years, The International Institute of Management Development or IMD in Lausanne, Switzerland has been conducted researches on World Competitiveness for 49 countries utilizing over 280 indicators. The Yearbook for 2002 was quite a revelation. In overall competitiveness, Thailand ranked 34 as compared to 26 for Malaysia and 5 for Singapore. On economic performance Thailand came 22nd as compared to 25th for Malaysia and 15th for Singapore. But on education Thailand's rank was down to 41 compared to Malaysia's 34 and Singapore's 12. Don't forget that this ranking is world-wide and among 49 countries.

Each year over 1 million Thais are enrolled in Universities and other tertiary institutions, after graduation, many of them would seek to go abroad for further studies. For this, most of them are required to take the TOEFL test. A recent study conducted by Thai University professors revealed that the average TOEFL score over 4 years when compared to our Asian neighbors including Singapore, The Philippine, Malaysia, Indonesia, Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, Thai college graduates came 8th beating Laos by only 2 points. Number 1, 2 and 3 are-as expected- Singapore, The

Philippine and Malaysia. Even Indonesia came 4th beating the Thai average score by 20 points. Thai students normally have English lessons as a compulsory 2nd language for 6 years in secondary school and another 4 years in college. If this is the best they can do, our educational system clearly needs an overhaul.

The National Education Act of 1999 envisaged wholesale reforms in 6 major areas ranging from restructuring of the education establishments to technology deployments, but I would just like to touch upon 3 aspects which will have critical implications on the issues of the day. These are Education Standards and Quality Assessment, the Student-centered Philosophy and the revitalization of the Teaching Profession.

On Education Standards and Quality Assessment, Thailand had a stroke of luck, the edict which created an independent public agency to carry out this task was passed and the organization formed before reactionary forces had time to gather momentum. It now remains for the Office of the National Education Standards and Quality Assessment or ONESQA to prove its mettle by auditing the quality of education in 45,000 schools and about 800 institutions of Tertiary Education within the next 5 years. After the end of that period, if the assessments have been conducted successfully and honestly as its acronym, HONEST KA, implies, we should be in a position to truly understand where we are in the Quality of Education game, for the first time in several decades. The Government, at that time, can then decide how to repair the weakness and fortify the strong points and determine whether the disparity of quality among schools and universities are within tolerable limits or if something has to be done.

The other two issues are really outside my area of responsibility, but they are interlinked and whether and how soon real reforms can be

successfully undertaken will have critical bearing on the quality of education and, indeed, the quality of future leaders and citizens of this country. Firstly, we must ask whether the concept of Student-centered education can be successfully implanted in our society. Obviously, everybody connected with education certainly paid Lip Service, to this philosophy, but I wonder how many people really understand the concept – and the revolutionary effects and it will have on the Learning-Teaching Process, on Curricular Design, on Classroom and School Architecture, on the resources to be mobilized and most crucial – on the essential paradigm shift for Teachers.

Secondly, if the first is to be successfully carried out, there has to be a massive reorganization of Teacher Training. Indeed, if the Powers – That – Be are serious about Education Reforms and genuinely care about the quality of future generations of Thais, the Teaching Profession will have to be revamped in such a way, that a teacher's status will be comparable to those higher professional callings such as doctors, lawyers, architects & engineers.

The first and second issues are heavily interlinked. If you wish to change the learning process from teacher-centered or rote-learning to child-centered by stimulating and guiding each child to develop his or her own potentials to the full, you have to change the role of the teacher from that of an omniscient guru to that of a coach. In other words, teachers must agree and be willing and able to transform their roles from of Maharishi or Fidel Castro to those of Sir Alex Ferguson of Manchester United or Butch Harmon-the coach of Tiger Woods. Not a bad prospect really, but a gut-wrenching change, nonetheless.

Why do I bring this up? Because, unlike the quality assurance aspect. These two issues are not settled yet. Legislation on Teachers' Training' Council which will supervise the quality and conducts of teachers are still

being hotly debated in our parliament. On these and other related issues, such as the number and composition of School Districts, the conservative and reactionary elements, who wish to maintain the status quo or at least to delay effective change for as long as possible are gaining an upper hand. So you are forewarned that meaningful Education Reforms will not be easy to implement, in this or any other comparable society.

Even with every child's right guaranteed by the Constitution and a comprehensive Master Plan enacted as a National Education Act, to make them work means that those who favour change – be they educators, teachers or parents must be prepared to fight every inch of the way against vested interests who will lose out if changes occur.

Do not underestimate their resilience and ability to make mischiefs. These people have no principles, beliefs or commitments to a worthy cause. You cannot expect the fat, cats and the crony capitalists to develop social conscience. It is up to us and those who subscribed to the core belief that every child has an inalienable right to a quality education to continue the struggles towards that goal, no matter how long it takes. Only with a strong commitment to that core belief, with patience and perseverance, can we ensure that the 15 million children in the Thai education system and many million to come, will one day get what they deserve – a quality education that will equip them to compete on the world stage.

Finally, let me tell you a story which should highlight the importance of the Student-Centered learning process and the difference between rote-learning and coaching.

Over 2,500 years ago in the city of Rajakrueh, there lived 2 brothers who were raised by their maternal grandfather. Grand-dad was a millionaire and was fond of going to the Temple to listen to the Buddha's sermons. The

elder brothers, Maha Bantok, who was much older, usually accompanied the grandfather. And in time, he asked for permission to be ordained as a monk. Because of his great intellect, Maha Bantok soon achieved enlightenment and became an Orahant. After a while, he wanted his brother Julla Bantok to attain the same state of grace and persuaded his grandfather to allow Julla Bantok to be ordained. Maha Bantok instructed his little brother to memorise 4 lines of verses. For 4 long months, Julla Bantok tried, but failed to learn the 4 lines of verses.

In exasperation, Maha Bantok asked his little brother to leave the monkhood. Early in the morning of the day that he was due to disrobe, Julla Bantok accidentally ran into the Buddha, who told him not to leave and gave him a piece of white cloth and a simple chant. Rubbing the white cloth repeatedly and chanting the simple mantra. Julla Bantok managed to attain the final stage of enlightenment and became an Orahant before noon of the day, and later was able to give a brilliant sermon in front of the Buddha, his elder brother and 500 other monks.

So, as you can see, the concept of Student-Centred Learning and the role of a Teacher as a Coach are over 2,500 years old. If the concept and the methodology worked well then, there is no reason to doubt their effectiveness today.