

## **School council involvement in Thai primary schools**

Darunee Jumpatong

### **Introduction**

Public education has made a major contribution to the well-being of society and it continues to do so through a century of social transformation (Caldwell and Hayward, 1998). Even though there have been some flaws in schooling, schools are the grass-root organisations which play a very important role in the development of individuals and society. Currently, it is acknowledged that a single school in involved of its own decision-making will provide better quality education than a school run by a centralised bureaucracy (Levacic, 1995). The basic assumption is that to establish the smaller, more locally rooted schools with self-managed practices in their governance, schools will become more accountable and more efficient, as well as providing better arrangements for access and provisions responsive to the needs of the local community. As a consequence, the introduction of the self-managing school in the public sector is a significant movement for current school reform (Caldwell and Hayward, 1998). A growing recognition of the contribution to be made through school councils is consistent with the trend towards devolved systems. Educational reform, as it has emerged in many countries including Thailand, has moved to respond to such trend.

The fundamental theory adopted in this study is the theory of decentralisation. The major assumption is that decentralisation brings public services closer to the people, who have opportunities to participate more actively in decision-making processes about local policies and activities than in centrally decided ones. The service then become more responsive to and is tailored for different needs of different localities. This parallels that of participatory development by encouraging people's participation in the whole development processes. More effective and sustainable development outcomes can be ensured, because people feel more ownership of activities in which they are participating. In this process, government, school, and community have respective roles to play. Instead of one controlling others, a partnership is required. Thus, a delicate balance between top-down and bottom-up communication and approaches needs to be sought (Saito, 2001).

In this regard, a school council has an essential role to play in schooling. The key responsibility of school councils should be to ensure that the student is the central focus of the system, to strengthen the capacity of the school to manage its own affairs, and to express the character and needs of its local community within the framework of Government policy (The Ministerial Working Party, 2000).

### **In the Context of Thailand**

Thailand, due to the new constitution of 1997, has begun to reform its educational structure and administrative system. In addition, Thailand faced the major problem of economic crisis in 1997. Since those years, there has been public criticism of the Thai educational system due to these characteristics: the centralised and ineffective system, the low level of participation of the public, and the irresponsiveness to local needs. A more decentralised educational system is the urgent need of the society (Thai Farmer Bank, 1996). The self-managing school, therefore, is a major concept introduced to the system where schools should be more self-managed in order to adjust their functions catching up with the changing environment and by being more accountable. Three major kinds of functions have been decentralised to schools: curriculum and instruction, personnel management, and resource management. In response to this, the national budgetary system has been changed from the planning and programming budget system to performance-based budgeting where the budget is allocated in a lump sum to schools. Consequently, schools have more flexibility. As a result, one strategy in response to those changes is that community should play important roles in schooling through the establishment of school councils.

In rural Thai communities there is a strong reservoir of goodwill and support for schools. Parents see a school as an opportunity for their children to gain skills needed to move from the agricultural sector to other kinds of employment. Communities are proud to have a primary or secondary school in their community (or vicinity). Wheeler et al (1997) notes that status barrier exists between schools and communities. Community members view teachers and administrators as having knowledge superior to their own and they show considerable respect to school officials. There is a reluctance to become involved in or attempt to assert influence over classroom or curricular matters, although community members can be counted upon to provide financial and in-kind support for schools and to participate in celebrations and holiday

events. This status barrier not only limits parental involvement to more symbolic participation, but also serves to devalue indigenous knowledge held by community members (Wheeler et al, 1997). Hallinger and Kantamara (2001) note that due to the highly collectivist nature of Thai culture, school staff are more likely to ‘move in the direction of change’ as a group than as individuals. This shapes the context for school improvement by locating change in the social group somewhat more than within individuals.

In the past, there had been a ministry order in 1981 stating that every school should establish a school council to function as an advisory unit. It is noted that the school council had limited influence on schooling. With recognition of those results, in 1996, the central government encouraged all schools to establish their own councils which are advisory units and involved in decision-making in schooling. However, many studies show that those school councils placed more emphasis on supportive functions rather than involvement in decision-making (Kosum, 1999).

In 1997, the new Constitution of the country was enacted which gives the emphasis on community participation in education. In 1999, the Ministry of Education again reviewed the content of the ministry order to be responsive to the Constitution. It is recommended that ‘the basic education school council’ should be established in every school. The council, of 7-15 members, is to be comprised of the representatives of parents, teachers, community leaders, alumni, and the school principal who is assigned to be the secretary of the council. This council is supposed to be functioned in the areas of: a) the formulation of school planning and policy; b) the approval of annual school planning; c) the approval of school curriculum; d) the monitoring and control of the school implementation according to the plan; e) the promotion of recruitment to all school aged children; f) the encouragement to protect children’s rights: the talents, the disabilities, and the under-privileges; g) the participation in schooling in three areas: educational management, financial management, personnel management; h) the mobilization of educational resources, the external expertise, as well as indigenous knowledge to fulfill the student development. I) the promotion of the school and community relation. J) the approval of the annual school report. Kosum (1999) qualitatively investigates the community participation in schooling in basic education of Thailand within the former scheme of the ministerial policy. The

study finds that the meaning and areas of community participation in schooling are directly effected by the conditions of the community context: economic, social, politic, culture, and sense of belonging of the community, and school responsiveness. In this sense, the government policy of community participation in schooling has no direct effect to the community participation in practice. The current characteristic of community participation in Thailand is a lack of equity. It depends upon the power and resources of some people: the more power and resources people own, the more they are involved. However, the school council members as well have had significant concern in communication among people in the community about schooling. Kosum (1999) suggests that community participation in education in Thailand is a good initiative. Further development of this issue to effect better schooling is that the school can provide education to be responsive to the local needs and able to promote the communal self-reliance.

### **Areas of School Self-Management**

The decentralisation of responsibility to schools for various aspects of educational management has become the trend in contemporary society. In many developed countries, self-management, or school-based management as it is called in the United States, has emerged as a major element in a series of related reforms in comprehensive restructuring of education. The nature of self-managing schools requires increased levels of staff and parental participation (Evan, 1993) and community involvement (Murphy, 1997) in decision making related to the allocation of resources within a centrally-determined framework of goals, policies, standards and accountabilities (Caldwell 1998).

It is reported (Ministerial Working Party, 2000) that self-managing schools as they have evolved in Victoria, Australia, over time have been a successful innovation and constitute the corner stone of the next stage of development. Victorian public schools are guaranteed a high degree of flexibility within a broad policy framework set by the government. As a result of the introduction of self-management, the roles and responsibilities of school councils have developed very significantly. They are the local pivot of enhanced self-management in which the different needs, interests and responsibilities are reconciled and supervised, and an essential support base and point of accountability for school management and leadership is desired.

In a self-managing school the locus of decision making is delegated to the school which is empowered to make decisions which fall within three areas: curriculum and instruction, personnel management, and educational resources and the budget (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1995).

### 1. Curriculum and Instruction

In the future world, global trends mean ever greater mingling of cultures and thus learning to live together, cultural identity and inter-culturality will become priority issues. Moreover, the most acute crisis facing many countries is that of social cohesion, a crisis fuelled by growing inequality, poverty and exclusion, and a sense of social crisis compounded by a moral crisis and the spread of violence and crime. Therefore, in every country, one of the prime functions of public education has been that of building a social cohesive society (Power, 2000). It is noted that, within a school-based management system, schools have nearly total authority over curriculum matters (Murphy, 1997). Curriculum and standards schemes shall be regarded as frameworks rather than prescriptions, and every attempt will be made to balance time and effort in key learning areas to reflect school needs and priorities, especially for, but not limited to, programs in literacy and numeracy (Caldwell, 1998). In doing so, school-based curriculum means that each school staff decides what teaching materials are to be used, as well as the specific pedagogical techniques that are to be emphasised (Murphy, 1997). In this sense, Cairney (2000) notes that there is much to be learned about how schools can be more responsive to cultural diversity and the uneven spread of resources within and across communities. The big challenge is to transform schools into sites for learning that are far more responsive to the social and cultural diversity of the communities that they serve.

### 2. Personnel Management

There is a strong association between the knowledge and skills of staff and learning outcomes for students, so schools need to place a high priority on staff selection and professional development to ensure that knowledge and skills are consistent with professional capacities to help ensure these outcomes (Caldwell, 1998). A feature of staff selection and professional development will be the building of high performing teams whose work is needs-based and data-driven, underpinned by a culture that

values quality, effectiveness, equity and efficiency (Caldwell, 1998). First, closely connected to budgetary discretion is site-based control over the defining of hiring of staff. In the least aggressive model of school-based management, the allocation of teaching positions is determined at the central level. Teachers and administrators interview candidates, make the final choice, and pass their selection back to the district. That is teachers are no longer sent to the school from the central office. However, under more comprehensive models of site-based control, the allocation of professional positions is not predetermined. While schools are still free to select personnel, they also have the option of using funds budgeted for teachers for other purposes responsive to their needs or even hire two or more para-professionals (Murphy, 1997).

Second, there is often a close relationship between teacher development and school change (Ming, 2001). The teacher's role is a very important variable in the determination of school success. It is a relationship where successful change in school depends much on continuous teacher development (Ming, 2001) that teacher's role should change (Bollen, 1996). Yet, the situation of teacher development today has come to a point where its effectiveness depends not so much on the formal training programs organised by the universities and educational authorities, but on whether a school can engage teachers in every learning opportunity within the workplace (Ming, 2001). Bollen (1996) notes that we need improvement strategies that will mould teachers' cultures and behaviours in such a way that pupil behaviour will change.

However, there is a controversial issue regarding the benefit of teachers to be involved in participation. Dimmock (1993) refers to the study of Chapman (1988) that increased teacher participation may generate greater commitment to curriculum policy decisions, which may improve educational outcomes. Participation seems to result in increased trust between senior management and teachers. It is possible that school-based management, in so far as it facilitates a more participative school environment, could lead to an increased sense of control over school activities for teachers and principals and a greater sense of individual contribution to the school. A more participative school environment may enhance the sense of personal efficacy felt by principals and teachers that could be shown to facilitate adaptive behaviour, promote constructive behaviour change, and lead to improved performance. As a result, it seems that the school organisation has been developed as a community. Moreover,

Ming (2001) notes that the concept of community is an antithesis of the bureaucratic organisation. A community differs from a bureaucratic organisation in that school administrators do not rely on external control to force people to work. Instead, they rely on norms, purposes, values, professional socialisation, collegiality, and natural interdependence. However, the study of OECD finds no link between participation and improved teacher practice. Indeed, participation may detract from teaching performance by distracting teachers from their classroom duties (Ainley and McKenzie, 2000).

### 3. Resource and Financial Management

Resources are usually thought of as a set of materials available for purposeful use. The task of resource management is concerned accordingly with the techniques and processes necessary to ensure the effective deployment of finite available resources (Strain, 1990).

Decentralised budgeting often means the allocation of funds to the school in a lump sum rather than for predetermined categories of expenditures. This allows the school to determine how funds will be employed. The ability to roll over unspent money is the final element of site-based control of funds. When budget authority is decentralised, schools are able to carry over budget surpluses (Murphy, 1997). However, Strain (1990) notes that greater autonomy in financial matters has brought with it a requirement for greater accountability. Dimmock (1993) refers to Brown's study (1990) that there is evidence that school-based management fosters more planning by the principal and the school, and that more resources are available at the school level to align with those plans. Rubenstein (1997), analyses the linkages between budgeting processes and spending patterns, reveals that schools exhibiting rational decision-making tend to spend a higher proportion of their budgets on instruction. Moreover, there is some evidence that increased resources are channelled to activities thought to be linked with learning outcomes, such as professional development and textbooks (Dimmock, 1993).

Although there might be ill-conceived school-based management plans can have a negative as well as positive impact on a school system. However, it should be noted that there will be no 'one best way' as far as models for self-management are

concerned; each school must design its own, base on situational factors that include mission and vision (Caldwell, 1998). So while there is a general international trend to decentralisation of management decisions to the school level, there are some quite significant differences in how the elements are configured (Levecic, 1995). Thus, in studying the effects of the implementation of self-managing school in any one country, it is important to assess the relative contribution of the different elements of its version. Moreover, the study of Hallinger and Kantamara (2001) to understand elements of successful school improvement in Thailand suggests that an emerging challenge for scholars and practitioners in school improvement is to generate, interpret and balance knowledge gained from global and indigenous sources.

### **Preliminary Findings**

This study aims to investigate the school council involvement in the context of self-managing school in Thailand. The focus of study is the practice of how school councils become involved with the package of arrangements that constitute the framework within which teaching and learning occurs: curriculum and instruction, resource and financial management, and personnel management. It is a qualitative-based research with a case study approach. The case studies are two ‘distinctive’ pilot schools in the ‘school-designed curriculum scheme and the PBB Project’ of the Ministry of Education, Thailand. Although the study is not yet completed, preliminary findings from field work in the schools can be reported:

1. The involvement of the school council in primary schools is relatively weak. Even though the council recognises the need to get involved in schooling, it is also acknowledged that most of the council members are poorly educated. As a result, they cannot be profoundly involved in the school-designed curriculum and instruction, school plans and budgeting, and school personnel management. The council still works as an advisory rather than a decision making unit. The school principal and the staff, thus, are the most influential actors in those three areas of school management.

2. The school staff does not ensure the achievement of school-designed curriculum meets the national standards. The staff is satisfied with its responsiveness to the community needs. However, the local community also places the emphasis on the improvement in academic achievement, particularly in Thai, math, and English.

3. There is a good sign in the allocation of lump sum budgeting of the pilot project of PBB. The schools engage in rational budgeting processes by attempting to link spending decisions to school goals.

4. The most significant problem of school management is the shortage of teachers. It is the shortage of both in number of teachers and in specialization of specific areas of teaching, in Science and English, for instance. Due to this shortage, the school staff has perceived that it is overwhelmed with burdens.

5. The school principals have a strong and positive attitude towards the concept of school self-management. The principals are supportive of the need for a system of accountability. The faults of the previous system have been fully recognised.

6. The school council members work with trust and respect. Members do not feel there are status barriers. However, the school council improvement measures are required. They desire more information, meetings, or even talks with the schools in order that mutual understanding is better developed.

In the two schools studied it was found that the school councils could not play important role of maintaining checks and balances within the system. Therefore, there is an urgent need for the Thai policy makers to place more emphasis on this movement that could make a significant contribution to the system.

## References

- Bollen, R. (1996). School Effectiveness and School Improvement: the Intellectual and Policy Context. In D. Reynolds, R. Bollen, B. Creemers, D. Hopkins, L. Stoll and N. Lagerweij. Making Good School. London: Routledge.
- Cairney, T.H. (2000). Beyond the Classroom Walls: the rediscovery of the family and community as partners in education. Educational Review. Vol. 52 No.2 (pp.163-174).
- Caldwell. B.J. (1998). The Self-managing Schools and Improved Learning Outcomes. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Dimmock, C. (1993). School-based Management and Linkage with the Curriculum. In C. Dimmock (Ed.) School-based Management and School Effectiveness. London: Routledge.
- Evans, G.C. (1993). A Values Perspective on School-based Management. In C. Dimmock. School-based Management and School Effectiveness .(pp. 94-113). London: Routledge.
- Hallinger and Kantamara (2001). Learning to Lead Global Changes in Local Cultures-Designing a Computer-based Simulation for Thai School Leaders. Journal of Educational Administration. Vol. 39 , 2001.
- Kosum, Sirikarn. (1999). Community Participation and Schooling for Basic Education Provision. Ph.D. Thesis. Srinakarintaraviroj University, Bangkok.
- Levacic, R. (1995). Local Management of Schools. Buckinham: Open University Press.
- Murphy, C.M. (1995). The school council as an agent of instructional change: a comparative case study (site-based, decision making). Unpublished EDD thesis. University of North Texas.
- Ming, F.T.W. (2001). Book Review of Profound Improvement: Building Capacity for a Learning Community by C. Mitchell and L.Sackney. Journal of Educational Administration. Vol 39, No. 4 pp. 394-398.
- North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (1993). Decentralization: Why, How, and Toward What Ends? [www.ncrel.org/](http://www.ncrel.org/) (2/02/02).
- Power, C.N. (2000). Global Trends in Education. International Education Journal, Vol.1 No.3.

- Rubenstein, R.H. (1997). School-level budgeting and resource allocation in the Chicago Public Schools: Processes and results. Unpublished PhD thesis. New York University.
- Saito, F. (2001). Decentralisation Theories Revisited: Lesson form Uganda. Ryokoku RISS Bulletin, No. 31 March 2001.
- Strain, M. (1990). Resource Management in Schools: Some Conceptual and Practicel Consideration. In I. Cave and C. Wilkinson (Eds.), Local Management of Schools (pp. 15-30). London: Routledge.
- Thai Farmers Bank Public Company Limited (1996). Thai Education in the Era of Globalization: Vision of a Learning Society. Copied Report.
- The Ministerial Working Party. (2000). Public Education: the Next Generation. Melbourne: Department of Education, Employment and Training, Victoria.
- Wheeler, C.W., Namfa, B., Duangsa, P., (1997) Linking School Change to Community Participation in Social Forestry: a Guided innovation in Thailand. In D.W. Chapman et.al. (Eds.), From Planning to Action: Government Initiatives for Improving School-level Practice.