

# The Implementation of the Learning Reform Policy: Case Studies of Public Secondary Schools in Thailand

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*Abstract:* This paper presents the implementation of the learning reform policy in two public secondary schools in Thailand. The data obtained from each school's documents, four-week participant observation, and interviews during their first semester of education year 2001. The implementation of both schools is incomparable because they are in different context—different location, politics, leadership, and culture, and they have been doing different pace of implementation. Nonetheless, the two schools have many conditions alike. They both are encountering similar problems, and receiving similar support due to central agencies including the workload problem, the curricular problem, the financial and personnel inadequacy, the policy problem—in production, in conveyance, and in evaluation, the document provision support. Also, there are similar unanticipated outcomes. The implementation awakens teachers but discourages them owing to the increasing amount of work. The implementation also allows students more chances to intellectually develop.

## Introduction

Education reform is undeniably a global phenomenon. In Thailand, education reform emerged officially with the National Education Bill, which was proclaimed in 1999. The Bill was divided into nine chapters. The chapter on learning reform is “regarded as being at the heart of the educational reform” (Sub-Committees on Learning Reform of the National Education Commission, 2000). According to the Bill, all educational agencies have to implement this policy. Educational ministries as well as their agents have to plan and provide sufficient resources in order to support implementation at the institutional level. Educational institutions have to support individual teachers as they apply the learner-centered approach to their classes.

How public secondary schools have implemented this policy is an area of my interest. To obtain the answer, the research has been conducted. Two public secondary schools, one in Bangkok and the other in a remote area of a province of Thailand, and some policy people from the central as well as provincial agencies, as necessary, were requested for participation in the research. Only findings of the two schools are presented in this paper.

The findings derive from three qualitative research approaches—document analysis, participant observation, and interviews. They were conducted in both schools during their first semester of the education year 2001. The observation was conducted in four-week period. At the last week, two key administrators and five extreme case teachers were interviewed. Data gained from these procedures are categorised in relation to purposes, why staff thought the implementation was important; process, any support for and obstacles acting against the implementation; and outcomes, details of the implementation as well as other unanticipated impacts of the implementation of the school and its staff.

The following paragraphs mention brief description of each school's profile. Then findings from both schools' implementation are presented due to the analysis themes: purposes, process, and outcomes. The school in a province will be entitled as Medtaa School whilst the one in Bangkok will be named as Karunaa School.

### School Profiles

#### **Medtaa School ('M' School)**

Medtaa School is the only secondary school situated in a subdivision of a province in central Thailand. It provides education in lower and higher secondary level as well as vocational classes. The school contains approximately one thousand students and about thirty teachers. Its students come from nearby districts, sometimes nearby subdivisions. They are not selected. The relationship between the principal and teachers is formal and distant. Teachers unconditionally follow the administrator's authority. Among teachers, overall relationship seems cooperative. Despite being in different subject departments, they help each other, especially for activities that involves the school's reputation. Furthermore, when there is a conflict, the two parties tend to discuss a problem then find a remedy. The school is located in a community that has intense political environments, and is rural poor.

#### **Karunaa School ('K' School)**

Karunaa School is located in a metropolitan district of Bangkok. It provides, as well, both lower and higher secondary education. The school contains more than a hundred staff including over ten facility helpers, and approximately two thousand students. The relationship between the principal and teachers is informal but still distant. The administrators' authority here is not as sacred as in Medtaa School—teachers are more confident and powerful. Among teachers, overall relationship is segmented. When misunderstanding or problems occur, there is no discussion among groups. Some groups dislike others, and show it vividly. The community that the school serves is the urban poor community. Families live in slums.

### Findings

#### **Findings in Medtaa School**

##### Purposes

Most teachers specify two reasons for their own implementation. The first, figured as the most prominent reason, is the pressure to abide by the National Education Bill which specifically relates to their own survival in the external quality assurance mechanism. The second is the staff belief in the policy's positive impact on students.

##### Process

##### *Supportive features*

Supportive factors can be categorized into external and internal ones. External supportive factors are those originating from three sources—the central agencies, from two agencies within the province: the provincial agency and *Sahawidthayaakhed* (a cluster of schools nearby, divided by the Department of General Education), and from the community. Internal supportive factors are those originating by the school administration, and by teachers.

Support from the central agencies can be divided into psychological support and academic support. The psychological support, which is in the form of a commitment to the immediate implementation of the policy, is provided by the leading educational authorities up to the Prime Minister. The academic support is from the two educational agencies—the Office of National Education Commission, and the Department of General Education. They both provide mostly books, also visiting lecturers and some videotapes regarding the education reform policy.

There is also support from two local agencies: the provincial agency (the official unit, its staff assigned by the Department of General Education), and the smallest and closest agency to the school: *Sahawidthayaakhed* (the school groups consisted of local public secondary schools, assigned by the Department of General Education, yet operated by its members' staff). Support from both agencies is in a form of professional development, particularly training. The provincial agency provides training of '*Khruu Kaennam*' (spearhead teachers) regarding to the project initiated by the Department of General Education and set up by the regional superintendent office. This training provides practical knowledge of teaching and action research

Despite the community's poor condition, two kinds of support are provided from the community. The first is the community helps for the school publicity, particularly to local politicians who have power and money to provide the school basic facilities. The second is financial support from particular local politicians. However, to gain this support from these politicians needs personal relationship.

Internal elements of the school that support its own implementation are from its administration, and in some cases teachers. Administrative support is initiated mostly by the academic division. However, some support is created in the school administration system, and some even conveyed directly from the principal.

Teachers also provide positive elements towards the implementation of the instructional reform policy. The support is in the form of peer support to reinforce their colleagues who although are implementing the policy, feel discouraged by some obstacles they have encountered. The reinforcement includes discussions, consolation, even showing interest to follow their peers' teaching style.

#### *Obstructive features*

The negative features are categorized into external elements (from the central, from the community), and internal ones (the administration, individual teachers, and students). The problems from the central agencies are divided into one involves resources provision, and the other involves the policy itself. Problems involving resources provision are the one due to the central policy of limitation of number of personnel, and insufficient funds for professional development. Problems of the instructional reform policy itself range from its production, the juxtaposition between the central agency's need of instant results in its evaluation and teachers' need to have more time to learn about the policy, the problem of leaders' general practices to any centrally initiated policies in that they hardly focus to achieve the policy but the satisfaction of powerful persons, and the inflexible curricular. Ironically, although both administrators and teachers present

the problems on resource inadequacy, ones on policy are reported by teachers only.

Three kinds of the community's conditions burden the school implementation of the policy. They are political, economic, and social conditions. The community's political situation is one of the obstacles. Political groups in the community often interfere the school's management, for example priority of the school's policy, funding to the school. The community's poor economic condition also obstructs the school to have sufficient financial support. Three social circumstances of the community as well burden the school implementation. The first is the additional but inevitable social expenses that lessen teachers' incomes (which is already a little amount) make teachers do not want to work in the remote school. The second negative social condition is the weaker community due to various problems such as addiction to drug, and illegal daily lotteries. It moves interests of people in the community away from considering the school's changes as important. The third is the community's traditional lifestyle that conflicts with the western underpinning concept of the learner-centered teaching style.

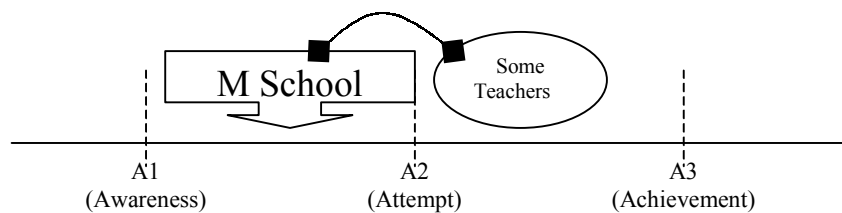
Three internal obstacles according to the school management concerns most of teachers, and are listed by all interviewees. The first is an insufficiency of financial resource. This inadequacy includes the school's learning resources particularly books in the school library, and teaching materials. Due to this shortage, often teachers have to sacrifice their personal incomes to provide students routine teaching materials and some materials for special activities such as an academic competition. **The second yet the most direct impact to teachers' application of the new teaching method is that teachers have to teach some subjects that they are not qualified for. This obstacle impacts directly to the classroom practices regarding to individual teacher limited academic as well as professional background on that particular subject's content and learning nature. Teachers not only concern about this obstacle in respect of this limit but some also present that it really blocks themselves from their utmost teaching capabilities.** The other is a teacher's workload problem. Besides, some teachers mention five internal obstacles—not shared by all of them but worth considering. They are a public relation problem, a personnel management problem, an evaluation problem, a professional development problem, and its unreadiness.

### Outcomes

#### *Anticipated Outcomes*

If the implementation of this policy means using the learner-centered teaching approach in classrooms, approximately 10% of teachers have implemented the policy. If it refers to the production of the learner-centered teaching documents, most teachers have implemented it. School staff's viewpoints also concur with this statistics.

The school is in the early stages of the implementation. Regarding the Department of General Education's criteria of 3A's (Awareness, Attempt, and Achievement), the staff agree the school is between the 'Awareness' stage, and—in some cases—is in an 'Attempt' stage, as in the figure 1.1 below.



*Figure 1.1* Stage of the implementation of the learning reform policy by Medtaa School in its first semester of 2001 due to 3 A's criteria of the Department of General Education.

However, when considering the implementation by each subject department, some seem to be making more progress in using student-centered teaching style than others. Most staff identify two subjects, Science and Thai Language as subjects whose nature and content are more conducive to the new pedagogy. Some teachers practise even more progressively than the school administrators does.

#### *Unanticipated Outcomes*

The school implementation of the instructional reform policy also indirectly changes several school's aspects: its climate, individual teachers, and students. The school climate has changed since the policy was introduced to the school. It is that the school and its staff are more open-minded to other new policies that introduced later. Impacts to teachers and students are divided into positive and negative ones. To teachers, positive impacts are an improvement of instructional behaviors despite its small scale, an increase in teachers' professional development, more participation, and teachers' awakening. Negative impacts are exhaustion, discouragement, even ignorance. To students, positive impacts are the acknowledgment of rights, and more activation. Negative impacts are that this new approach provides students more group activities that, due to some teachers' concerns, can lead to sexual intercourse.

#### **Findings in Karunaa School**

##### Purposes

Four reasons entail teachers in Karunaa School to apply the new teaching approach. The first is their own motives—they do it because they want to do it, or realise that the implementation is worth doing. The second is that attempts of other colleagues—principal and peer teachers—influence them to do. Many teachers refer to the principal's hardworking for the policy that urges her to continually implement the policy. Some teachers apply the new teaching method due to their commitment to their mates who are spearhead teachers. The third reason of teachers' implementation is for students' benefits. Some teachers deny the authority's influence. Instead they states they have practiced it for their own students: for their best and zest. The fourth reason is an influence from mass media that makes some teachers feel underdeveloped not doing it.

## Process

### *Supportive Features*

These elements will be categorised into external (from outside the school) and internal (from within the school). External factors are divided into ones from the central agencies: the Office of National Education Commission, and the Department of General Education, ones from the local agency, especially from *Sahawidthayaakhed* (a cluster of schools nearby, divided by the Ministry of Education), and ones from the community. Internal factors are the school's administration, teachers.

The Office of National Education Commission provides two kinds of support. The first is documents about the policy. The second is academic support from teachers who participating its teacher development project called *Khruu Maebaeb* or 'mold teachers'. From the Department of General Education, the school's staff perceive one support: the financial support for the *Khruu Kaennam* project (the spearhead teacher project). Yet it is criticised as inadequate.

In Karunaa School, none of support from the provincial agency is referred by any staff. However, *Sahawidthayaakhed* support is mentioned. *Sahawidthayaakhed* provides a support to Karunaa School in a form of training. Teachers feel that these trainings can catalyse many teachers to improve their teaching approaches

The community around Karunaa School is poor and cannot provide the school much support. Fortunately, the school's council that comprise available and potential parents as well as teachers and the principal as its secretariat is founded for a long while and already assists the school in various matters: financial, academic, collaboration to the school projects, even alleviation of students' problem.

Support from the school administration is classified into ones from the principal himself, and ones from the school general administration. Support from the school principal is regarded by most teachers even isolated ones. His actions of support include his commitment to the policy, his several attempts to clarify what is and how to of the policy, his application of psychological reinforcement techniques, and his evaluation. In addition to principal support, four activities in the school administration also foster teachers to adapt the new pedagogy. They are comfortable, and accessible libraries, training provision, a well-managed academic plan, discussion of problems and supervision within subject departments, tutoring for students who have learning difficulties.

Two supportive attempts are from teachers themselves. The first is a project initiated by teachers. It is one that students have to read specific lessons in front of their parents and get a signature afterwards. However, its implementation faded. The second is the networking attempt from the spearhead teachers.

### *Obstructive Features*

These elements will be categorised into external (from outside the school) and internal (from within the school). External factors are divided into ones from the central agencies, ones from the local agency, and ones from the community. Internal factors are the school's administration, teachers, and students.

The central agencies entail four obstacles to the school's implementation of the learning reform policy. The first is caused by three actions in their implementation process. Firstly, the Department commenced the implementation without considering whether schools were ready or not. Secondly, the recent launch of another education reform policy—the internal quality assurance policy—has pulled away teacher's attention of the new teaching approach to their classroom. Teachers have to produce documents for the quality assurance instead of undertaking their instructional development. Thirdly, the Department has accelerated the evaluation. From many staff's point of view, the time of the evaluation to this policy is too soon. It could deactivate implementers from doing deeper evaluation to superficial but instant one. The second is according to the current secondary level curricula. They comment in its nature that focuses on quantity of content versus quality of teaching process. The problem is caused by two different contexts. Firstly, intensive content of some subjects did not allow teachers to be able to apply this method every hour, especially the beginning hours of the subject that need to be about background knowledge. Secondly, there is a policy centrally originating to decrease study hours for the same amount of content for some subjects, such as Science. The third is a shortage of resources: financial, and personnel. The shortage of financial resource is caused by the decrease on the Department of General Education' funding tuition fees per head of students to the school. This reduction has an impact on the school capacity to purchase instructional tools. The shortage of personnel is caused by the new personnel limitation policy. Whilst some teachers had early retirement, there are no new teachers recruited into the school.

The community also involves obstacles to the school's implementation of the policy. The first is its social value that emphasises on students academic achievement, particularly their ability to be able to pass the university entrance examination more than their learning skills. The second is families that are incapable of supporting the school to implement the policy, or even reinforcing their children's learning skills.

Two critical activities in the school administration are concerned by many teachers. The first is the instructional reform policy, as felt by some teachers, not being really the first priority policy. Some teachers perceive that administrators prefer obtaining policies and projects from the Department of General Education to develop classroom teaching practices as teachers who implementing the policy are not appreciated as much as ones who work in response to these projects. The second is staff's senses of workload that have been developed due to three causes: an increase of tasks, an increase of teaching hours, and a decrease of an amount of the school staff due to early retirement.

Problems due to teachers refer to a problem of their fragmented relationship, a problem of their own teaching approach, and a problem of their production of outcomes. The fragmentation among groups of teachers obstructs the whole school implementation of the new teaching method. It blocks expansion of the knowledge, and the policy implementation itself. Also, many teachers still attach to the traditional teaching way that focuses on subjects' contents rather than learning process. This attachment obstructs not only in their own practice but also their peers'. Some teachers cannot use the new teaching approach if their peers who teach the exact same subject but use the old teaching style because within the

same timeline they could not finish teaching as many chapters as their peers if using the new teaching approach. Three problems entail obstacles in teachers' evaluation. The first is their misconception of the nature of the new teaching approach. Many teachers in the school have been wondering whether their implementation of this new pedagogy is worth changing due to no obvious students' development occurring in this stage.

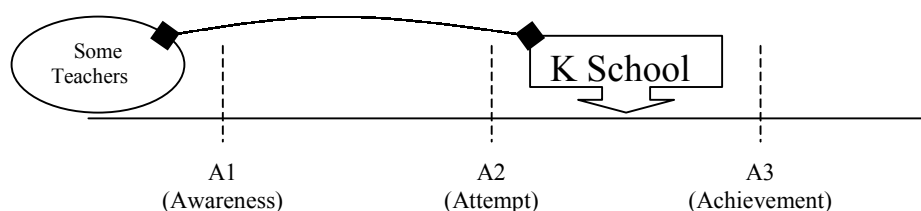
Students are regarded as one of internal obstructive features in the school's implementation of the policy. They lack learning skills due to their previous learning experiences—their families and their previous level education, and they have low motivation to study, to learn, and even to try to learn. Many teachers reveal a problem that students hardly think following their lessons. Teachers suppose students have low enthusiasms to study.

### Outcomes

#### *Anticipated Outcomes*

The answers on percentage of teachers who change their teaching styles are various; however, all of them are over 40 percent. Despite statements of certain percentage, some teachers doubt that some implementers may implement if refer to their documents but not in their deeds. Strangely, some teachers who can apply the student-centered pedagogy excellently in her classrooms do not have any concrete documents for the approach.

Refer to the 3 scale criteria of the Department of General Education (Awareness, Attempt, Achieve), the school in in the stage of 'Attempt', and some cases, in the stage of 'Achieve'. Please see the figure 1.2 below.



*Figure 1.2* Stage of the implementation of the learning reform policy by Karunaa School in its first semester of 2001 due to 3 A's criteria of the Department of General Education.

Some teachers implement advance than others. On the other hand, some teachers show no attempt to implement the learner-centered approach at all. For example a teacher included her students to the lesson of bugs. On the contrary, another teacher wrote the subject content on a blackboard and required her students to copy all of them the entire hour.

#### *Unanticipated Outcomes*

The school implementation of the instructional reform policy also indirectly affects two stakeholders: individual teachers, and students. They are divided into positive and negative ones. To teachers, they find the implementation of the new teaching approach enables them three positive points: less role in classroom, more diligent in teaching, and less stressful in teaching. The implementation lessens teachers' role in the classroom. Yet it will not be successful without students' cooperation. Many teachers also evident their peers' increasingly diligent for example there are more preparation of teaching. As they are more prepared, some

of them feel less stressful in their teaching. Two negative impacts also exist due to the policy. The first refers to negative attitudes of teachers towards the policy when it was introduced with vagueness. The second is discouragement and stress that caused some teachers' burnout.

In addition, students have three positive changes after the implementation of the new teaching method. The first is they have developed their thinking skills. The second is they are more confident due to the achievement of assigned task by themselves. The third is that they find studying is more entertaining than before. However, teachers indicate that it has taken a while before they step out of fears and be able to present their opinions. The application of the new teaching method would have had a negative impact to the students only if teachers had used the full-fledged version of it. Many teachers affirm that it is essential to provide some background knowledge for students to be able to work by themselves.

### Conclusion

The implementation of both schools is incomparable as a result of two reasons. Firstly, they are in different contexts—different location, politics, leadership, and culture. Secondly, they have been doing different pace of implementation. Karunaa School has implemented before and beyond Medtaa. Due to the 3 A's criteria of the Department of General Education, Karunaa School is in a stage of 'Attempt' to 'Achievement' whereas Medtaa is in a stage of 'Awareness' and in the beginning of 'Attempt'. The different progress entails the schools to face different problems and receive different support during their implementation, and their staff to have different reaction and viewpoints towards the policy at the time. Nevertheless, the two schools have many conditions alike. They both are serving poor communities that cause them to have greater struggled with shortage of financial resources, and their students to be less academic competitive. They both are encountering similar problems and receiving similar support due to central agencies such as the workload problem, the curricular problem, the financial and personnel inadequacy, the policy problem— production, in conveyance process, and in evaluation, support in document provision. Also, there are similar unanticipated outcomes. The implementation awakens teachers but exhausts and discourages them owing to the increasing amount of work. The implementation also allows students more chances to intellectually develop.

As this is only a part of my ongoing research involving what is happening in secondary schools. The next step will be on scenarios' of policy people towards the implementation in institutional levels in respect of their interviews and the policy documents. They also are analysed into the same topic: purposes, what they think why schools have to apply this policy; process, what do they perceive supportive and obstructive to the implementation of the Learning Reform Policy in schools; and outcomes, anticipated and unanticipated outcomes that they suppose the school have.

### Reference.

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