

Child-Friendly School Administration and Student-Centered Learning

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Introduction

Children of the 2000s have entered the world at a point in history when 191 nations (UNICEF, 1999) have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The foundation articles of CRC express the overarching principles of non discrimination, the best interest of the child, the rights to survive, develop, and be protected, and the right to participate and have one's views considered. The CRC is, thus, a commitment on the government's part to all children in the country. In support of the CRC implementation most countries adopt a right-based or people-centered approach for development.

A right-based or people-centered approach requires a nation to find effective ways of influencing outcomes for children at the family, the school, and the community levels, as well as through institutional and administrative arrangements of the government at local and national levels. It also calls for more inherently integrated, cross-sectored and decentralized activities, and for active participatory approaches. This people-centered approach recognizes that children/youth themselves are also central actors in the development process.

In most nations, the CRC has been creatively used to promote the idea of children as independent, thinking subjects capable and deserving of a great degree of participation. Education Reform is an ongoing effort toward further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner.

Learning reform has been regarded as the main thrust of an undergoing educational change in many countries. One of the complex issues facing now is how to balance children's needs for physical and psycho-social development with their participatory rights. The CRC can provide a sound basis for designing educational programs to address specific problems of learners, particularly those of children.

At present, most program strategies will focus on transforming the CRC from a legal framework into an implemental and goal-oriented actions that will endeavor to make families, communities and institutions, child-friendly. Schools and the administrative system which supports schools are among the institutions targeted to become child-friendly.

A child-friendly school system recognizes and respects children's rights and responsibilities. It provides the enabling environment to realize children's rights not only in schools, but also in the children's homes and their communities.

A key feature of a right-based, child-friendly school system is that it is linked tightly to the child-centered learning process. In creating child-friendly learning conditions, one has to consider two types of factors affecting school reform success, i.e. the theoretical factors and the real and practical factors. The theoretical factors underlying the child-friendly school model are derived from the theories of change, educational administration and management, educational

decentralization, and organization/institution learning. The real/practical factors will reflect how effective the process of learning reform is being implemented. Other indicators cover background and performance of all those involved, including their attitude, motivation and collaboration/cooperation.

A Right-Based, Child-Friendly School (CFS)

To transform existing schools into child-friendly schools which support child-centered learning and education, all those involved in the management of the education system should share the following considerations:

Theoretical Factors	Practical Factors
<p>Healthy for Children:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Physical Health; - Psycho-social-emotional health and well-being; <p>Effective with Children</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A child-centered curriculum and teaching-learning methods structured; - Learning process nurtured; - Learning opportunities equalized and quality learning outcomes promoted; 	<p>Child-friendly school ensures:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Healthy school policies and practices; - Healthy, hygienic, safe environment, water and sanitation facilities; - Health education through life skills approaches to promote healthy attitude, behavior and practices; - Positive experiences for children leading to self-esteem and self-confidence; <p>Child-friendly school promotes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A structured child-centered curriculum and teaching/learning methods appropriate to the child's developmental level, ability, and learning style; - Active and goal-oriented learning with self-regulating and responsibility; - An equal opportunity for quality learning outcomes by learning how to learn and mastering general knowledge and basic skills, including life skills;

Theoretical Factors	Practical Factors
- School-based management	- A decentralized school-based

<p>decentralized;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teacher capacity, morale, and motivation raised; <p>Protective of Children</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No violence, exploitation and abuse of children; - No stereotyping, exclusion, and discrimination of children on the basis of differences; - Respect for diversities and differences of children; 	<p>management placing priority on the needs of children and their reality;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A teacher-friendly organization which enhances teacher capacity, commitment, status, and income; <p>Child-friendly school guarantees:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Safe, protective spaces for children; - Elimination of gender stereotyping, child exploitation and abuse; - Flexibility and responses to diversity, taking into account differences in children's linguistic, cultural, and social background;
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Theoretical Factors	Practical Factors
<p>Involved with Families and Communities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Child-centered; - Family-focused; - Community-based; 	<p>Child-friendly school mobilizes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Children participation in perception, thinking, action, and evaluation; - Family support for harmonious collaborative relationships between parents and teachers to develop the whole child; - Local partnerships in school-based management and monitoring of the rights and well-being of all children in the community.

A Child-Centered Learning Approach

The principles of learning theories which can be applied to child-friendly school system in support to a child-centered learning approach should be considered also.

Theoretical Factors	Real, Practical Factors
- Learning begins at birth. Different	- A teaching- learning process should

<p>environments have distinct effects on development and strengthen various capability for learning, as each learner is blessed with more than one kind of intelligence.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Learners are capable of learning and self-development. They differ in competence, capability, pattern of development, and learning preference. - Learning is an internal process. The successful learner is naturally be active, goal-oriented, self-regulating, and assume responsibility to construct meaning from information and experiences. - Learners' motivation to learn is influenced by their physical and emotional states, including beliefs, interests, goals, and habit of thinking. Also environmental factors, i.e. culture, technology, and instructional practices are influential. 	<p>include a variety of activities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In teaching and learning, individual differences should be regarded. - Parents and teachers should provide appropriate supports and guidance, and proper stimulation for active learning, through which boys and girls can better their strategic learning skills, - A teaching-learning process should take into account a prior knowledge and all differential development aspects of individual learners- physical, intellectual, emotional, and social domains.
Theoretical Factors	Real, Practical Factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Learners learn effectively from first-hand experiences (learning by doing). - Learning is a social event. It is influenced by social interaction, interpersonal relations, and communication with others. - Learning is a lifelong process. It can take place any where, at any time, and at all time. Therefore, learning is everybody business. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Educational activities should allow children to experience learning to their highest potential and in line with their aptitude, needs, and interests. - A teaching-learning process should promote social interactions, and encourages collaboration, sharing of ideas, and respect of diversity. - Students, teachers, school principals, school board members, parents, and people in communities are all learners who should share and learn from each others by means of self-development.

Recommendations for Key Strategies

Based on the above-mentioned theoretical framework and rationales, key strategies to develop a child-friendly environment to promote child-centered learning are as follows:

1. Create a strong link between children's health and school performance.

World Health Organization (WHO) identifies four characteristics of healthy and child-friendly school.

- A place of safety, where children are protected from all forms of discrimination, abuse, exploitation, and violence;
- A place where diseases can be detected and often treated;
- A place of healthy environment with safe water and sanitation;
- A place where life skills are taught.

Another key characteristic should be added to reflect a learning environment in child-friendly school.

- A place for children to enjoy their rights to express themselves freely, have fun and take part in enjoyable learning activities, and be involved in decisions that affect them.

2. Decentralize the management of school.

School-based management is flexible to adapt to local conditions so as to meet the educational needs of all children. Various means for decentralization of school administration may include:

- Empower school to take a variety of initiatives required to become child-friendly;
- Transform leadership of school principals, teachers, school-board committee members, and parents into effective team work and team learning;
- Promote school self-management by encouraging support and leadership of key people in school and community. Leaders help create a vision and management directions;
- Improve school management for accountability and effectiveness by using a cycle of change that moves from Planning (P) to Doing (D) to Checking (C) and to Acting (A);
- Create opportunities for parents to be involved in decisions about school policies, activities, and methods;
- Facilitate school self-management by developing management information system or an early warning system which monitors key indicators of child rights and development, enabling parents and teachers to identify children with potential problems well ahead of time and take remedial action accordingly;
- Give schools more autonomy to assess and resolve their own problems. They will

learn that choices or decisions are driven by current data, success and failures. Best child-friendly practices are recognized and promoted.

Empower and reskill teachers.

Teachers should be retrained to be more in keeping with a child-centered, rather than a teacher-dominated, classrooms. Joint retraining of teachers, school administrators, and their supervisors are required on the following key areas:

- Child-centered curriculum enrichment, lesson-planning and outcomes;
- Child-friendly appropriate teaching-learning styles and classroom learning practices;
- Active, participatory, and experiential learning activities in and outside the classroom;
- Promoting healthy behaviors and positive life skills among students;
- Child-friendly student assessment and evaluation to improve performance;
- Creating a positive school climate and joyful classroom learning environment;
- Classroom management and child-friendly school disciplines;
- Providing appropriate strategic instructional materials and references for students and teachers.

Work in partnership

Child-friendly schools can easily find partners from a range of organizations, in order to provide additional inviting gateways to learning for children.

- Mobilize and coordinate a multi-sector collaboration to consider first the needs of children over the needs of others in support of the child-centered learning approach;
- Encourage other stakeholders at all levels of the community to take part in the management and financing of child-friendly school and child-centered education;
- Locally enrich child-centered learning by the community resources, practices, traditions and way of life.

Example of Linkage between Child-Friendly School Administration and Student-Centered Learning in Thailand

Background

During the past years, Thailand has abided by her commitment to provide quality education to all as mandated by the National Education Act, 1999. People of all sectors have echoed a demand for an immediate education reform and their strong determination to be involved. Education process is expected to be the first of the highest quality to enable the

young Thai to acquire intellectual ability, useful skills, and moral values. Through the educational reform the future Thai will empower themselves to meet the challenges of the fast changing world with the right choices in life and grow up to be responsible citizens of the country and the world.

Consequently, school systems across Thailand are struggling to bring about education reform in a climate of relentless change and diminishing resources. One of the challenges Thai educators face is how to institute national learning reform, including decentralized child-friendly approach to improve teaching, administration, assessment, and others related aspects.

National Pilot Study: Learning Reform Schools for Developing Quality of Learners

The national study, with funding support from the Office of National Education Commission (ONEC) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in 2000, was carried out on a voluntary basis by 250 schools which have expressed their concerns to respond to the above-mentioned challenge. The study was, thus, designed applying the key strategies recommended before, to pilot a cooperative learning of whole school reform in 3 key components:

- Refinement of strategies to promote student-centered learning,
- Decentralization of child-friendly, school-based management,
- Bottom-up whole school reform.

Refinement of strategies to promote student-centered learning

At classroom level, reform of the learning process was essentially a shift from contents or subject matters to learners. In the pilot classrooms, teaching with focus on learners or student-centered approach required the teacher to engage in forward planning and self-evaluation, experiential teaching techniques, child-friendly classroom management, and other CFS component skills. The child-friendly initiative resulted in locally adaptive curricula and modified teaching techniques to meet children's needs.

Sumon Amornvivat (2002), one of the four-consultant team, reported that teacher learning made a difference. Individual teachers conducted self-training which shifts from isolated learning and occasional workshop participation to focused, ongoing organizational learning built on collaborative reflection and joint action with peer teachers, principal and outside consultants.

Each teacher, in his/her different way, identified and translated important needs into a plan for action, then did it, checked for results, and made corrections before taking further action. The PDCA cycle helped channel teacher learning, energy, and commitment to contribute to student learning

The methodology underlying this Study was inductive. No model was tested, instead the range and diversity of innovative approaches to student-centered learning was ascertained. Sumon (2002), described the impressive diversity of learning activities developed in the pilot schools that they have mostly involved cooperative and experiential learning, often with an interdisciplinary dimension. Students were provided opportunities to present themselves freely both in written and oral forms.

In the Pilot Project, an alternative to top-down directing/controlling supervision was constructed to reflect collaboration and consultation for creativity. Many of the activities initiated by the pilot schools had either the theme of environmental or cultural preservation. Many also had an integrative learning dimension, such as environment across the curriculum, local knowledge/wisdom across the curriculum, or Thai language across the curriculum (Sumon in Fry, 2002:42).

Decentralization of child-friendly, school-based management

At school level, individual principals and their management teams started learning reform with different arrangements. Most of them pulled together the whole school in trying to meet the specific student achievement goals that they have discussed and created together. During implementation, many teachers perceived time as the biggest barrier to school change. Therefore, rescheduling the school day or student learning time helped allow principals and teachers to focus collaboratively on the real work of teaching- to plan programs and curriculum, exchange ideas, and reflect together about instruction, student needs, and teacher growth.

In this Study, school district/provincial authorities were not major players. The pilot schools operated fairly independently from them. However, some of them supported many school principals in developing evaluations to reinforce school and individual plans which provide major information for individual principals to conclude their learning experiences. The Study findings confirmed the school requirement not only to be free from the influence of pedagogical theory, but also be unfettered from too rigid bureaucratic procedures.

Boonmee Naneyod (2002), another member of the consultant team, found that principals with distributive leadership style could increase intensive interaction and closer relationship among school personnel. Those who have shared power and authority with larger teams encouraged not only an exchange of learning among teachers, but also a shared vision, mutual trust and understanding. These factors are critically important and contribute to the responsibility and accountability of schools to become friendly to their students.

Other critical factors, contributing to the success of school-based management in the Pilot Project, included the capacity, determination, motivation, and confidence of the school principal, the nature of the school's internal and external relations, and the consistency between new initiatives and local culture/customs (Boonmee in Fry,2002).

Bottom-up whole school reform

The sense of whole school as a community of learning and practices directed individual pilot schools in their reform efforts. An informal structure like coaching was arranged as an on-going process of teacher learning. Individual teachers created opportunities for sharing and learning within their daily work. Besides the outside partner, coaches also included peer teachers and master teachers from within and outside the school, who observed and helped each other on a routine basis. Also on-site training was designed by the schools in collaboration with the outside partners and master teachers to meet the specific needs of the principals and their teachers. These regularly scheduled training sessions were less costly.

For the pilot schools, accountability was not just an end-of-year external requirement. It required on-going feedback and evaluation to help them sustain change momentum, keep their commitment alive, and focus on the concrete student performance goals the whole school set

out to achieve. Therefore, the internal quality control system of individual pilot schools identified concrete indicators to cover improved job performance of teacher/principal, and changes in school organization and routines to respond to the unique needs of their students. Improved student learning was their final indicator.

According to Sumon (2002:5), all the following qualities attained by the students of pilot schools resulted from both the learning reform of the Project and the previous efforts of supervision and development provided by the schools' respective authorities:

- Interest in and avidity for learning as well as contentment in participatory learning – illustrated through 12 behaviors;
- Development of working process and capacity for planning and teamwork— illustrated through 9 behaviors;
- Development of capacity in accord with the students' aptitudes and interests to their highest potentiality—illustrated through 12 behaviors;
- Development of moral and cultural values as well as respect for others—illustrated - through 10 behaviors.

Laeka Piya-Ajariya (2002:18-19), another member of the consultant team, found that those schools which fully appreciated the content and spirit of the 1999 National education Act could manage themselves to become more child-friendly and supported child-centered learning. All the concerned parties realized their respective responsibilities and were able to align their roles to those of others, with the improved student learning as common ultimate goal, as elaborates in the following figure:

Student Assessment and Evaluation of the Pilot Study

Nonglak Wiratchai (2002), another member of the consultant team, reported some schools have consequently revised student assessment based on authentic situation and have adopted an integrated quality assessment system. Many, however, have not integrated assessment as part of the teaching-learning process, while the majority of teachers have not been able to link their work with the schools' quality assurance.

According to Nonglak (Nonglak in Laeka, 2002:16) the evaluation of the pilot schools revealed that they have achieved increased quantitative development, regarding learning reform, personnel development, school-based management, and internal quality assurance, while the whole school reform has not been as extensive as desired. The rate of whole school reform, however, has noticeably increased. Implementation of the Pilot Study has therefore lessened inequality among schools. All pilot schools have changed their culture, with increased emphases on participation, teamwork, consultation and learning together etc. Concrete evidences of the noticeable changes can be discerned. Most pilot schools have been able to accomplish their main missions as required by the Study, while the rest have been able to fulfill certain tasks only.

In analyzing the conditions and factors conducive to the success of the Study, it was found that the differences lie with the process and output of the teachers and principals, those of students, the principals' previous achievements, teachers' average age and percentage of teachers who have been awarded. In addition, the participation of outside partners in conceptualization and solving technical problems, and those relating to personnel administration has accelerated collective efforts within the pilot schools, resulting in speedier and more effective school reform.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Normally, rights and enjoyment are words rarely associated with the school system and the process of learning. For the past years, Child-Friendly School Initiative has shown that learning needs not to be a disciplined pursuit devoid of fun. A right-based, child-centered approach for learning reform has made the systems of school, family, and community, child-friendly.

Child-friendly school innovation is, thus, an attractive idea and relatively easy to sell. However, from the Thai experience and those of other countries there are numbers of risks and constraints when the idea is put into practices.

Misunderstandings of the child-centered approach are found regarding a) a relaxation of standard of knowledge and performance, b) learning from completely open and minimally planned activities, and c) the teacher role being diminished or minimized. Consequently, there is an urgent need for participatory communication to help make teachers and other concerned parties aware of the fact that the teacher is still at the heart of children's learning. Student-centered strategy requires the teacher to use a variety of teaching style and effective leadership, to be creative, and ensure clarity of learning outcomes.

To be at the heart of children's learning, teachers need to improve their capacity a) to develop children's psychosocial competence or life skills, which will allow them to make the right choices in situations of high risks; b) to identify problems faced by children and find local

solution to these problems with the involvement of children, parents, and relevant community parties; c) to weave or link individual children's needs and problems into a standard-based and quality-assured educational program. These are capacity areas often found weak in many teachers.

Schools are often unable to adapt new initiatives to their own specific set of unique circumstances. In order that the child-friendly initiative takes root, be sustainable and replicable, it is essential that teachers and school administrators understand more fully how to plan ahead and ensure objectives are met. They need to be involved in the planning process of CFS initiative, so as to understand what they are required to do and adapt this to their own needs. This, thus, requires a development of their planning and self-evaluation skills.

It is essential that teachers, principals, and their supervisors be oriented or provided with a broad overview of the key elements of child-friendly school system. This is a potential constraint in implementation, considering the big number of participants. The availability of credible child-friendly school system trainers, that have the necessary background, attitude, and relevant experiences, is another limitation.

Like many initiatives, the child-friendly school has to compete with other priorities of the national education system. The weak support from the school's respective authority and the government constraints the development of supporting policies and enabling conditions for child-friendly school and student-centered learning. At the policy level, child-friendly schools should be a normative goal of the education system. All related activities address not only the school implementation level, but also the management monitoring, technical assistance and supervision level. It is for this reason that the central/regional managers and supervisors also should learn more the content on child rights and the components of child-friendly school.

Integration of child rights into basic educational practices calls for greater inter-sector linkages of the educational system with other sectors. This is a challenge, especially for the highly centralized and non-devolved educational system.

The underlying principle of child rights is still very much a legal and conceptual framework. What is needed is the transformation of CRC from a legal framework into an implemental and goal-oriented actions. Greater policy and public debate should be encouraged to popularize child rights and create better understanding of the implication of child rights commitments in the national context. The challenge is to convince policy makers to consider the best interests of children in all policy planning and implementations. The government's continued support through child-friendly policies, related laws and regulations, and appropriate resource allocations are essential.

To conclude, child-friendly schools implementing a right-based, child-centered approach for learning reform help promote quality learning outcome, physical and mental health, and development of essential life skills for the school children. Child-friendly school administration (CFS) is not a theoretical or ideological exercise, but a mean to lead the way to achievable results on a national scale.

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