

The Next Round of Education Reform by the Thai Government and the Four Pillars of Education

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Recently I had the good fortune to lead the Princess of Narathivas University Council and the University President to pay a courtesy call on the Minister for Education, Mr. Jurin Laksanawisit. The Minister was kind enough to provide us with the policy guidelines for the next round of education reform by the Thai Government, which in brief covers:

- Life long education
- Total system of education
- Research university, etc.

I have high admiration for the Minister's ideas and effective communication. We were all able to appreciate the clear vision and the mission of the Ministry of Education.

As a medical person with more than 25 years Thai education system experience through teaching and managing in the kindergarten, primary, secondary, college, and university systems, I have learned that education can be the catalyst for change for the good. To do this effectively education must be geared up to face a multiplicity of cultural and ethical demands in response to the need for economic and social development. This is even truer today in Thailand with the increasing challenges (opportunities and threats) posed by technology in the 21st century and the rising quality of life expectations of the people, who have placed their faith in the education system to deliver on the education reform promises embedded in the National Education Reform Act of B.E. 2542 (1999). Academic studies and comment, as well as media reports and commentaries, are replete with comment on the tardiness and disappointing results of the current round of Thai education reform.

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The Four Pillars of Education

From the significant UNESCO report outlining a wide-ranging understanding of the term education, *"Learning: The Treasure Within: Delors, Jacques et al"*, we can infer that for education reform to cater to and be compatible with the life-long learning concept and an emerging knowledge-based society in Thailand for the 21st century, the reform will need to be solidly based on the concepts embodied in the four pillars of education development:

1. Learning to know
2. Learning to do
3. Learning to live together, learning to live with others
4. Learning to be

The four pillars of knowledge integrate as a whole; with many points of contact, inter-section, and exchange.

Learning to know presupposes adequate universal education and the opportunity to study a small number of specific subjects in more detail. This also includes learning to learn by gaining the implements of understanding to be able to take advantage of what lifelong learning offers; combining a sufficiently broad general knowledge with an in depth knowledge on a small number of specific subjects: "Know everything about some things and something about everything". The intention should be not only to teach information and test the short-term retention of information, but to learn how to learn effectively and continuously to gain knowledge. This requires effort, concentration, discipline, determination,

and a fair amount of intrinsic motivation.

Learning to do is not only about getting professional credentials but also about acquiring occupational skills and competencies to be able to act creatively in your environment, cope with countless new situations, and to work in a team: learning to perform in a range of social and work situations, both formally and informally, that goes beyond established social borders, nationally and internationally.

Learning to live together, learning to live with others is building up an understanding of other people, the realities of mutual and global dependencies, and the value of collaboration and conflict management, through taking part in joint projects and conflict solution strategies: The ability to participate and co-operate with other people in all human activities in a spirit of respect for the values of pluralism, mutual understanding, and peace.

Learning to be is a crucial progression from the previous three pillars: the development of your individual personality, values, and attitudes to be able to act with sound judgment and a sense of personal responsibility. Education, therefore, must consider all aspects of personal potential: memory, cognitive ability, aesthetic intelligence, physical capacities, and communication skills.

The current Thai formal education system still, for the most part, puts emphasis on the attainment of specific information and testing of the students' short-term retention of that information, to the detriment of other forms of learning. Thai formal education is also thought by some to: ignore the need to de-



velop fundamental learning skills; diminish the intrinsic motivation to learn; reduce real critical thinking; overlook instilling positive attitudes and social values; endorse the status quo; dampen innovation, inventiveness, and enterprise; promote individualism; discourage teamwork; encourage selfishness; and depress altruism. Education equity, curriculum content, and teaching and learning methods have also been found wanting. By examining the disparity between work place needs and the skills and competencies of graduates of the Thai education system, it is clear that education is not even meeting the economic needs of Thai society for the 21st century. Then who is it helping? It is now well past the time for us to truly envision education in a more encompassing way; one that not only informs, but also guides forthcoming educational reforms and policy, in both content and methods of teaching and learning.

I can see where the four pillars of learning can offer a worthy basis for this next round of Thai education reform, if appropriately modified and applied within specific, local, regional, and national contexts (historic, economical, geographic, political, environmental, traditional, social...). What we must be very aware of is that ideas and principles are always wonderful, however, they must be made practical and effectively put into action, constantly monitored, and assessed and revised if necessary, before we can achieve the goals of quality education for all in Thailand: education that optimally meets the needs and aspirations of all stakeholders (students, teachers, academia,

government, industry, community...) and stands the test of time. If the new round of Thai education reform is to be successful it needs more than a worthy vision and well practiced rhetoric. It also needs effective implementation to put it into practice. To do this depends greatly on strong political will/determination to steer through the Thai political dynamics of today to make and implement the proper strategic choices that will shape the future of Thailand that is agreeable to the wishes of the stakeholders. That is we need effective mission oriented leadership; a leadership with the national interest at its heart.

Some of the Political Dynamics in Thai Education Reform

Dynamics is generally thought of as any forces that produce motion or effect change. Political dynamics usually refers specifically to those machinations that influence decision making in a political context.

Before we talk about political dynamics in the context of Thai education reform, we must first agree on what politics really means in our discussion. Arguably, politics can be seen as a process by which groups of people make decisions and this process can be observed in all human group interactions, including government, corporations, academia, communities... Max Weber defined politics as the struggle for power. In the reality of education reform politics in Thailand, it is probably a bit of both.

One very important political dynamic not specifically mentioned in the UNESCO paper



is "**Political will**". That is the determination or resolve to make a political decision or carry out legal action in a political context to the benefit of society as a whole, no matter the negative personal interest or private agenda consequences of that action. The lack of political will and the political and/or personal agenda of education leaders charged with implementing education reform are often quoted as the main reasons for the implementation failure of Thai education reform efforts following the enactment of the National Education Reform Act of B.E. 2542 (1999).

If we are to learn and profit from the past reform implementation shortcomings, we have to objectively get to the real truth of the failures (not witch hunts or purges of those who do not agree with us) and to acknowledge the problems, if we are to accomplish the goals of quality education for all (EFA) in our budding knowledge-based Thai society in the 21st century. In so doing we can build up a wider vision for Thai educational goals: to facilitate holistic approaches to restructure educational content and teaching and learning methods through curriculum renewal, as well as to build a national capacity in developing key skills and competencies essential for all learners so that they can cope not only with the workplace, but with the rest of their life. Of course let us not forget education's role in fostering good citizenship and democratic principles. Education reform implementation is not a simple straight forward task and will require not only good management of the tasks involved but also effective leadership and stew-

ardship.

If we agree that it is very unlikely that the formal education system will ever have all the financial resources it needs to respond to all the education challenges at any one point in time, then we can see that choices have to be taken to best answer the challenges confronted within the financial resources available. Currently Thailand spends about 2-5% of GDP on education (depending on the source of the information). UNESCO believes that as a rule of thumb, countries should spend at least 6% of GDP on education to achieve EFA. Currently Thailand spends 25% of the total national budget on education (equal top spender in world along with Malaysia in terms of total national budget, according to the *2009 EFA Global Monitoring Report*), so it will be a big ask, with all the other competing entities and priorities for a justifiable share of the Thai budget, to expect any substantial increase in education expenditure from direct public funding, especially in the light of the current global financial crisis. Therefore, innovative ways must also be explored not only to use government funding available more effectively, but also to expand the potential sources of financial resources, such as promoting private investment and maybe even government guaranteed loans for private investment in education to ease the education burden on the public purse; often considered high risk by lending institutions. The more success for private enterprise in education, the more public financial resources can be diverted to other government priorities.



Another important political/financial dynamic of note in the education reform debate is the allocation of sufficient education financial resources to teaching and learning professionals for:

1. bestowing lecturers and teachers with appropriate teaching and learning tools, improved work environments, motivational stimulus, and upgraded professional standing to encourage more lecturers and teachers into the classroom to effectively deliver the education reform's revised curricula (encompassing the 4 pillars of learning),

2. guaranteeing lecturers and teachers receive the support required to develop and/or maintain appropriate skills and competencies (their own lifetime learning experience) so they can provide a quality learning experience for the students, and very importantly, remain committed to teaching and learning.

These two matters in education reform are important enough to have a higher financial priority than new major infrastructure construction programs or bureaucratic administration staff expansion.

Justifiably, Thai education is being asked to do more and accomplish more to satisfy the needs for continued sustainable economic and social development, especially in areas of lifting the status of the underprivileged and under-served in the rural and remote populations and sustainably coping with challenges and dangers posed by rapid gains in technology and the competitive economic advantages that technology affords countries who successfully adopt technology. It is irrational to ex-

pect education to solve all the problems confronting Thailand in the short term. Education reform should not be seen as a stop gap or short-term solution to an economic problem, but as a mid-term to long-term investment in the future of Thailand. Bi-partisan socio-political and economic choices for education reform should only be made after real democratic debate. Equitable strategies need to be applied which are aligned with the agreed choices, priorities, and achievable deadlines; with decentralization, good governance, accountability, and transparency paramount. UNESCO suggests that the whole reform process needs to be community driven with regulatory oversight by the education authority (the political/bureaucratic authority): The authorities' role is one of taking a long-term view of the future (a stewardship role); ensuring system stability, durability, and the ability for the system to reform itself; ensuring the cohesiveness of the whole while setting priorities; and ensuring true public debate on the social, economic, and financial alternatives concerned.

Progress of Current Round of Thai Education Reform

I know that a lot of knowledgeable, dedicated, and enthusiastic people have done a lot of hard work endeavouring to make the Thai Education Reform a reality. You only have to go to the Ministry of Education web site, follow the debate through the media, peruse the academic and non-academic commentary to know that this is true. The signs of planning activities are visible and the rhetoric



is all there for reform to happen, if only we can progress from the rhetoric to effective implementation, review, and maintenance of the reformed education system. The end product of the reform (teaching and learning activities and the quality and relevance of the knowledge, skills, and competencies of the graduates in relation to needs for progress and development of a knowledge and skilled based society in the 21st century), however, tells the true story; it is almost universally agreed that nothing substantive has changed for the better, ten years on from the enactment of the National Education Reform Act of B.E. 2542 (1999): there is still a perceived increasing disparity between work place needs and the skills and competencies of graduates; quality of life improvements are patchy; inequities in opportunities and quantity and quality of education continue to increase, especially in the under-privileged rural and remote areas. The answers to why education reform seems to be failing or to be non-existent, lay in: the relevance, substance, and feasibility of the vision and planning; the implementation mechanisms; priorities given to the reforms by leaders tasked to turn the vision and goals of the reform into reality; the timing in terms of the prevailing socio-political-economic environment; the leadership and stewardship quality; lack of political will; uninspired academia; vested bureaucratic and political interests; institutionalized corruption; lack of appropriate or inappropriate technical, inter-personal skills and leadership qualities of the implementers (leaders and followers at all levels)...the list goes

on. If you take your pick of any of these as a reason for failure, you will be partly correct.

Maybe the Thai education reforms are too encompassing, too ambitious, in light of the reasons put forward for the need for reforms in the first place: the dearth of provisions in the Thai education system that enhances the skills and competencies encompassed in the four pillars of learning. The very same people we expect to be the leaders and followers to carry out the reforms, for the most part, have been grounded in the pre-reform Thai education system: The system which concentrated on teaching by rote and the students remembering specific information to pass the tests to qualify to go on to more of the same at the next higher level; paying little attention to developing informed reasoning based on the use of cognitive abilities to add value to knowledge; scant support for leadership development or the discouragement of abuse of authority; promoting individualism and competition while discouraging teamwork and initiative; and encouraging selfishness and self interest.

Conclusion

All is not yet lost. Even though the progress in education reform embedded in National Education Reform Act of B.E. 2542 (1999) is tardy and not yet meeting the expectations for the majority of the stakeholders, it still outwardly appears to have bipartisan political support at the national level. There remains a lot of hard work and pain for many before the reform starts to show more



promise than it has. Some say that there is some light at the end of the tunnel, but others say that the light at the end of the tunnel is the headlight of the express train racing towards us. Nonetheless, education reform, encompassing the UNESCO four pillars of education, must carry on and accelerate so that Thailand can continue to develop a truly democratic, knowledge and skills based society; people who are able to make the well informed individual and group decisions to cope with this era of rapid technological change, as well as the social, political, and economical realities in this 21st century, and at the same

time, deal with the environmental uncertainty of global warming: A society devoid of poverty and inequalities; a learning, happy, progressive, inventive, socially, economically, and financially stable society, and one that is caring and peaceful; people who know who they are and where they are heading; living in cooperation and harmony with their neighbours in an increasingly globalizing world.

Effective focussed leadership coupled with a strong political will to achieve the goals of Thai education reform for the national good, will be the key to success.

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