Cultural Values and Learning in Thailand

The Thai people are sensitive to their own rich heritage and alert to new and emerging values as they adjust their schools to modern needs.

The history of public education in Thailand dates from the progressive action of King Chulalongkorn in the late 19th century. Around 1855 he began sending royal princes to England, Germany, Russia and Japan to study Western and other distinctive ways for introduction into programs for the welfare of the Thai nation. His concern for strengthening the kingdom to withstand the rising tide of foreign colonial expansion in the region led to the establishment of a school in the palace, and other schools in Bangkok and key locations in the country. The main purposes of these early schools were to train government officials and to provide literacy instruction as a means of arousing national consciousness and patriotism among the people. By 1921 a national system of compulsory primary education was adopted. It was not until after 1932, however, that this policy became widespread in the rural areas.

Patterned after the classical European systems of education, particularly the British, Thai schools have aimed at preparing Thai citizens in the manner of the scholarly gentleman of leisure. From the earliest periods of Thai history, the kings and royal princes were noted for favoring artists, dancers, poets, and dramatists, some of whose works have formed standard content in the school curriculum. The emphasis in formal education came to be put on the development of an intellectual elite who absorbed the type of scholarship which would not only equip them for advanced studies abroad, but would also qualify them for membership among the aristocrats of the Thai social hierarchy.

Each level of the educational organization has had its part to play in maintaining the values of the ruling class. The four-year compulsory primary (pratoom) school has sought to provide mainly literacy training and a basic understanding of Thai nationality. Rigorous examinations at the end of each grade resulted in high percentages of children repeating a grade several times until they often reached the school-leaving age of 15 and yet had only completed the third grade. The examinations required for entry into the six-year secondary (matayom) school again eliminated large numbers of children. For those who wished to continue their education, vocational courses were intro-
duced. These usually lacked attraction because education had to be academic to be esteemed; besides the trades did not convey the respectability ascribed to white collar jobs, especially the jobs in the civil service. The students who went on to complete the secondary school would again have to qualify for entrance to the two-year university preparatory courses before finally standing for admission to the university.

Although the program of studies listed for the school has contained a full regimen of subjects, certain areas have had traditional weight and emphasis, indicating their importance in Thai culture. The study of Thai language and literature is regarded, even in the primary school, as more than just literacy training. It is a means of developing "the golden tongue." The use of well-chosen words, witty and poetic, with allusions to classical Thai literature and in the manner of a Thai nobleman, is the mark of an educated man or woman. The study of Buddhism is a constant in every curriculum and serves as a strong reminder of the qualities of ethics which the ideal Thai must understand and practice for fundamental self-realization and full enlightenment. Thai history, with incidental references to geography and
to other countries, is another area to which a large portion of the curriculum is devoted. It is aimed at instilling a deep national pride in the feats of the royal ancestors and the past glories of the kingdom. Of increasing importance is the study of the structure and workings of the constitutional form of government as well as of the duties of every Thai citizen.

Recent Educational Reforms

Education in Thailand since World War II has been assuming new directions as a result of an enormous amount of experimentation which seems to be in support of some definite social and cultural changes. Of new and compelling significance is the reliance which the government is attempting to place upon the people to advance the quality of living in each community through a broadening of the people’s responsibilities, through the provision of educational opportunities, and through the utilization of all available resources and talents; thus Thailand would be enabled the better to meet the challenges at home and in the international context.

Since 1950, the Ministry of Education has initiated pilot studies, starting with the one in Chachoengsao, a province 60 miles from Bangkok, and extending to other provinces in the kingdom. The Chachoengsao Pilot Project1 was organized as an in-service training laboratory through which teachers and members of the community could develop a program of effective teaching, functional learning, and improved living conditions. Some 233 primary schools, 4 primary-extension schools, 3 secondary schools, 2 vocational schools, and 1 three-year teachers college were involved.

One of the first efforts of the teachers, principals and supervisors assigned by the Ministry of Education was to analyze how the content of instruction was related to the problems of the children in their daily living. As a consequence, teachers in study groups developed units of study which enriched and gave significance and a functional slant to the traditionally prescribed content. Children began to explore with their teachers such matters as how we can protect our health, how our families can use the new services of the local government offices (agriculture, cooperatives, health, adult education), how developments such as the construction of a new dam, the increased air travel in the country, new highways, etc., were changing the opportunities for Thai people, what the newspapers were saying, etc.

These curriculum modifications drew heavily on the firsthand explorations of the children and teachers and the results of work done by government and international agencies working with adult groups in the various communities. Children began to develop an understanding of the here and now and the ways in which they could shape their world. The school personnel indicated their approval of such approaches as would prepare the children for change.

The necessity to consider ways by which all children could be helped to learn more effectively became apparent. There was concern for the large num-

1 The Chachoengsao Pilot Project was assisted by specialists in community education from UNESCO, WHO, and ILO and educational specialists from the U.S. International Cooperation Administration. The Thai directors of the Project were outstanding educationists, many of whom have taken professional training in the United States, Europe, Japan, and the Philippines.

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ber of children who had difficulty meeting the requirements of the course of study, for example, that all number facts be mastered in the first and second grades using both Thai and Arabic figures. There was concern also about the many children who could not read or write well enough to achieve functional literacy by the fourth grade, which was the customary terminal point for most children.

Children were generally lectured to or asked to copy notes from the blackboard and memorize them for the examinations. The text used by the teacher as her “lecture” reference with perhaps a few more texts among the children for reading practice, the children’s copy books, and a small blackboard before the class were the only materials in use. Instruction seemed to be based on the idea Confucius expressed, “When I have presented one corner of a subject to anyone and he cannot learn from it the other three corners, I do not repeat the lesson.”

Study groups of teachers analyzed the needs, abilities, motivations, previous experiences, and responses of children to learning-teaching situations. Most of the teachers, who for the most part had had limited professional training, were eager to try “modern methods of teaching” or “learning by doing” because they had heard about them in their lectures on modern educational theory, but were not sure how they could be applied.

Gradually classrooms were changing from lecture rooms into laboratories of provocative, realistic, and effective work. Children were planning, working in groups on their level with more understanding and specific guidance by their teachers, going on field trips, working with word pocket charts, building experience stories, receiving developmental guidance for new concepts and skills, revealing their insights in discussions, home and school projects, art work, dramas using classical Thai dancing, in writing, experimenting to test scientific principles, analyzing instructional materials prepared by teachers in workshops, giving programs for their parents and other classes, etc.

Evaluations and promotions became more qualitative than quantitative. Some valuable and encouraging investigations began in an attempt to ascertain the learning achievements of the children in these experimental schools. In fact, a lively spate of educational research in child study, testing and evaluation is in process, headed by Thai Ministry of Education officials. An International Institute for Child Study was set up in Bangkok in 1954 with the assistance of UNESCO to gather data concerning child development in the region.

A Sensitive Adjustment

The necessity for all children to have a longer period of education than the four years of primary education was recognized in the extension of some primary schools to seven year schools for experiment before converting all primary schools in the kingdom. The additional three years were to be a continuation of the minimum program of general education for all children, including those who may qualify for the academic stream in the secondary school which was also being reformed to allow for a comprehensive program, geared to the varied talents and abilities at this advanced level. Practical courses which would equip the boys and girls to develop skills which could be applied for better use of community resources and for better living were features of the extended primary schools. Craft shops.
homemaking rooms, farm plots, fishing ponds, livestock pens, and chicken coops were designed on the school campuses, with the help of the farmers, the priests and craftsmen in the villages.

Organizing the curriculum for these courses required a sensitive reconciliation between certain traditional conceptions of education and the avowed purposes of the new program. Teachers, principals, and supervisors grappled with the question of whether, in the study of home economics one could respectfully teach about foods in such realistic terms as the preparation of rice to conserve its food value, the growing of vegetables and their preparation, or the making of little boys' school pants along with the admired "finishing school" activities of leisure class girls who were usually taught how to make flower garlands, floral offerings, flower-shaped fruits and vegetables, expensive ambrosia-like desserts, and fancy embroidery.

Teachers began to hail the enthusiasm and growth of the formerly bored child, slow child, and shy child. There were teachers, of course, who had misgivings about the changes. Should children be asking so many questions? Was it not too difficult to maintain the traditional standards of reserve and discipline and even respect for teachers when children were being permitted the freedom of leaving their seats and working together on projects? Didn't the lecture-study (memorize)-examination method insure systematic coverage of content and prepare the gifted child better for advanced study? Wasn't too much time being spent on the use of instructional materials and activities? Couldn't the teacher tell the children all they needed to know? Shouldn't the slow learning child continue to feel the responsibility of having "to get it the best way he can"? Why should a teacher in the third grade feel any responsibility for helping children with work which should have been mastered in the earlier grades? Shouldn't the topics dealing with the matters of daily living be left to the home? Weren't the schools: attempting to imitate or impose foreign procedures?

Apart from the fact that many of these teachers were really expressing their personal insecurity and bewilderment, they were also indicating concern about any threats to the personality traits which Thai people had always accepted and prized. While there was nodding agreement that Thai children growing up in this age would need to be intellectually curious, experimental, creative, enterprising and practical, the teachers were mindful of how such children were going to retain the grace, respect, reserve and self-effacement esteemed by Thai people. However, the leadership in the Ministry made it clear that far from seeking to introduce "alien" manners, it was their intention to incorporate into Thai culture those "universal" approaches to life that would benefit Thai people. By the same token, there was firm determination to prepare for technological advancement and at the same time to preserve the humanistic, aesthetic, and spiritual pursuits which have inspired Thai people to arrive at their own deep feelings and fundamental meanings, be it for the past, the present or the future.

**New Ways of Working**

Prachataphatai (democracy) as a value in Thai culture was gaining strong expression as a directive for ways of working in education. Not only were the children assuming dynamic roles, but school personnel at all levels of the administrative ladder were emerging as
leaders and active participants in policy making. As a centralized national system of education, it had been customary for the Ministry of Education to dispatch regulations concerning school procedures to the districts, to be followed as issued. More and more, the point of view of Ministry officials was that the local districts, the faculties of individual schools and the local citizenry should assume responsibility for discovering ways to improve the education of their children. In-service teacher activities—workshops, conferences and study groups planned by the local districts and assisted by resource persons from the Ministry became common occurrences.

There is a new recognition of the teacher. A young, first grade teacher, who does not have a high civil service rank, but who has good ideas and is accomplishing much with her children may now be asked to serve as the discussion leader or demonstration teacher at a conference, rather than a principal or teacher with many stripes on his uniform because of his rank or seniority in the civil service. In fact, stripes and uniforms are being left at home except for formal occasions. Ideas, actions and accomplishments count, and it is recognized that everyone is needed to get the best accomplished.

The communities are feeling the effects of the changing schools. The farmer, the merchant, the fisherman or the craftsman along with the priest are being invited to take part in the activities of the school—to plan for improving facilities, to see what their children are learning, to share their personal experiences with the children, to work with the school personnel and other agency leaders in community betterment projects.

Parent groups build schoolhouses, assist children with projects at home, and take pride in having a school which receives them and helps them with their problems. They come to the school to see the school nurse about their children’s health or to ask the agricultural teacher about farm problems, or to use the shop to repair a boat or a farm tool. They are interested in how well their children learn. They made themselves heard not long ago when they wanted to know how phonics was being taught. The new attractive basal reader for beginners omitted the pages of phonics and alphabet study which the parents had faced when they went to school. The newspapers were filled with the queries of the parents. Teachers were questioned in the marketplace and on the road, by parents who wanted to know.

The growing influence of the school upon the home life of the children was shown dramatically in the province of Chachoengsao soon after the school architect initiated a way to paint the dark weather-beaten classroom walls with an inexpensive, locally produced, tempera mixture in pastel shades. The attractive splashes of colors on the shutters of the schoolhouse started a chain reaction of home beautification. Home projects led to tilapia fish ponds at home to supplement the family diet, improved cooking arrangements, protected water supplies, gardening and fruit plots in addition to the rice farm, etc.

Several other notable programs have been established, to promote a full-scale modification of the standard of living in Thailand. A vocational institute was opened in Bangkok with branches in other parts of the kingdom to which boys and girls can go for technical training as

(Continued on page 442)
chosen for criticism. There were many opportunities for working in small groups, and many discussions about which procedures were productive and which not.

Some aid was also forthcoming. In the middle of the year we acquired a laboratory class. In September two scholarship students who had been studying in the United States returned, and the class could see some very modern teaching. An inspectors’ seminar, with its discussion sessions, became a laboratory for the group process class.

The response to this treatment was amazing. It reaffirmed my faith in the human capacity to learn and to change, provided there is sincere and fairly skilled teaching. Discussions became quite productive, and “saida do foco” (departure from the focus) became a kind of crime. Starting from an almost complete passivity, at the end each developed a fairly respectable individual project, on some aspect of curriculum development, teaching, or the use of group procedures. Many worked on patterns of diagnosing needs, for which techniques in South America are almost nonexistent. It was a joy to see the group labor at developing and using the new tools: a different manner of thinking, systematic patterns of analysis, and a creative application of both criticism and analysis. Most surprising was the fact that in the final evaluation there were requests for extending the very features which were the newest and which at first were so unwelcome: more time for application of the methods of curriculum development; greater stress on human relations in the group itself, and as a technique of working with groups; an earlier start for the individual project, and of independent reading and discussion in small groups; above all, a warm gratitude for having found a “new way.”

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Learning in Thailand

(Continued from page 424)

machinists, electricians, printers, dietitians, etc. A teachers college was organized in Bangkok to provide special education for school administrators and supervisors, offering evening classes and graduate work. With increased funds and an adequate corps of highly trained leaders in a wide array of specialties, the communities of Thailand are slated to have many better opportunities to realize the advantages which the modern age can provide.

Education in Thailand is strongly guided by the deep cultural values in the Thai heritage. Cultural values, however, are not fixed. There are emerging certain new values which are the products of the times. These new values are having their effects upon the goals, methods and content of education. They are inducing changes in the ways in which Thai people think, feel and act.

It has been part of the history of the Thai people to seek a flexibility and astuteness in embracing the developments in the world which may best protect them and enable them to live in strength, respect and independence. They are continuing to be cautiously selective and sensitively adaptive. They, as many other people now in the process of building their nation’s human and material wealth, are tapping world-wide experiences and resources and are seeking the best from any source; by this process they are likely to profit more in this search than will countries which feel that they have already arrived.