

The Construction of Democratic and Autonomous Citizens in a Progressive Thai School: Possibilities and Challenges

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Abstract

One of the key challenges for Thai education since the last century has been to produce citizens who are able to think for themselves and who can contribute to the common good of society. The past two decades have seen a growing interest in innovative education methods and the establishment of Thai schools with progressive educational philosophy and pedagogical approach potentially more capable of developing citizens with critical thinking skills and higher awareness of social problems than that in mainstream schools. This study examines the process of citizen construction in an alternative Thai school through both the formal and the so-called “hidden curriculum”. Findings suggest that school curricula which expose students to social issues and concerns, are capable of generating meaningful and critical learning for them and can engender the right conditions for the development of democratic citizenship. However, hierarchical power relations embedded in Thai social structures continue to be observed in the alternative school, a factor which can undermine the progressive educational idea. This situation also poses an important challenge for the construction of democratic and autonomous citizens in Thai society.

Keywords: Education, Progressive Schools, Democratic Citizens, Thailand

Introduction

Skeptics of mainstream education have raised their concerns over the impact of formal education in Thailand in producing docile and uncritical citizens for the capitalist market economy (Thongchai, 2003). There have also been suggestions that the Thai school curriculum largely indoctrinates learners on nationalistic values and practices which can hinder the development of

democratic and autonomous citizens (Mulder, 1997). Nevertheless, there have been important developments in the Thai education scene in the wake of a period of political, social and economic transition since the turn of this century. The National Education Act B.E. 2542 (1999) and the Second National Education Act B.E. 2545 (2002),¹ and the education reform project, have been adopted as a way of equipping citizens with the necessary skills to compete in the globalized economy, while showcasing traditional Thai values and democratic and rights-respecting norms:

“The learning process shall aim at inculcating sound awareness of politics and democratic system of government under a constitutional monarchy; ability to protect and promote their rights, responsibilities, freedom, respect of the rule of law, equality, and human dignity; pride in Thai identity”.²

The 1999 National Education Act also recognizes formal, non-formal and informal education provided by the government, communities or the private sector. The private sector has seen a proliferation of ‘alternative schools’, which have adopted a pedagogical approach based on child-centered, experiential (involving experience and observation) and community-oriented learning.

As democratic education theory posits that pedagogical practice based on direct experience of the world can enable the development of “responsible democratic citizens capable of concern more for the common good than for self-interest” (Carr, 2003:222), schools which follow progressive education tradition may be seen as instilling democratic citizenship. However, since education and schooling in Thailand - as in other Asian societies - is embedded in localized values and norms, the way in which pedagogical progressivism is used to promote the construction of democratic and autonomous citizens is not without its contradictions.

The objectives of this article are: 1) to illustrate how progressive pedagogical approach, as adopted in alternative Thai schools, may contribute to a construction of democratic citizens; 2) to examine the challenges for progressive and democratic education embedded in the hierarchical social relations in the context of Thailand.

¹ Office of the National Education Commission, Office of the Prime Minister, Kingdom of Thailand, http://asemilhub.org/fileadmin/www.asem.au.dk/LLL_Policies/Thailand_-_The_national_Education_Act_year_1999.pdf (accessed 3 June 2016).

² The National Education Act B.E. 2542 (1999) and the Second National Education Act B.E. 2545 (2002), Ch. 1, Section 7, p. 4. See also the Basic Education Curriculum B.E. 2544 (A.D. 2001) and the Basic Education Core Curriculum B.E. 2551 (A.D. 2008), Ministry of Education, Kingdom of Thailand.

Progressive education and the construction of citizens in a cultural context

In education, 'progressive education' commonly identifies pedagogical progressivism. It often refers to teaching approaches based on the needs and interests of learners, reflecting also a child's developmental stage. For education progressives, teaching the skills to learn a subject is more important than teaching the subject content itself. Teaching the skills to learn a subject usually involves exploratory, self-directed and collaborative methods of learning. Students play an active role in their learning experience, by engaging in projects of interest to them and/or of social relevance (Labaree, 2007). This is in contrast to what might be understood as traditional education approaches, where the learning focus is on subject-content with didactic or rote methods as common practice. Although the differences between educational progressivism and educational traditionalism may be perceived to be methodological, Carr (2003) argues that there is a normative difference between the two traditions. At one end, educational traditionalists see the need for human beings to be initiated into the received wisdom and values of a given society or culture in order to become 'civilized'. Hence, education is considered in its reproductive role, that is, as an "instrument by which a given community ensures the continuity of its way of life" (Carr, 2003:218). Education progressives, on the other hand, argue that people are innately good and education is a means to develop individual capacities for effective democratic participation.

The vision of progressive education is said to draw on the political and social philosophy of John Dewey (1859-1952), the American psychologist and educational reformer whose ideas have influenced education and social reform. For Dewey, the purpose of education in a democratic society is to enable the development of social intelligence in the young, by encouraging them to resolve practical, moral and social problems of communal life through the process of collective deliberations and a shared concern for the common good (Carr and Hartnett, 1996:63). At the same time, an important purpose of progressive education is concerned with cultivating the habit of free enquiry and challenging 'authority' in different aspects of school life. Not only authoritative teaching and authority of knowledge subject is put into questions, but also is the authoritarian structure found in most schools (Carr, 2003; Harber & Mncube, 2012). As such, instead of exercising authority in classroom management and academic knowledge, teachers are expected to engage students in child-centered curriculum that would allow learners to access a wide range of information and opinions as well as to be "critical readers" of their society (Beane & Apple, 2007). Students are also supported to develop a sense of personal autonomy, i.e., the ability to act on their own values and interest. Structure-wise, progressive schools promote a kind of egalitarian structure that enables teachers and other members of the school community to voice their concerns and to participate in the decision-making process for various aspects of school life.

The progressive vision of education can be seen to support the development of democratic citizenship of the type identified by Westheimer and Kahne (2004) as “participatory” and “justice-oriented”. The former is concerned with citizens who take active part in a democracy through political and civic activities, including voting and community-based efforts, while the latter involves citizens who critically analyze and address social issues and injustices. However, Carr and Hartnett (1996) caution that the idea of social learning, as expounded by Dewey, has become largely depoliticized and that his practical problem-solving and collaborative learning principles have now been reduced to pedagogical techniques aimed mainly at developing citizens’ skills for a global, liberalized and ideas-based economy (Kennedy, 2008). Thus, such pedagogical approach may not be adequate for the development of democratic citizens. Moreover, values and practices, as well as relationships between different members of the school community, are shaped by cultural and hierarchical norms, juxtaposed against egalitarian and democratic values and practices.

In the context of Asia, values embedded in the culture, tradition and religion including those of filial piety, obedience, unity and harmony, as well as respect for authority, are being imparted through the school’s formal and hidden curriculum (Lee, 2008; Doong, 2008; Bajunid, 2008; Pitiyanuwat & Sujiva, 2002). In Thailand, the National Education Act of 1999 – ostensibly, a product of the democratization movement of the 1990s – advocates democratic values such as rights, freedom, equality and human dignity, adherence to Thai values, as well as the “promotion of religion, art, national culture, sports, local wisdom, Thai wisdom and universal knowledge”.³ While Thai values are not defined in the Act itself, they can be drawn from school textbooks prepared under the Basic Education Curriculum B.E. 2544 (A.D. 2001) and the Basic Education Core Curriculum B.E. 2551 (A.D. 2008), which prescribe Thai values to include, for example, showing gratitude and respecting one’s elders, as well as loyalty to nation, religion and monarchy (Srikam et al., 2001; Ministry of Education, 2006). Moreover, it is recognized that traditional Thai society is characterized by hierarchical social relationships, where social ranking according to birth, status, power and wealth of individuals, and their corresponding behavior appropriate to their place in the hierarchy, is regarded as important (Girling, 1981). Adherence to this norm and practice can, at times, be in tension with the teaching of skills in critical thinking and collective deliberation, as well as values of rights and equality that progressive and, to an extent, the Thai National Education Act, intend to promote. The degree to which progressive education and pedagogy can negotiate these various and, at times, conflicting values, while enabling development of democratic and autonomous citizens, will need to be understood through these different dynamics.

³ The National Education Act B.E. 2542 (1999) and the Second National Education Act B.E. 2545 (2002), Ch. 1, Section 7, pp. 4-5.

Progressive education in Thailand

In Thailand, education progressivism is linked to the movement of alternative education. Despite its various definitions,⁴ the movement of alternative education in Thailand – as broadly understood today – stems from a reaction against the rigidity of a formal education system and its increasingly alienated learning content and method removed from children's daily experience. An early product of this movement, the Children's Village School established in 1979, drew on a branch of Western progressive education tradition of A.S Neill (1883-1973), the Scottish educator who postulated that human nature flourishes in conditions of freedom. Devised mostly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, the school nurtures egalitarian and democratic values through direct and democratic experience. After the creation of the Children's Village School, a number of new schools with alternative educational vision and learning approach were established (Junvith & Tanmunthong, 2012). Some distinctions have been made between alternative education that operates within the formal education system and community-based, non-formal alternative education (see Jakpisut et al., 2005 and Jones, 2008 for discussions on these schools). The alternative schools operating in the formal education system, which are the focus of this study, draw on various branches of progressive, child-centered learning traditions developed in the West, including the Montessori, Waldorf, Neo-humanist and Constructivism methods.⁵ These schools have adopted project-based, experiential and active learning concepts and integrated curricular approach that have enabled them to offer a variety of learning experiences to the students. In addition, many of these alternative schools have also applied Buddhist principles onto the teaching-learning process, while promoting a balance of technological know-how, localism idea and Thai values. In this respect, these alternative schools in Thailand seem to be capable of offering diverse learning possibilities for their students.

⁴ Four main definitions of alternative education exist, including: 1) education and learning in non-mainstream education system e.g., the concept of de-schooling; 2) education for children with special needs and gifted children; 3) education that emphasizes holistic learning and diversity of learners; 4) education/school with a higher level of autonomy than regular schools (see Junvith and Tanmunthong, 2012).

⁵ Founded by Maria Montessori (1870-1952), the approach rests on the belief that "a child's early years from birth to six are the period when they have the greatest capacity to learn" (<http://www.montessori.org.uk>). The Waldorf schools offer a developmentally appropriate, experiential and academically rigorous approach to education. Neohumanist Education (NHE) is based on the philosophy and principles of Neohumanism, which stand for "the practice of love for all creation including plants, animals, and the inanimate world" (<http://www.nhe.gurukul.edu>). Central to Constructivism is the notion that learners play an active role in 'constructing' their own meaning, where "knowledge is not seen as fixed and existing independently outside the learner" (Le Cornu et al., 2003).

The study

School profile

The case study for this paper is a private, co-educational school identified by a pseudonym as the Rainbow School. The school was among the first alternative day schools in Thailand to offer classes from pre-primary through to the twelve years of basic education (six years each in primary and secondary levels), using the Thai national education curriculum, as most alternative Thai schools cover only pre-primary and primary level or operate as boarding schools. The birth of the Rainbow School coincided with the growth of the alternative education movement, which played an important role in the adoption of the 1997 Constitution and the subsequent National Education Act of 1999, marking the beginning of the current era of education reform. When the school opened for enrollment in 1997, its students in the early years were largely children of educated middle-class parents, including those with a supposedly progressive vision who supported education reforms. These parents were dissatisfied with mainstream education that emphasized rote learning and the disconnection between teaching content and students' real life experience. The Rainbow School's pedagogical approach thus draws on different models and theories of learning, which have been, and continue to be, tried and tested. Since the beginning of the school's operations, however, experiential and hands-on learning has been an integral part of the educational process at the Rainbow School, including numerous field visits by students and teachers to different communities in the country. During the first 14 years of its operation, the student body grew approximately from 260 to 1,200. During the period of this research, there were approximately 370 students in the secondary section of the school, which is the focus of this study.

Methodology

In order to investigate what schools do through their overt and hidden curriculum, which can contribute positively or negatively to the construction of democratic and autonomous citizens, this study employs quality methodology of ethnographic nature. Data were collected during a year-long research, from June 2011 to May 2012, involving participant observations of daily and special school activities as well as classroom sessions. A series of semi-structured and unstructured individual and group interviews was also conducted, with 23 students, six teachers, two administrators, one staff member and one parent. The interviews were audio-recorded with permission of the participants and then transcribed. In addition, school documents and teaching plans or roadmaps were also studied, to understand the intended purpose of the formal school curriculum. Spending an extended period of time in schools also allowed me to observe

relationships between different school actors, which constituted an important aspect of school culture and what is considered as hidden curriculum.

Findings

A key finding in this study suggests that the school curriculum, such as the one adopted by the Rainbow School, enables students to explore and engage in social issues and can generate meaningful and critical learning for young people. This learning process, which requires students to investigate, analyze and take actions on social and development problems, can be seen as moving towards instilling a participatory and justice-oriented citizenship (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004). Despite this possibility, however, it is evident that democracy and social justice were not the main aims of the school's progressive educational approach. Rather, social and environmental literacy and activism among students developed as a by-product of the inquiry- and community-based learning approach intended to serve the development of individual students and their skills for the 21st century economy and society, as called for by the Thai education reform. Furthermore, despite the school's attempt to promote horizontal school structure and relationship between different school members (in order to enable shared-decision making and participation which is also reflective of a progressive educational ideal), the values and practice of respect for authority and seniority integral to traditional Thai social structure continue to be observed. This situation has raised questions on the kind of democratic and autonomous citizens that can be constructed in the Thai context. The democratic possibility will be examined first.

Curriculum design and pedagogical approach: a transformative possibility

"Ultimately, the aim of education at the Rainbow School is to prepare young people to be able to rely on themselves and to tackle problems that they will face. This is done through cultivation of self-awareness and social awareness"

(School publication. Translation by the author).

The philosophical and educational aim of the Rainbow School stated here has been supported by the particular design of the school's curriculum and pedagogical approach, which is distinct from that in most regular Thai schools in at least three important ways. First, while following the National Education Curriculum, the Rainbow School has its own consideration for knowledge selection, which recognizes and values knowledge beyond what Apple (2004) calls

'high status' knowledge and that which is geared towards high-stake testing. Unlike other well-known schools that emphasize academic excellence in mathematics and science – the two subject areas which are considered to be macro-economically more beneficial and which have received greater attention in the ongoing education reform – the Rainbow School places importance on social studies, a subject area where citizenship education is formally situated.

Knowledge which the Rainbow School deems important includes what is drawn from Thai traditions and culture, as well as the one embedded in the so-called 'localism discourse'. This discourse revolves around the revival of community as a moral concept that can be used to resist the forces of globalization, the focus on the agricultural sector and local wisdom, and the adoption of the Buddhist conception of moderate consumption (Pongpaichit, 2005). Thus, learning content in key subject area such as social studies has centered on the theme of local knowledge and tradition, as well as changes in Thai society, which have accompanied growth-centered economic development policies. Table 1 highlights the key learning objectives as indicated in the teaching plan or road maps for social studies units belonging to Secondary 1 to 3.

Table 1 Key learning objectives, Social studies units, Secondary 1 to 3. Rainbow School

Class Level /Term	Secondary One	Secondary Two	Secondary Three
Term 1	To learn about and become aware of negative and positive factors affecting the well-being of people living in Bangkok.	To research into the history of rice cultivation culture in Thailand, including through a stay with farmers in rural villages.	To explore the problem of over-consumption by investigating the use and production of plastic items, and to learn about impacts of the industrial sector through a visit to an industrial estate.
Term 2	To understand and become aware of the changes in city life by travelling through and learning about different aspects of Bangkok: administrative, transportation/ communication, arts and	To gain knowledge on the political history of Ayutthaya (capital of the Thai Kingdom in 6-18 centuries), to be able to analyze different sets of historical information and to understand factors	To learn about the industrial revolution in the West and its impact on the world, and to investigate origin of the different manufacturing products in Thailand.

Class Level /Term	Secondary One	Secondary Two	Secondary Three
	culture, tourism, economy and commercial system.	causing political changes in different periods.	
Term 3	To explore historical development of Bangkok for students to appreciate the city's roots and civilization, and for them to help take care of historical sites.	To learn about economic and geographical aspects of the Ayutthaya Kingdom.	To learn about the history of Southeast Asia.

Source: Individual teachers' road maps for 2011 Academic Year

Along with the emphasis on knowledge about Thailand and its history, the school considers teaching skills for 21st century global citizens as a crucial aspect of its education. The development of such knowledge and skills is carried out through the second distinctive feature of the school's curriculum and pedagogy as well as its child-centered and inquiry-based approach. While this pedagogical approach can be seen as responding to the development of skills deemed desirable for the idea-based economy, the school's curriculum, which is organized around local and other thematic areas relevant to the student's real life and the larger societal context, can also be positive for democratic education (Beane & Apple, 2007). At the same time, the thematic and inquiry-based curricular and learning approach allows both teachers and students to engage in a learning process that involves the practices of problem posing, critical reflection and social action – a pedagogy which also underpins social justice education (Cerecer et al., 2010). An example of the learning process and its impact can be gleaned from the case of students in Secondary 5 who took up a project looking at the impacts of development projects on local communities – an important social justice issue in Thailand that often involves opposing viewpoints from various stakeholders.

Developing 21st century skills and participatory citizenship through an inquiry-based learning

The Rainbow School's inquiry- and project-based learning approach involves four basic steps:

- 1) generating some interest in an issue or a problem among the students;

- 2) allowing them to investigate that issue/problem;
- 3) students organize and synthesize the information collected;
- 4) creating a platform to present their learning to their peers and other members of the school community.

Step 4 usually takes place through a series of school-wide term-end presentations. In most cases, the students are encouraged to recommend ways of addressing the problems or the issues under investigation. The self-directed learning approach practiced at the Rainbow School contains elements similar to programs of education for democratic citizenship, as observed by Kahne and Westheimer (2003). According to these scholars, important pedagogical and curricular strategies for supporting democratic and participatory citizenship require creating civic commitment among students, while helping them to develop civic capacity and connection in the learning process. To build a civic commitment, students need first to be exposed to social issues or problems that are controversial or require attention, before being given the opportunity to have a positive experience in engaging with the community on the issues. At the same time, they should be supported to develop skills in research, designing surveys, facilitating meetings and public speaking, as well as connecting with other groups engaged in similar work and with those who can be their role models (Kahne & Westheimer, 2003:61-64).

Students in Secondary 4 and 5 at the Rainbow School are afforded the opportunity to learn about communities, while exploring issues under the broad thematic unit entitled “Knowing every patch of grass in Thailand”. During the time of this research, students in Secondary 5 came to learn about the “Thailand National Spatial Development Plan 2600”,⁶ a country-land use plan designating different parts of Thailand into different land use zones over the next 50 years, with background studies carried out on each of the geographical regions of the country to learn about its resource base, local livelihoods and culture. With their teacher’s guidance, the students studied relevant documents to better understand the context and details of the Plan, using this information to analyze the country’s development direction. They noticed that certain areas of the country have been designated as “major industrial development zones” and this has prompted them to start asking questions about the impact of this Plan on local communities. The students were also keen to know whether the local people had knowledge of the National Spatial Development Plan.

In order to gain further information, the teacher helped them organize a field visit to a community in an eastern province on the bank of the Bang Pakong River, one of the areas designated as a major industrial development zone. The students carried out field research on an industrial estate already established in this province and identified a number of issues of concern,

⁶ The year 2600 represents the Buddhist Era (B.E.), corresponding to 2057 A.D., the difference being 543 years from the birth of Lord Buddha to the birth of Christ. This research took place in 2554 B.E. or 2011 A.D. The ‘Thailand National Spatial Development Plan 2600’ was launched in 2002 (B.E. 2545) and covers Thailand’s 76 provinces.

including the environmental impact created by the industry. Their study also revealed that 95% of the people surveyed were not aware of this National Spatial Development Plan. Equipped with this information, the students organized a forum at the end of the first term to present the findings from their field research and from the survey. The forum was attended by students from other classes, parents, teachers and people from the concerned communities. They also invited some key actors and stakeholders, including representatives from the Department of Public Works and Town and Country Planning, community representatives and academics to join the discussion. The students made their presentations on the importance of the Bang Pakong River Basin and the impacts caused by industrial development in the area. At the same time, they also presented the perspective from the business side about the prospect of economic growth derived from industrial development. After the presentations, two students facilitated a panel discussion on the topic, with the exchanges becoming animated as the speakers from the state agency felt they were being held accountable. However, all ended well and the students were encouraged to take on this project a step further, which they did in the school's second term.

In the second and third terms, the project took students' citizenship learning through their civic engagement onto the next level. The teacher connected the students with a few academics and policy activists involved in spatial planning, who suggested that they look into the country's southern development project, known as Southern Seaboard. The students learned about the actual and potential impact of this project on local communities and started to ask two important questions: "Can spatial planning help to protect the communities?" and "How can students and young people take part in determining the country's development direction?" To help them gain perspective, the students attended a seminar on spatial planning. They also went on field studies to a southern community to document the impact of a steel plant on the local community and the environment, and to learn how local people can be active participants in the process of developing a spatial plan. As well as documenting and analyzing their findings, the students also recorded what they learned from the experience. Through their connection with the academic and policy activists, the students took up the challenge of developing a Health Impact Assessment report (HIA), which is a constitutional requirement prior to implementation a development project. The students were granted funding from the Office of the National Health Committee to prepare this report, which they completed at the end of their school year in the third term. The students' final activity consisted of a forum entitled "Participation of civil society, especially youth" to share their findings from the field studies and to present the HIA report containing facts, figures and information relating to local livelihoods (agriculture and fishery) and the development of the steel industry in the area. The report also highlighted voices and actions by local people to engage in the area's planning process, as well as shedding light on inefficiencies in the official spatial planning process, including the absence of meaningful participation by local communities.

As a result of this project, the students developed a greater sense of social and environmental justice, by learning about the country's development plan and their exposure to local communities. Greater awareness of the issues involved, and the views about the causes of the problem, are reflected in a conversation I had with three student participants in this learning process:

Researcher: So, what did you learn from this project?

Student 1: Both areas that we studied are the country's important food hubs. If they disappear we will have to find food from other sources which may not be available. If the tuna fish are gone from here [Bang Pakong River], the ones at Mae Klong [River] will be gone too because they are connected.

Student 2: We found out that there are a number of foreign companies involved in the business. If they come to take over our food hub and there is a food or energy crisis in the future where would we get our food? Other countries probably won't sell us their food. Why should we risk having foreigners taking our land to make money? I guess we don't want to be the world's toilet but rather [we want to be] the world's kitchen!

While the above comments point at some external factors seemingly creating problems in Thailand, the students also had interesting responses to my question on how they perceive themselves as being part of the problem or part of the solution:

Student 1: We are probably both. We consume a lot from the industrial sector. But I think there should be some consideration for what the country has lost. Perhaps we need to have a balance by having only a moderate level of industrial development.

Student 2: The industry expands because of people's overconsumption. If we can limit our consumption, then [the industry] probably won't need to expand more than [it is] necessary.

Student 3: We have to begin with ourselves by changing the way we consume.

Researcher: How about at the structural level? How would you address the problem?

Student 3: Perhaps we can spread information... as we did with the National Spatial Development Plan. We can also do the same about this problem.

The views expressed by the above students reflect the localism development knowledge and values which the school has tried to promote, i.e., that the problem of resource

depletion and unsustainable development practices in Thailand are caused by the country's pro-industrial development direction and overconsumption. Individually, students see that it is also their responsibility to alter their consumption pattern to a moderate level. While changing individual behavior carries importance, it is clear that the students are not analyzing the problem from a structural perspective. In this connection, Westheimer and Kahne (2004:244) argue that although the traits of personally-responsible citizens – including taking responsibility for one's community, obeying the laws and volunteering – have the potential to strengthen a democracy, they “are not *inherently* about democracy” (original emphasis), since such characters are also desirable in a totalitarian regime. Thus, although this learning approach helps foster responsible and participatory citizenship, it does not automatically produce justice-oriented citizens who would question and challenge systemic injustices.

In this respect, it is important to note that developing social literacy and activism through experiential and community-based learning, as in the case above, was not the main initial purpose of education at the Rainbow School. The initial purpose of community-based learning, according to a senior teacher, was to allow students to see things with their own eyes, rather than learning from textbooks. However, as both students and teachers became more connected to the communities and issues they were exposed to, there emerged a new consciousness, including the realization that the students should do something for the society.⁷ Although learning about social justice and democracy was not the initial purpose of education at the Rainbow School, its experience suggested that school curriculum that enables learners to explore and engage in social and development issues, and their uneven effects, can be a crucial dimension of education for democratic citizenship in the context of Thailand. Yet, more will need to be done to teach students to analyze structural issues of inequality and injustice, for justice-oriented citizens to bring about social change. Next, the challenges for developing democratic and autonomous persons that lie in unequal power relations in the school context will be explored.

Contradictions in progressivism: power relations in the school and the challenges for democratic learning

The elements of progressive education, as discussed above, provide an example of what schools can do through their overt curriculum for positive implications on the development of democratic citizenship. However, it has been pointed out that ‘incidental’ learning, or hidden curriculum, can more effectively influence students’ political socialization than civic classes or “other forms of deliberate teaching of specific value orientations” (Apple, 2004:79). An important aspect of learning about democracy and the principles of autonomous citizens in the school context lies in how democratic ideas and practices are conceived through a formal and informal

⁷ Personal communication, 1 July 2011.

school structure (Kanpol, 1999; Beane & Apple, 2007). Studies have shown that in schools, structures are characterized by bureaucratic administration and hierarchical control. Shared decision-making and an egalitarian ethos, which are indicators for school democracy, are uncommon features in most traditional schools around the world, including Thailand (Harber & Mncube, 2012; Tanosawan & Pornprachatham, 2010). However, at the Rainbow School, where a progressive pedagogy is adopted, the school has also tried to create an egalitarian school structure, to enable a more horizontal relationship between different school actors through the practice of communal living. Thus, unlike in traditional Thai schools where lines of authority are well defined under the formal school structure, at the Rainbow School this aspect of formal school hierarchy seems to be rather discreet. Kennedy and Lee (2010:125) have also observed that in traditional Thai schools, principals can act as the sole decision-making power in the school. The school administrators explained that the school's top leadership does not attach much importance to institutional structures, which tend to be hierarchical and bureaucratic. Instead, a kind of 'collective' leadership, as well as non-bureaucratized and egalitarian interactions between different members of the school community, is to be encouraged. However, while this idea has the potential to promote a greater equality and participation by different school actors, in practice it can create tensions with the Thai norm of deference and obedience toward authority and seniority.⁸ This situation can be observed both in the relationships between the school's top leadership, teachers and administrators on the one hand, and between teachers and students on the other.

One of the school's practices viewed by the school administrator as reflecting a horizontal relationship between the school's leadership and the teachers, concerns the teachers' autonomy in curriculum planning⁹ and the teachers' role in shaping certain school practices – both deemed important aspects of school democracy (Kanpol, 1999; Beane & Apple, 2007). Teachers at the Rainbow School appear to enjoy a level of autonomy and control over their professional life and in making decisions on certain aspects of school practices. Some long-serving teachers mentioned that they appreciated the space provided by the school for them to explore and experiment with ideas in developing the learning process. One teacher remarked: "I enjoy doing this...devising teaching plans...it's always challenging. They [the administrators] also let the teachers help solve the problems (through meeting circles), to propose solutions and to try them out. This is how we can learn all the time".¹⁰ However, through my observation and interviews with teachers, it is evident that the school's top leadership – or what everyone in the

⁸ In Thailand, this custom is known as 'phu yai', with deference and respect shown to people of higher rank or status.

⁹ Every teacher is expected to develop their own teaching plan or "roadmap" for each school term. This includes a description of themes and topics they will teach, as well as the process of teaching and learning.

¹⁰ Personal communication, 16 January 2012.

school refers to as *Ajam*¹¹ – continued to exert a high level of control by, for example, not approving the plans prepared by teachers and asking for them to be revised. In this regard, the exercise of autonomy and control on the part of teachers may be more limited than what has been projected. Furthermore, despite the non-hierarchical and non-authoritarian structure and culture promoted by the school, teachers feel a mix of intimidation and respect towards the school's top leadership. According to a teacher, “although we are told to be direct about any concerns or problems, no one dares to talk to [the school's top leadership] frankly. Everyone seems to say what *Ajam* wants to hear... it's like there is some power which everyone is afraid of”.¹² Whether such a ‘culture of fear’ reflects a real or perceived authority, or both, that has been exercised by the top leadership, this situation poses an important challenge to the ideas and practices of democracy in the school. I realize from talking to the teachers that despite the expectation that they help empower the students, much of their own personal welfare or rights may have never been articulated or effectively addressed.

One of the problems faced by a number of teachers, especially those teaching in the lower-secondary level, has been that of work overload. Due to the innovative teaching-learning approach adopted by the school, teachers spend considerable periods of time preparing for class and making assessments. Moreover, teachers are required to participate in the school's ‘teacher development training’ sessions, which are normally held at the weekend. An old-time teacher stated that she had voiced her concern about work overload at teachers’ meetings but the point was disregarded because teachers in the upper-secondary level did not encounter that specific problem. At the same time, the teachers felt reluctant to discuss this problem with the school's top leadership, because “if we were to tell [the school's top leadership] our concerns...[they] might ask us what we want. So, we have to think about it first...whether this problem is a real issue or is it because we don't manage our work well enough. [...] But it's also difficult for us to talk about cutting down on teaching time as we see *Ajam* works all the time. She has set a very high standard”.¹³

Studies on progressive schools elsewhere suggest that, in traditional institutes, operationalizing democratic and egalitarian structures and practices, to replace hierarchical and authoritarian structures, can be fraught with tensions and challenges. In a progressive school in the US, where democratic school governance through shared-decision making was adopted, teachers spent substantial amounts of time in teachers’ professional development programs and attending meetings to discuss and take decisions on various aspects of school life. Although teachers were appreciative of the fact that their voices really counted, they also felt that the process was draining. Despite such tensions, however, the principal and the teachers did try to

¹¹ In Thailand, ‘*Ajam*’ (teacher) denotes high-school or university teachers.

¹² Personal communication, 10 October 2011.

¹³ Personal communication, 16 January 2012.

work with, and support, one another, to ensure that teachers were able to voice their concerns and towards collective decisions and responsibility in governing the school – the process which occasionally included teachers standing up to the principal's views and taking decisions on certain matters (Knoester, 2010).

In the case of the Rainbow School, however, despite attempts by the school to promote an egalitarian school culture, hierarchical and unequal relationships persist between the school leadership and the teachers, as well as among the teachers themselves. The teachers feel a mix of fear and deference towards the benevolence and wisdom of the school leadership, while also exhibiting a sense of uncertainty and inadequacy on their part. This situation is arguably related to the aspect of Thai social norms embedded in what Mulder (2000:60-63) defines as the “hierarchy of unequal moral relationships” and the “powerful hierarchy” between individuals.¹⁴ As such, unlike experiences in Western societies, the Thai cultural concepts of hierarchy and inequality constitute an important consideration and challenge for practicing democracy and developing autonomous citizens in the Thai context. At the same time, although the informal and non-bureaucratized school structure allows for a more collective decision-making process that rests on non-adversarial and communal ideals of democracy, such a practice does not automatically translate into an equitable outcome, as in the case of the discussion on work overload between teachers in lower- and upper-secondary levels. In this regard, it needs to be recognized that unequal power relations exist in the seemingly non-hierarchical space of ‘meeting circles’. The contradictions inherent in this kind of context are also evident in the relationship between teachers and students at the Rainbow School, as discussed next.

Students-teachers relationships

The relationship pattern between teachers and students at the Rainbow School reflects the norms between the school leadership and teachers, with a degree of openness and participation observed between teachers and students. The administrators and teachers are of the view that the student-teacher relationship is not one of hierarchy but equality, since “the students can express their opinions on any issues”.¹⁵ The students confirm this, by saying “we have been close to the teachers since we were young...we can talk to them and consult them on

¹⁴ Mulder (2000) distinguishes between hierarchies of unequal moral relationships, as encountered in intimate circles (parents-children or teachers- students, based on the recognition of wisdom, leadership, benevolence and relative age), and powerful hierarchies of more distant, yet still personal relationships, characterized by suspicion and uncertainty.

¹⁵ Personal communication, 16 January 2012.

any issues”.¹⁶ These statements are corroborated by my own observations, with interactions between teachers and students appearing cordial. I did not witness teachers raise their voices or corporal punishment¹⁷ being meted out. Generally, teachers at the Rainbow School do not overtly exercise power over the students. In fact, I have been informed that the school's top leadership wants the teachers to refrain from exercising any power of authority over the students. On the other hand, students mentioned feeling inadequate while having mixed perceptions about the democratic outlook of the school and the teachers. The students expressed different views about the level of participation they have access to, in making decisions concerning their own learning and on various aspects of school life. According to some students, they are able to participate in making classroom rules and taking decisions related to students' activities, such as sports day and other special events. However, other students stressed that the school leadership and the teachers do not usually canvas students for their opinions about important policies and practices, but merely inform them of changes in the curriculum or school rules. The students expressed rather negative views:

“On the surface the school seems to be democratic because they let students express their opinions such as on setting up classroom rules. But on bigger issues students don't have the right to give opinions”.¹⁸

“I want to have a school website where we can put our comments. I've googled other schools and saw that students can make comments about their schools but we can't do that here...so there are no opinions”.¹⁹

Although progressive education considers the development of responsibility and personal autonomy in children to be depended on the “positive climate of reciprocal trust and respect in which young people are free from the manipulative pressures of social, political or other indoctrination, and to express their views without fear or anxiety” (Carr, 2003:226-227), it is evident that students at the Rainbow School are not always able to relate to their teachers

¹⁶ Personal communication, 16 January 2012.

¹⁷ Corporal punishment was prohibited in Thai schools in 2000, when the Regulation on the Punishment of Students 2000 did not include caning among permitted disciplinary measures. This was subsequently revised and the Ministry of Education Regulation on Student Punishment 2005 similarly does not include corporal punishment among permitted disciplinary measures ('Corporal punishment of children in Thailand', Report prepared by the Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children (www.endcorporalpunishment.org), accessed 5 June 2016, <http://www.endcorporalpunishment.org/assets/pdfs/states-reports/Thailand.pdf>).

¹⁸ Personal communication, 5 January 2012.

¹⁹ Personal communication, 5 January 2012.

without anxiety or fear. Some students talked about how negative reactions by some teachers have made them feel rejected:

“When we complain to the teachers, they would sometimes respond in a way which just turns us down. They would say “so what”. Then we don’t know what to say... It felt like we have been rejected. There are teachers who listen to you, but there are also those who are not so open”.²⁰

It is striking to observe that this kind of interaction between students and teachers mirrors views expressed by some teachers about their relationship with the administrators, especially with the school’s top leadership. Evidently, the pattern of relationships between the students and some teachers has developed over the years, with the students responding to this situation through self-censorship and by developing indifference towards what the teachers say and do. In this connection, Mulder (2000: 66-67) suggests that Thais cultivate the attitude of indifference to cope with the pressure of a hierarchical or obligation-inducing society. Although such an attitude serves to maintain the smooth surface of Thai social life, as pointed out by Mulder (2000), this practice can hinder democratic values by creating a culture of non-participation and avoidance. Hence, according to the students:

“We’ve learned that if the teachers are not OK with what we were trying to say, then we can’t do anything. When we were in Secondary 1 we had some disagreements with the teacher but were not successful [in getting the teachers to accept our ideas], then the same thing happened in Secondary 2 and 3. So now we stop having any arguments and disagreements. We let the teachers do their own thing and we do our own thing. If the teachers complain, we listen...but we might not do what they ask us to do...so it becomes a problem”.²¹

The comments by the students above also revealed that there are some contradictions in the ideas and practice of equality and horizontal relationships between students and teachers. There are also challenges in finding a balance between the development of autonomous individuals and the exercise of freedom of expression by the students on the one hand, and their adherence to Thai cultural norm of showing respect and obedience towards one’s seniors, on the other. While teachers at the Rainbow School encourage students to express their views and to be critical in a classroom context or as part of the school’s formal learning, they also feel uncomfortable about the way their students express themselves or raise questions in other

²⁰ Personal communication, 16 January 2012.

²¹ Personal communication, 16 January 2012.

contexts, especially when it concerns various school rules and practices. The teachers are of the view that some students do not understand that there are limits to their freedom of expression. A senior teacher pointed out that “the students cannot use their freedom to scold a teacher if the teacher has said something that they do not like and made them feel bad because knowing what’s appropriate and giving respect to seniority is the strength of our culture. But they don’t have to be afraid of seniority. They can tell the teachers that they are really upset but they have to do it politely”.²²

In this respect, it becomes apparent that while the Rainbow School promotes a progressive curriculum and pedagogy, which can have positive implications for the development of democratic and autonomous citizens, traditional values and norms concerning respect for, and obedience towards, authority and seniority continue to be enforced. Despite the adoption of a horizontal school structure, teachers and students learn how to relate to people of different status through their everyday interactions embedded in Thai cultural norms. The importance of these norms was reflected in a comment made by the vice-principal of the secondary school section. According to her, “when we didn’t have the term democracy, we lived together by adhering to culture and tradition...culture is our law...so we live by [the value of] *kala-thesa*”.²³

The Thai cultural observation of *kala-thesa*, which refers to what is appropriate in terms of manner, behavior and expression according to the time and occasion, reflects an important value in the Thai way of life. According to Van Esterik: “this [Thai] contextual sensitivity to the right time and place for actions and statements is essential to the maintenance of an internally differentiated pattern of powers over social life and cultural expression”.²⁴ However, as this norm comes into conflict with the value of autonomous individuals being promoted by the school, the ensuing tensions are not easy to reconcile. This situation represents one aspect of the challenges to democratic learning and practices in the context of a progressive Thai school which represents a more advanced end of the Thai education scene.

Conclusion

In response to economic changes and challenges that emerged in the last few decades, a number of schools in Thailand have adopted new teaching and learning methodologies based on direct experience, to teach critical thinking and problem-solving skills to the citizens. The case of the Rainbow School demonstrates that pedagogical progressivism can enable the development of skills deemed desirable for the idea-based economy that depends on research

²² Personal communication, 10 February 2012.

²³ Personal communication, 10 October 2011.

²⁴ Penny Van Esterik. 1999. ‘Repositioning Gender, Sexuality, and Power in Thai Studies’, in *Genders and Sexualities in Modern Thailand*, (P.A. Jackson and N.M. Cook, eds.), pp. 275-89, cited in Jackson 2004:190.

and innovation, communication and intellectual knowledge (Kennedy, 2008). At the same time, exploring social issues helps to foster social awareness and civic commitment among the learners, which constitute an important foundation for the development of democratic citizenship. However, while such scenario presents an important possibility in Thai education, the aim of constructing democratic and autonomous citizens is challenged by the adherence to Thai cultural norms and practices of respect towards hierarchy and authority. Despite attempts by the school to move away from a hierarchical school structure and authoritarian school culture, there continues to be unequal power relationships between different members of the school community. In order to enable a more powerful and genuine construction of democratic and autonomous citizens, it is pertinent to question existing inequality in Thai schools and Thai society at large while ensuring that education institutions can be a place for fostering greater democratic values and experience for all young people.

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