Contemporary Thai Primary Schools through the Years

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ABSTRACT

Amidst the various educational reforms implemented in Thai education system is a burning question of the current state of schools in the country. What has been accomplished and what is there to improve? This paper utilized a qualitative research design in exploring the current state of Thai primary schools in Thailand. Specifically, it employed critical discourse analysis to extract relevant data from pre-service teacher's coursebooks. Additionally, an informal interview was conducted to supplement and provide further information on the areas of school learning resources, daily routines, school activities, classroom rules, and new functions of teachers aside from teaching. Observations and responses were coded and grouped into themes. The results of the study showed some progress along learning resources; several changes in daily routines and school activities; a more comprehensive classroom policies that include social and cultural rules; and a multi-faceted functions of Thai teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decades, Thailand's economy has grown prodigiously. It has been very competitive not just in Asia but in the world. In its 20-year national strategic framework (2017-2036), the country aims to advance from its current state as a 'developing' country to a 'developed' country (The Nation Thailand, 2017). At present, Thailand is one of the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). As one of the pillars, it will ensure a thriving economy for its people through various means including capitalizing on the power of education to flourish its economy. It has relentlessly crafted and implemented various educational reforms to address national and local educational problems. These reforms had been undergoing since 1997 following the crisis that enervated Thailand's economy. While the situation was an outright political and economic dilemma, there was a unanimous understanding that the 'inadequate education system' in the country was a significant contributory factor (Zack 1997; The Nation 2001; Jungck & Kajornsin, 2003).

Some of the major reforms include the National Education Act of 1999 and the 2008 Basic Education Core Curriculum. The NEA Act of 1999 laid in provisions to reform three major areas of Thai education system including: the teaching and learning methods, school management systems, and the framework of education in Thailand. It has also intended to decentralize authority; focus efforts on local initiatives in addressing educational needs of the people; support educational practitioners; accommodate Thai tradition, culture and beliefs into the curriculum; develop a learning environment where learners play an active roles in the teaching and learning process; and improve quality education (Fry, 2002; Hallinger, 2004; Wongwanich & Wiratchai, 2004; Kantamara, Hallinger, & Jatiket, 2006; Hallinger & Lee, 2011).

In AY 2005, the Basic Education Curriculum B.E. 2001, was implemented in all grade level in the primary school. It played a major role in the Thai curriculum at the basic level (The Basic Education Commission, 2001). It provided a framework for preparing Thailand school curriculums. Notable principles are as follow. 1. To create standards that will serve as a foundation for Thai-ness and universal values among learners; 2. To make high quality education accessible to all; 3. To promote decentralisation of Thai education system; 4. To structure the Thai curriculum for all types of education; and 5. To advocate learner-centered approach to teaching. Revisions on the Basic Education curriculum encompassed many other factors, like changes on what to teach, how to teach, who should teach, how to assess the teaching-learning process and many more. Consequently, new learning standards and learning outcomes had been generated that required new facilities and application of better teaching techniques and approaches.

Despite the overwhelming effort conducted to overhaul Thai education system, however, overall learning outcomes and the quality of education continues to lag behind. Fry and Bi (2013) reported that Thai education ranks very low on various assessments that includes the Global Competitiveness Report in 2012; TIMMS international assessment in 2011; the ONESQA; and in the OBEC report. Moreover, a recent study on the state of English language in Thailand also revealed that despite the country's 'willingness' to be competitive internationally and the government's policies and national reforms, the improvement remains at a very low level (Kaur et al., 2016).

Thus, this study was conceptualized to provide an updated glimpse of the current state of Thai schools and how far it has progressed since the implementation of various educational reforms. Although a number of literature regarding Thai schools and education abound, the focus is mostly restricted to a certain aspect of Thai schools and not providing a general picture which can be crucial to understanding the so called 'Thai education paradox' (Fry, 2002). Such study will be helpful in providing baseline data to improve future educational reforms. It will also aid in tracking progress of what had been achieved and how it can be further regulated to ensure success in the future.As the topic already covers a broad range of areas for investigation, the authors deemed it necessary to delimit the scope by focusing only to Thai primary schools along the following areas:
a. the school learning resources;
b. daily routines;

c. school activities;

d. classroom rules; and

e. other functions done by the teachers aside from teaching.

Thai schools and education system

Several studies have investigated various aspects of Thai educational system assumed to have contributed to the distressing state of the national and local education system. Yunibandhu (2004) cites problems arise as Thai cultural framework remains the basis of judgement and action within the school. For instance, Thai schools are characterized by high power distance which is evident in the hierarchical and beauraucratic management system (Hallinger & Kantamara, 2000). The teacher-centered approach is still prevalent with traditional learning modes that emphasize memory and passive learning (Fry, 2002). Deveney (2005) describes a typical day at a Thai school as follows: it starts with assembly, followed by lessons, break, lessons, lunch, etc., At break-time, the children ran outside to play football or chat to their teachers. Classes are mainly conducted with a one-way-communication: teacher to student Students were reported to be well-behaved and discipline was a nonissue and they continue to be non-participative and passive inside the classrooms. According Hallinger and Kantamara (2000), to understand Thai schools, one has to start from understanding the local culture.

Thai school activities are also mostly reflective of the Buddhist beliefs and traditions. This is manifested in the frequent ceremonies celebrated in schools such as Songkran Festival, Makha Bucha Day, Buddhist Lent Day, etc. Other activities are organized in observance of royal ceremonies such as Majesty king Maha Vajiralongkorn's Birthday, H.M. the Queen's Birthday, Chulalongkorn Memorial Day etc. or in celebration of historical milestones such as the Constitution Day. Thathong (2010) cites several other learning activities typical in most Thai schools like Boys and Girls Scout activities, events that are geared towards environmental education, clubs, and projects in and outside the school premises.

In terms of the physical environment, Thai schools are very similar to typical schools with displays on the walls, blackboards to explain concepts, and children writing on their notes (Deveney, 2005). However, evidence of improvements were noted along technology and the use of ICT in the classrooms. For instance, thousands of Thai schools are utilizing Thai-Com satellites for educational purposes (Fry, 2002). Similar result has also been reported by Hallinger and Lee (2011) as they investigate the state of ICT implementation among schools in Thailand. Regarding the matter, the study showed that financial support has been a key factor in the inadequacy of educational reform implementation in general; however, this is not the case in the ICT affairs. The Thai government has evidently made ICT a priority as sufficient funding was allocated to ensure its successful implementation. When compared to international schools, Thai schools are nowhere behind (Deveney, 2005). There have been many improvements specially in the aspect of learning resources.

Also at the heart of the educational reforms are the teachers and administrators whose duties and responsibilities will have to adjust to the policy changes. Khemmani (2006) lists possible new roles that include acting as facilitators and advisors, designers of new learning activities and experiences, counselor who

provides encouragement, and assistants to students in their journey to self discovery. The learner-centred policy, likewise, transforms teachers from being the source of knowledge to the role of facilitators of knowledge as they assist students to learn how to learn. (Nonkukhetkhong et al., 2006). Moreover, teacher expectations have also become multi-faceted (Noom-Ura, 2013). They are no longer just expected to deliver lectures, they are also expected to effectively use technology in their teaching, conduct research in education, and carry out various administrative tasks required in classroom and school-wide assessments and evaluations. These expectations and additional tasks for teachers are posing various problems within the new educational paradigm (Pimpa, 2005; Punthumasen, 2007; Yordsala et al., 2014; Samriangjit et al., 2016).

METHODOLOGY

The study utilized critical discourse analysis (CDA) method to analyze and interpret the texts written by pre-service teachers in their coursebook and an informal interview held on July 20, 2019 to supplement the data retrieved from the coursebook analysis. The respondents of the study include a total of 34 pre-service teachers who are undergoing their Practicum 1 course in 30 public and private primary schools in Bangkok and Nakhonnayok, Thailand. The observation lasted for a month with the respondents reporting daily to their cooperating schools. The use of observation in gathering data is advantageous for its directness and flexibility (Cargan, 2007). When conducting observation, one can record actions and behaviors happening at the moment with all its natural and authentic truth. Additionally, one can utilize not just the sense of sight but also various senses including the sense of touch, smell, taste, and feeling to gather data and make relevant conclusions. The pre-service teachers are English and Science education majors and are, at the time of the study, on their fourth year of higher education studies under the five-year education curriculum. All pre-service teachers are Thai students who have previous experiences of random classroom observations in community schools during their freshmen and sophomore years for community service activities such as English for Community, English Camps, and English Teaching Outreach Programs. Utilizing, therefore, the pre-service teacher's observations, reflections, and first-hand experiences will be very insightful of the current states and affairs of Thai primary schools as they are tasked to conduct objective observations and develop comprehensive reports regarding their assigned cooperative partner schools. Results of the observations on the areas of learning resources were counted and converted into percentage scale while responses on daily routines, classroom rules, and teacher's function in school were coded and grouped into themes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The overall data gathered from the teacher trainees were organized and grouped into the following themes:

Research objective 1: What learning resources were observed by the practice teachers in the different cooperating schools?

The pre service teachers observed different learning resources in the different schools where they were exposed. All schools are equipped with basic facilities that include classroom, library, guidance office, computer laboratory, playground, canteen, and faculty room. The facilities for learning science and technology has the greatest percentage with 91%. Additionally, the schools do not value only the integration of technology but also protects the health of the students as shown by the 82 % rank for the facilties on health and physical activities.

Table 1. Learning Resources (N=34).

		Number	**Percent**
1	Facilities for learning science and technology	31	91
2	Facilities on health and physical acivities	28	82
3	Language learning facilities	23	68
4	Facilities for arts and culture	18	53
5	Facilities for religious expression	5	15

Learning resources play an important role in any educational institution. According to Sims and Sims (1995), the availability of learning resources can influence the choice of instructional design which in turn is crucial in choosing the instructional design needed for students' learning. Thai primary schools have adhered to this idea and have prioritized learning resources in their institution as releflected in the result of this study. Whether it is a private or a public school, Thai primary schools have ensured the availability of learning resources including dedicated rooms or spaces to support certain subject areas (Chaney & Lewis, 2007) as follows:

a) Facilities for learning science and technology

Most schools have science laboratories to support the learning of science subjects. In addition, many schools have also built rooms for learning technologies such as STEM rooms, Smart TV rooms, and even media center in more affluent private schools. This implies the eagerness of Thai schools to be globally competitive and to facilitate teaching and learning by bringing and using technology in the schools. Papert (1980) argues that an educational system that puts technology in the center provides students with the ability to cope with difficulties they may encounter in the learning process. So, to help students learn, technological opportunities should be offered to them. "I learned a lot in the STEM room. My cooperating teacher taught me how to use the facilities in the room and how I can use it in my work as an English teacher in the future." "I am very familiar with science laboraties because my major is teaching science. I am happy to see modern science laboraties in elementary schools.It makes me excited to work in the future."

b) Facilities for health and physical acivities

As good brain demands a good body and good health, schools have medical units in times where students feel sick or in cases of emergency. Sports are also encouraged among learners with school gyms and even swimming pools.

> *I experienced helping a student. He was dizzy so I brought her to the school clinic. The experience made me realize the importance of clinics in schools. I never went there as a student so I do not think of it much before.*

"The school I observed has a big swimming pool. Many students enjoy swimming there on Wednesdays."

c) Language learning facilities

For language learning, Thai and English language are encouraged among young learners. For this purpose, schools have language laboratories equipped with computers, headsets, and software systems for students to listen, record, and communicate in the target language with their peers. "In one of our classes in the college, we used language laboratory for practicing TOEIC. Now, I am confident working with my cooperative teacher in the language laboratory." "Every classroom has computer in the school that I observed so it is easy when the teacher wants to play songs and show videos to students."

d) Facilities for arts and culture

The promotion of arts and culture is another primary focus in Thai education system; thus students are motivated to learn, understand, and appreciate Thai culture, arts and tradition. Music rooms, piano rooms, art rooms, and social studies rooms are made available for students not just to learn but to experience arts and culture as they get involved with performance activities and immerse themselves with real life stories and various historical events. "I like the music room a lot. I can play the piano so I can help some students." "I live in the countryside and my elementary school have few facilities. I am surprised to see piano rooms in my cooperative school because it is a small school."

e) Facilities for religious expression

Although Thailand is known as a Buddhist country, it has shown great respect to other religions. Schools, for instance, provide rooms for religious practices among their students -a chapel for Christians and a prayer room for Muslim believers. "I am muslim so I am really happy to see the prayer room in the school where I had my practicum." "In xxx, they have a chapel for conducting mass every Wednesady."

Research objective 2: What daily routines did the practice teachers observe during their teaching practicum?

In order to create a collaborative working environment conducive for learning and teaching, the school and classroom activities should be well-planned and well-

organized to maintain order and prevent chaos. This is also to achieve the mission and vision setforth by the schools. Table 2 shows the school routines and Table 3 covers the classroom routines. The school routines start by assemblying together to set the tone of the day. Consequently, it is followed by the different classes to carry out the different fields of learning in the varied grade levels. On the other hand, the classroom routines, as shown in Table 3, are the activities done inside the classrooms as each field of study unravels. This starts with a greeting and ends with giving of homework to the students.

Table 2. School routines.

Activity	Time	
	(Grades 1-3)	(Grades 4-5)
Assembly	8:00-8:20 am	
Class Time	8:20-10:10 am	8:20-11:05 am
Lunch Break	10:10-11:05 am	11:05-12:00 am
Class Time	11:05-3:05 pm	12:00-3:05 pm
Clean Up Time	3:05-4:05 pm	

Classroom routines, on the other hand, include:

Table 3. Classroom routines.

Time	Acitivity
5 minutes	Greetings/Pray/Introduction
10 minutes	Review of Previous Lessons
25 minutes	Class Time
5 minutes	Activity Time
5 minutes	Homework Period

Two types of daily routines were observed by the pre-service students – school routines which is observed by everyone within the school premise and the more variable classroom routines. The typical school routine starts with the assembly where the National Anthem is played followed by other activities as Buddhist chanting, students vows, recitation of school motto and creed, a short talk on moral and ethics, and announcement for the day (Barrow, 2019). Activities were also different for students from Grades 1-3 to students in Grades 4-6. Students in Grades 1-3 starts the day with Home Room Period and 2 morning classes with a lunch break usually from 10:10-11:05 am. In the afternoon, there were 4 classes with a 20 minutes break after the first two classes. For Grades 4-5 students, morning schedule consists of 3 classes with the first break of 20 minutes after the first class. Lunch period is again followed by 3 classes with a 20 minutes break after the first two classes. All students participate in the cleaning time at around 3:05-4:05 pm.

Classroom routines include the typical activities as introduction, review time, class time, activity time, and homework period. However, these specific periods may come in various activities. For instance, introduction can be singing a song in

English, a short pray time, a greeting time, a dance performance, etc. Homework period too can be anything from checking of homework, assigning homework, or copying homework from the board. For the more affluent schools, activity time may include mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) where students play online games through their smartphones or ipads. Club activities, English conversation classes, and Scout period are also randomly scheduled throughout the week for specific classes or groups of students.

Research objective 3: What school activities have the students participated during their practicum?

The teacher trainees joined different school activities in their assigned cooperating schools and these were grouped into three communities and societal awareness, religious or spiritual, and career-related activities. Out of 27 activities gathered, career-related was the greatest 61.54%, followed by community and societal awareness activities with 26.92% and the least was religious or spiritual with 11.54%.

Table 4. School activities participated by primary students.

Activities	Number of activities	Percentage
Career-related	16	62.54
Community and societal awareness	7	27.92
Religious or spiritual	3	12.54
Total	**27**	**100**

The teacher trainees were assigned to different cooperating schools within the district and they observed that each school has its own school activities. They observed activities that were related to the   teaching –learning process, community or societal awareness, and spiritual or religious activities. These allowed them to be exposed to possible activities that can be held in school settings. This exposure was essential for them because it provided an opportunity and experience about working conditions at schools (Jogan, 2018). The exposure also helps them prepare for the teaching career in the future. Effective induction has shown to have a positive impact on pre-service teacher professional development and retention as well as student achievement (Villar & Strong, 2007; Ingersoll, 2012). The high percentage of the career-related activities participated by the pre-service teachers confirms the sincerity of the different schools to do the jobs assigned to them.

a) Career- related activities

As discussed earlier, most of the activities participated by the teacher trainees were career-related – a profession for which they train (Career, 2019). Among the most common cited activities by the students were 'Welcome Back to School Activity', 'Orientation Day of Students', 'To be Number One Evaluation Activity', and co-curricular and extra- curricular activities. Welcoming students to school makes them feel that they are under the guidance of caring adults and it makes them

feel secure and motivated to learn and participate in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities (Lanier, 1997).

> *"I joined the welcoming of students for the new school year. It was very exciting and scary for me. Exciting because it is my first day and scary because I am not sure if the students like me or not."*

"The science club was very fun may be because I like science and I will become a science teacher in the future."

b) Community or societal awareness related activities

Aside from joining career-related activities, there were activities that were held by the cooperating schools related to the events happening in their community, nation, or the whole world. Nowadays, teaching profession does not only include teaching inside the classroom but advocating students on a political level that teachers have to work with politicians, colleagues, and the community members to set clear and attainable standards for students (Cox, 2019). These activities were: World Tobacco Day, Remembrance to General Prem, Wai Khru Day, and Royal Coronation of the King. "When students paid respect to me during the Wai Krhu Day, I felt so happy and proud. I can feel I am a real teacher at that time." "The World Tobacco Day was very memorable for me because I helped in making props for the event."

c) Religious or spiritual related activities

The activities identified in this theme were: Visakha Bucha Day, Eucharistic celebration, and Catholic activities and festivities. Thailand is a very religious country with 93.6% Buddhists and 1.2 % Christians. Their being religious affected their everyday life and even the activities in schools. Visakha Bucha Day is the most important Buddhist holiday that commemorates Buddha's birthday, death, and enlightenment (Cavanagh, 2014). The Eucharistic celebrations and festivities were important too, to the Christians and were celebrated in the Catholic schools in Thailand. "I am Catholic but I have respect of the Buddhist ceremony so I joined the celebration of Visacha Bucha Day.I helped students in giving their offerings to the monks." "I join the mass on Wednesdays with my students."

Research objective 4: What classroom rules have they observed during their practicum?

The teacher trainees observed that every cooperating school formulated their classroom rules. These rules were formulated by students with their teachers to have a set of principles that will guide them in their conduct. The rules formulated were categorized as academic, social, procedural, and cultural (Curvin, 2014). It was noted that most of the rules formulated were on procedural rules with a percentage of 47.06, followed by social rules, academic rules, and social rules with percentages of 23.53, 20.59 and 8.82 respectively. The high percentage of procedural rules would imply the high regard of Thai people to teach the young generation to follow

procedures such that peace and order be maintained and maximum learning can take place.

Table 5. Classroom rules followed by primary students.

No.	Rules	Number of Rules	Percentage
1.	Procedural	16	47.06
2	Social	8	23.53
3	Academic	7	20.59
4	Cultural	3	8.82
	Total	**34**	**100**

Classroom management is possibly the most important challenge facing beginning teachers. A new teachers' reputation among colleagues, school administrators, school authorities, and students will be strongly influenced by his or her ability to perform the managerial functions of teaching, particularly creating an orderly learning environment and dealing with students behavior (Arends, 2012). Classroom management and instructions are highly interrelated (Brophy & Putnam, 1979; Evertson & Emmer, 2008) As such, the pre-service teachers should be taught the importance of classroom rules to the teaching and learning process and be trained to formulate these rules with his or her students, because students are more likely to follow them if they are involved in formulating them. Like any other schools in the world, these pre-service teachers also observed students with emotional and behavioral problems. Westling (2010) reported that dealing with these challenging behaviors take up a significant amount of teacher's time, reduces their effectiveness as teachers, and inhibits the ability of the other children's learning. Hence, they must be deat with accordingly to ensure overall teaching-learning effectiveness.

a) Procedural rules

These are the rules and expectations implemented in the classrooms like keeping the room tidy and clean, taking off shoes before entering the room, being on time, lining up, dress codes and behavior in common areas like the corridors, lunchroom and library. It also includes safety procedures inside and outside the classrooms. "In the morning, the teacher stand by the door and check that the students are wearing complete uniform."

b) Social rules

These rules and expectations involve issues in the real world that needs to be such as fighting, insubordination, and the misuse of technology-related devices. "During test time, the students put their phones inside their bags." "The students are told not to bring sharp objects in the classrooms."

c) Academic rules

These rules and expectations are related to learning, such as doing homework, class participation, cheating and interrupting others. "The studentsare told not to

talk when other students are reciting." "Plagiarism is prohibited in student's essay and reports."

d) Cultural rules

These rules and expectations are about the way the students treat minority groups based on religion, race, sexual orientation or disability. "I observed in a private school. Some students are foreigners. One of the rules in the classroom is to show courtesy and respect to all classamtes." "In the school observed, some students wear pants as uniforms although they are female."

Classroom rules are essential because these will help the teachers to manage the classroom and to maintain discipline (Doyle 1990; Weinstein & Mignano 2007). Research has shown that one of the characteristics of effective classroom management is that teachers are skilled in establishing and maintaining clear rules and procedures (Bohn et al., 2004). Moreover, a meta-analysis of classroom management studies, conducted by Marzano (2003), shows that effective design and implementation of rules and procedures are linked to lower frequency of disruptions in classrooms.

Research objective 5: What other tasks of teachers have the students observed during their practicum aside from teaching?

The teacher trainees observed that the critic teachers do not only teach but also do other jobs.There were four most common other tasks done by the critic teachers observed by the teacher trainees which ranked 2.5 and with a percentage of 15.38. These were catalyst analyzers, curriculum specialists, surrogate parents, and being a chairperson. Extending helping hands followed next with a rank of 5 and a percentage of 11.54. Ranking 6.5 with a percentage of 7.69 were resource specialists and learners. Lastly, with a rank of 8.5 and percentage of 3.85 were support providers and book keepers.

The findings imply that teachers have many responsibilities nad that the teaching profession now includes a multi-faceted task. Aside from teaching, other priorities include - acting as catalyst analyzers; using their initiatives to act as chairpersons to ensure that school atmosphere is pleasant and conducive for learning; help to stabilize good relationships among teachers, parents, students, and administrators in the school; acting as curriculum specialists to help meet the global, national, and local vision and mission of education; and as surrogate parents to the children entrusted to them.

Table 6. Other tasks of teachers aside from teaching.

No.	Other tasks	Rank	Percentage
1	Catalyst analyzer	2.5	15.38
2	Curriculum specialist	2.5	15.38
3	Surrogate parents	2.5	15.38
4	Chairpersons	2.5	15.38
5	Helping hand	5	11.54
6	Resource specialist	6.5	7.69
7	Learner	6.5	7.69
8	Support provider	8.5	3.85
9	Book keeper	8.5	3.85

The result revelas that teachers are now catalyst analyzers, who are ever ready to solve problems; they are chairpersons who lead those who does all the managerial jobs aside from teaching (Lanier, 1997); they are curriculum specialists who check and evaluate documents against basic education curriculum; and surrogate parents who see to it that all their pupils are safe and well cared for. Moreover, they also act as helping hand, ready to lead in school clubs, set-up events, and do extra jobs as a leader. They are resource specialist to people looking for information in the school. They are support providers to people learning new skills or piece of information, as well as professional circle support. They even act as book keepers who keep and monitor the cafeteria revenue and food stamps. "My mentor was very kind. She often explain to me what she does in the classroom." "The teacher assigned to me also leads the English club in the school. She showed me the bulletin board where they have pictures as a club."

CONCLUSION

Contemporary Thai schools are slowly evolving and expanding to include modern teaching perspectives and approaches. The changes are evident in many areas of the education system. The changes include both minor and major steps which gives a glimpse of hope for a brighter education system in Thailand. Learning resources have included various facilities that promotes technology, health, and culture to support the overall well-being of the students. Daily routines and school activities are generally the same but fun and more engaging activities were added to the teaching-learning process. Community and societal awareness activities were emphasized in addition to career-related and religious activities.Classroom rules were no longer confined to academic and procedural rules but also social and cultural rules to maintain discipline and accommodate the changing classroom environment. Lastly, it was noted that the teachers do multi-task as catalyst analyzer, chairpersons, curriculum specialist, and as surrogate parents to the students as well.

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