

## **Part III**

### **Case Studies in Southeast Asia**

## Chapter 7

### **The Development of Primary Education in Thailand and Its Present Challenges: From Quantity to Quality through Effective Management**

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#### **Summary**

The history of the development of primary education in the country and the present tasks to be achieved are described focusing upon the policy aspects. Under the military governments during the period including 1957 to 1973, the educational administration was transferred to the hands of militaries. Along with the increase in the number of students, the number of teachers also increased, but their salaries and working conditions were deteriorated. After the 1974 student revolution took place, the civil government was established and the educational administration returned to the competence of the Ministry of Education. The curriculum reform in 1978 brought about the change of the duration of the primary level from 7 years to 6 years. The 1980 National Primary Education Act provided that all villages should be equipped with schools. The development of primary education entered the completion stage of universalization in the 1990s. Since then, policy decisions and their implementations have been carried out in accordance with the EFA (Education For All) plans. The gross enrolment ratio in 1998 was almost 100% and since then over 100%. In 1996 the net enrolment ratio was about 90%; repetition ratios were higher in lower grades (8% in the first grade and less than 1% in the sixth grade); and the survival ratio was 95.5%. Regarding the quality of education, differences between areas and between social classes (private schools and public schools) are found. Its absolute level is low as the 1995 TIMSS (Third International Mathematics and Science Study) results show: of the 26 participant countries, 22<sup>nd</sup> in mathematics and 24<sup>th</sup> in sciences. According to the educational evaluation conducted from 2003 to 2005, about 40% of the sixth grade children performed rather poorly in Thai language, sciences, mathematics and English. Improvement of the instruction methods, betterment of teachers' working conditions, decentralization of educational administration, and abolishment of small size schools are designed to improve the less than ideal situation. The decentralization plan is facing strong objection by teachers' organizations and is in stagnation while reduction in the number of small schools has been progressing slowly.

#### **Key words**

Thailand, primary education, quality, management

[Yonemura, Akio ed. *Universalization of Primary Education in the Historical and Developmental perspective*, Research Report (Chousakenkyu-Houkokusho), Institute of Development Economies, 2007]

## **Introduction**

Primary education is the fundamental education. It is also compulsory education that requires every citizen to acquire. It is the education that aims at enriching children's multi-faceted development, with an emphasis on reading and writing ability, cultivating morality, thinking ability, life skills, and problem-solving ability according to their personal needs.

This article will review the development of primary education in Thailand to see how the system was changed, what were the key factors for success and failure, and what are the challenges to be pursued.

## **Section 1 History of Primary Education in Thailand**

Prior to the introduction of the school system from western countries to Thailand, education in the country was traditionally provided by three main institutions of the Thai society: homes, palaces, and temples. While occupational and life skills were transmitted from generation to generation at home, boys were taught with knowledge about reading, writing, Buddhist preaching, and morality at temples. Royal and noble family members were trained with high level classic art and literature in palaces. Such education could be categorized as informal education, which did not require any curriculum, evaluation, building, policy, plans and purposes. Parents and monks automatically played significant roles as teachers.

Primary education was the first system of education established in the reign of King Chulalongkorn, who ruled Thailand during the same period as Emperor Meiji of Japan. Throughout the one hundred-year history, primary education in Thailand has developed, according to the changing situations and governments' policies, from quantity-oriented to quality-oriented. And now the heart of all concerns for primary education is not only the matter of improvement of quality, but also the effective and efficient management.

### **1.1 Thailand's Primary Education during the Modernization Period**

The first education reform in Thailand was initiated by King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910) who has been highly respected by Thai people as one of the greatest visionary kings in the history of Thailand. During his reign, many neighboring

countries had already become colonized by European colonialism. Thailand was no exception in suffering from the threats. In order to protect the nation's sovereignty, the King played a leading role in strengthening Siam's diplomatic and international ties with the superpower countries such as England, France, Russia and Germany. After his visits to many countries in Europe and Asia, the King returned to his country with the policy of modernization to transform Siam<sup>1</sup> into a modern nation so as to protect the nation from falling under the colonialism. It was, therefore, during this period that several reforms took place, for example, railway system, postal service, modern public administration system, military reform, bureaucratic reform, and so on.

Education was regarded by the King as an important means of modernization. Realizing the value of investing in human resources, the King provided King's scholarship and sent capable young men to study in Europe. After the graduation, those men were assigned to leading positions in bureaucratic offices following the bureaucratic reform and the establishment of various departments and ministries. It was obvious that the main purpose of training people with the new education system was to have them serve in civil service. Besides, the King sent his close assistants to observe the management and operation of education in many European countries including Japan. Many of them returned home to serve as active agents for education reform.

The reform of education in Thailand began with the establishment of a Royal primary school in the Grand Palace in 1871. A few more Royal schools were established in the following years. It was not until 1884 that the first school for commoners was established at Wat<sup>2</sup> Mahanaparam. However, at the beginning there was a rumor (Krisana Sinchai: 1982) that the state established a school for recruiting children to serve in the military, which caused parents' panic and refusal to send their children to school since being a military at the time one had to live a miserable life<sup>3</sup>. In order to correct people's misunderstanding, the King had to make an announcement to public explaining the true reasons for the school establishment.

Later, with the support of Royal family members several other schools were established by the King and his Royal family in Bangkok areas to commemorate the anniversary of Royal special occasions. Most schools for commoners, however, were established in the temples and the schools' names normally began with "Wat" which

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<sup>1</sup> Thailand's former name of the country

<sup>2</sup> Wat means the Buddhist temple in Thai language

<sup>3</sup> Referred to in Sinchai (1982, p.16).

means “Temple” and “Ban” which means “Village” in some cases where there was no temple in the areas. At the same time, the increasing needs for teachers led to the establishment of teacher training schools in Bangkok and other major cities.

In 1887 the Department of Education was established as a bureaucratic office to oversee and operate education of the country. Accordingly, all schools were under the jurisdiction of this department. Five years later, the Department of Education was renamed and upgraded as the Ministry of Education on the first of April 1892. In 1898 the first Education Plan was promulgated and education was expanded to other provinces in countryside. Education from primary level to secondary and higher level dramatically flourished during the forty-two years on the throne of King Chulalongkorn.

It went without saying that within the absolutism which absolute political power and authority rested upon the monarchy, King Chulalongkorn was in the proper position to lead education reform in Thailand and he had contributed a great deal to the development of education in the country. In spite of the absolute power, the Monarch did not find it easy to break through obstacles in the task of providing education for his people. As mentioned before, due to the misunderstanding and misinformation, people refused to send their children to schools. In addition to this, as time went by, it was found out that the establishment of the school system caused the monks to lose their important role as teachers. Though schools and temples were situated next to each other, there seemed to be no relation between the two institutions. Schools taught modern subjects such as science, mathematics while temples mainly perform religious rituals. The establishment of the school system was perceived as not only the separation of schools from temples, but also the separation between academics and morality.

## **1.2 Primary Education during the Democratic Development Period**

King Vajiravuth did not fail to follow his father’s step in supporting education of all Thai people. He himself was educated in England and the influence of English education could be seen in his literary and educational work. He established the first boarding school called “Vajiravuth College” and founded the Boy Scout system. It was also during his reign in 1921 that the first Primary Education Act 2464 was promulgated on the first of October 1921. The day has been regarded as the Primary Education Day since then. The law provided that children of 7 years of age needed to go to school until 14 years of age to receive 3 year compulsory education in primary

schools which were established in every Province and Ampher (District) . The compulsory education shall be free. However, Thai men of 18-60 years of age were required to pay for “Suksa Plee”, which meant “dedicating to education” as a form of educational tax to the education authority for supporting the operation of education.

Since schools were established and run by temples and community people with the support from the “Suksa Plee” education tax, it could be said that schools belonged to community though most of them were established in the area of temples. The so-called “Rong Rian Prachabarn<sup>4</sup>” which literally means “Schools operated by community people”, may be perceived as community schools according to its meaning and the way of operation. However, teachers’ pay was very low and most of the teachers were not systematically trained to be professional teachers. Besides, due to the economic crisis after World War I, the “Suksa Plee” education tax system was subsequently abandoned. The state decided to intervene by subsidizing schools and because of that reason schools were gradually separated from community and became under control of the Ministry of Education by the strong centralization system. Public primary schools, therefore, has depended solely on the government’s budget since then.

In 1932 Thailand experienced a remarkable political change in the history when the so-called People’s Party, composed of 92 officials, military and civilians, seized political power and requested King Prajadhipok to confer the Constitution to people. So as to avoid bloodshed confrontation, the King agreed to give his power to people through the democracy on December 10, 1932, which accordingly turned Thailand’s politics from the Absolute Monarchy to the Constitutional Monarchy. The People’s Party declared to develop the country towards the modern democratic state by six principles: Sovereignty, Domestic Peace, Economics, Liberty, Right and Equality, and Education. Education was therefore regarded as one of the six major pillars of the democratic state. Regarding the education principle, the government would develop primary and secondary education to its best potentials, expand Rong Rian Prachabarn (primary schools) so that there would be at least 1 school in each village to meet the requirement of the Constitution in delivering education to people.

During the reign of King Prajadhipok, there were three National Education Plans. The National Education Plan 1932 required that learners must spend 4 years for general primary education and 2 years for special primary education. The latter 2

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<sup>4</sup> Rong Rian means school, Pracha means people, and Barn means look after or administer

years emphasized on learning reading, writing, and occupational skills in farming, livestock raising, plantation, construction, handicraft, and commerce. The National Education Plan 1936 required that learners must attend the 4 year primary education with an emphasis on three skills; cognitive skill, physical skill and morality. The National Education Plan 1951 added another skill – handmade skill, in the 4 year primary education.

### **1.3 Primary Education under the Military Dictatorship**

Since the transformation into the Constitutional Monarchy, politics of Thailand experienced several changes including elections, and coup d'état. Field Marshall Piboonsongkram returned to his power last time in 1948 and became the Prime Minister until he was ousted by a coup d'état. After that Thailand was ruled by following two military dictators; Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat 1957-1963, and Field Marshall Thanom Kittikajorn 1963-1973. Thus, primary education fell under the regime of the military dictatorship which tightly controlled education. Children, along with adults, were cultivated with military leaders' preaching and motto.

One distinctive development of primary education during this period was that in 1960 the National Education Plan was promulgated and the compulsory education was meant to expand from 4 to 7 years depending on the capacity of each local area. Primary education was divided into 4 year lower primary and 3 year upper primary education. The system was then 7-3-2. The Ministry of Education was responsible for state schools, established by the central government and Prachabarn schools established by local community. Office of Private Education Commission was responsible for private schools, and Municipals were responsible for primary schools established by municipals.

The primary education curriculum according to the National Education Plan 1960 had four aims; self development, human relations, life skills, and civic education. The education guidelines according to the curriculum was regarded as the "Progressive Education" adopted from the U.S. education system. That is the promotion of individual's overall development through learning by experience and problem-solving. Education was aimed at responding to individual's needs, interest, aptitude, taking into consideration the individual difference, so that individual learners will develop to the fullest. Therefore, elective subjects were provided. There were both individual teaching and team teaching, and supplementary activities.

In 1966 primary education encountered another remarkable change when the Law concerning the Transfer of Primary Schools to Local Administrative Organizations was promulgated. The law provided that 24,150 primary schools out of the metropolitan areas, which were then under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, be transferred to Provincial Administrative Organizations which were then local administrative organizations under the Ministry of Interior. Although provincial administrative organizations were run by elected board, but chairman of the board was the governor appointed by the Minister of Interior. As such, the board was certainly dominated by the Ministry of Interior. Field Marshall Prapas Charusatian, the Minister of Interior, who was the most powerful military leader at that time was believed to be the plotter for the transfer since a large number of schools and teachers could add up monetary power and manpower to Ministry of Interior, the most powerful Ministry in the cabinet.

It was sad to say that almost twenty years under the Ministry of Interior was the most bitter period for primary school administrators and teachers. There were several reasons for such hatred. Teachers complained that they were improperly treated by officials in the Ministry of Interior. Several undesirable treatments were cited as unacceptable behaviors such as having female teachers serving meals and other entertainment to high ranking officials at welcome receptions. Teachers were not given priority in the promotion when compared to those officials directly under the jurisdiction of the public administration organizations. Most of all, the quality of education was declining since officials of local administrative organizations under the Ministry of Interior were not keen on education. Neither did they understand educational content and methodology. Primary school teachers lacked morale, support, and professional development. Needless to say, the future and opportunity of their career path was not promising at all.

Primary school administrators and teachers were frustrated and almost in despair. Many of them joined together as teacher organizations in the movement to seek independence from the Ministry of Interior.

#### **1.4 Primary Education and Education Reform Initiative 1974**

The bloodshed clash between students and military that led to the overthrow of the military government and ended up with the victory of students and civilians on

October 14, 1973 brought along with it another historical event in the history of primary education in Thailand.

The rebirth of democracy period allowed educators and scholars to rethink and redesign the education system in response to the social demand on education reform. The Sunya Thammasak government established an Education Reform Committee composed of several distinctive educators and scholars to review the nation's education system and propose the education reform guidelines. The proposal for education reform plan which was entitled "Education for Life and Society" was submitted to the Ministry of Education. The proposal was believed to be the most ambitious education plan with a purpose to create the Thai society in which importance would be placed on equality, equity, freedom, rationality, and public consciousness. However, it was a pity that the Minister of Education turned down the proposal (Sripasart: 2003) with the reason that the proposal was too radical and dominated by the socialist and communist ideology. Although the education reform initiative became abortive, many of the principles and content in the proposal were integrated in the primary education curriculum issued following years.

Along with the formulation of the Education Reform guidelines, the National Education Commission whose many members were appointed in the Education Reform Committee was also preparing the new National Education Plan. Therefore, the Plan became another channel to push for the education reform to some extent.

The National Education Plan 1977 provided that primary education was changed from 7 to 6 years. Education was regarded as the lifelong continuing education with an aim at enhancing the quality of citizens so that they could make a good living and contribute to society through education for the safety, security and happy living of Thai society.

The aims of the National Education Plan 1977 were nine folds. First, to teach learners to respect the right and duty of one's and other people, be disciplined, comply with the laws, religious and ethic values. Second, to deepen learners' understanding and eagerness to participate in nation's politics according to the system of democratic monarchy, and get firm hold of the nation, religion, and monarchy. Third, to be responsible for the country, locality, family and oneself. Fourth, to have consciousness as a Thai and a part of human kind, to love the nation, realize the national security and participate in protecting the nation. Fifth, to maintain the equality, honesty and equity. Sixth, to have good personality, physical and mental health. Seventh, to be diligent, have occupational ability, economic spending, and

engage in business legally. Eighth, to be able to communicate and cooperate with each other, seek the truth, have creativity, problem-solving ability, and solving the conflict with intelligence and peaceful means. Ninth, to acquire knowledge, appreciate the value of art, culture, nature, environment, and the nation's resources.

As many members of the Education Reform Committee were among those who formulated the National Education Plan 1977, they could relate and transmit the important issues of education reform from the Education Reform Proposal to the National Education Plan.

### **1.5 Primary Education under the Ministry of Education**

As mentioned above, primary school teachers and administrators were not happy under the Ministry of Interior. In his doctoral dissertation, Dr. Rung Kaewdang also indicated that the quality of primary education was declining because it was not operated by professional educators. As primary education is the fundamental stage of education and the most important one, he suggested that primary schools be transferred back to the Ministry of Education, to be operated by professional educators and reformed to cope with the changing situation. The research finding had a profound impact on the administration of primary education.

The research finding was in line with the research conducted by Office of the National Education Commission (Office of the National Education Commission: 1977) which found that primary education under the Ministry of Interior was deteriorating. Schools under the Provincial Administrative Organizations had the highest repetition rate. Students lacked textbooks and learning equipment, did not attend a kindergarten, and were in poor health. With the strong support of the Office, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and teacher organizations, the government agreed to respond to the demand. Such change was called the "*Liberation of teachers*" from the tyranny.

In 1980 the National Primary Education Act was promulgated. The law stipulated that primary schools were transferred to be under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education. The administration of primary education was in the form of a governing body at each of the three levels: the National Primary Education Commission, the Provincial Primary Education Commission and the District Primary Education Commission. According to the law, Office of the National Primary

Education Commission (ONPEC) was established as an organization to oversee the operation of primary education under the Ministry of Education.

Along with the structural change, primary education was reformed in various aspects. In terms of quantity, primary schools were established in every village, which was the smallest unit of community. Moreover, in order to provide more educational opportunity for children in remote areas, lower secondary education course was offered in many primary schools. These schools were called “Schools for the Expansion of Educational Opportunity”. School lunch program was also introduced nationwide to promote children’s nutrition. In addition to school lunch service, primary school students were provided with milk as supplementary food to enrich their health.

Another noticeable change in primary education during this period was the reform of primary education curriculum. The Primary Education Curriculum 1978 has three main characteristics. First primary education was regarded as education for all. Second, it was the education aimed at enabling learners to utilize it in daily life. Third, it was the education aimed at building the national unity, but each locality had an opportunity to initiate some parts of curriculum that were deemed suitable to the community needs.

As mentioned before, realizing the difficulty of promoting universalization of 7 year primary education, the new primary education system was shortened to be 6 year compulsory education, in compliance with the Education Development Plan that suggested the introduction of 6-3-3 system as same as American and Japanese system. In a sense, the compulsory education was extended from 4 to 6 years.

The new curriculum 1978 was composed of four categories of contents. First, Skill Enrichment Groups which included learning ability especially in Thai language and mathematics. Second, Life Experience Promoting Group which dealt with the process of solving problems of life and society, realizing problems and needs of human beings in various aspects for a better living. Third, Character Building Group which was concerned with activities for the development of learners’ personality. Fourth, Work and Occupational Fundamentals which were about general experience in working and fundamental knowledge for engaging on occupational practice.

The curriculum focused on enhancing learners’ thinking ability, practical skills, creativity, and problem solving ability. Therefore, it goes without saying that the reform of primary education curriculum were influenced by many principles derived from the education reform proposal in the year 1974.

## **1.6 Primary Education and the Economic and Social Development Plan**

The 15-year National Education Plans and 5 year National Education Development Plans, which were in line with the National Economic and Social Development Plans, had played a significant role in the development of primary education of Thailand. Especially the 8<sup>th</sup> National Education Development Plan 1996-2001 emphasized “man” as the center of the development.

Before the economic crisis in 1997, the provision of education was quantitatively expanded on a large scale. The enrollment ratio at primary level remarkably increased to 100% before reaching the year 2000, reflecting Thailand’s effort in achieving the Education for All (EFA) goals.

In contrast to the increase of enrollment ratio, the number of primary school students has gradually decreased as a result of the declining population birth rate.

However, there were still a big number of this age group who were missed out from schools, mainly those disadvantaged children who lived in remote areas, who were handicapped, and who were financially troubled.

## **Section 2 Primary Education and the Contemporary Development**

The political reform which led to the enactment of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand 1997 marked another important step of education reform of Thailand. Especially, Article 43 stated that A person shall enjoy an equal right to receive the basic education for the duration of not less than twelve years which shall be provided by the State thoroughly, up to the quality, and without charge. In providing education by the State, regard shall be paid to participation of local government organizations and the private sector as provided by law.

### **2.1 Primary Education and Education Reform Policy**

In accordance with the Constitution, the National Education Act 1999 was enacted. The Act contains several issues carefully designed to achieve the goals of Education for All and All for Education

First of all, in terms of Education for All, the National Education Act stipulated that compulsory education shall be extended from 6 to 9 years, requiring children aged seven to enroll in basic education institutions until the age of 16.

Secondly, education shall be specially provided to persons with physical, mental, intellectual, emotional, social, communication, and learning deficiencies, those with physical disabilities; or the handicapped, or those unable to support themselves or those disadvantaged. Education for specially gifted persons shall be provided in appropriate forms in accord with their competencies. Thirdly, educational institutions are authorized to provide any one or all of the three types of education: formal education, non-formal education, and informal education. Credits accumulated by learners shall be transferable within the same type or between different types of education regardless of whether the credits have been accumulated from the same or different educational institutions, including learning from non-formal or informal education, vocational training, or from work experience.

The prescriptions above clearly embraced the spirit of the Jomthien Declaration on Education For All and the six Dakar goals.

Apart from the measures for achieving Education for All goals, the law also required that several strategies be taken to mobilize resources from all parts of society for education. Firstly, other than the State, private persons and local administrative organizations, the law stipulated that individuals, families, community organizations, private organizations, professional bodies, religious institutions, enterprises, and other social institutions shall have the right to provide basic education as prescribed by law. Secondly, there shall be mobilization of resources and investment in terms of budgetary allocations, financial support and properties from the State; local administrative organizations; individuals; families; communities; community organizations; private persons; private organizations; professional bodies; religious institutions; enterprises; other social institutions; and foreign countries, for use in the provision of education. Thirdly, there shall be distribution of general subsidies for per head expenditure commensurate with the needs of those receiving compulsory and basic education provided by the State and the private sector.

These provisions clearly indicated that in order to achieve Education for All (EFA) goals, it is necessary to mobilize resources, which could be interpreted as budget, manpower, technology, equipment, knowledge, wisdom, buildings, network, and so on, from all parts of society so that there would be sufficient resources for providing education for all people. By this meaning, all will be participating in the provision of education reflecting the ambitious idea of All for Education.

According to the objective of education reform, learning reform is the heart of all concerns. Realizing the potential of human brain, the law required that education

shall be based on the principle that all learners are capable of learning and self-development, and are regarded as being the most important. The teaching-learning process shall aim at enabling the learners to develop themselves at their own pace and to the best of their potentiality. In short, to improve the quality of learners, the most important substance of education reform was to emphasize on more learning and less teaching.

As for the curriculum, the National Education Act stipulated that education through formal, non-formal and informal approaches shall give emphases to knowledge, morality, learning process, and integration of the following, depending on the appropriateness of each level of education:

(1) Knowledge about oneself and the relationship between oneself and society, namely: family, community, nation, and world community; as well as knowledge about the historical development of the Thai society and matters relating to politics and democratic system of government under a constitutional monarchy;

(2) Scientific and technological knowledge and skills, as well as knowledge, understanding and experience in management, conservation, and utilization of natural resources and the environment in a balanced and sustainable manner;

(3) Knowledge about religion, art, culture, sports, Thai wisdom, and the application of wisdom;

(4) Knowledge and skills in mathematics and languages, with emphasis on proper use of the Thai language;

(5) Knowledge and skills in pursuing one's career and capability of leading a happy life.

The provision above clearly indicated that instead of dividing the contents into different subjects, there will be an integration of subjects so that learners learn how to integrate different disciplines, create one's own body of knowledge, and utilize it in real life.

Furthermore, in organizing the learning process, the National Education Act required that educational institutions and agencies concerned shall:

(1) provide substance and arrange activities in line with the learners' interests and aptitudes, bearing in mind individual differences;

(2) provide training in thinking process, management, how to face various situations and application of knowledge for obviating and solving problems;

(3) organize activities for learners to draw from authentic experience; drill in practical work for complete mastery; enable learners to think critically and acquire the reading habit and continuous thirst for knowledge;

(4) achieve, in all subjects, a balanced integration of subject matter, integrity, values, and desirable attributes;

(5) enable instructors to create the ambiance, environment, instructional media, and facilities for learners to learn and be all-round persons, able to benefit from research as part of the learning process. In so doing, both learners and teachers may learn together from different types of teaching-learning media and other sources of knowledge;

(6) enable individuals to learn at all times and in all places. Co-operation with parents, guardians, and all parties concerned in the community shall be sought to develop jointly the learners in accord with their potentiality.

Obviously, the learning process above has embraced all principle of learner-centered approach, combined with learning through experience, research-based learning, and lifelong learning.

In a sense, this was the guideline for the design of new curriculum and it seemed to be the most complete education guidelines Thailand has ever had. And yet, whether teachers and other concerned educational personnel can implement them successfully or not remains a question.

## **2.2 The Implementation of the Education Reform and Its Impact on Primary Education**

In compliance with the National Education Act, several measures have been taken in terms of legal actions. For example, the Compulsory Education Act 2002 was promulgated, followed by the Ministerial Regulation concerning the provision of criteria and methods to help the handicapped equipped with educational facilities, media, services and other assistances, promulgated in 2002. Likewise, the Ministerial Regulation concerning the right to provide education by families became effective in 2004 and so did the Ministerial Regulation concerning the right to provide basic education in the learning centers operated by enterprises, which became effective in the same year. Another legal measure was the promulgation of the Ministerial Regulation concerning the criteria and methods of allocating educational budget to the disabled in 2002.

Furthermore, the Cabinet meeting on April 7, 2004 had already approved the criteria and methods of allocating state subsidies as a per head expenditure for basic education to each group of learners of special needs, taking into consideration the equality of educational opportunities and equity.

Although many concerned organizations have put every possible effort in implementing the education reform, it seems everything is going on well especially primary education. Nevertheless, several obstacles occurred and many problems remain unsolved.

Most of all, the Basic Education Curriculum was promulgated and effective in 2001. One distinctive of the curriculum was that It allowed schools to design the so-called local or school curriculum which reflected community's problems, culture, wisdom and other contexts. The new curriculum caused worry and concern among teachers to a high extent. It took quite some period of time and a lot of training was needed to make teachers comprehend the requirement of the curriculum and acquire enough skills to create their own school curriculum and suitable teaching-learning activities.

### **2.2.1 Quantitative Development of Primary Education: The Achievement of EFA**

Thailand has put much effort in increasing the enrolment ratio of primary education. From the figure below, it is obvious that the number of primary grade 1-6 pupils from 1990-1998 remained rather constant, but gradually decreasing due to the declining birth rate.

Table 1 Total Enrolment in Primary Education as Percentage of Population Aged 6-11, by Academic Year.

<b>Academic Year</b>	<b>Pupils Grade 1-6</b>	<b>Population Aged 6-11</b>	<b>Pupils as Percentage of Population</b>	<b>Public: Private Ratio</b>
1990	6,472,459	6,923,487	93.49	90:10
1992	6,173,701	6,802,734	90.75	89:11
1994	6,302,096	6,691,323	94.18	89:11
1996	5,858,010	6,569,881	89.16	87:13
1998	5,930,829	6,494,237	91.32	87:13

Source: Summary Report of Thailand's Education for All Assessment 2000

In academic year 1990, there were 6.47 million pupils enrolled in primary grade 1-6, representing 93.5% of the population. The number was 5.93 million or 91.3% of the population in academic year 1998.

The ratio of the public and private provision of education was 87:13 in the academic year 1998, reflecting the government's larger share of providing primary education.

The Thai government allocated 3.5% of GNP to education or about 25% of the total annual expenditure. During 1990 to 1999, the budget had been increased by an average of 15% annually. The budget was allocated to education in the highest proportion in 1997 or 4.3% of the GNP. However, after the economic crisis, the budget allocated to the educational sector was slightly cut by 0.57%

The educational budget was categorized into operational and capital budget. The government was also responsible for other expenditures of students in public educational institutions, for example, educational materials, equipment, school lunch and supplementary food (milk). Thanks to the government's policy of promoting primary education level, many useful programmes were initiated. The School Lunch and Supplementary Food Programme were aimed at alleviating incidence of malnutrition in pre-primary and primary students while School Health Promotion Programme were aimed at providing health services, immunization services, and surveillance of growth and development.

During the decade, the budget for the provision of primary education accounted for 44% of the total educational budget and consistently increased year by year.

Thanks to the Thai government's continuing effort and several effective measures, the enrolment ratio of compulsory education was satisfactorily increasing in the past decade. And yet, in spite of the steady increasing enrolment ratio, a certain degree of the retention rate was also visible. The promotion system for the children from one grade to the next one in the primary schools was based on their performance, which was assessed by the mid-term and final examinations.

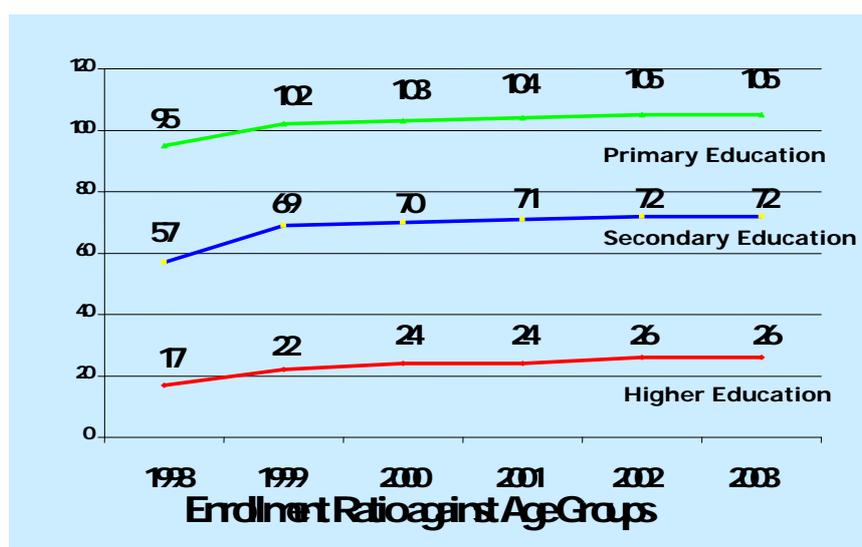
Table 2 Repetition Rate of Primary School Pupils by Grade

Academic Year	Repetition Rate					
	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6
1990	7.2	3.08	2.19	1.89	2.61	0.89
1991	10.6	3.53	2.41	1.99	2.59	0.8
1992	7.7	3.15	1.92	1.54	1.96	0.61
1993	7.66	2.9	1.86	1.51	1.84	0.59
1994	8.17	3.35	2.05	1.94	2.13	0.87
1995	8.23	3.42	2.09	1.88	1.97	0.83
1996	8.32	3.38	2.14	1.91	1.98	0.96
1997	7.53	3.17	1.99	1.89	1.94	1.0

Source: Summary Report of Thailand's Education for All Assessment 2000

As seen in Table 2, the retention was rather high in Grade 1 but continued decreasing. Especially in the last year of primary education, the repetition rate was generally less than 1%.

Figure 1 The Enrolment Ratio Compared to the Age Group 1998-2003



Source: Education in Thailand 2004

In term of increasing the enrollment ratio of primary education to the population of the age group in the recent development, it seemed that the goal of the universalization of primary education was relatively achieved in 1999, only one decade after the Jomthien Declaration on Education for All 1990.

Thereafter, the enrolment ratio climbed up to over 100%, reflecting the return to schools of those repetition groups and those missed out. The remaining task is the universalization of lower secondary education, which has become a part of compulsory education but ended up at 72% in 2003.

Behind these satisfactory figures, however, whether such provided primary education met with the special needs of each group of learners remain a question, especially those handicapped and gifted who need different educational services from normal learners.

Table 3 Percentage of Pupils Who Stay on Till Grade 6 and the Average Number of Years of Education

Academic Years	Pupils Who Stay on till Grade 6 (%)	Average Number of Years of Education	Coefficient of Efficiency
1990/1991	93.3	7.1	0.85
1992/1993	89.2	6.8	0.88
1994/1995	74.1	7.9	0.76
1996/1997	95.5	6.4	0.94

Source: Summary Report of Thailand's Education for All Assessment 2000

Moreover, it was also challenging to keep the survival ratio in the school system. As shown in the Table 3, pupils who stayed on till grade 6 was fluctuating due to the repetition and dropout problems.

### 2.2.2 Qualitative Development of Primary Education

Learning reform has been regarded as the most important issue or the heart of education reform. Several research indicated that human beings have learning ability and brain power. Education should, therefore, be designed to develop learners to their fullest potential. A Child-centered approach is widely recognized as the most appropriate teaching methodology for learning reform. To materialize the concept, Office of the Basic Education Commission and related organizations had organized training programs for teachers to change their teaching behavior from teacher-centered teaching to learner-centered learning. Moreover, the national education curriculum issued in 2001 provides guidelines for teachers to design their own local or school curriculum in accordance with the national curriculum.

In addition, the internal quality assurance system is established in every school as a prerequisite for receiving the external quality evaluation. The first five-year round of the external evaluation has just completed. Prof. Dr. Somwang Pithiyauwat<sup>5</sup>, director of Office of the National Education Standards and Quality

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Somwang Pithiyauwat, Result of the External Assessment. posted on September 22, 2005. available at

Assessment (ONESQA) revealed that (Pithiyanuwat: 2005) by the end of September 2004 all 40,000 schools providing basic education nationwide had been assessed. Among these about 17,651 schools have been completely analyzed. It was found that, in terms of learners, the aspect that was rated as high as the standard was learners' morality, ethics, and virtue. What remained below the standards were the systematic thinking ability, knowledge and skills as deemed necessary according to the curriculum, skills for seeking knowledge by oneself, and the love for working. In terms of school administrators, Dr. Somwang stated that the factors highly rated were leadership, general administrative ability, relationship and cooperation with community in educational development. What rated below the standards was the academic administrative ability. As for teachers, what met the requirement of the standards was teachers' qualifications, but what remained below standards was the adequacy of teachers' number and teaching ability to teach effectively. As for an overall assessment, only 45% of schools met the standards while the rest of 55% were rated below standards. Most of them were state schools of small scale in rural areas.

#### **a. The Quality of Primary Education**

The result of ONESQA's assessment was reaffirmed by the recent disclosure of the national test scores of grade 6 primary students as shown in the table below. Compared to private schools and those schools operated by Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) there was an interesting figure that primary school students under the jurisdiction of Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC) performed more poorly than those of private schools and BMA's. There were two reasons to explain the result. First, as Dr. Somwang said, (Pithiyanuwat: 2005) most schools belonging to Office of Basic Education Commission (OBEC) were small schools in rural areas. Second, private schools and BMA's were situated in urban areas where there were more adequate education resources.

It is also noticeable that private schools performed much better than state schools in general. One might conclude that private schools emphasize on efficiency and cost-effectiveness since they have a sense of ownership and profit-making. The number of private schools is rather small compared to state schools and most of them are located in urban areas where parents can afford the higher tuition fee. However,

there are many factors contributing to the success. Brother Visith Srivichairat<sup>6</sup>, a Catholic priest and principal of the St. Gabriel Educational Network argued that the secret of private schools' success is their high investment in the development of teachers, and that is why private schools have higher competitiveness than state schools both in the urban and rural areas.

Table 4 A Comparison of Average Scores from the National Test of Basic Education Operated by Different Organizations

<b>Org. Subjects</b>	<b>Private</b>	<b>BMA</b>	<b>OBEC</b>	<b>Municipalities</b>
<b>Thai</b>	<b>48.51</b>	<b>45.23</b>	<b>43.43</b>	<b>43.58</b>
<b>English</b>	<b>44.78</b>	<b>37.84</b>	<b>36.14</b>	<b>33.77</b>
<b>Maths</b>	<b>51.24</b>	<b>45.20</b>	<b>42.58</b>	<b>40.80</b>
<b>Science</b>	<b>46.94</b>	<b>45.12</b>	<b>40.57</b>	<b>41.21</b>

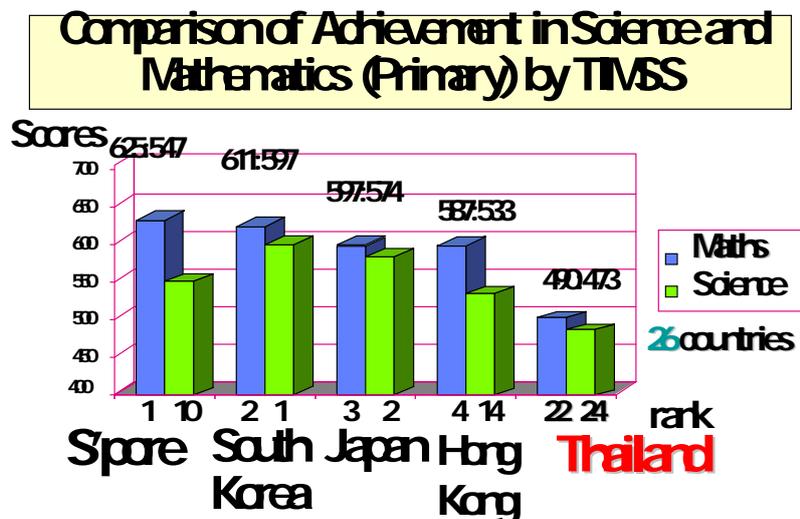
**A Comparison of Average Scores from the National Test of Basic Education (Primary 6) 2004**

Source: Office of the National Education Standards and Quality Assessment

Furthermore, in terms of the quality of education, it appeared that science and mathematics had been neglected in primary education institutions of Thailand, resulting in the low achievement of primary schools' students. With respect to the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), Thailand's ranking at 22nd out of 26 countries in mathematics and 24th out of 26 countries in science of primary school level indicated that the improvement of the quality of primary education is urgently needed. The outcome of the secondary school level was no difference since students had no strong academic background in the primary education level.

<sup>6</sup> In a personal interview with the author

Figure 2 TIMSS Comparison of Achievements in Mathematics and Science by IEA



Source: TIMSS's 1995 Results referred to in Rung Kaewdang's "The Revolution of Thai Education" 1999

The Institute for the Promotion of Teaching Science and Technology of Thailand had analyzed the performance of Thai students in the IEA's evaluation and found that the students performed fairly well in terms of multiple choice questions, but did poorly for the analytical thinking and laboratory experiments. Many educators attributed the poor achievements of students to teachers' teaching methods that overemphasized rote learning, neglecting the cultivation in students their thinking ability and continuous thirst for new knowledge by means of scientific learning process. Teachers were always at the center of the learning process. The achievements relied more heavily on results of tests of knowledge than creativity and performance.

In addition to this, the results of the nationwide education evaluation annually conducted by the Ministry of Education itself also yielded similar results.

The Department of Curriculum and Instruction Development has designed test kits and applied them to grade 6 pupils across the country every other year since academic year 1990. About 10-15% of grade 6 pupils from all regions and provinces were randomly selected to assess pupils' achievement and the quality of teaching-learning process. The subjects to be tested were Thai language, mathematics, science,

thinking and problem-solving skills, basic occupational skills, and social study. The passing scores of each subject were set at 50%.

In the academic years 1990, 1993, and 1995, most students scored more than 50% in Thai language and social study. The average scores in problem-solving, science, and mathematics were 39.9 – 72.9%, 45.3-53.1%, and 33.7-43.1% respectively. This was due to the prevalent teacher-centered approach and the emphasis on rote learning rather than analytical skills.

However, the new National Education Act is focusing on the reform of teaching-learning processes with the learner-centered approach. Learners will be enabled to pursue their quest for knowledge and self-development. The promotion of teaching-learning in mathematics, science, Thai language, and foreign languages is urgently and actively encouraged.

#### **b. Teachers and the Quality of Primary Education**

The quality of teachers is one of the main factors that has an effect on the quality of teaching and learning. Forty years ago when teacher colleges were expanding, teaching profession could draw the best and brightest from all over the country but not any more today due to the low pay and poor working condition.

Moreover, a large number of primary school teachers in Thailand have had financial difficulties due to the minimal salary received which could not match with their living expenses. Most of them were born to families of poor farmers. Compared to other civil servants, teachers are disadvantaged in terms of income and benefits. Many of them ended up with overwhelming debts. According to the survey by the Ministry of Education, the main reasons for teachers owing debts were their overspending on purchasing of houses, vehicles, children's and their own education, investment on a supplementary occupation, and the lack of financial disciplines. Teachers who owed debts felt disheartened. Many of them had to find extra work to earn more money and could not concentrate on classroom activities, which had an impact on the quality of teaching.

Apart from the problems of debts and working condition, teachers in general had inadequate access to new knowledge and information technology due to the lack of professional development. Many of them never received any on-the-job training to acquire new knowledge and professional skills. Needless to say, the problem of teachers' quality was one of many causes that contributed to Thai students' poor

performance in the achievement evaluation conducted by both domestic and international organizations.

In order to solve the problems of teachers, the National Education Act provided many substances for the benefits of teachers. First, teachers are encouraged to receive adequate professional development. As a high level profession, there must be a system for the control of the teaching profession standards and teachers shall have licenses.

The Council for Teachers and Teaching Personnel is an organization that would set professional standards, issue and revoke “teachers’ licenses”, and monitor the observation of professional standards and ethics of teachers and educational personnel.

Another important measure is the improvement of teachers’ salary and personnel system. In 2004 the “Teachers Act” was promulgated. This law prescribes essential matters on personnel management such as selection, appointment, promotion, and other fringe benefits for teachers. Moreover, the “Teachers’ Salary and Remuneration Act” stipulates the establishment of teacher’s salary scale which will entitle teachers to higher salary than other civil servants. This is a part of an effort to attract and retain the best and brightest in the teaching profession.

It is hoped that with the provision of these Acts, the teaching profession will be revitalized and it will be able to attract more capable persons to materialize the education reform.

Nonetheless, the implementation of the National Education Act concerning the reform of teachers has not progressed very much. For example, the system of teachers’ license has not been in place due to the delay of the system of teachers’ performance appraisal. Teachers’ lack of an opportunity for professional development also contributed to the problem of lowering quality of education. Furthermore, the shortage of teachers was making the problems of quality become worse since the government’s early retirement program has motivated a large number of primary school teachers, who felt learning reform was a big burden to them, to leave the teaching jobs.

Perhaps the most promising task is the mobilization of Thai Wisdom Teachers in the education system. Schools have been encouraged to invite local Thai wisdom teachers to teach at nearby schools, mostly primary ones. These local Thai wisdom teachers are those who, through long years of experience, have accumulated tacit knowledge about their occupations or specialization and are willing to transmit their

knowledge and expertise to younger generations. These teachers might be experts in organic farming, art, music, religion and tradition, traditional medicine, Thai food, dance, handicraft, etc.

The promotion of the use of Thai wisdom teachers has become popular especially in primary schools where local people and schools have close relationship. Many primary schools perform well by inviting Thai wisdom teachers to teach students in schools or sending their students to learn from those wisdom teachers at their residences. Several schools reported that children can learn better and more happily outside schools with these local wisdom teachers.

Though some schools were successful in solving the problems of teachers, many other schools were still in serious condition of lacking teachers in terms of both quantity and quality.

### **2.2.3 Administrative Development of Primary Education**

The National Education Act stipulated that the Ministry shall decentralize its power of education administration to Offices of Education Service Areas, schools and local administrative organizations.

#### **a. The Decentralization of Primary Education Administration**

To comply with the Act, former Office of the National Primary Education Commission, which were responsible for primary schools and Department of General Education, which were responsible for secondary schools, and Department of Curriculum and Instruction were unified as Office of the Basic Education Commission. Regarding the local education administration, the Ministry of Education divided educational zones into 175 education service areas. Primary schools and secondary schools in the same areas became under control of the same Educational Service Area, so that there would be a unity for the operation of basic education and the sharing of resources for effectiveness and efficiency. As for the decentralization to schools, it is provided by law that schools have become juristic schools, which a certain degree of autonomy is allowed.

Nonetheless, when it comes to the decentralization of education administration to local administrative organizations, it appeared that primary education teachers are sensitive to the issues more than secondary school teachers, which will be explained in the following paragraph.

## **b. Teacher Organizations and the Reform of Primary Education**

Thailand has not allowed the establishment of teachers' unions like in other countries because the Teachers Council, which is under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, is the central organization that oversees the promotion of welfare of teachers including the issuing and withdrawal of teachers' license according to the National Education Act. By legislature, Teachers' Code of Conduct, and social values, teachers should not go on strike or bargaining.

However, teachers could form their organizations by establishing teachers' associations and conduct non-profit making activities the same as general associations. There are many teacher organizations in Thailand, for instance, the Primary Teachers Associations, the Secondary Teachers Associations, the Federation of Teachers Associations, the Northeastern Teachers Associations, the Southern Teachers Associations, the Association of Primary Principals of Thailand, the Association of Secondary Principals of Thailand.

Many of these teachers' organizations, especially those primary teacher organizations, have played a significant role in changing education of Thailand.

During 1970's, for a period of time the power of administration and management of primary education was delegated to provincial administration organizations under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Interior. Under the highly bureaucratic administration of the Ministry of Interior, teachers felt they were not honorably treated and sufficiently recognized as professional education personnel. The education functions were not given as much importance as other functions such as the construction of infrastructures. Their career path was not as promising as other local officials. Very often teachers were ordered by their immediate boss at provincial administration organizations to serve in otherwise functions, especially, to entertain the visiting high ranking officials from the Ministry of Interior.

Dissatisfied with the Ministry of Interior, leaders and members of teachers' organizations joined together in the systematic movement for the transfer of primary schools back to the Ministry of Education. The movement resulted in the enactment of the Primary Education Act B.E. 2523. Thereafter, the teachers' organizations have been recognized and they gradually accumulated experiences in exercising political power.

Primary teachers were the group of teachers that had more problems than others. Many of them are in debts, stationed in impoverished schools, lack an opportunity to pursue their study or training. Every Minister of Education had

promised to solve the problems, but the Ministers' term often ended with no accomplishment.

Meanwhile, secondary teachers are less politicized because most secondary schools are located in metropolitan areas where economic situation is more prosperous. Moreover, secondary schools were allocated with higher budget and could generate income from donations and charity fairs. Many secondary school teachers could earn extra income from their private tutoring classes. In general, secondary teachers were in much better social and economic situation than primary teachers.

One factor that highly motivated primary school teachers to be enthusiastic in political role was the story of success of their precedent leaders. A number of former primary teachers successfully turned themselves members of the parliament, directors, and even the Ministers of Education. To climb up the career ladder to the highest positions was dream of many teacher organizations' leaders. It means they would possess not only authority to reward and punish teachers across the country, but also privileges, prestige, power and wealth. The politicization among teachers occurred when the organizations' members supported their leaders with a hope that their successful leaders would somehow reward them in return. The most politically active teachers' organizations were those from the Northeastern part of the country. Historically and geographically, people in the northeast areas experienced pressure from poverty, drought and disadvantages when compared to other parts of the country. The areas were once occupied by communist insurgency. Meanwhile, teachers in the south especially those in the southernmost troubled provinces have been concerned with their safety.

As far as legislatures are concerned, teachers' organizations are able to elect their representatives to penetrate into the committees at every level from the national level to local levels. The committees that allowed an opportunity for teachers' participation were the Teachers Council, the Teachers Commission, the Legislative Committees for Education Law Enactment.

Leaders of Teachers' organizations who supported the Minister of Education usually were rewarded in terms of promotion to higher positions, and other profits. Many of them became assistants of politicians. Other teachers complained about teachers' absenteeism from schools and classrooms for their private profits.

The movement concerning the appointment of education service area directors was one example that teachers' organizations put pressure for their own benefits by

demanding that the number of education service areas must be enough to secure their future promotion and expedited the Teachers' Act so that they could assume the new positions.

Politicians also played games with teachers' organizations to keep balance of power among them. Once when the Minister ordered the removal of their favorite boss to other organizations of less authority, teachers' forefronts challenged the Minister by wearing black dresses and lay wreaths to protest the order. The Minister stopped the movement by ordering teachers to stay in schools. Those who left schools would be punished for neglecting duties. The Minister also threatened to withhold the appointment of those protested against him and arranged another groups of teachers wearing red dresses to offer bouquets to cheer up the Minister.

Politicians realized the power of teachers' organizations. The enactment of the Teachers' Act became a game for drawing popularity from teachers. While the opposition party proposed that a salary scale should be attached with the Teachers' Act, the ruling party refused to do so, which caused fury among teachers and the criticism that the government ignored the demand of teachers. However, the ruling party promised that it would consider a better solution by enacting a separate Teachers' Salary and Remuneration Act. The opposition party snatched the government for planning the time frame to issue the Act before the general election in order to gain votes from teachers.

Sometimes, teachers' organizations made useful comments. They criticized that one year after the establishment of the new Ministry of Education, education reform was not concrete because education administrators at each level had no courage to change. Officials at top level still served the Minister of Education and at local level served superiors, while at school level teachers took care of themselves without support from above level. Children did not receive sufficient care and development.

The recent movement of teachers' organizations was to resist against the transfer of the power of school administration from the Ministry of Education to local administration organizations. As mentioned previously, most teachers still remembered the bad impression of their working condition under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Interior. They even threatened not to vote for the Thai Rak Thai Party. Finally, the Cabinet decided that the transfer of schools to local administration organizations would be postponed. To be more offensive, teachers' organizations went on to gather the number of their members in lodging with the House of

Representatives a complaint asserting that the Law concerning the Decentralization of Power to Local Administration Organizations be amended.

Teachers' organizations exposed their power by nominating the politician of their choice to assume the position of the Minister of Education. They also resisted to the transfer of schools to local administration organizations and exerted strong pressure on the government to expedite the Teachers' Salary and Remuneration Act and amend the Law concerning the Decentralization of Power to Local Administration Organizations. It was rather obvious that teachers engaged in political activities more for private profits. Little attention has been paid to the benefits of children, the quality of education, the development of curriculum, and teaching professional development of their members.

Unfortunately, teachers' organizations in Thailand have never lobbied for increased resources and intellectual improvement of their members. Above all, they should also play an important role in increasing the professional honesty and dignity of teachers and in restraining professional misconduct.

It should be observed that teachers who have been active agents in professional development were the National Teacher and Master Teacher awards recipients. These teachers devoted their time and energy for organizing school-based training for their members and did not penetrate into political activities.

Besides, mass media were another social group which understood the power of teachers' organizations. Mass media never hesitated to frequently ask and interview teachers' leaders on the controversial issues. Mass media benefited from getting news while teachers' leaders were more than happy to expose themselves through mass media to make themselves known to public for their political benefits.

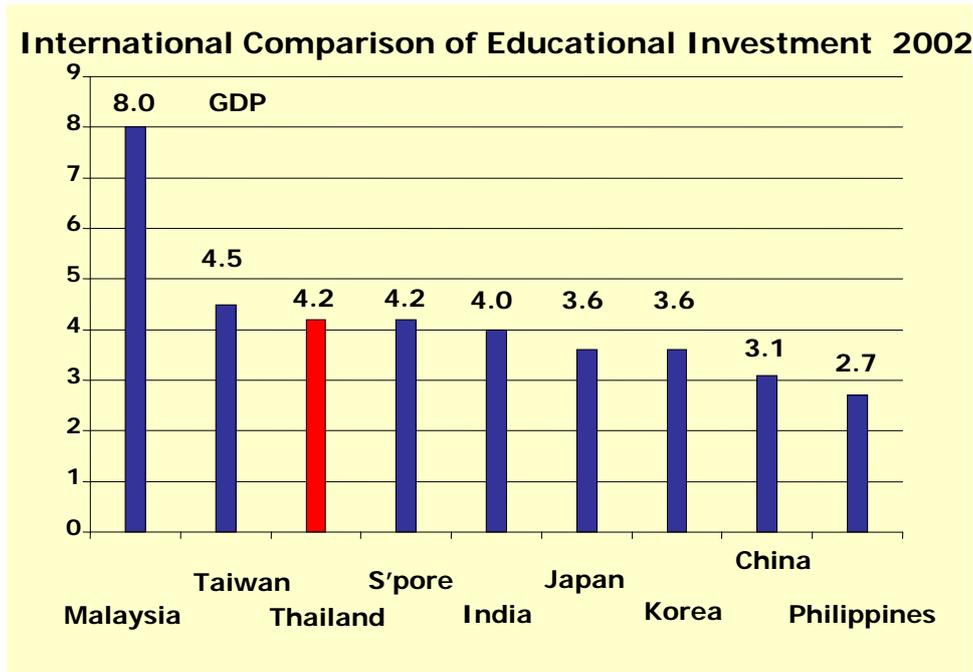
The government realized the bargaining power of teachers and their significance for driving education reform. Education reform would not move forwards without the cooperation of teachers. But it is a pity that such a power has not been properly utilized for the benefit of education reform and students.

### **Section 3 Primary Education and Challenges to be Pursued**

In spite of the economic crisis, Thai government never failed to increase educational budget every year, reflecting the government's high commitment to educational reform.

In 2002 Thailand spent as high budget as 4.2% of GDP. When compared to other countries in Asia, Thailand ranked the third, next to Malaysia and Taiwan. However, when compared to other countries especially Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Malaysia, it appeared that the enrolment ratio and the quality of education in Thailand were lower than those countries.

Figure 3 International Comparison of Educational Investment 2002



Source: International Institute for Management Development. IMD. World Competitiveness Yearbook 2004. Switzerland, Lausanne. referred to in OEC's Thailand's Competitiveness 2004

The fact that Thailand has put high investment but gained low performance of students as shown by various data sources obviously indicated that this country was not receiving adequate outcomes for its expenses.

In terms of quantity, Thailand may not be the worst since the enrolment ratio was successfully increased, but how to keep the survival ratio until the completion of primary education will remain a challenging task. In addition, the improvement of the quality of primary education and the decentralization of education administration are not of less important tasks.

### 3.1 Improvement of the Quality of Primary Education

The National Advisory Council on Economics and Society<sup>7</sup>, in collaboration with Faculty of Education, Chulalongkorn University, have conducted a research on “The Follow up of the Performance of the Government and Educational Agencies according to the National Policy and Economic and Social Development Plan”. The research found that in general there is very little change in terms of education opportunity of children between before and after the education reform. However, the handicapped and disabled children have better educational opportunities due to the provision of educational loans.

Dr. Kriengsak Charoenwongsak, as a researcher, suggested 8 measures (The National Advisory Council on Economics and Society: 2005) for the effective implementation of education reform. First, providing an educational opportunity and equality by ensuring that every child could have access to education. The allocation of subsidy shall be on fair-funding basis. Second, lifelong learning shall be promoted and more learning sources be established. Third, local administrative organizations and community people shall be promoted to provide education for lifelong learning. Fourth, the decentralization of education administration to schools shall be strengthened. Fifth, the reform of teachers and other personnel must be given importance. Sixth, Local wisdom, religion, art and culture must be promoted. Seventh, the National Test Center must be established to utilize the mechanism for monitoring the quality of education. Eighth, emphasis must be placed on the building of desirable character of Thai people.

According to the evaluation conducted during October 2003-March 2005 by Educational Evaluation Bureau, Office of the Education Council, the result concerning primary education are as follows: (Office of the Education Council: 2005)

Regarding the learners, it was found that students in the 6<sup>th</sup> year of primary education performed rather poorly in the National Test in four major subjects, 45.26% in Thai language, 42.41% in sciences, 41.70% in mathematics, and 41.14% in English language.

As for the learning process, there was an improvement of curriculum at each level to match the needs of learners such as the disadvantaged, and the gifted.

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<sup>7</sup> The National Advisory Council on Economics and Society. The Follow up of the Performance of the Government and Educational Agencies according to the National Policy and Economic and Social Development Plan. The Matichon. Available at <http://www.matichon.co.th> posted on 9 June 2005

However, teachers had no confidence in designing local curriculum and the curriculum was perceived as too much in content.

Concerning the teachers, it was found that a large number of teachers could not implement the child-centered learning approach well in classrooms. Some still use old style teaching and assessment methods, and that is the emphasis of academic performance or memorization.

As for educational media and technology, especially computers, it was found that the ratio of a computer per primary students was 90:1 while secondary level was 24:1. Especially, small schools had fewer computers than bigger schools. State schools had fewer computers than private schools. Most computers were out of date and inadequate.

In terms of teachers, the report found that the Ministry of Education was short of teachers and about 80,000 more teachers were needed for basic education.

Regarding the educational standards and quality assurance, it was found that after receiving the external evaluation, there was no utilization of the evaluation results for the development of schools.

These are only some findings that reflected the lowering quality of Thai education, especially primary education. Therefore, the improvement of the quality of primary education will be the most challenging task of all concerned in the next decade.

The government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra had pledged to the Parliament and public that this government will not fail to reform Thai education according to the National Education Act. The Prime Minister himself had also mentioned in many places that he did not work for the next election but for the next generation. However, due to the frequent changes of the Ministers of Education and education reform policy, his performance of the first four year term was perceived as poor in terms of education reform. During the campaign for his second term, the Prime Minister again vowed to push education reform to its success. He recently announced the government's policy on an educational Mega Projects. The project will cover the purchasing of 250,000 high speed computers for schools all over the country so that there will be no schools without a computer. Further, the government will provide 500,000 portable notebooks for all students so that students can carry them anywhere and have access to sources of knowledge around the world.

The mega projects are hoped to increase the learning opportunity of Thai students. And yet, technology may be an important means for an access to sources of

knowledge. There are many other measures that need to be taken for the reform of learning. First of all, the professional development for 600,000 teachers is urgently needed so that they can gain new knowledge and know how to use educational technology. The training should be operated by school-based training, distance learning via satellite and networking in which teachers meet and share their knowledge and experiences. Teachers of the best practice such as the Model Teachers, and the National Teachers Award recipients should be utilized as trainers of the trainees. In addition to this, faculty staff of higher education institutions in the areas should also take part in the development of teachers. The outcome of professional training for teachers should be related with the issuing of teachers' license. The license should be given to those who received the training and passed the evaluation as qualified professional teachers. Otherwise, the license will be meaningless to education reform. Second, learning sources such as museums, libraries, science centers, etc. shall be established. The government should establish such learning sources or encourage private sectors and local administrative organizations to perform such functions. Third, the evaluation of primary education must be seriously given importance and the outcome of the evaluation must be utilized for the improvement of education.

The improvement of the quality of education should be the most important and challenging task of this government. Primary education is the fundamentals of the whole education system. If the achievement of primary education is not increased to meet the standard, it is hard to improve the quality of Thai education as a whole.

### **3.2 Problems of Small schools**

As mentioned earlier, primary schools were established in every village. However, at present most of them have become small schools due to the declining birth rate. Moreover, thanks to better transportation that links villages and the city, many students chose to move to bigger and more famous schools in the cities which have better equipment and facilities. Most small schools were primary schools under the jurisdiction of former Office of the National Primary Education Commission (ONPEC). In the past ten years the Ministry of Education had decided to close down some small schools since they consumed too many resources, but had to face the resistance from schools' principals, teachers, and community.

Office of the Basic Education Commission, therefore, had undertaken the "Project of Improving the Quality of Small Schools". Up to 2003, there were 10,877

small schools with fewer than 120 students. Among these, there were 1,766 schools with fewer than 60 students.

There were two main problems concerning the small schools.

First, students in small schools had poor academic achievement when compared to schools of bigger size, because these small schools are short of resources, for instance, inadequacy of teachers, lack of teaching equipment and media, especially high cost technology. The cause of these problems was the criteria for allocating budget, which depend mostly on the number of students.

Second, most small schools had the problem of inefficiency in administration as the investment was high when compared with bigger schools. According to the standard, the teacher-student ratio should be 1:25, but for small schools the ratio was 1:8 or 1:11 only.

Since 1993, ONPEC has conducted research and development of several types of small school operation, which included the dissolution of schools with approval of community and schools. For those which could not be dissolved, a variety of innovative methods were introduced such as mobile classroom unit, teachers riding horses, and distance learning via satellite.

Table 5 The Unification of Small Schools 1993-2003

Academic Year	The number of small schools with fewer than 120 students	The number of schools to be unified each year	Total number of the schools unified
1993	10,741	25	25
1994	11,247	291	316
1995	11,276	55	371
1996	11,432	54	425
1997	10,649	150	575
1998	11,044	395	970
1999	10,969	258	1,228
2000	10,934	138	1,366
2001	10,970	282	1,648
2002	10,735	172	1,820
2003	10,877	468	2,288

Source: Office of the Basic Education Commission, **Small Schools**. Available at [http://www.moe.go.th/small\\_sch/](http://www.moe.go.th/small_sch/)

Up to now, more schools have been unified, but the number of small schools also keeps increasing due to the decreasing number of students. Office of the Basic Education Commission will continue solving the problems of small schools. However, the Office found that the improvement of small schools' efficiency still had some problems and obstacles as follows:

- 1) the policy concerning small schools were not clear and not continuing due to the frequent changes of policy.
- 2) school administrators were too much attached to the position and resisted to the unification of schools for fear of losing their principalship.
- 3) the transportation fee provided for students, whose schools were closed down and had to travel to another school, was rather small and not enough for them in practice. Besides, in some fiscal years, the transportation fee subsidy was late or entirely cut.
- 4) some community resisted to the dissolution and unification of schools
- 5) the sharing of resources between small schools were not effectively implemented.

In October this year Mr. Chaturon Chaisang<sup>8</sup>, the Minister of Education had revealed about small schools that according to the survey conducted by Educational Service Areas, there were 11,720 small schools out of 32,879 schools all over the country. Among this there are 6,297 schools or about 53.73% of overall schools that had only 0-80 students. The rest of 5,423 schools or 46.27% were also small schools of 81-120 students. The Ministry has classified small schools into 5 categories; 1. those ready to develop into leading schools, about 1,410 schools or 12.03% 2. those ready to solve problems, about 7,221 schools or 61.61% 3. those needy but could not be dissolved, about 2,221 schools or 18.95% 4. those needy and should be dissolved 601 schools, or 5.13%. Among these, there were 80 schools which had no students at all and 5. those located in special areas about 267 schools or 2.28%.

As for the solution to the problem of schools without students, the Minister stated that the Ministry would consult with community and people before issuing the Ministerial Regulation for dissolving schools.

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<sup>8</sup> Ministry of Education's News Release on The Dissolution of Small Schools, referred to in Komchadluek on November 2, 2005.

In case it is impossible to close down the schools, there are also some other solutions. First, the Ministry will adopt a privatization policy by allowing an opportunity for private sector to operate the small schools. Second, the unification of small schools will strengthen them. This measure will result in the moving of teachers from the closed schools to teach in other schools where there was a shortage of teachers and the moving of students to other schools nearby. Third, innovative strategies will be introduced. These are the merging of classes, the use of new technology in teaching such as computers, the development of learning sources, curriculum and seeking for support from local administrative organizations in providing education.

Efficiency in financial management is still a problem. Furthermore, in general, small primary schools in rural areas could not have adequately good facilities due to limited resources. Although the Cabinet agreed to allocate budget to schools by per head expenditure, small schools in remote areas are found disadvantaged since the number of students is smaller than schools in urban areas. It is also hard for them to mobilize resources from poor surrounding community.

Even though privatization will be encouraged in solving the problem of small schools, it is not easy for private sectors to invest in the rural areas where community people are poor and the inputs are small. Unless the problems of small schools are solved, the efficiency of resource management remains a challenging task for the government.

### **3.3 The Transfer of Schools to Local Administrative Organizations**

Even these days, primary school teachers still strongly resist to the transfer of schools to local administrative organizations. As explained previously, the past ill treatment they received still haunted in their mind. Nowadays primary school teachers see staff of the Tambon (Village) Administrative Organizations, which are the smallest units of local administrative organizations and situated closely to schools, have inadequate understanding of education and how to operate it.

At the same time, because primary school principals had not received adequate professional development, they rather have the culture of using political pressure by engaging a mob or a demonstration to exercise their bargaining power against the government. According to the recent survey on opinions of teachers, students and parents across the country conducted by the Upper House's Commission on Education, it was found out that over 80% of the respondents disagreed with the

transfer of schools from the Ministry of education to be under the jurisdiction of local administrative organizations.

The contradiction erupted again when the court ruled that the Cabinet had no authority to postpone the transfer of schools to local administrative organizations and would have to comply with the law. The Ministry of Education thus had to continue the preparation of the transfer. This time the Ministry proposed the following conditions. First, the transfer will be possible only after the local administrative organizations wishing to accept schools could pass in the evaluation of their readiness conducted by representatives of concerned sectors. Second, the transfer of schools must come from the collective decision of the majority of school stakeholders, school council, teachers, and principals. Third, the transfer of teachers must be on voluntary basis only. Moreover, within two years after the transfer, if the teachers feel unhappy and want to move back from the local administrative organizations to the Ministry of Education, they can do so without any requirement.

The Cabinet on its meeting of November 14, 2005 accepted the proposal. Nevertheless, the teachers were not yet satisfied with the Ministry's proposal and asserted that the government should amend the Law concerning the Plan and Procedure for the Decentralization to Local Administrative Organizations, so that there will not be any transfer of schools. Further, if the local administrative organizations want to provide education, they should do so by establishing their own schools.

On the contrary, the local administrative organizations argued that the Law concerning the Plan and Procedure for the Decentralization to Local Administrative Organizations has been enforced since 1999. If there will not be any decentralization, the government should have amended the law long time ago. They, therefore, disagreed with the teachers' proposal for the amendment of the law and ascertained that they are ready to operate education according to the law. Recently, at their meeting, the Tambon (Village) Administrative Organizations decided that they will stop their financial support to schools under Office of the Basic Education Commission until the transfer of schools will be made clear.

Meanwhile, secondary school principals declared that 2,700 secondary school teachers and principals would rather be with the Provincial Administrative Organizations. It has been generally known that the secondary school principals complained that after the unification of primary and secondary schools under the same Office of the Basic Education Commission, secondary schools became disadvantaged

in many aspects. First, primary school teachers and secondary school teachers have different organizational cultures, and it is hard for the secondary schools teachers, especially principals, to tolerate with the primary school teachers' politics-oriented working style. Second, in Educational Service Areas where the director was former director of Provincial Primary Commission, priority would be given to primary school teachers and principals. Thus, secondary school principals, as a minority group, feel disadvantaged in terms of promotion. Third, secondary schools received less budget since more resources were allocated to primary schools. Therefore, to many secondary school principals, being under the jurisdiction of Provincial Administrative Organizations, where there are abundant resources and educated administrators, is better than being with the Education Service Areas.

Controversy and chaos seem to divide Thai educational society into pieces with the conflicts among teachers, and between teacher organizations and local administrative organizations. Teacher organizations declared that they will not vote for the Thai Rak Thai Party in the next election if the government insist on the transfer of schools to local administrative organizations.

Teachers and local administrative organizations keep arguing through mass media. Both sides cited various reasons to support ones' needs. Meanwhile, most people do not yet understand what impact the transfer will bring to the education of their children.

Dr. Visanu Kruangam<sup>9</sup>, Deputy Prime Minister and the key law specialist of the government, as the Chairman of the Committee for the Decentralization of Education Administration to Local Administration Organizations, asserted that the transfer of education to local administrative organizations must continue in compliance with the law concerning the decentralization, which provided that the central government must allocate 35% of its budget to local administrative organizations. At present the central government has allocated only 24% of its budget to local administrative organizations. Therefore, transferring teachers' salary and other educational expenditure to local administrative organizations would increase the budget up to 35% or more and enable the government to meet the requirement by law. He strongly agreed that the transfer of schools must continue according to the law. He also regarded the importance of local administrative organizations as local

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<sup>9</sup> Dr. Visanu Kruangam's Remark at the Press Conference concerning the Necessity of the Transferring of Schools to Local Administration Organizations on the 8<sup>th</sup> of November, 2005.

governments that should help share the burden of the central government especially in the tasks concerning human development such as education and health, not just road construction and drainage. His idea was in line with the Minister of Education who said that as far as the law was not yet amended, the transfer of schools to local administrative organizations must continue.

It is true that in any democratic society people have freedom of expression and are entitled to participate in politics. It is also common for people to engage in a strike or demonstration when they are dissatisfied or disagree with the government. However, since both teachers and local administrative organizations' administrators are educated people and live together in the same local areas, they should talk together using reasoning ability and think of students' benefits as the most important. Most of all, because the decentralization has already been prescribed by law, the government will have to comply with the law unless it has any otherwise policy. Since the conflict occurred because teachers did not have information and an opportunity to participate in the process of decentralization, it is the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Interior that have to communicate the facts and reasons to their subordinates and solve the problems.

The resistance to the transfer of schools by primary school teachers will continue for many months. Especially primary school teachers in the Northeast vowed to fight against the government until their request is accepted. Schools were closed in many provinces where teachers came to join the demonstration in front of the Ministry of Education and the Parliament. In addition, demonstrations have been held by teachers in some Northeastern provinces on weekends to draw attention from mass media and the government.

The Prime Minister does not seem to worry too much. He understood that because there would be an election for the Upper House in a few months, some leaders of the teacher organizations tried to make themselves known to public through teachers' demonstration. Teachers, on the other hand, refused the allegation and threatened to make a stronger strike. The Minister of Education, likewise, said he would not tolerate with the teachers' leaving classrooms during school days for the demonstration. He also declared to issue a penalty measure against teachers who leave classrooms for the demonstration.

Whether primary school teachers will win or lose remains a question, but it is likely that the conflict will continue for many more months.

## **Conclusions**

This article has explored the development of Thai primary education with an emphasis on three main aspects; the quantitative development, the qualitative development, and managerial development.

Throughout the one hundred year long history of the development of primary education in Thailand, it is apparent that primary education was the first type of education to be introduced from western countries. King Chulalongkorn established primary schools in the palace for the children from royal and noble families. Royal primary schools were also established in the capital area and upcountry for commoners. They were called state schools. On the other hand, schools established by community people in the temples were called community schools or “Rong Rian Prachabarn” in Thai language.

In terms of quantitative development, the Ministry of Education, and concerned organizations, has apparently put much effort in the expansion of educational opportunity for all Thai people. Through various measures such as establishing primary schools in every village for all children of age group to access to primary education, increasing government’s educational budget, producing adequate teachers, providing scholarships for the disadvantaged, improving health by the school lunch and supplementary food (milk) program and so on, the goal of universalization of primary education seemed to be achieved in 1990’s. However, there are still some students of special needs such as the handicapped, the otherwise disadvantaged groups, and the gifted, who should receive particular types of primary education that are suitable according to their needs.

In terms of qualitative development, it appeared that the reform of learning-teaching processes with an emphasis on the learner-centered approach is necessary. With the reform of learning process, students will be enabled to pursue their quest for knowledge and self-development. Especially, the promotion of teaching-learning in mathematics, science, foreign languages, and life skills such as problem-solving ability, creativity, must be actively encouraged. Primary education is the fundamentals of higher levels of education. Unless the learning reform is earnestly promoted, the quality of learning in primary education will not be improved and the enhance of the national competitiveness of Thailand will not be possible.

Therefore, the author would like to suggest that much importance must be placed on the training of primary school teachers so that they can have more access to

new knowledge and improve their skills in the use of technology. Apart from professional teachers, there are many other knowledgeable people who can supplement the inadequacy of capable teachers. Therefore, all parts of society should be encouraged to take part in the teaching-learning activities of primary education. By this way, parents, monks, local wisdom experts, and many other human resources in community can be primary school teachers.

Moreover, the role of Office of the National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (ONESQA) must be enriched. The result of the external evaluation should be utilized for the development of schools.

Finally, needless to say, the managerial development is the heart of primary education development. In order to provide quality education to all primary schools students all over the country no matter where they are, primary schools must be provided with adequate educational resources, on equality and equity basis. Taking into consideration the problems of small schools, the author perceives that it is necessary to take appropriate measures. Except for some remote and isolated areas where the transportation is inconvenient and where there are no other schools nearby, those schools with very few students should be dissolved or unified for the reason of economy of scale and cost-effectiveness. The dissolution and unification of schools will enable the government to spend money efficiently, schools to be strengthened and sharing of resources will take place. Moreover, for those primary schools with poor performance, the privatization of schools should be introduced so that there will be a competition for improving the quality of primary education.

Last but not least, regarding the transfer of schools to local administrative organizations, as far as the schools' willingness is concerned, it is necessary that secondary schools be transferred to Provincial Administrative Organizations. When compared to the case of primary schools and Tambon(Village) Administrative Organizations, where resources are scarce and knowledge is inadequate, secondary school teachers are more academic-oriented and Provincial Administrative Organizations are more knowledgeable, open-minded, and financially sufficient.

As for primary schools, the author agrees that the transfer should continue based on the two main criteria; the local administrative organizations pass the evaluation of the readiness, and the teachers are willing to be transferred. By this way, not all primary schools will be simultaneously transferred, but the transfer will gradually take place when both sides are ready. Some educators even compared this situation with the marriage of a couple which should not be forced but on voluntary

basis. After a few years of transferring, an evaluation must be conducted. If there are some best practice that could show sign of improvement, these will be models for more implementation of the decentralization of education administration in the future.

If primary education is operated by competent local administrative organizations, there will be many advantages. First, local community will help the government share the responsibility and expenditure of providing education to people. Second, there will be a competition among local administrative organizations in improving the quality of primary education since community people are concerned with education of their children. Third, the problems of small schools will be solved by local administrative organizations since they understand the situation of schools better than the Ministry of Education and have more sense of ownership and cost-effectiveness.

However, local administrative organizations must be careful, not to interfere with the school affairs, but to support, advise, and recommend. Education should be operated by professionals. Local administrative organizations may require schools to improve the quality of education, but principals and teachers must be properly respected and school autonomy must be retained.

To propose an appropriate model for the decentralization of education administration in Thailand, Office of the Education Council has conducted a research on the educational decentralization in selected countries and found that it is necessary to establish a Board of Education independent from local administration so that education will be free from local politics and well respected as a high level profession. Teachers may welcome the Board of Education more than local administrative organizations for they would be protected from political interference. On the contrary, local administrative organizations may not be happy with this idea since it will not allow them an authority to control teachers.

The decentralization of power of education administration to local administrative organizations according to their readiness would be beneficial to primary education in terms of quantitative, qualitative, and administrative development. However, since teachers' resistance to the transfer of schools is still severe and politics-oriented, this decentralization might be perceived as a big obstacle for education reform. Therefore, it might be better to discuss less on the decentralization temporarily but more on the learner-centered learning so that the learning reform for the benefit of learners would return to be the core of education reform and move forwards. If every party concerned thinks more of what learners

would benefit, the conflicts concerning the decentralization might be lessened. Schools and Local Administrative Organizations will cooperate more closely if both sides share a vision and an aim at enhancing the quality of students who are their own community children. Most of all, primary education is the fundamentals of the whole education system and primary schools are the only education institutions which are located in every community. They, therefore, should be supported and operated by every institution in community for the benefits of all community people.

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