

New Paradigm for the Life Skills Development of Children and Youth in Elementary Education Schools in the Rural Highland of Omkoi District, Chiang Mai, Thailand: Towards Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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ABSTRACT

This article aimed to understand the causes and importance of the new paradigm for developing life skills, for the purpose of elevating the quality of education and the quality of life of children and youth in the elementary education system. This study focused specifically on the context of schools in the highland area of Northern Thailand, under the concept of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals, where all students would be equally provided with educational opportunities that, in turn, would eliminate any educational inequality. The new paradigm would also help students to develop life skills in accordance with the guidelines provided by the World Health Organisation (WHO), the Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21), and the Basic Education Core Curriculum B.E. 2551 (2008) in order to provide guidelines that would prove suitable for the specific context of the area that could be further translated into strategic management.

Keywords: Life Skills of Children and Youth, Schools in the Rural Highland, Sustainable Development Goals, SDGs

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INTRODUCTION

Background and Importance of the New Paradigm for Developing Life Skills of Children and Youth

As part of the Royal Speech given by His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej The Great, during the graduation ceremony of Kasetsart University, His Majesty the King said: *"...the country's development must proceed in an orderly fashion, that is, starting from the very foundation - a sufficient pool of resources for the people to live comfortably. We can do so by saving, be mindful of our spending, and do so correctly. Once we create a solid foundation, we must then help and support the people to pursue their careers, allowing them to be self-sustainable. Therefore, the foundation is the most important, as only individuals with the occupations and statuses that are enough to sustain themselves may pursue greater growth and prosperity. Therefore, we should gradually pursue further growth and progress, in an orderly fashion, with*

great caution and carefulness, while being economized, in order to prevent any failure." (1) During the past decades, Thailand has faced numerous changes in every aspect, including those in terms of the economy, society, politics, administration, culture, technology, and the environment. The underlying intentions of those changes were to further develop the country, and allow the country to contend with the pace of the development of the global community, whereas the advancement made in technology and information would lead to rapid changes in the education system. At present, Thai society requires knowledge, a knowledge economy, as well as every related aspect of self-reliance to compete against other states and countries in the global community. The equilibrium between the rural community and the urban community is also important, so to cultivate the country with the community against both domestic and international changes. In order to drive every step and process of this development, it is

necessary to acquire knowledge that also conforms with the lifestyle of Thai society. Thus, morality, ethics, and the principle of sufficiency must also be promoted and cultivated among the people, so they may conduct their duties with great determination. Moreover, doing so would provide beneficial immunity for the life of the Thai people against any changes, whether it be at the level of the individual, family, community, society, or the country (2).

At the 70th United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in New York, USA, the UNGA investigated the result of the operation under the United Nations (UN)'s Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (2000-2015), which aimed to promote every country to further improve the quality of life of their people. Moreover, the UNGA considered and approved the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (3), that is, for the period from 2015-2030. The Agenda also encompassed some SDGs for the educational sector; namely, creating a guarantee that everyone would have access to a high-quality educational service, thoroughly and equally, and supporting opportunities for lifelong learning. These are very important goals for Thailand.

The Ministry of Education of Thailand implemented the Agenda as part of the Ministry of Education's 12th Education Development Plan, 2017-2021. As part of the Plan, the Ministry of Education specified the Second Mission: *'providing an equal opportunity to access education services to every person thoroughly'*, and developed the Fourth Strategy: *'expanding the opportunity to access the education services and lifelong learning that are aimed at students of every group and every age, in a manner that is suitable for the context and the developmental status'* (4). In terms of access to the education services and the equality-related issues, the aforementioned mission and strategy would be highly effective for the basic education system. Section 1, Article 9 of the National Education Act, B.E. 2542 (1999) and the Amendment (2nd Issue) B.E. 2545 (2002), on the subject of organising the structure and process of the education service, requires the decentralisation of the related authority to the local educational areas, educational institutions, and local administrative organisations. Article 60(4) of the Act requires that the government must allocate the budget for funding the operation and investment project of the government educational institutions in accordance with the country's National Educational Plan, educational institutions' missions, and educational equality (4). The initiation of 'thorough and equal access to education' on the global scale was put in motion after the UN announced the Universal Declaration of Human Rights at the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948. This Declaration specifies that everyone is equal, in terms of the economy, culture, and citizenship, without any discrimination regardless of their nationality, skin colour, gender, language, religion, and political beliefs. Under this Declaration, education is a basic human right (4).

Moreover, there are other assemblies that have created clear and solid effects on the subject of thorough and equal access to education. For example, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)'s General Conference at Chomthian Beach, Chon Buri province, Thailand, in 1990, included the World Education Forum, where members came together to create the World Declaration on Education. The vision of

the World Declaration on Education stated that, within 2015, every child and adolescent, especially females, children with unique needs, and children of ethnic minorities must have access to the compulsory elementary education system (5). In 2000, UNESCO also arranged the World Scholarship Forum at Dakar, Senegal, in order to evaluate the progress of their plans and initiations. The resolution of the Forum proposed the principle of 'Education for All', where the education system must also focus on poor and disadvantaged people, especially children in those groups of people. This also includes those people that have to enter into the labour sector and live in rural areas, immigrants, ethnic minorities in terms of their nationality or language, adults who suffer from AIDS and HIV infection, poor people who suffer from health problems, the disabled, and people with learning disabilities (6). In another World Scholarship Forum, at Inchon, Republic of Korea, in 2015, the Forum passed resolutions that covered the concepts and operation guidelines for monitoring the result of the SDGs, as part of the 2030 Agenda. The Forum also focussed heavily on education, as quoted: *'Education can change a human's life.'*

The Concept of Developing Life Skills for Children and Youth

The society of the new decade is the age of the rapidity and advancement of communication technology, the diversity of nationalities and cultures, and the assimilation of thoughts and beliefs of different groups of people. Members of such a society must brace themselves and keep pace with the lifestyle of this modern age with great discretion. Such dramatic changes in society would inevitably affect children in the learning ages regardless of how they live under the ever-changing flows of technology and how they meet with their parents' expectation towards the educational result of their children, as well as how they face inappropriate temptations or models that exist in their environment (7). Such a situation could result in many juvenile-related problems, including the problem of adapting their emotions and mentality, health-related issues, violence, game addiction-related problems, drug-related problems, sexual related-problems, etc (7-9). These problems are extremely severe in children and youth with low-level life skills, those who lack good immunity against society, those who, after graduation from the elementary education system, become underachievers, affected by mental and emotional issues, and are prone to conflict in their lives. Therefore, teachers must arrange a highly-efficient learning process that would cultivate life skills in students, which would allow them to survive the domination of technologies, and be ready to contend with and respond to the invasive nature of society (10).

Life skill development (11, 12), hence, is a learning process that aims to allow students to develop the proper knowledge, skills, and attitude, so they may recognise the value of themselves and others, to be able to make the right decision, and solve issues concerning their emotions and stress. This would create a good relationship with other people, so they could adapt themselves with and to any situations and manage their lives efficiently. Life skill development is a concept that conforms with the goals of the Basic Education Core Curriculum B.E. 2551 (2008) (13), which requires that life skills must be an important capacity that the educational institution must cultivate within every student. As such, educational institutions must arrange education services, so students would be an

individual of the desired quality that would be in accordance with the key performance indicators for learning, the desirable characteristics, and the Core Curriculum's intention. One of the desirable core competences, in terms of life skills, is the ability to adapt the process learned in people's daily lives, so they could be able to continuously learn on their own and live together within society. Thus, people would create beneficial interpersonal relationships, appropriately manage any problems and conflicts, appropriately adapt to changes in society and the environment, and know how to avoid undesirable behaviour that would affect their lives and others, especially during elementary school. Therefore, life skill development is comprised of four components. The first component focusses on the recognition of one's value and of others, and recognising one's aptitude, ability, advantages and disadvantages, and differences, as well as ultimately knowing oneself, one's value, being proud with oneself, having life goals, and being responsible to society. The second component emphasises the ability of critical thinking, decision-making, and creative problem solving. This component also includes the ability to filter the news, information, problems, and surrounding situations, the ability to criticise and evaluate the surrounding situations with proper reasons and information, and the capability to recognise the underlying causes of the problems, find alternatives to make the decision, and to creatively solve those problems. The third component focusses on emotion and stress management, that is, one's ability to recognise, understand, and contend with one's emotions, the underlying causes of stress, the method that can be used to control one's emotions and stress, the method that can be used for relaxing, and the ability to avoid and change the behaviour that could lead to undesirable emotions. Lastly, the fourth component concentrates on the creation of a good relationship with other people by learning and understanding their perspectives and emotions, the ability to use verbal language and non-verbal language to communicate one's thoughts, able to recognise other people's thoughts and needs, behave appropriately under any situations, and communicate in a manner that fosters a good relationship allowing people to collaborate and work with others happily (5).

In terms of the important paradigm for life skills in the twenty-first century, according to the brainstorming and information gathering undertaken by the Sasin Institute for Global Affairs (SIGA), Bangkok, Thailand, the necessary life skills for the twenty-first century could be categorized into four major groups. These consisted of the skills regarding one's ability to live and socialise (Life and Socialising), whether in terms of one's flexibility and adaptability, in order to live inside a society and adapt to any situations; for example, the changes in people's responsibility, role, duty, or schedule. Other necessary life skills are those regarding the ability to recognise and adjust one's performance in accordance with the feedback received from other people, as well as the ability to understand and negotiate efficiently, and the capability to socialise and exchange across different cultures (8, 14-16). That is, skills which allow people to behave appropriately, to know when they should speak up and when they should listen, and be able to respect the different ideas and values of different cultures, especially the ability to be open-minded (11, 14).

Therefore, it is very important for learning activities that aim to develop life skills to cultivate learners' ability to

understand oneself and others, to recognise interpersonal differences, possess good morals and ethics, and the ability to appropriately communicate and express one's feelings, as well as cultivate creative thinking and the responsibility for oneself and other people. All the aforementioned skills are the basic life skills that should provide a guideline for fostering strong immunity against society among children and youth, which would allow them to grow and develop appropriately according to their ages, and express good behavior (11, 12). Moreover, cultivating good life skills within children and youth would help with the issues regarding self-development and self-actualisation that would allow them to be responsible for themselves, as well as give them an opportunity to build a good shield that they could use to protect themselves during a crisis. This would also allow them to withstand any pressures and challenges from their peers, families, and society. It is evidently clear that children must be strengthened, so they would be able to face any new challenges that could come in various forms, and face and solve various problems efficiently (6, 13).

Necessary Life Skills for Unique Contexts

Based on the situation review conducted by the Educational Reform Committee, the authors would like to address the field data regarding the context of schools in the highland area of Northern Thailand, and to analyse the problem of inequality regarding the development of the quality of life of children and youth in this area. This issue would be of great concern to every related authority, including those issues from the perspective of educational opportunities, the opportunity to access good training, have a good quality of life, and the preparation of human resources for the country's development, so to prepare these children and youth into being an important force and high-quality human resources for the country's future development. Educational institutions that are located in the highland area of Thailand, namely, in 20 provinces in North Thailand, have faced the problem of transportation access. As a result, it has been difficult for government organisations to access this area and help the people. Simultaneously, in the 26 provinces near the border between Thailand and the neighboring countries; namely, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Republic of the Union of Myanmar, and Kingdom of Cambodia, also face several complications, including the problems of the economy, society, and security, as well as poverty, drug trafficking and production, smuggling, illegal immigration, population relocation, etc. However, though faced with inequality, within the unique context of the geographical characteristics that present several difficulties for the authorities to provide them with compulsory education services, the educational-related authorities are still determined to solve those area-specific problems, as well as reform the overall education system, so to truly create educational equality even though they have to face so many limitations. As a result of the working group on reforming the education system, as part of the pilot project "A systemic reform of the education system in the highland area of Chiang Mai, in order to eliminate inequality and to enhance the community's potential with a multidisciplinary approach", the authors also found that, at present, educational inequality is still a major problem of the utmost urgency though efforts had always been given to solving this particular issue. However, the inequality between the urban communities and rural communities seems to be widening. In Chiang Mai province of Thailand,

there are over 200 schools in the highland area. These schools are under the supervision of various authorities and require further systemic enhancement and support, so to achieve the goals of children and youth development, as well as develop the quality of life of the families and communities in the area. Nevertheless, there are several more limitations and constraints found among those underprivileged communities in the highland area. If those problems are not solved, they would further affect the quality of the education system, children and youth development, and ultimately, the quality of the Thai people in accordance with the Thailand 4.0 Policy of the Thai government, which would reflect the intention of developing the entire spectrum of the education system (16).

From the resolutions from the meeting between the stakeholders of this situation, the resolutions covered seven major areas: 1) solving the problem of illiteracy, 2) solving health- and environmental-related problems, 3) occupational promotion, 4) developing the life skills of children and youth, 5) promoting the career progress of the local schools' administrators and teachers, 6) providing infrastructural support for health and hygiene; such as, clean water supply, health promotion materials, and other necessities, and 7) the collaboration within the network of higher educational institutions in Chiang Mai province, so that everyone would collaborate together in a network (17). This is especially true for the context of children and youth, as they would become important core players in the development of the community, society, and country in the future amidst the ever-changing context of society, as a result of the environmental factors, both internal or external. Thus, these factors may influence the behavioural deviation among children and youth, especially in the current context of the Thai family, which is evolving from a large extended family into a single smaller family, where parents have to work hard to survive in the struggling economy. As a result, parents would lack the opportunity to sufficiently take care of their children and have to rely on the educational institution starting from early childhood education, elementary education, high school education, occupational education, to even the higher education system. More importantly, adolescence is an important cornerstone of a child's development, especially at the age of 12-13 years old, which is known as '*the age of the raging hurricane*' (18, 19). This age presents both a crisis and opportunity for children to further improve their potential, as they attend the basic education system from elementary school to high school. Therefore, this would be of the utmost necessity that every related party, and not just the smaller units in society; such as, the family or the community, including the educational institutions, local administrative organisations, community leaders, folk scholars, and communities continuously come together and reflect the problems of children and youth in the local area.

Another important problem that the working group found and studied was the problem of staying in school dormitories in the highland area. This problem occurred

as a result of the geographical context, which was not quite convenient for students to travel back and forth between the schools and homes because they lived too far away from their schools, travelling along steep mountains was troublesome, etc. After they returned home, students could be disheartened about returning to school and eventually stopped going to school. Some schools solved this area-specific problem by arranging school dormitories for these students. Such schools also arranged learning activities that taught students how to adapt with their living conditions, good life skills, and how to live with their peers. School dormitories are under the supervision of teachers, who would take care of making sure that students observe and follow all the rules and regulations required for them to live peacefully together. These schools also scheduled a lesson review session, learning quality enhancement session, as well as many other extracurricular activities besides the normal classes. Therefore, with good management that utilised the appropriate managerial procedure, especially the one that focussed on the participatory development of life skills among children; schools could play an important role in developing the life quality of children and youth who attended schools in the highland area. Such an effort would greatly affect students' quality and lead to greater benefits for the country. The government, hence, must invest in the necessary resources required for elevating both the quality of the education system and the students' lives. This would not be merely limiting their academic lives in the classroom, but also their general living conditions, hygiene, that would allow them to learn to live together and to develop the necessary life skills for students in the twenty-first century.

Epilogue: Paradigm the Leads to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

In any case, the early phase of this effort would require multidisciplinary collaboration from members of various academic backgrounds, so to form a working group of public service academicians. Members of such a group should come from higher educational institutions and related associations. Such collaboration would pioneer a new dimension, improve the paradigm's potential, promote the participation of members, and enhance the power of every related sector ultimately resulting in the development of the paradigm based on the collaboration between the government sector, private sector, as well as non-profitable organisations. The new paradigm would help solve those area-specific problems by creating high impact activities or projects. Additionally, those high impact projects must really have importance that could clearly answer specific demands. The projects must affect the public on a wider scale and influence a large portion of the population. Moreover, movements regarding the collaboration of the multidisciplinary network may promote many of the paradigm-based sustainable development efforts to be in accordance with the SDGs, where those projects should be methodically initiated and aim for sustainability. (Figure 1)



Figure 1: New Paradigm for the Life Skills Development of Children and Youth in Elementary Education Schools in the Rural Highland of Omkoi District, Chiang Mai, Thailand: Towards Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (17)

The new paradigm would be useful for the presentation of the research project's main proposals by allowing the authors to thoroughly study the area in question. The new paradigm would also allow stakeholders to collaboratively solve those education-related problems in the highland area of Chiang Mai province. Moreover, from the authors' non-formal discussion with the students; namely, children and youth who resided in the area in question, they were interested in and intended to participate in the life skill development activities. Though life skill development covers quite a wide perspective, the authors intended to use the perspective of the targetted audiences to select the most necessary components. The authors also realised the importance of the participatory process, which should be implemented with every phase and step of the life skill development programme, whereas the authors would periodically present the feedback to the local area. The authors would also intend to cultivate youth leaders from those children that would become role models of life skill development among the targetted audiences, as well as work with stakeholders of the local community (11, 12). In this new paradigm, it would be necessary for educational institutions, which are responsible for education management, to modify their management scheme, curriculum, and teaching activities. This should be conducted in accordance with the ever-changing society and economy and answer the ever-changing demands of society. Therefore, it would be necessary to reform the country's primary education system, especially the reformation of educational institutions' management and administration. As such, educational institutions should be more independent in their process. Therefore, the decentralisation of the decision-making authority is required. In the new paradigm, decision-making should be the responsibility of every part of society, including the people, families, communities, business organisations, and government authorities; all those players should participate and be responsible for education management to the fullest of their potential. Therefore, for these schools of a specialised context, it would be necessary that the authors must continue the study, so to understand and modify the paradigm used in the management,

administration, and strategic management. This would allow these schools to contend with the changes and limitations that would be related to education management, as well as reduce any inequality in the opportunity to access the high-quality education services of children and youth who live in an underprivileged area.

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