

EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION IN THAILAND: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The Ministry of Education in the country of Thailand recently announced the establishment of two distinct educational tracks – a conventional/ traditional track and an unconventional/ progressive/ alternative track. This decision was perhaps guided by the success of innovative pilot education programs in the country, collectively called “the Lighthouse Project.” This article is concerned with one program in this project – the Darunsikkhalai School for Innovative Learning (DSIL) –detailing what it has accomplished and the challenges it faces in attempting to bring about new definitions of learning and teaching in Thailand. In this article, a detailed description of the school, and the research procedures used to study it precede a full discussion of the primary challenges facing this particular school.

Thailand, like most every country, is a land of contradictions. An accepting culture overall (e.g. of religious diversity and sexual identity), its people can also be very dogmatic on certain issues (e.g. getting angry when someone does not stand during the king’s anthem) (Sullivan 2008); it is a land of great natural beauty but is also marred in places by urban sprawl and pollution; and it is now a country with two distinct educational tracks – conventional and unconventional (P. Israsena, personal communication, April 25, 2008). The Thai Ministry of Education (MOE), which recently announced this globally unprecedented decision, was perhaps guided by the

success of innovative pilot education programs in the country, collectively called “the Lighthouse Project.” This article is concerned with the case of one program in this project – the Darunsikkhalai School for Innovative Learning (DSIL) – detailing what it has accomplished and the challenges it faces in attempting to bring about new definitions of learning and teaching in Thailand. In the article, I first provide a detailed description of the school and the research procedures used to study it. After “setting the stage” in these sections, I move on to explore the primary challenges facing this particular school, and conclude with a discussion of how this case illustrates fundamental problems facing the educational community in respect to changing conventional paradigms. While the case has intrinsic worth as a fascinating story of one group’s efforts to bring about change, it can also be of interest to individuals and organizations seeking to explore educational reform and the practical problems of implementation. In this sense, this research could be described as an “instrumental” qualitative case study where a specific case is explored to give insight into an intriguing issue; as Stake (1995) indicates, “Case study here is instrumental to accomplishing something other than understanding this particular” phenomenon (p. 3). In this instance, the case of the DSIL is used to help readers understand the fundamental challenges and opportunities that exist for any group of people attempting to change conventional educational paradigms.

DESCRIPTION OF SCHOOL

DSIL opened its doors in 2000, and at the time of this study employed about twenty “facilitators” (teachers) to guide the education of close to 90 “learners” (students) aged five to sixteen. Located on the campus of King Mongkut’s University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT) in Bangkok, the school is a semi-public/semi-private institution [located on a public university campus, nominally under the purview of the Thai MOE, but with significant leeway to try out innovations, and financially supported by tuition (approximately 242,000 baht per child per year - about \$8,000 US) and foundations (Thaicom and Suksapattana Foundations)]. The school launched with the end goal of helping create quality citizens who are life-long learners, economically competitive, globally-oriented, and peaceful. The means DSIL chose to reach that end included the

intertwining of three theories by: (1) creating a “Constructionist” educational environment (Constructionism is MIT Professor Seymour Papert’s learner-centered, project-based learning theory, explained in more detail a bit later) (Papert, 1980, 1991, 1993), (2) providing all organization members with voice and power in school management and governance (based on Peter Senge’s idea of a Learning Organization, explored in more depth later) (Senge et al., 2000), and (3) placing special emphases on morality and personal development through Buddhist mindfulness meditation. In establishing these means to its end goal, the DSIL was making a clear break from conventional schools in Thailand which are characterized by a top-down bureaucracy and classrooms in which there is a high teacher-student ratio (40-60 students per class), a great deal of teacher transmission of information, emphasis on student silence, and rote learning of the highly-detailed, standardized national curriculum. An in-depth discussion of each of the innovative means used to reach DSIL’s end goals follows.

Constructionism

Seymour Papert’s Constructionism is similar in many ways to constructivist thought about the nature of knowledge and the nature of knowing. These theories both question conventional, objectivist ideas, arguing that knowledge is not transmitted in toto from one person to another as a finished product, but rather each individual constructs/builds/acquires knowledge bit-by-bit through personally meaningful experiences and reflections. Constructionism and constructivism thus value learning by doing, and engaging in hands-on, intrinsically-motivating, real-life tasks.

Constructionism distinguishes itself from constructivism mainly in its emphases on technology/computer use and the belief that physical products should be constructed by the learners. Papert (1993) argued,

the construction that takes place “in the head” often happens especially felicitously when it is supported by construction of a more public sort “in the world” – a sand castle or cake, a Lego house or a corporation, a computer program, a poem, or theory of the universe. Part of what I mean by “in the world” is that the product can be shown, discussed, examined, probed, and admired. It is out there (142).

In Papert’s works, he also raises objections to mandatory,

standardized curricula in schools, arguing that learning is more meaningful (i.e. more long-lasting and motivating) if the learner gets to have an element of voice and choice in when, how, where, and what subjects are studied. In *The Children's Machine* (1993), he passionately argues, "traditional education codifies what it thinks citizens need to know and sets out to feed children this 'fish.' Constructionism is built on the assumption that children will do best by finding ('fishing') for themselves the specific knowledge they need" (Papert, 1993, 139).

The DSIL operationalizes Papert's Constructionism through its curriculum and scheduling, assessment, and technology use.

Constructionist Innovations At DSIL

Projects and Classes

While some aspects of the DSIL school day and curriculum were reminiscent of conventional education, (e.g. distinct math, English, Thai, art, physical education, and club classes for 1-4 hours per week each), the majority of learners' time (12-15 hours per week) was spent in project groups, which was where Papert's Constructionism was most evident. And even in some of the more conventional classes, such as physical education and club, students had a certain degree of voice and choice over subject matter (e.g. the students elected to take Tae Kwon Do, ping pong, badminton, basketball, or dance).

In terms of the project groups, at the time of this study, children were divided into three houses based mainly on age. Prior to one trimester's end, learners were asked what they would like to study during the next trimester. A few project topics were decided per house and learners then were subdivided based upon which topic they wanted to study (observed topics included Global Warming, Food Science, Physics, Sufficiency Economy Theory and Practice, Body Systems/Biology, and How Is a Person a Genius?). Once divided by topic, children created mind maps around that topic, listing what they already knew as well as what they wanted to know. Between trimesters, while learners were on break, facilitators took the mind maps, combined them, connected the topic and its subtopics to the Thai national curriculum where possible (so that core academic subjects were integrated and learned as a natural part of the process), and added in field trip activities, possible expert speakers, etc. From there, facilitators roughly sketched

a trimester plan. While planning, facilitators tried to incorporate as many hands-on learning opportunities as possible, as well as attempted to vary activities so as to attend to all students' different learning styles; additionally, they brought in technology wherever possible, integrated traditionally separated subjects, and connected topics to children's lived experiences (e.g. to answer such questions as: why learn this? What's its relevance to my life?). When learners returned from break, facilitators shared their plans and children were encouraged to add or delete things. Once the trimester began, facilitators guided learners in their understanding of concepts by engaging them in active, hands-on work (e.g. preserving foods in the Food Science project, interviewing self-sufficient villagers in the Sufficiency Economy project, etc.), but learners were always free to object or suggest changes to lessons at hand.

During both project and "conventional" class time, class sizes were all quite small, on average about one facilitator to three students during projects, and one facilitator to nine students during the more "conventional" classes. To some extent, this was an enactment of Papert's injunction that "organized ...education can help [learners] most by making sure they are supported morally, psychologically, materially, and intellectually in their efforts" (Papert, 1993, p. 139). Small class sizes allowed the facilitators to do this with relative ease.

English Class

The school, at the time of this study, was working on integrating the English language into the school in a more Constructionist way. DSIL views English as a primary mechanism to aid its students in becoming global citizens who are economically competitive. As English has become the lingua franca worldwide, the school wants to ensure that its graduates are bilingual, speaking both Thai and English. The study of English at DSIL is evolving. For a number of years, English was treated as a foreign language subject, with a specific amount of time set aside each week for focused instruction with a native-speaking facilitator. This conventional treatment was due to staffing difficulties, but in the past year, those difficulties have receded. DSIL was able to hire a larger number of fluent English speakers from the United States, Australia, and Canada, and thus, at the time of this study, while English instruction was still carried out as a discrete class (homogeneously grouped according to ability with a native-speaking facilitator for each class), English

was also beginning to be integrated into project work at differing levels (minimal at younger ages, full immersion with older learners). The English fluency of Thai staff plays a role in the degree to which English can be spoken in the classes; at the time of this study, only a minority of the Thai facilitators were fluent in English, most had only minimal to passable English skills. Because it argues in its literature that “learning a foreign language in the context of an activity can promote greater fluency in the particular language and can certainly be more meaningful and enjoyable . . . than traditional parroting drill and practice” (DSIL website 2008) the school is working on ways to not only increase learners’ English ability by integrating it into project time, but also to increase the Thai staff’s English fluency. The school is doing such things as running meetings in English and providing scholarships for Thai facilitators to study in the United States.

Assessment

The Constructionist emphasis on the creation of physical products and self-reflection emerged in some of this school’s assessment choices. In terms of self-reflection, learners were encouraged to engage in daily self-assessment of activities and personal interactions. In terms of physical product creation, the students did a number of things. For example, on a weekly or bi-weekly basis (depending on the project), students engaged in “Show and Shares” where they presented to and discussed with their peers some of the knowledge they had gained that week. At the trimester’s end, children created portfolios of their work in all classes and wrote summative project reports in which they identified ideas learned and relevance to their lives. Also at trimester’s end, learners created Exhibitions of their work, which included demonstrations, plays/oral presentations, and visual displays.

Technology

DSIL was also Constructionist in its high level of technology. Since 2000, a 1: 1 ratio of computers to learners has existed. My observations revealed the learners and facilitators to be very technologically savvy, using computers as well as multimedia equipment to facilitate developmentally-appropriate learning on a daily basis. Students used PowerPoint for presentations, word processing software for reports or other written communications, edited digitally filmed clips, and navigated the internet for research and

communication purposes; teachers directed the students to certain web pages for demonstrations/ visual representations of content, they documented student work products by taking digital pictures, and so on.

Learning Organization

In addition to its Constructionist innovations, the DSIL is also innovative in its governance practices. The school has identified itself as a “Learning Organization,” a term coined by Peter Senge to describe an organization where individual members feel a sense of ownership, and where a democratic management system is in place to encourage an optimal degree of member participation (Senge et al., 2000). While there was a management team in place to coordinate and implement decisions (made up of the President, Provost, Vice-Provosts, Human Resources, Administrative, and Instructional Technology Directors), other structures and practices gave parents and facilitators opportunities to have a strong voice in school governance. For example, facilitators had a weekly meeting not only to discuss “housekeeping details” (e.g. hear announcements, coordinate physical space usage, etc.) but also to hash out organizational and philosophical concepts (e.g. should the school divide children by age? What does personal development look like?, etc.). Parents were also active in coordinating retreats, and putting forward ideas through the Leadership Committee (e.g. urging the school to use Bento boxes on field trips rather than styrofoam, lobbying to have a parent’s room in the building, etc.). While learner voice on macro school organization matters was not evident at the time of the study, learners did have their voices heard on curricular and assessment matters as discussed above, and the school management has indicated that as students get older, representatives will be invited to take spots on the Leadership Committee.

Morality/ Buddhism

The DSIL extends its innovations into its focus on morality and mindfulness. Thailand is a Buddhist country and because the DSIL wishes to develop in its students an appreciation of “Thai-ness,” it has sought to bring in Buddhist mindfulness meditation practices as a means to develop students’ morality (Suksapattana Foundation, p. 11). Mindfulness practices are focused on individuals controlling focus, lessening ego, and following core injunctions (e.g. caring for others, not stealing, life or property, not lying to others,

etc.). The school encourages mindfulness by incorporating certain practices into the school day. For example, each day begins with “assembly” time in which the different houses meet to engage in chanting and meditation (the younger the children, the shorter the time period for meditation; time is added as the children progress through the different houses). After chanting and meditation, the facilitator engages the children in discussions of moral issues or activities that will help the children develop their self-understanding. Teachers also try to embed morality and self-knowing activities and discussion into the content of the projects. Absolutely key to all these practices is hiring staff who can be good role models of mindfulness. The school thus works hard to locate staff members who embody the ideals of passionate, life-long learning, compassion and caring, and deep self-reflection leading to personal development.

Intertwining Of The Three Theories

The DSIL, in its literature, argues that Buddhist mindfulness, Constructionism, and Learning Organization theory are all quite compatible. Good learners must be fully conscious and focused; people who share governance of the school must decrease their ego so as not to become embroiled in power and control issues; and if one’s dignity is honored through having a voice and choices in an organization, one tends to honor the dignity and life of others. There is cultural resonance between Thai Buddhism, Constructionism, and Learning Organization theory, and the DSIL seeks to capitalize on the connections by helping its students become mindful learners who value their Thai-ness, care for others, and for their society.

Conclusion

In everything the school does, it is seeking to develop in students five “quotients”: (1) IQ (Intelligence Quotient) and (2) AQ (Adversity Quotient) which are characterized by the ability to work with different kinds of materials and media, contextualized understanding of formal concepts and disciplines, competency in English, ability to pursue an inquiry and engage in a long-term project, creativity and ability to assess situations and solve problems (even those that seem especially troublesome), and the ability to use this acquired knowledge and wisdom in any and all situations as a basis for improved decision making, problem solving, and, most im-

portantly, innovation; (3)TQ- (Technology Quotient) which is characterized by technological fluency (ability to use technology); (4) MQ (Morality Quotient) and (5) EQ (Emotional Quotient), which are characterized by a sense of community and responsibility in working and living with others, a holistic awareness and understanding of how the world works so that learners can take responsible actions, the ability to have a stable state-of-mind and reactions to situations, and the ability to translate data into wisdom by merging knowledge with experience and strong morals (DSIL website, 2008).

These end goals and the means by which the school seeks to meet them are all highly innovative for Thailand (and would be for many other countries as well). DSIL invited me to document their innovations to share with a worldwide audience. In the process of data collection about these innovations, I began to discern that there's nothing easy about implementing such changes, and so the progress the school has made in challenging the educational status quo should be highly lauded. This does not mean that everything is finished and perfect, though. The school does face some significant challenges to its innovations, and I came to identify these challenges over the course of my study. Information about my research approach is therefore called for prior to a full discussion of these challenges.

PROCEDURES AND METHODS

This research began with a meeting between the DSIL provost and myself which took place in July, 2007. Mr. Santi Tisayakorn was in the United States on a trip to both recruit facilitators and do initial research into partnership possibilities with my university and area high schools. At this meeting, Mr. Tisayakorn formally invited me to conduct a case study of the school. He suggested no specific research questions; rather, he sought a descriptive analysis of the school's innovations. We agreed on the necessity of my studying the school for an entire twelve weeks (two weeks of facilitator planning time, and the ten week project session with children in attendance) in order to get the fullest "outsider" understanding possible. I then began my research process by doing background reading on Constructionism, the school, and Thailand in general. In mid-January, 2008, I departed the United States and headed for

Bangkok, where I stayed until April, 2008.

During my twelve-week tenure at the school, I divided my research into two main parts. The first part was during the first ten weeks, and involved observation of and, to a small degree, participation in the structures, practices, and functioning of the school. I observed the facilitators during the first two weeks as they planned for the upcoming project session. Then, during the third week, I accompanied the oldest house of learners (Elastic House) and facilitators on a week-long field trip to the village of Ban Sam Kha, 12 hours by train north of Bangkok. The students were running a learning camp for the village children while there (teaching Physics, Chemistry, Biology, and Business). Upon our return to Bangkok in early February, I commenced observing each project, as well as the different levels of English and math for one week each (for an overall total of 7 weeks); during these weeks, I also sat in once for each house's morning Buddhist mindfulness meditation time, as well as making one visit to each house's club class (Tae Kwon Do, dance, badminton, basketball), art class, and chorus class.

As English was only in dominant use in the Elastic House projects, the three highest level math classes, and the English classes, the school assigned one of the vice-provosts to be my translator at all other times. The use of a translator, of course, raises validity concerns for my research in that the translator may have a vested interest in interpreting situations in the most favorable light, and therefore translates the "official" classroom discourse rather than the subtext, side conversations, etc. that are so important in ethnographic research. While I recognize these drawbacks, I had no choice but to accept them as necessary preconditions of the research in that I do not speak Thai. In my initial communications with the school, I had come to believe that English was more often spoken than actually the case (I am not implying that the school deliberately misled me; perhaps I just assumed too much, thinking that a school seeking an English-speaking researcher would be run using mostly English). Because of these pre-travel conceptions about language, I had not anticipated the need for translation, nor were any funds available to hire an impartial translator when I arrived and discovered the problem. I was incredibly grateful for the translation services provided by the DSIL.

With my full-time presence at the school I was, in some ways, like an intern, taking part in meetings and the occasional English or

project class; in other ways, I was most definitely a non-participant observer and respected guest. In this first stage of the research, I compiled 45 full days of observation field notes. I spent the final two weeks of my stay involved in the second part of my research – conducting 18 semi-structured narrative interviews with parents, Thai and English-speaking facilitators, and management team members, all of whom volunteered to be interviewed on the school's campus. Interviews ranged across a series of themes related to the mission and vision of the school, intergroup relations, personal opinions about the school's successful and unsuccessful aspects, differences between this school and more conventional schools in Thailand, Thai culture, and so on. There were three sets of specific questions for each of the populations interviewed, although there was some repetition/overlapping of questions among them. (See appendix at the end of this article for a full listing of questions posed to each population of interviewees.) Each interview, which lasted 45 to 75 minutes, began with the signing of a consent form, was audio-recorded for later transcription, and was conducted in English. This last fact raises yet another validity concern, in that my potential interview pool was limited by language. In a sense, all interview research is delimited by the fact that participants must be willing to volunteer their time, but the language factor adds another dimension to the self-selection bias present in this sort of research.

My own observations provided the basis for inquiry into issues at the school. I entered this research without any pre-established research questions beyond exploring the ways in which the school was innovative. I hoped for an organic emergence of other important issues and within a few weeks after my arrival, a key question began to surface in my thinking about the school: What are the challenges of creating schools in Thailand that breaks from the hegemonic paradigms about teaching and learning?

THE CHALLENGES

Challenge 1: Building a Learning Organization with a Shared Vision

Peter Senge et al.'s (2000) ideas about schools as Learning Organizations are predicated on creating a shared vision. They argue that a Learning Organization must focus on a mutual purpose, have shared images of the future, as well as principles and guiding

practices by which they hope to get there. In such an organization, people must feel safe and be willing to express themselves strongly and clearly in a diverse setting. People must also feel as if they hold an equal amount of power in making and enacting decisions and they must feel a sense of kinship and collegiality with other people in the organization. This latter does not mean that everyone must see eye-to-eye on all issues, but there must be an undercurrent of respect for differences and a trust that everyone's best interests are in mind. Getting to the place where this shared vision can be created in a collegial atmosphere is no easy task, and the DSIL encountered, and continues to encounter, many bumps in the road along the way.

Thai Socialization

One major obstacle to this end is Thai culture and people's reluctance to openly speak their minds. Quite a few of the Thai facilitators, parents, and management team members I interviewed acknowledged that Thai culture is a hierarchical one, with extreme deference to authority and elders ingrained in people from a young age. So, even though the DSIL president and provost continually repeated the point in various meetings with staff and families that each voice was valued and invited, many facilitators and parents did not speak their concerns openly. In fact, at the end of each interview when I asked the participant if he/she had any questions for me, a number of parents pointedly asked me to be sure to raise with the management team the concerns they discussed. Now, this could well be a case of parents wanting my voice (as a respected, Western researcher) to join theirs in expressing concerns, but I did not get the sense that this was always the case. Rather, my sense was that some parents did not feel comfortable raising their concerns themselves. Some facilitators made the same request of me and went further, saying that they did not believe the management was sincere in its one voice/one vote promise. These individuals cited instances where they felt decisions were taken out of their hands and handled unilaterally by the management team (e.g. house organization structure, and certain personnel policies). Now, whether or not this belief of insincerity is factually true or the facilitators' reticence in speaking out stemmed more from their cultural socialization, the fact remains that a number of the facilitators I interviewed expressed feelings of disenfranchisement.

Cultural Conflicts

Another obstacle to creating a collegial environment with a shared vision at the DSIL arises from the fact that it is starting to have a richly diverse, multicultural facilitator staff and cultural misunderstandings and resentments are rising. At the time of the study, the school had a majority of Thai staff at both the management and facilitator level. In addition, there was one American vice-provost, two American facilitators (one of whom is mostly fluent in Thai), one Canadian facilitator, one Australian facilitator, and two Taiwanese facilitators (these latter attended university in the United States and were recruited from there, although one of them had already been immersed in Thai culture as her family lives in Thailand now and she attended an international high school in Bangkok). Tensions clearly existed between the different cultures on staff (more tensions were evident between Thai and Western culture staff than between the Thai and Taiwanese staff).

The first tension related to equity issues. Some Western staff felt that they had heavier workloads because they taught multiple preparations (e.g. project class, English class, and some math), whereas some Thai staff felt they had heavier workloads as they were the ones who did most of the communicating with the outside society (e.g. setting up field trips, communicating with parents, etc.). Some Thai staff also expressed resentment toward the English-speaking staff because the latter's salaries were significantly higher than theirs, and because it sometimes seemed to them that the English-speaking staff got preferential treatment (ease of getting time off, more approval of budget requests, etc.).

A further tension related to cultural respect expressed by a number of the Thai facilitators was that they sometimes felt their culture was disrespected by the Western staff (e.g. in how the Western facilitators dressed, expressed their respect for the king, or communicated. In this latter, Thais felt that the Western facilitators were too dominating and not open to others' views). On the other side, some Western staff expressed to me that they felt the knowledge they brought with them (of the English language and Western folkways) was not fully valued by the Thai staff. For example, some of the English-speaking staff spoke of how they felt their skills and time were wasted by being assigned to work on projects with Thai staff who either avoided using English in any instruction/ learning activities or simply did not have levels of English fluency suf-

ficient to do so. Some English-speaking facilitators thus spent multiple hours each day in an environment where they could not aid students in guiding learning because little to no English was used. Their resentment in this case, tended to be aimed more at management for what they saw as poor organization of personnel, rather than toward individual Thai facilitators, but a small degree of resentment toward the latter did exist.

This language barrier also surfaced in facilitator and whole-school meetings. English-speaking staff detailed to me, and I myself observed, meetings and Exhibitions held almost entirely in Thai with no translation provided. I also attended a number of meetings held mostly in English with some Thai translation for the many Thai facilitators and parents whose English was not fluent and who thus could not fully understand the discussion. Even when such translations occurred, the depth of discussion did not seem to be very deep. This language barrier and the other cultural tensions that existed precluded, to a large extent, the development of a deeply shared vision among all organization members.

Lack of Education Philosophy Background

Another obstacle to the creation of a shared vision at the DSIL is the background experiences of both the staff and parents. An innovative school is, in large part, difficult to establish and maintain because so few people have experience in challenging the educational paradigms, and this is very much the case at the DSIL. Most, if not all, school members (parents, management, facilitators) were educated in conventional, teacher-centered, standardized curriculum and test-driven schools – these experiences formed a sort of “apprenticeship of observation” in which these individuals had minimal access to more student-centered pedagogies or alternative paradigms of learning (Lortie, 1975). Thus, the school members have little in their past school experiences to guide them in doing things in a radically different way. While many parents, facilitators, and management were drawn to the school for its unconventional aspects, their rejection of the conventional tended to be more visceral than researched. For example, a small number of interviewed parents indicated that they consciously researched and sought out an alternative educational environment for their children, whereas most other parents stated that they were drawn to the school upon reading a short article, or hearing about it on TV and then attending one of the school visits. Currently, prior to or after enrolling their

children, many parents surely engage in research on the school's counter-hegemonic philosophies, but at least initially, a number of parents joined the school without having fully researched or understood the implications of innovative education approaches.

The background of many facilitators and management staff also evidenced a lack of deep reflection on educational philosophy issues. Most management members had no formal training in education; in fact, many of them were formerly corporate executives with the Siam Cement Group. Most facilitators had no formal education training, because the school has made a point of seeking out content-area/domain knowledge specialists (people who majored in zoology, physics, chemistry, history, business, biology, engineering, photo journalism, and so on) rather than trained educators. The upper-level management made this choice because it believes that Thai teacher education programs do not prepare individuals to be effective facilitators of learning in a student-centered, Constructionist, Learning Organization. As with parents' initial lack of deep reflection, the non-education backgrounds of facilitators and management means that when they come up against certain situations or choices, they will sometimes fall back on "default" thinking about schools: behaviors and viewpoints more closely aligned to conventional school practices. Lack of educational background certainly doesn't preclude an eventual deep understanding of the unconventional philosophies of education, it just means that the shared visioning process will take longer and demand more personal commitment from members.

Complexities of Constructionism

A last challenge to building a shared vision in the school is that knowledge about Constructionism can be constructed in many different ways by different people. Papert's writings about the theory (1980, 1991, and 1993) are, in my opinion, somewhat obtuse. He rarely fully illustrates what a Constructionist school might look like in practice. I believe that this is purposeful, for to be prescriptive with a theory that is all about individuals and groups constructing knowledge in their own ways (often through trial and error) would be the height of irony. But, this lack of clear examples of the fullness of his ideas can lead to internal disjointedness, fits and starts, and members losing faith in a school's attempt to be innovative. DSIL has experienced some of this latter in the past eight years. Members of the management team shared historical information with me

about how the school, in its first six years, struggled with parents pulling their children out because they didn't understand why the school was making the choices it did. They did not understand why the end results the school was aiming for did not happen quickly, and they did not seem to understand that the school was feeling its way towards Constructionism.

The DSIL has also experienced some trials/fits and starts. For example, I have been making a point throughout this article of stating "at the time of the study," or "when the study was conducted" because I am aware, by continued written communication with members of the school, that the DSIL is going through some major structural changes as I write. Talks began while I was at the school about possibly doing away with the house structure and the group projects. There were concerns that this structure, coupled with a high number of new facilitators and families who lacked deep understandings of Constructionist learning, were resulting in a drift back to conventional education practices of whole-class learning, pen and paper assessments, excessive teacher control, and posting of grades (and thus an increasing focus on extrinsic motivators and competition). There were also concerns that the school was just "going through the motions" on some of its innovations. Interviews with some facilitators and management revealed fears about the school not deeply following Constructionist practices; for example, what looked on the surface like children getting a voice in matters was, on closer inspection, just kids taking the easiest way out, thereby not becoming life-long learners able to overcome adversity. Or, they feared that while self reflection and alternative assessments were in place, they were frequently carried out in haphazard, rushed ways. Because the school is a Learning Organization, talks among some staff and parents dissatisfied about this drift back towards the conventional, and the sense that the school was just going through the motions, resulted in a deep, whole-school discussion about the matter and an attempt to re-align the school's structures more closely with interpretations of Constructionism that emphasize individual learning projects, real-life product creation (authentic and performance assessments), and shared power between learners and facilitators. Whether or not this re-alignment and resulting new structures and practices will make the DSIL more Constructionist is up in the air at this time. While this process of trials -- > reflection - -> changes - -> trials is theoretically consis-

tent with Constructionism as an approach to learning about Constructionism, and is exactly what a Learning Organization should be doing to arrive at a shared vision, the process can be uncomfortable for school members and can ultimately work against reaching a collective vision for the future. The school, though, is “pushing through the pain” and seeking this consensus.

Challenge 2: Gaining Support in the Greater Society

The MOE’s recent decision to endorse both conventional and unconventional educational tracks implies that support exists in the greater Thai society for having choice in approaches to learning. Where did such unusual support come from and what does this say about how the new, unconventional schools emerging from this new regulation will fare? To answer this question, a bit of a detailed biography on the school’s president/co-founder and information on the school’s emergence are needed.

Potential Need for Powerful Patronage

Mr. Paron Israsena is the 81-year-old president and co-founder of the DSIL. Mr. Israsena is distantly related both maternally and paternally to the King of Thailand. He attended a private, British-style boarding school in Bangkok, and studied engineering at MIT in the 1950s. After working for the General Electric Corporation in the United States after graduation, he returned to Thailand and worked for the Kamol Sukosol group (auto dealer for Mazda), Shell Oil (Thailand), and then joined with the Siam Cement Group where he rose to be the CEO. While CEO, he also served as a senator in the Thai Parliament. After Israsena retired from Siam Cement in 1992, he was invited to be chairman of Shin Satellite Company. The company launched a satellite for communications and assigned some channels for long distance learning for underprivileged children in rural areas. At this time, Israsena was also becoming quite actively involved in a number of civic-oriented foundations (e.g. Thaicom and Suksapattana- the latter an organization founded by MIT alumni in Thailand).

In the 1990s Seymour Papert came to Thailand on the invitation of the Suksapattana Foundation. Israsena, whose appetite for assisting in education reform had been whetted by his involvement with Shin Satellite, was quite intrigued by the ideas Papert set forth and, with Israsena’s help, the Thaicom Foundation, Suksapattana Foundation, and MIT jointly launched the Lighthouse Project. Is-

rasena originally hoped to integrate Constructionism and Learning Organization practices into the public schools right away. Unfortunately, he and others discovered that teachers who went through some Constructionism training and then went back into the schools to try to bring about reform from within ultimately failed due to the power of the dominant system in absorbing/assimilating reforms. So Israsena and others decided that an entirely separate school needed to be founded in order to test out the new educational philosophy in a more pure setting. At the time, Israsena was chair of the KMUTT council (equivalent to head of a board of directors) and he was able to convince the council to house the experimental school, which came to be called the Darunsikhalai School for Innovative Learning, on its campus.

Mr. Israsena works tirelessly in promoting Constructionism throughout Thai educational and industry circles. He has been awarded six honorary doctorates for his civic work, he sits on several boards for both profit and non-profit organizations, and he serves on several government committees. This activity connects him with powerful individuals in Thai society and he also has connections from his corporate experiences, his time as a senator in the Thai parliament, and his highly elevated social position in Thai society. Israsena is clearly a very respected, powerful individual in Thai society and a valuable patron for the DSIL. He has access to the "halls of power" as well as to the media (he frequently is on TV and in the newspapers promoting DSIL and Constructionism). His energetic efforts to garner support for the school, coupled with his position in Thai society, surely played a substantial role in the MOE's recent two-track decision. This begs a question, though: is a Mr. Israsena a necessity for the success of an unconventional education track in Thailand? Will other unconventional schools need a powerful patron like him in order to maintain support from the halls of power and the grass roots? The Thai cultural tradition of deference to authority, power, and age might indicate the necessity of such an individual. If no person with those characteristics steps up to take on the responsibilities that will come with the emergence of an entire track of new schools, will the innovations survive? Hopefully, there is enough low and mid-level support gathered at this time so that such an individual is not an absolute must, but this is a challenge to innovation that potentially waits on the horizon for Thailand's and other countries' efforts to alter educational para-

digms.

Parental Fears

Another potential challenge from the greater society rests with parental fears and higher education entrance requirements. Thailand, like so many countries, values credentials and degrees, and parents wish to maximize opportunities for their children to gain these. Asking parents to take a leap of faith and embrace a new educational approach that may result in lower test scores or missed opportunities to attend certain universities might be asking too much. Here is where the challenges to innovation become recursive. If the school does not meet the challenge of developing a shared vision, and if the school does not work to maintain support from societal institutions (e.g. MOE, higher education), then the challenge of getting parental support becomes much more daunting.

The school is currently working to show parents and society at large that its learners still succeed at traditional measures of success by having the students take part in the national tests (O-NETS) and by having the older learners take and pass at least five International General Certificates of Secondary Education (IGCSE) tests in order to get a high school diploma and university entrance both in Thailand and abroad. However, it is simultaneously working at helping everyone see that a fundamental rethinking of education is at hand as well. As Papert argues about Constructionism in *The Children's Machine* (1993), DSIL is not really offering an alternative way for students to learn the same list of items of knowledge; rather, they offer a different way of thinking about everything in education. My interviews with parents, facilitators, and management confirmed that making the case for an alternative educational paradigm is, and will continue to be, one of the biggest challenges facing the DSIL and the new unconventional schools that begin to emerge.

CONCLUSION

The ontological vocation of human beings is to struggle to become – to bump up against limit situations, reflect, and then take action against them (Freire, 1970). Perhaps the same is true for schools seeking to overcome the educational status quo. On the one hand, an observer could look at the DSIL in deficit-thinking terms, saying, “Oh, the school is not this or is not that yet.” Or, one could

look at the DSIL as an entity climbing a mountain. While it has not reached the very top in terms of overcoming all its challenges and obstacles, it has accomplished quite a lot both for itself and for education in Thailand and the world and what it has attained should be celebrated. The school is truly a Learning Organization engaged in a spiraling feedback loop – it is continually assessing its successes and its alignment with certain philosophical precepts and, on the basis of these assessments, corrects its course as it goes along. This is the heart of Constructionist learning and so, in that sense, the school is true to its innovative paradigm for education. We need more such schools worldwide, and Thailand's MOE has recently opened the doors wide for their creation – now, let's hope that people take up the challenge and venture through.

Here is where the main value of this case comes out: other groups of people attempting to create schools that challenge educational paradigms in the same ways that the DSIL is doing in Thailand can look to this school's story for examples of what challenges to anticipate and work through.

For any school seeking to implement a new sort of governance and theory of learning, developing a coherent vision amongst school members is paramount. Specific practices must be put into place to internally firm up and externally communicate a school's vision. School leadership and community visioning research (e.g. Ellis, 1992; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Mercogliano, 2006; Peterson, 1995) can provide useful information for schools seeking specific step-by-step processes they could undertake to move them toward a specific vision that is not only shared by all school members, but also is effectively communicated with the greater society.

Part of this vision ought to include a systematic, in-depth analysis of different educational philosophies (something that seemed to be lacking at the DSIL) so that school members can gain a contextual understanding of where schools have been (conventionally) and why alternatives might be called for. School members can thus more deeply understand that a new educational paradigm is not just about negation of the old; rather, that it is about creating a whole new set of ideas about teaching/learning and involvement in this process. In the words of dialectical analysis, conventional schools are the thesis; negation of conventional school characteristics is an anti-thesis, but

Negation . . . is not itself a form of liberation . . . It is [the] act of overcoming (synthesis, consciousness) which is the critical and liberating aspect of dialectical thought. Action lies not in the act of negation (antithesis, demystification) but in the act of overcoming (synthesis, consciousness) (Gintis, 1973, 72).

Part of communicating this new synthesis must include allaying parental fears over future opportunities for their children. The DSIL case shows that a school must somehow provide concrete examples for parents of cases where the traditional educational paradigm was overthrown and children's life opportunities were not diminished in the process. (There is a small, but growing, body of literature about the results of unconventional educational theories – see the Alternative Education Resource Organization website, for example.)

Schools trying to break away from the conventional must also anticipate tensions amongst staff, such as the DSIL has experienced, and purposefully build in practices that unite, rather than divide, personnel. Team-building activities that extend beyond the visioning process, and careful scrutiny of regulations will be necessary components of keeping everyone focused on a common goal while also feeling individually valued.

Lastly, the DSIL case reveals the possible necessity of a “powerful patron” to help smooth the way toward acceptance of an unconventional school by the greater society and powers-that-be. While this idea may be somewhat inimical to United States citizens who have been socialized in ideas of equity and grassroots organizing practices, we also see examples in this country of our own Paron Israsenas. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is one such example of powerful supporters of some new ideas about education. Financial support from powerful individuals (given both by the patron him/herself or funds generated by the patron's connections) tends to make things easier for a new school to emerge and stay true to its unconventional paradigm. This is certainly not to say that a powerful patron *must* exist for an unconventional school to be viable; however, there is no denying such a patron's value in helping move things along more quickly and smoothly.

While the case of the DSIL is intrinsically interesting in its own right, I hope that this close examination of the challenges it is facing in Thailand will offer up some object lessons to others in the education community who might seek to fundamentally challenge

status quo educational paradigms. Stories such as the DSIL's are part of an important "critical mass" of research about unconventional schools aimed at showing people that alternatives are out there and that challenges to the monolith of conventional education are viable.

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APPENDIX – INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

All interviewees volunteered to be interviewed (all teachers, parents, and management staff were invited to be interviewed at a time of their choosing). Interviews were conducted on the campus of the DSIL. All interviewees signed consent forms approved by

the author's university's Institutional Review Board. The following are the questions asked of each of the three populations (teachers, parents, management staff). Interviews lasted anywhere from 45 to 75 minutes and were conducted by the author in English (with one exception, when the parents of one student requested to have a Thai translator present). All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed by the author.

Questions for Teachers

Constructionism and tensions between this and traditional approaches to education

- Did you go to traditional Thai public school? Please describe what that was like and how this school is different and the same.
- What does constructionism mean to you? What is difficult about living up to this philosophy in schools in Thailand?
- When the school says, "learning how to learn," what do you interpret that to mean?
- When Thai norms and traditions (like obeying elders, or rote memorization of Buddhist precepts) contradict what is needed to be a global citizen (e.g. a questioning attitude) – which should take precedence?
- Why do you think learner-centered learning as an educational approach has not been adopted widespread in Thailand? What's stopping it?

Your beliefs and basic info

- Why work here rather than somewhere else – some other school?
- How long have you worked here?
- What sorts of students should schools help create? Does this school help create such students?
- What would you like this school to do more of? Less of?

Curriculum matters

- What do you consider to be the ideal amount of homework (time commitment)?
- Of the 5 Qs (Intelligence Quotient, Emotional Quotient, Technology Quotient, Adversity Quotient, and Morality Quotient) – which do you see as most important?
- Do you think the Thai national curriculum is important?

Why/why not?

- Are you satisfied with how the math and English classes are taught?

Questions about the school

- If you've been here 3 years or more ...how has this school changed? Has it gotten closer or farther away from true constructionism? Why?
- In what ways does the school communicate with parents?

Students

- Are the kids here better behaved than in most schools in your experience? If so, how do you account for that?
- How focused do you think the students are on external evaluations (grades)/extrinsic motivators (prizes, recognition, rewards)?
- Do you think the students should have more power in the school (e.g. should play more of a role in school governance, rule making, promotions criteria, grading criteria, etc.)
- How would you characterize a lot of the chatter/students talking amongst themselves that goes on in class? Is it "off-task" behavior in your view?
- Do you think the kids are honest in their self evaluations or are they just going through the motions?
- If a kid wants to do his/her own project/self-study, how is that permitted in using school time – when is it done?

Morality/EQ

- What exactly do you do to develop students' EQ and morality?

Teacher Matters

- Do you think there are too many or too few facilitators?
- Why is English not emphasized in all the age groups?
- Is there an equal workload between Thai and English Native Speaking (ENS) staff?
- How is your growth as a facilitator supported?
- For ENS – how do you balance teaching Western values with respecting Thai culture? How do you respect Thai culture? Or not?
- How far in advance do you do your specific lesson planning? I am familiar with the mind mapping that is done before the project session begins, but am curious about the specific lesson

planning. If you are a math or English teacher, also address how far in advance you do planning for that. If it is very “spur of the moment” planning, please explain why you choose to approach it that way.

Questions for Parents

Constructionism and tensions between this and traditional approaches to education

- Did you go to traditional Thai public school? Please describe what that was like and how this school is different and the same.
- When the school says, “learning how to learn,” what do you interpret that to mean?
- When Thai norms and traditions (like obeying elders, or rote memorization of Buddhist precepts) contradicts what is needed to be a global citizen (e.g. a questioning attitude) – which should take precedence?
- Why do you think learner-centered learning as an educational approach has not been adopted widespread in Thailand? What’s stopping it?

Parent-School Relationship

- Why did you choose to send your child here? Was there any particular individual who played a role in persuading you?
 - How long has your child been a student at this school?
 - What does this school require of you as a parent?
 - What did this school promise you it would accomplish?
- What sort of individual did it say it would help your child to become? Has the school kept these promises?
- In what ways does the school communicate with parents about a child’s progress?
 - What would you like this school to do more of? Less of ?

Curriculum matters

- What do you consider to be the ideal amount of homework (time commitment)?
- Of the 5 Qs (Intelligence Quotient, Emotional Quotient, Technology Quotient, Adversity Quotient, and Morality Quotient) – which do you see as most important?
- Do you think the Thai national curriculum is important? Why/why not?

- Are you satisfied with how the math and English classes are taught?

Questions about the school

- If your child has been at DSIL 3 years or more...how has this school changed? Has it gotten closer or farther away from true constructionism? Why?

Students

- Does your child talk about what he/she/they've done in school each day without being prompted too much?
- How focused do you think your child/children is/are on external evaluations (grades)/extrinsic motivators (prizes, recognition, rewards)?

Morality/EQ

- Morality – what sorts of morals do you hope the school is instilling in your child/children?

Questions for Management

Constructionism and tensions between this and traditional approaches to education

- Did you go to traditional Thai public school? Please describe what that was like and how this school is different and the same.
- What does constructionism mean to you? What is difficult about living up to this philosophy in schools in Thailand?
- When the school says, "learning how to learn," what do you interpret that to mean?
- When Thai norms and traditions (like obeying elders, or rote memorization of Buddhist precepts) contradicts what is needed to be a global citizen (e.g. a questioning attitude) – which should take precedence?
- Why do you think learner-centered learning as an educational approach has not been adopted widespread in Thailand? What's stopping it?

Your beliefs and basic info

- How long have you worked here?
- What sorts of students should schools help create? Does this school help create such students?
- What would you like this school to do more of? Less of?

Curriculum matters

- What do you consider to be the ideal amount of homework (time commitment)?
- Of the 5 Qs (Intelligence Quotient, Emotional Quotient, Technology Quotient, Adversity Quotient, and Morality Quotient) – which do you see as most important?
- Do you think the Thai national curriculum is important? Why/why not?
- Are you satisfied with how the math and English classes are taught?

Questions about the school

- If you've been here 3 years or more ...how has this school changed? Has it gotten closer or farther away from true constructionism? Why?
- In what ways does the school communicate with parents?

Students

- Are the kids here better behaved than in most schools in your experience? If so, how do you account for that?
- How focused do you think the students are on external evaluations (grades)/extrinsic motivators (prizes, recognition, rewards)?
- Do you think the students should have more power in the school (e.g. should play more of a role in school governance, rule making, promotions criteria, grading criteria, etc.)

Morality/EQ

- The school says it develops students' morality – what exactly does that mean? What exactly does EQ mean – what does the school do to develop?

Teacher Matters

- How is facilitator growth supported? How are they trained? What kinds of continual staff development do they get?
- Why is English not emphasized in the younger groups?
- Is there an equal workload between Thai and ENS staff?

PERCEPTIONS OF JORDANIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS TEACHERS TOWARDS CRITICAL THINKING

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to discover themes or concepts, generated from the collected data, that formed building blocks of grounded theory in the study of secondary school social studies teachers' perspectives. This research study was conducted in Jordan, where secondary school social studies teachers were interviewed regarding their perspectives of teaching critical thinking skills in their classrooms. All interviews were audio-taped in Arabic and later translated into English. Data, including the translation of the audio, video tapes, the Ministry of Education guidelines, and textbook teacher manuals were analyzed qualitatively.

The study results indicated that Jordanian secondary school social studies teachers are not familiar with the definition and teaching strategies of critical thinking; the Jordan Ministry of Education Guidelines did not require teachers to teach critical thinking. In addition, teacher manuals for the state-required textbooks provide only detailed content information, with only minor references to teaching critical thinking. Previous research, conducted by the author on middle and high school students in Jordanian public schools, supports the finding that students do not acquire critical thinking skills from their public school education in Jordan.