



Sustaining the Sustainable Development Goals





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Sondang Tampubolon
Network Coordinator

Francis Isaac and Marlon Cornelio
Special Edition Editors

Alvin Quintans
Editorial Assistant

Bea Reyno
Program Coordinator

Network of Social Democracy in Asia
Unit 3-E, 112 Maginhawa Street, Barangay Teachers' Village East,
Quezon City, Philippines, 1101

Website: www.socdemasia.com Facebook: facebook.com/SocDemAsia
E-mail: secretariat@socdemasia.com

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By: Chatra Kamsaeng

Broken Ladder: Equitable Quality Education Conundrum in Thailand

It is a long-standing and widely held belief that education is a great equalizer, offering individuals a ladder to climb out of poverty and attain social mobility. This may be true in the past when Thailand built its economy from the ground up through widening access to education and feeding the workforce in the rising manufacturing sector. It drastically reduced Thailand's poverty rate from higher than 50 percent in 1990 to a mere 5 percent nowadays.¹

This belief is now being challenged, however. While school enrolment rate in Thailand has markedly increased to almost 100 percent for primary schools and around 80 percent for secondary schools,² more people nowadays are questioning if education can really help improve lives. Yet, there are always top students from Thailand earning academic medals or gaining admission into global educational institutions and high-tech jobs.

A significant disparity remains in the quality of education nationwide. Affluent families pay hefty amounts of tuition to get their children in prestigious and international schools, whereas most students are in public schools whose quality are declining. The situation of Thailand is, therefore, unique since the challenge of improving education quality across the country is harder than providing access.³

SDG Goal 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education, is crucial in addressing the heart of Thailand's education problem. This year marks 15 years of the 'Free Education for 15 Years' policy, which has increased education subsidy per head while not necessarily making it absolutely free. But the larger problem currently lies with the quality of education that is being provided. The government has somewhat acknowledged the problem, but has no tangible plan to address it.

¹ Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council (various years). *Poverty and Inequality Report*. Bangkok. (Available in Thai language).

² World Bank Data.

³ Doner, Richard and Ben Ross Schneider (2016). "The Middle-Income Trap: More Politics than Economics." *World Politics*. 68 (4); pp. 608-644.

Poor and Unequal Education Quality

The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores, a widely accepted indicator for academic performance, for Thai students have been well below the average of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and their regional peers in all three subjects (reading, mathematics, and science). Their average scores have also declined over the past decade. The proportion of low-performing students has risen from 33-50 percent to 53-68 percent.⁴ In other words, they may grasp the material but struggle to apply it in problem-solving.

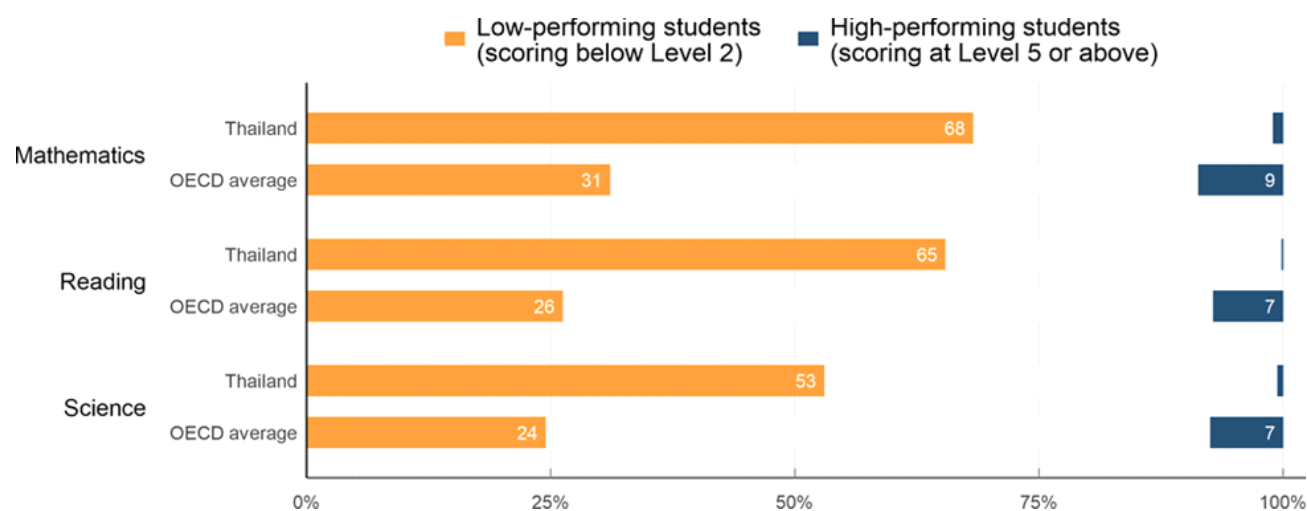
While educational inequality exists in other countries, it is more pronounced in Thailand. In OECD countries, the average share of poor performing students is only 24-31 percent—less than half of that of Thailand. On the other hand, they have 7-9 percent of high performing students who can excellently apply their knowledge. In Thailand, this figure stands below 1 percent, indicating that only a small fraction of Thai education can produce such top performers.⁵

One major contributing factor is teacher shortage. Students in schools with no report of the problem perform on average 10 percent better than those in schools reporting severe shortages.

On the one hand, shortage can arise from teachers not being able to dedicate their time to teaching. They need to spend a significant amount of time on document work such as project reports and

“SDG Goal 4 is crucial in addressing the heart of Thailand's education problem.”

Image: www.adraasia.org



Source: OECD, PISA 2022.

⁴ Tangkitvanich, Somkiat and Pongtat Vanichanan (2023). *PISA Scores: A Warning Sign of an Education Crisis*. Bangkok: Thailand Development Research Institute. (available in Thai language).

⁵ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2023). *PISA 2022 Results: Factsheets Thailand*. Paris.

evaluation forms, and overseeing extracurricular activities. The 2014 survey found they spent 84 days for non-classroom activities out of 200 days in each academic year. While there has been no up-to-date systematic survey, evidence suggests teachers are not getting back their teaching time.

Yet, the bigger problem lies in teacher allocations. While Thai education has a long history of development, teacher shortage is still rampant in public schools. Teacher shortage is witnessed in 78 percent of public primary schools and 48 percent of public secondary schools. The figure is 84 percent in small schools (less than 120 students) and 93 percent for small primary schools.

Too Small a School to Achieve Big Impacts

On the surface, Thailand has hired teachers quite adequately. Overall, there are 5.2 teachers per 100 students, which is above the recommendation of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) of 4 to every 100. So, there are currently more than enough

teachers, and there will be an oversupply in the future considering the sharp decline in birthrate.

The problem lies in the distribution of teachers and schools. Teachers are allocated to each public school by school size, number of students, and studying hours. This formula yields proportional resource allocation to students. However, schools need to reach a certain scale to be effective, and small schools usually suffer from its too-small scale. Schools with 41-119 students get 6-8 teachers, and schools with 1-40 students get at most 4 teachers. On average, these schools have 62.4 students with 3.7 teachers.⁶

This means that the teacher-to-student ratio in these small schools is well above the average and the suggested levels. Yet, these few students are often divided into six to nine grades, implying these schools do not have sufficient teachers to cover all the grades. It is a common practice that one teacher teaches two grades simultaneously. As a consequence, many students receive poor education quality.

“Teacher shortage is witnessed in 78 percent of public primary schools and 48 percent of public secondary schools.



Image: static.bangkokpost.com

⁶ Khumpuch, Kasidet (2023). “Clustered Teachers, Scattered Schools”: Problem in Thai Teacher Allocation. Bangkok: 101 Public Policy Think Tank. (available in Thai language).

Adding teachers to these schools can solve the problem, say, by having at least one teacher per grade. But a developing country like Thailand also has many other problems waiting to be fixed. The inefficient provisions and disproportionate amount of assistance given to more than half of public schools has been a considerable drain on the country's resources. This, in turn, minimizes the capacity of the government to deal with other pressing issues. Moreover, with Thailand's declining birthrate, there will be more of the overly small schools across the country. This will only use up more resources while achieving lesser outcomes.

Taking the Bull by the Horns

Providing inclusive and equitable quality education for all does not necessarily require spending more resources but can be achieved through structural reforms that maximizes benefits.

One necessary step is to merge small schools with other schools, large or small, in the same area to reach a minimum scale. This has been proposed in Thailand for a long time which spurred much debate. But given the decreasing number of students, it will be unavoidable eventually. Merging schools means under-resourced schools can reach economies of scale so teachers can teach and utilize the infrastructure and leaning equipment more effectively.

This does not mean that Thailand has to close all small schools which will raise the transportation burden of students in remote areas. In fact, some 62 percent of public schools in Muang district (or the province city center) are facing teacher shortages compared to 70 percent in rural areas. Therefore, there is so much room for improvement, at least in urbanized areas, without causing too much problem.

Following the World Bank's proposal that small schools to be merged must be within six kilometers from other schools while farther schools should be protected, 17,168 public schools can be merged while 3,218 schools should be preserved.⁷ This, in

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Image: static.bangkokpost.com

⁷ World Bank Group (2023). *Thailand Public Spending and Revenue Assessment: Promoting an Inclusive and Sustainable Future*. Bangkok.



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turn, will reduce the number of public schools from 29,592 to 12,424 schools, allowing 147,451 teachers to be able to give better quality education.

Decentralize the Underlying Management Structure

Yet, merging classrooms cannot be done within the current school management system. Public schools are centrally managed by the Ministry of Education, so at the local level, they are fragmented. Therefore, schools must be decentralized to local governments where there will be more flexibility to manage resources as well as in hiring and pooling teachers, to make the schools more effective. The central government must limit its role to ensuring minimum standards and providing flexible resources to be managed locally.

At the same time, the accountability of teachers has to change from reporting to the Ministry to some form of local evaluation. Instead of spending time writing project reports and filling evaluation forms, teachers should be focusing more on student outcomes. This requires evaluators to closely observe teaching quality and place more weight on student performance for evaluation. This also extends to giving teachers or

schools the flexibility to design or choose the curriculum under the Ministry's supervision.

Urge for Education Social Pact

In confronting the education conundrum in Thailand, we begin to realize that the problem transcends technical and management issues because it requires political clout to make difficult decisions. The stark reality is that as wealthy and powerful families continue to enjoy easy access to exceptional education, the urgency of addressing the systemic problem of educational quality and inequality may diminish.

To pursue SDG Goal 4 demands a paradigm shift—a departure from the status quo of educational apathy and complacency. A strong social coalition must emerge that is committed to making the hard choices necessary to dismantle entrenched inequality in the education system.

Failure to confront this conundrum risks making education a broken ladder for the majority. Only through bold and collective action can we chart a course towards an inclusive and equitable education system—one that empowers every individual to realize their full potential and contributes to collective prosperity and well-being. ■

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