Evaluating the Quality of an Elementary School in Rural Thailand: Villagers’ Perspectives

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This paper aims to understand how a marginal group of people, especially parents in a rural area in Thailand, defines and evaluates the quality of their school. Although quality of schooling is an elusive and complicated concept, each stakeholder has a point of view on how to make a good school. This is due to the fact that education belongs to all parties in a society. A qualitative approach was employed to grasp parents’ perspectives on the quality of schooling. Five families in a rural area in a northern province in Thailand participated in the study. Five distinguishing aspects emerged: post schooling success, immediate schooling success, teachers’ dedication, students’ discipline, and the relationship between school and community.

Educational Quality Assurance, Quality of Schooling, Educational Accountability

INTRODUCTION

The global “Education for All” initiative of the 1990s, as well as other policy initiatives of the last two decades, has stressed the importance of improving the quality of education. In developed and developing countries alike, educational evaluators have been faced with heightened attention to the perennial question of what is meant by “improving educational quality.” There also is a movement of decentralisation for raising levels of participation in decision making and for giving people more of a chance to shape the context of their own lives. The notion of decentralisation is that educational management is shaped by local communities, teachers, and principals of the schools in terms of curriculums and teaching methods (Carnoy, 2000).

In addition, globalisation as phenomenon by which social, economic, and culture aspects of people are universally changed (Stromquist & Monkmen, 2000) is praised for opportunities by holding out the promise of increasing productivity and higher living standards (World Bank, 1999). The global village consists of local and state systems that are connected through individuals whose lives are shaped simultaneously by both systems (Esterik, 1996). Education policy, especially as a major part in the policy of national development in both developed and developing countries, will be focused more on issues of attaining sufficient quality. Education indeed allows marginal populations to participate in and enjoy the fruits of global development, while at the same time to safeguard the integrity of their communities and natural environment (Nielsen & Cummings, 1997).

Up to the present day, the concept of educational quality has existed in people’s minds for the most part only as a broad and general idea (Suryadi, 1992). According to most of the decentralisation movements, the level of participation should be focused on the grassroots level. One of the primary challenges for evaluators of community-based programs is the design and implementation of assessments that are useful and relevant, as well as rigorous (Patton, 1997). Moreover, the community-based evaluation will be able to focus on the cultural reality dimension,
sharing similarities with the best practice of general human service evaluation (Telfair & Lauar, 1999).

Thailand, like many other countries, has focused on questions of improving the accessibility and quality of education. The Thai government announced the National Education Act in September 1999. One of the important aspects of the national act is that the local administration organisation shall have the right to provide education at any or all levels in accordance with the readiness, suitability and requirements of the local area. This is a giant step for decentralisation in educational sectors in Thailand. In keeping with the increasing emphasis in evaluation on understanding the views of local stakeholders, this research tries to better understand how rural villagers in Thailand perceive and evaluate the quality of primary education offered.

Chambers (1983) supported the idea that those who live in the remote areas, the ethnic and linguistic minorities, the marginal or nomadic populations, have indeed been last in terms of the quality of the educational services provided to them. If we are at all serious about reaching the last frontiers of education for all in this century, they will need to be put first in terms of satisfying their views of needed improvements in education quality.

There is an argument supporting participatory development asserting that participation may be strong in the planning phase of a program but decline in later stages (Gaventa, Creed and Morrissey 1998). However, I firmly believe that presenting the villagers’ perspectives at the launching of the Thai National Education Act will demonstrate the expectations of villagers to encourage the evaluators and the policy makers to do more studies about how to assess educational quality. An in-depth study of an elementary school in rural Thailand working with key informants and interviews of villagers is the focus. An analysis of villagers’ views on educational quality is contrasted with national education standards in the country. This study also sheds some light on how a marginal group of people views the quality of their school in order to share grounded information from a country where education reform is now gaining paramount public concern.

**The Quality of Schooling**

*What is quality?* Downey, Frase, and Peters (1994) claim quality is meeting, exceeding, and satisfying a community’s needs and expectations with the recognition that these needs and desires will change over time. This definition of quality is influenced by Deming’s (1986) view of quality as meeting and exceeding the customers’ needs and expectations and then continuing to improve. In addition, the American Society for Quality Control (Johnson & Winchell, 1990) defines quality as the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs. These definitions of quality originate from a managerial perspective. However, Seigel (1994) suggests that some educators may object to the term customer and may prefer to come up with their own terminology. Generic names such as recipient, beneficiary, and client as well as references to specific education stakeholders such as student, parent, teacher, employer, and so on, can serve just as well.

To determine school quality is quite a challenge for evaluators. Since quality is abstract and difficult to measure, the tendency therefore is to rely on easily measurable outcomes such as competitive examinations and standardized tests (Hopkins, 1987). Using examinations as a major outcome measure, however, limits the range of educational aims because they are only a part of the quality of education. Examinations usually measure only cognitive achievement, they do not assess other personal qualities such as skills, attitude, character, and ethics. Ironically, the over-emphasis on outcome measures like examinations may have the effect of reducing the quality of
education because in order to increase examination results more emphasis is placed on instrumental forms of teaching.

This paper attempts to define the quality of education based on parental perspectives. Relating to the quality of education in general, most of the quality arguments are from professional or research-based knowledge. According to the decentralisation movement and putting people at the margin first, this paper argues that every level of management should respond to villagers’ perspectives. This study focuses on the needs and views of the parents since the current movement is more toward parental involvement in the education process. For instance, family background variables affect both educational qualities and outcome (Card & Krueger, 1990). Moreover, the studies of individual families show that what the family does is more important to student success than family income or education. International comparisons show high academic success of students from Asian countries, which may be attributed to the priority their families give to education (Stevenson, 1993). Parents are often victims of economic circumstances that prevent a more active role in education. All parents want to see their children succeed in school. Some parents have to contend with their own negative memories of school. In terms of decentralisation, education management should welcome the involvement of parents in the classroom on problem-solving teams and as equal partners in the educational process. Therefore, the study aims to examine how the villagers perceive the quality of their children’s schools. It is a reflection from parents in a local area as an example to the Ministry of Education in Thailand for future educational development. Moreover, the study provides grassroots’ perspectives on how they view school quality to encourage educators, evaluators, and administrators to realize the significance of parental concerns.

**RESEARCH STRATEGY**

The village chosen as the study site was purposely selected based on accessibility, convenience, size, and voluntary school staff. The voluntary school staff was considered as an important aspect. Additionally, I was seeking a small school that served about 300 to 400 households and where I could easily commute from town to the village. Firstly, the educational office authorities gave me a few schools. I then selected a school according to the criteria mentioned above. I quickly gained villagers’ and teachers’ trust because the principal was familiar with my research assistant, and my status as a student was very welcome to villagers. The study site is located in Tak province in the north of Thailand. This city is about 200 miles from Bangkok.

The elementary school site was located in a district of Tak province about 25 miles west of the district seat. The target school of this study has six teachers including the principal and 60 students from pre-kindergarten up to level six. The school serves about 400 households in the surrounding area. There is a temple near the school, which was there before the school was established. In the early period of this school, it was located at the same place as the temple, which is now on the west side of the school’s current location on a mountain. The school was relocated to facilitate access by students and parents.

Parents were the key informants for this study. At first, I asked the school to recommend parents who were involved in school activities. Two of the key informants were on the school board committee. To invite more parents to participate in the study, I asked the principal to recommend some other people. However, the principal was worried that the parents might not be at home while I was conducting the research. Some parents had to work in the fields so that accessibility was somewhat difficult. Practically, the principal or a teacher asked students whether their parents stayed at home on that day. Then, he would ask a student whose parents stayed home to take the researchers to his or her home.
I received the consent of the villagers with whom I met as well as permission to tape the conversation. At the beginning, a teacher from this target school brought my assistant and me into the site but it seemed people were reluctant to provide information. Later, we asked the principal to let the students take us to meet their parents instead.

This study used a qualitative approach. Villagers were interviewed in Thai. The study took place at a province in Thailand during summer 1999. I had two research assistants: one was a female educational supervisor in the target province. She conducted interviews with me in the field since she was considered as a local staff member. I asked her to join the research process because I also had interviews with female participants. The other assistant was a male researcher working in a curriculum development area. He helped me in transcribing the tapes to text files. In-depth interviews were conducted with six parents. Three of them had their children in fifth and sixth grades, whereas the other three families had children who completed sixth grade at this school. Two participants in the study were male.

With respect to data analysis, I examined “recurring regularities” in the field notes, observation notes, and transcripts to grasp the meaning of parents’ perspectives to illustrate their understanding of the quality from the villagers’ perspectives. I looked for informative incidents from parents’ opinions. I then grouped and categorized the information according to their recurring themes. This methodology is a classification system for the data (Patton, 1987). During the field studies, my assistant and I found it necessary to simplify the questions or encourage participants to use their own dialect. In addition, we worded questions and clarified some terms to make them as explicit as possible, and allowed the parents to talk to their friends or cousins if they asked for advice or naturally engaged with others in the interviews (Phillips, 1965).

**Profile of Interviewed Parents**

Five different families were interviewed. All of the participants had graduated in elementary levels and had lived in the village more than two years. These participants had concrete relationships with a target school either being a school committee member or sending their children to the school. The number of female participants was more than the number of male participants due to the majority of men in the village commonly worked overseas. A profile of the six participants is presented in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonyms</th>
<th>Phu Yai Pan</th>
<th>Inn</th>
<th>Kamsor</th>
<th>Jamreang</th>
<th>Sawath</th>
<th>Sanga</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship with the school</td>
<td>A parent and on school board</td>
<td>A parent and on school board</td>
<td>A parent</td>
<td>A parent</td>
<td>A parent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child’s status related to school</td>
<td>Graduated</td>
<td>Graduated</td>
<td>Fifth &amp; sixth grade</td>
<td>Sixth grade</td>
<td>Sixth grade</td>
<td>Graduated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>Farmer and Freelance carpenter</td>
<td>Homemaker</td>
<td>Homemaker</td>
<td>Homemaker</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Phu yai Pan is a 52 years old man who has an elementary level of education (fourth grade). “Phu yai” is a Thai word meaning a head of the village. Although Phu yai Pan has retired from the position, the villagers still called him by this title. Phu yai Pan was the head of the village and also on the school board before he left the village to work in Iran as a family driver for 2 years to earn some money to send back home. He added that in this village most young men around 25 to 45 year old were interested in working overseas to support their families and parents. Most of those who went abroad were successful in getting jobs as semi-skilled laborers. Nowadays, Phu yai Pan
grows rice annually. He would take turns with his cousin to utilize the land inherited from his ancestors. The amount produced would depend on the weather each year. Some years he would get less and in other years he would be lucky, so he would get more. He also has 50 cows that he grazes along the mountainside seasonally.

Inn is 54 years old and Phu yai Pan’s elder brother. Inn completed education at fourth grade. Inn also is on the school board. During the time the study was conducted, Inn was working with one of the federal government projects. This project aimed at funding the village and it allows villagers to make their own decisions on how to utilize the funds in the most efficient way to benefit the village. He was working on building a water tank in the temple area since it was considered as the most public place and the most efficient location to distribute the water to the households during the dry season. Inn is good at carpentry work as we observed from his work, although he did not hold any diploma from formal institutions. Inn’s children had finished their elementary schooling. He said that he was quite happy that his children could get jobs in town.

Kamsor has two children in the target school. Most housewives in the village were committed to taking care of their children, as she was. Her husband works overseas. She is the only parent raising her children. Kamsor finished fourth grade and so did her husband. According to Phu yai Pan, about 50 per cent of males around 25-45 have been working overseas. If he includes the number of those working in the city, the number would be more than 50 per cent. Kamsor’s husband is working in Taiwan and he sends her a monthly allowance. Before getting this job, her family had to pay 4,000 dollars. It has been 10 months since her husband left for Taiwan when we visited her house. She said she paid all the debts including the 15 per cent interest. Kamsor’s family has moved from another village on the other side of the nearby mountain because the family considered the future education opportunities for their children and they wanted to live closer to the city.

Jamreang has two children: one is studying in a secondary school in the city near this village, and the other is studying in the target elementary school at sixth grade. Jamreang finished fourth grade in school since the compulsory education at that time was only the fourth grade. Her husband is working in Dubai. This family paid about 2,000 US dollars to get the job. She said her husband sends her money about 200 - 300 US dollars a month. If her husband sends her money late, she borrows from her cousin in the same household. Jamreang’s family also moved from the other side of the mountain two years ago.

Sawath is working as a labourer in the village doing such jobs as growing rice, household chores or any other kinds of labour. Sawath has two children: the elder one studies at a secondary school in the urban area where her son’s friend from the village also studies; the younger one is a female student at sixth grade at the target elementary school. Sawath’s family moved to this village at about the same time as Jamreang’s family. Her husband is working at Brunei Darusalum and sends about 250 –300 US dollars back home each month.

The last family that we interviewed about the quality of school is Sanga’s family. This family is the only family in the sample that does not work overseas. This is because Sanga’s parents have a lot of land in this area and the family has been in this village longer than any other family except Phu yai Pan’s and Inn’s. Sanga’s husband grows rice and he owns cows. He takes care of the cows and has the cows fenced in the lower level of the house. Sanga’s child has finished education from this school and worked at a factory in another city in the northern part of Thailand.
RESEARCH RESULTS

What is the quality of their elementary school from the parents’ perception?

After listening to the parents’ ideas, I tried to learn how the parents define the quality of their elementary school from their perspectives. I mainly asked them about how they perceived the quality of the school and what was the evidence to support their thoughts. In other words, I studied the experience of the parents to shed some light on increasing local participation for the provision of education. This would help us to examine effectively the current educational system. From analyzing field notes, observation notes, and transcripts, five distinct aspects emerging from the study were:

1. post schooling successes,
2. immediate schooling successes,
3. teachers’ dedication,
4. students’ discipline, and
5. the relationship between the school and community.

For each theme, at least two parents mentioned each of these dimensions of quality.

Post schooling successes

Phu yai Pan stated that he was quite satisfied with school performance. According to him, he was satisfied that his son graduated from this school and got a job. Phu yai Pan sent his son to continue studying in the city since there was no secondary school in the village. Inn also stated that he was satisfied when the children got jobs outside the village. He expected that his children would be able to work at a stable job and they could have decent jobs. He also hoped his children would be able to work in other jobs besides farming because it would make them happier. Inn said most parents would expect the same thing since the parents saw their current situation as a problem and the only way they could become better off was through higher education. In the conversation with Phu yai Pan, he mentioned that the village did not have job opportunities for students that villagers were looking for.

Immediate schooling success

Phu yai Pan, Inn and Sanga, whose children graduate from this elementary school, responded to the question of whether they were satisfied with the school by saying that they were satisfied in some levels. However, Kamsor, whose child was attending the school, said there were parents who complained about the quality of schooling. She explained that their children could not read fluently and the children did not have homework when they finished school each day. Kamsor added that last year she did not see any English homework at all. Her concern was that her child would not be capable enough to continue at secondary level and that her child would be embarrassed and frustrated when her friends could study faster. Regarding the assessment system, Sawath stated that she did not understand the grading system although her child told her that a ‘4’ was better than a ‘3’. The school also had letters explaining the student assessment system. She still was not quite clear why the school had the system. Jamreang also said her child got a ‘4’ but still could not read fluently but when Jamreang was in school if she could get good scores, she had to be able to read very well. Kamsor also had a similar situation in that she observed her child when he was watching television to see how fast her son could read from advertisements or sometimes from reading newspapers. Kamsor did not want to criticise openly the outcomes for her children because she realized that the teachers should get some respect from the villagers and that as a parent she should behave as a good model for her children by showing gratitude toward...
teachers. Sawath also mentioned that some parents took their children from this school to the other schools because of its low performance but she did not want to do that because her child was in the last year at this school.

**Teachers’ dedication**

Some parents mentioned that teachers were the main persons who were a part of their children’s education. Jamreang indicated that she would like to see teachers’ dedication in teaching more than now. She believed her child studied only one subject a day. Jamreang said, in this school, the students’ performance was lower than the previous school. She could tell from her observation when her child was doing homework or reading newspapers at home. She felt the school at the village where her family previously stayed encouraged her child to read more than this. She could also see her child’s enthusiasm when her child was doing homework. Jamreang would like teachers to visit her house occasionally to encourage her children to study more because her children more readily obeyed their teachers. Sawath also hoped that the teachers in this elementary school would pay more attention to teaching since she felt her child was getting worse by having a lower level of achievement, and had less enthusiasm in working on his homework.

**Students’ discipline**

The parents felt that helping their children at home was an obligation. Students were expected to do household chores such as washing, cooking, and cleaning. Parents were quite satisfied with their children’s responsibility. However, with regard to students’ discipline, some parents complained that their children did not behave as well as they expected. Sanga felt that the teachers were quite generous because teachers were too friendly with the children. She expected the teachers would teach her child more discipline in the sense that her son would be more obedient, concentrate on his homework, and pay respect to his elders. Sawath understood that their peers might influence the children’s behaviour when they were at school, and that teachers should take responsibility of this issue.

**Relationship between school and community**

During the conversation with Phu yai Pan and Inn, both of them constantly talked about school activities with the villagers. I therefore raised questions about school activities such as school maintenance, annual fund raising and how the school cooperated with the villagers. Phu yai Pan said that the school activities were good opportunities for the villagers to participate in school management. Phu yai Pan was a school board committee member before he went to work in Iran. The annual fund raising event called “Jedi Khaw Peauk” was very common for the people in this village. Phu yai Pan explained that it was the time that all villagers would get together and donate their rice or money for school, and the school committee would manage this donation based on committee agreements. He added that the money from this event was used to build school fences and playground facilities for children.

Jamreang said that each family was expected to give a donation. Some parents would donate money while others would donate rice. She donated 20kg of rice whereas the others who would donate money normally would give less than 100baht (US $3) which is a lot from the villagers’ point of view. Regarding the school activities, Inn mentioned that the villagers tended to agree with the teachers’ ideas and were happy when the teachers asked for cooperation. Kamsor said that the way of doing annual fund raising was different between the current principal and the old one, because the previous principal would report how the money was spent. She thought that it was a very good idea. She said she did not want to know exact details but somehow she saw that the
different working styles of the principals might influence the school management. All the parents responded to the question of whether they agree with the school idea to improve the building or facilities in school. They always agree with the teachers’ suggestions. Therefore, they would rather wait to hear what the school would ask for and tell the villagers to do. One parent stated that the teacher loved their school so it was good if they wanted to improve their school.

One parent mentioned school environment and instructional media. During the conversation with Inn, he also believed that a good quality school would provide the instructional media and be clean.

From these comments, it is clear that generally the parents were very much involved with the school and kept in touch with the school via their children. Moreover, the distance of this school was not too far for parents to come to school by taking too much time for traveling. Parents who still have their children in school looked at the quality related with students’ performance by using their own observations and comparisons with their own experience and also with a similar school in the nearby area. Parents also questioned the teacher’s attention toward teaching in the school although they may not state it explicitly. Some parents who had their children at this school tended to look at the school in terms of infrastructure, and teacher-parent relationships. In addition, parents also indirectly questioned the curriculum. For instance, one parent stated that she could not help her child to understand the mathematics since it was different from her time. She interpreted the situation that her child would only believe what the teacher taught in class and be disciplined by the teachers.

**How do parents’ perspectives reflect the national educational standard?**

The national education council conducted a number of studies and invited many educational organisations to get involved in the process of identifying the education standards (NEC, 2000). These standards are grouped into three categories: students, educational activities, and input. It is clear that the national standards partially cover the need for parents in general. It is also equally clear that the parents have their focus on what they expect from sending their children to an elementary school for six years of education. Regarding student characteristics, interestingly and naturally, the parents’ observations and involvement with their children activities at home frame their conclusions about their children’s achievement. Although the school presented report books, the parents were not able to fully comprehend the evaluation information. With respect to the educational activity standards, the parents viewed quality in terms of educational activity standards in many aspects: teaching methods, assessment processes, local participation, and public relations. The national standards include the education administration structure, training, a coherent curriculum on student and local needs, and student-centered strategies. It is worth keeping in mind that it is essential to ensure that teachers are being effectively used as teachers and that they are not devoting too much of their time to clerical and administrative tasks (Bennett, 1975). In terms of input standards, it is valuable to hear that parents consider themselves as being role models for their children when they directly or indirectly interact with teachers. However, it was unfortunate to learn that some parents did feel left out of the school administrative system. This study shows that decision making in environmental development originally came from the teachers and the principal. This helps explain why the parents did not feel a part of the school.

One important aspect in the provision of education stood out from the study. That is, although the government has conceptually and collectively constructed national standards to ensure that the schools reach these requirements, the needs of local stakeholders cannot afford to be overlooked. In doing so, greater effectiveness and more involvement from schools are clearly seen from the parental points of view. The Ministry of Education has to keep in mind that parents have indeed
high expectations on their schools. If the school is to demonstrate how well it performs, its local stakeholders' voices must be considered first.

**What is the local notion of schools’ quality?**

The quality of schooling from the villagers’ perspectives is that certain levels of their children’s achievement required concrete evidence as facilitated by the teachers’ full attention in teaching the children and by some level of community involvement based upon the school’s needs and community agreement. Obviously, policy makers, educational staff, teachers and administrators need effective communication to establish an underlying understanding of educational goals to the local people. Not only do the local people need to be educated about the current education movement, but also policy makers and educators must learn the needs of the people. Parent meetings or public hearings are suggested to provide opportunities for parents and communities to develop a wider and deeper vision of the current education and to listen to the needs of community members. In short, the needs of people are quite straightforward and applicable to their own community conditions, whereas national level standards are rather general and need to be adjusted to fit the concerns of people. Listening to the voices of those in the margin will definitely enable us to collaboratively build a society in which every one has a chance to win together.

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