

Developing innovative inclusive practice at Meanprasatwittaya school in Bangkok Thailand

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Abstract

For almost 30 years, Meanprasatwittaya School in Bangkok, Thailand, was at the forefront of developing inclusive practice. This presentation will discuss some of the innovative practice developed by teachers at the school and present some of them in photographs and on DVD. The presentation will also discuss the leadership of the school, its growth during the 1990s from a school of 300 students to one of over 1,300, the story of how it became the first school in Thailand to have a fully open admissions policy. The presentation will conclude with the dramatic story of how the school was forced to stop its innovative inclusive practice in March 2005.

In this paper we aim to present a short case study of the development of an inclusive school, with an emphasis on the roles of the principal and school staff in developing Meanprasatwittaya school into one of the most well known schools in Thailand, and becoming a model of child-centered, participatory, inclusive education. The school employed an array of techniques to provide an educational environment that supported the mental, spiritual, physical and moral development of each child. Although Mantariga Witoonchat is no longer the principal of this school, we hope that the story of the school will be a useful case study for developing innovative inclusive practice.

Background to the School

Meanprasatwittaya School (Meanprasat) is a private school offering classes from kindergarten through to 12th grade, with a current enrollment of approximately 1,300 students. It was established in 1950 with support from the community and is located in a traditionally poor area on the outskirts of Bangkok. In 1984 it was registered as a foundation, and continues to receive funding through both tuition and private donations.

The school had developed from modest beginnings to become one of the most well known schools in Thailand. Based in a section of the city traditionally plagued with drug and other social problems, the school had nevertheless developed gradually into a national model. Having provided the guiding vision to Meanprasat School since 1973, in 1986, Mantariga Witoonchat introduced child centered learning, incorporating ideas from international specialists. Active learning or “learning by doing” was introduced as a practical approach to teaching. Over the years the school had attempted to introduce the latest pedagogical techniques while maintaining the core values of the school.

Meanprasat wrote a school charter every 3 years, which clearly defined the current status and priorities for the future. It was geared towards improving student learning, including the recent addition of portfolio assessment and an integrated curriculum. All parties involved with the school had an active role in writing the charter.

In terms of infrastructure, the school had 5 main buildings housing 37 classrooms, a Thai museum, a Buddhist garden, library, computer room, music room, audio/visual centre in every classroom, a Thai dancing room, sound lab, first aid room, ceramic center, an activity center, large meeting room, swimming pool, canteen, school shop and 12 school buses.

Because it had sufficient private support, however, the school was able to offer lower cost tuition to students than other schools with comparable facilities and type of education.

Leadership of the school

Meanprasat School was widely regarded as a pioneer in child-centered activity-based learning long before the Ministry of Education in Thailand became interested in the concept. The school achieved numerous awards and honors over the years, including the Royal Certificate of the Annual Royal of Distinguished Primary School in 1995 from the Ministry of Education and the Annual Excellent School Award from the office of National Primary Education Commission, Ministry of Education.

The school's approach to education was based on the following elements:

- A child-centered approach, including a child-friendly environment
- Child participation
- A flexible and evolving curriculum
- Use of art and music instruction
- Incorporation of innovative teaching methods
- Inclusion of disadvantaged students.

In addition, the school operated according to several key principles. The school believed in a "head, hand and heart" philosophy for complete human education. This means developing the intellectual (head), the physical (hand) and the spiritual (heart) aspects of children, and this was accomplished through the use of varied techniques and activities as summarized below. Overall, the school affirmed that children should be happy while engaged in the learning process, since only then can they reach their true potential.

In order to create child-friendly schools and systems, it has been argued (Briggs, 2003), that schools need leaders with:

- Clear and strong vision,
- Good leadership skills, including understanding how the school operates within a complex local and national context,
- The ability to motivate teachers to be involved at the school level by using their own expertise and knowledge to help make school decisions

We would also argue that the above should facilitate the development of innovative and more inclusive practice in the school. This underpinned much of the leadership and decision making in the school.

Child-friendly systems and Special needs integration

The philosophy of the school was that every child deserved an education and children with disabilities were no exception. In the 1990s, the school had begun to admit students with a wide range of learning disabilities into mainstream classroom settings. These students included children with:

Learning disabilities
Autistic Spectrum Disorder
Downs syndrome,
Physical disabilities,
Hearing and speech impairments.

These students comprised approximately 10 percent of the total student body. Teacher training was provided before and after accepting children with disabilities, including techniques and strategies for including disabled students in mainstream environments. The inclusion of children with special-needs alongside their peers was based on the concept that all children had the right to a good standard of education and that this group should have the chance to mix with society and to be accepted by it also. The school argued that children with special needs would make better progress in a mainstream setting than in special provision.

Admission process

The parents of all disabled children were interviewed before their application to ensure that they understood what the school could realistically do for their children. Often the expectations of parents were too high and the school needed to sensitively discuss this with them. Upon receiving an application for a student with special-needs, the school would arrange an interview with trained staff, to collect detailed information about both the child and parents such as health data, history of the child's development, etc. An interview by the principal with the child then clarified the school's objectives regarding the new student, including the primary objective of enabling "the child to live within a mainstream environment."

If accepted, a child was then given an assessment placement, in order for the teacher to observe the child's behavior in the mainstream classroom environment. If the teacher felt that the school would be able to include the child and that they were not a danger to themselves or others, the child was admitted. The first step after admittance was to arrange a discussion between parents and teacher to develop a plan for the child.

In order for the teacher to determine the learning objectives for the student, she needed to know what the child could do at present. Then a series of short-term goals were set for the child. There was not a set curriculum for the children with special needs. Each one was assessed on an individual basis according to specific targets set. The teacher kept a detailed record of the student's physical health, emotional behavior and intellectual progress. This was used to develop further objectives and provided a clear history of the student's development. The teacher observed how the student interacted with others during group activities and the other students played a part in helping the student to develop their social skills and confidence.

All students with special needs at Meanprasatwittaya School had a Portfolio in which selected items of work were kept. This was one method of evaluating the student's progress; another way was by teacher observation in the classroom. Students with hearing-impairment had regular listening tests conducted by the class teacher.

At a broader level, the school had framed education within the context of the community. The school philosophy was that successful learning in the classroom is dependent on the values and involvement of families, community leaders, and other members of the community. If adults prized learning, it would be prized by children. The school board contained representatives of parents, religious groups, business institutions and other local leaders.

In general, the approach was geared around improving students' learning, and we looked into all areas for feedback that would enable us to improve aspects of the school.

Discussions with parents indicated that the school had had a powerful impact on individual students. Some parents were unable to find schools that would accept their children until they were admitted to Meanprasat. Most parents of children with disabilities were pleased with the progress of their children, both in terms of academic development and social inclusion.

At the national level, the school had become a resource for teachers. In line with the national education reform, all schools in Thailand should have adopted child centered learning by the end of 2002 and Meanprasat was assisting both private and government schools throughout Thailand in this effort. The Ministry of Education encouraged teachers from all parts of the country to observe the teaching methods at Meanprasat. On average some 5,000 teachers per year received a detailed tour of Meanprasat, which culminated in a workshop to expand upon what had been observed in the classrooms.

Local wisdom and community integration

Meanprasat was the only private school in the country that had integrated children with disabilities into mainstream classes, with a goal of 10 percent of each class reserved for children with disabilities. There were 130 children with disabilities at the school, representing a variety of mental, physical and sensory impairments. Each class was taught by two professional teachers, and the kindergarten used a multi-grade approach, teaching children from age 3 to 5 in the same classes.

As described above, the school had combined a strong bond with the community and Thai values with constant upgrading of teaching and learning methods and activities. Teachers worked in teams to design new innovative teaching methods for individual students based upon their learning abilities.

Community and parental participation was strong. Parents were invited to come to the school and be involved in the school development plan, from providing input on school plans, to supporting the learning process, to monitoring and evaluating students learning in class. It was common to see parents at the school participating or supporting the teacher in some way.

With a Buddhist approach to learning, moral ethics were strongly emphasized in all areas of school life. During each school day there were regular short meditation breaks during the study day, which helped students to develop self-awareness as well as peace of mind. In the kindergarten classes, students prepared each morning by passing a lighted candle to each other. The students sat in a large circle and focused their minds on the coming day's activities while passing the candle to each other, giving the traditional Thai Wai greeting when receiving or giving the candle. This reflected community values, and had been accepted and encouraged by the community.

The school used the arts as a major teaching tool. Students were involved in arts in various ways to support the learning process. The school had a special art room for art classes, although it was also evident in most regular classroom activities.

Key factors for developing innovative inclusive practice at Meanprasatwittaya School

The most important thing was to be open to new ideas and to be prepared to try new activities out without fear of making mistakes. This meant that the management must believe in what

the teachers were doing and the potential of human beings. The administrator must be prepared for a struggle at first. In introducing new concepts or ways of working we had to realize that it would not be an easy or a short process. According to our experience, as the school attempted to develop active learning methods within a child-friendly, inclusive environment, several factors had proven to promote positive and supportive learning environments in classrooms

- **Organize the presentation of lessons and activities**

Teachers needed to be confident and competent in their presentations to the class, laying the foundations for effective learning. Teachers were expected to prepare materials and review lessons in advance in order to master the information and skills at the core of learning activity. This was especially relevant for children with disabilities. Teachers needed to prepare beforehand specific adaptations or strategies to ensure that the needs of disabled students were taken into consideration.

- **Values, attitudes, and behaviors are considered the “essential environment”**

At Meanprasat, the most important element in the learning environment was made up of the values, attitudes, and actions that students, teachers and administrators took part in every day. Teachers should exemplify the values that lead to intellectual curiosity and learning, and fostered those values in children. Interaction with children should nurture investigation and experiment, hard work, and appreciation for the unique abilities of each learner. Teachers were trained to create structures, in the form of learning activities, that channel and shape communication between children. Although this generally applied to children with disabilities, instruction might involve one-on-one interaction while the rest of the class was involved in group work, or the specific help of other students in the class.

- **Avoid negative communication**

Teachers were encouraged not to speak in raised voices to children, as this destroyed the environment that nurtured learning. Teachers should not be sarcastic, or belittle a learner's efforts, and should not scold children harshly, or humiliate them.

- **Treat all learners equally**

Fair treatment of children ensured that they understood that the teacher cared about the success of each of them. Teachers should call on girls as often as they called on boys and aimed to ensure that they paid equal attention to learners from minority ethnic groups, those who were new to your school, and students with disabilities.

- **Utilize a variety of learning strategies**

All children could learn and the teacher must adapt his or her techniques according to the ability and interest of the student.

- **Assessment should be flexible**

Thai education is structured around the grade system, and this creates several barriers to developing successful inclusive practice. At Meanprasat, we felt that examinations were not always the most effective method of evaluating student progress and learning. Students could be assessed on presentation of their work on a daily basis, or perhaps through classroom observation by the teacher. A portfolio could be developed which contained the students' work and “exhibitions.” Assessment should be based on a variety of interactions: student to student, teacher-student, and student-parent.

One of the more successful innovations at the school was the introduction of project-based assessment. Instead of taking exams to pass their grades, students were partly assessed through a group presentation based on a project they had been working on. On the last occasion this took place, in March 2005, Grade 3 students presented on a range of topics including Mosquitoes and Health, Soil and Growth, Electricity and Volcanoes. The students presented their work in a series of posters and pieces of writing to an audience of parents. The parents were given an assessment grid to fill in which then contributed to the grade assessment of the students. The groups were mixed ability and contained a complete cross section of the class community. Parents were very supportive of this form of assessment. They felt it told them much more about their child's learning and progress than an examination grade. The children were also more involved in the assessment process and found it an enjoyable and rewarding experience as compared to the examination which was very stressful for them.

- **Support student participation in determining curriculum content**

Children were more likely to take responsibility for their learning when they had chosen the subject matter. Democratic class meetings were held at Meanprasat where a selection of topics was presented by the teacher and then openly discussed and agreed upon by students with the teacher. We believed that actively involving students in this process led to higher levels of achievement because it increased student motivation and enjoyment.

- **Parent and community participation is critical**

Parent and community support and participation were a crucial factor for any learning institution. Schools should encourage parents to become involved in all areas of school life, such as field trips, student assessment and lesson planning. The community should have the opportunity to participate in certain school activities. A regular newsletter distributed to the local community often generated interest, which led to increased community involvement. Regular contact between parents and teachers stimulated parent's interest in their child's learning and could often serve to identify problem areas in the initial stages. This collaborative relationship enabled us to problem solve with parents where we identified difficulties and challenges.

- **Encourage experimental learning**

Meanprasat School defined the learner-centered approach as providing a safe and secure environment in which the learner could explore and discover while being facilitated by the teacher. This meant students needed significant freedom to discover on their own, with appropriate guidance and support from teachers and other students.

- **Eliminate the fear of failure**

It was important to foster the philosophy that it was normal and acceptable to make mistakes, because we all learn from mistakes. Teachers were encouraged to model this in the classroom. We believed that lack of confidence was often caused by a fear of failure of making mistakes, which in turn hindered the learning process.

We have tried to provide an overview of the developments in the inclusive practice at Meanprasat School. Unfortunately, the development of the school took a different course rather suddenly in March 2005.

A Critical Change

As a Foundation School, Meanprasat was managed by a Foundation Board comprising local community leaders, amongst others. In March 2005, the board of foundation, with no notice or discussion voted Mantariga Witoonchat out of her position as Principle of the School with no explanation. Various interpretations were offered as to why this happened. The chairman of the board was said to be looking for political election and some thought he wanted to use the reputation of the school to support his campaign. Others believed that the move was motivated by the desire amongst some Board members to turn the school into a more financially profitable business.

We cannot be sure what motivates individuals to behave in destructive ways. We can only document what happened within the first months after Mantariga Witoonchat's removal from the school:

- Around ten committees both from the board of foundation and the board of administration have been replaced by outside personnel, who have political influence. A number of teachers and educational staffs have been sacked, due to disagreement with the policies of the new administrator; Three hundred students, including most of the students with disabilities, have been taken out of the school by their parents or been told to leave. The students with disabilities have been described by the new administrator as 'the patients'. The new teams of teachers and administrator have argued that it is not the school's responsibility to work with student with mental or physical disabilities as they believe that these children deteriorate the school's development, and they should be monitored by doctors instead.
- Teaching and learning methods and activities have all returned to 'chalk and talk' approaches, which are memory based, and offer no opportunity for the child to develop creativity or critical thinking. The school's approach to healthy living and eating has been sacrificed to financial gain as soft-drinks and salty snacks are now liberally sold in school in place of the fruit and vegetables that were previously available.
- The school no longer supports training and developing teachers on the grounds that this is too expensive and not conducive to effective school development.
- Teachers and students are not allowed to express their opinions on school administration, or participate in the discussion of curriculum contents freely; as a result, teachers, students, and parents are under pressure and stress. The few students with disabilities who remain in the school are no longer making the good progress they were.

This case study provides some evidence that the school principal has a profound role in initiating change, for either better or worse. If the principle has visions and ethics, dares to perceive different and innovative opportunities for improving the school, and operates good governance, then innovative inclusive practice can develop. If the principle has a narrow vision, and does not believe in the potential and creativity innate in every human being, whether adult or student it is unlikely that they will initiate or facilitate the type of school improvement which provides participation and achievement for all.

A New Opportunity

Mantariga Witoonchat is preparing to open a new school, named Anantha, located in Nongjok district, in Bangkok. This new school aims to:

- educate students through a child-centered learning approach,
- create child-friendly environments,
- develop innovative inclusive practices which respond to the diversity of our local community.

The former staff of Meanprasat and visiting international teachers and academics will be able to work collaboratively again, in order to create learning environments that are appropriate and supportive to the development of all our students.

Reference

Dr Kerri Briggs (“Sharing ideas on school-based management”, Bangkok Post, October 28, 2003).