

Thailand: Human Rights Education

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Thailand is undergoing simultaneous reforms in various aspects of its national life—politics, law, economics, the government system, and education. New ideas are being discussed in line with the need to bring the country's economy back to health and to implement the provisions of the 1997 Constitution.

Education in general and human rights education in particular play a crucial role in the process of societal reform.

Human rights education is defined in the draft National Plan of Action for Human Rights Education as follows:

The process of learning, searching, and taking action, in order to develop the knowledge, understanding, awareness, values, attitudes, skills, personalities, behavior, and standards, or norms, in practicing human rights which will result in peaceful coexistence, enabling people to live together with common understanding and common courtesy, with unity, dignity, responsibility, equality, friendship, and acting towards each other as fellow human beings, with mutual respect for each other's rights and freedom. These are essential basic factors that will lead to any kind of development with qualities which are the principles of civilized social progresses.

Background of Human Rights Education in Thailand

In the past, the Thai people learned about human rights through daily life. During the Sukhothai period (1240-1438), the relationship between rulers and subjects was a basic

principle in promoting and recognizing individual rights and freedom. The abolition of slavery during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910) was a recognition of human equality and dignity in Thai society. However, learning human rights through the general education system had not been properly systematized. Human rights was learned through ordinary, daily interactions, without any particular form and covering all fields.

Thailand became a member of the United Nations (UN) soon after the World War II, and voted to adopt the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Although the declaration was not legally binding, the government incorporated human rights principles in the Constitution and in many important national laws. Many lawyers and students of international law and international relations learned about them, but the general public did not.

In the early postwar days, the public knew little of the Constitution and laws as communication technology was backward and the level of literacy low. National Education Commission statistics show that in 1998, people aged 60 and above have on average 3.3 years of education. The government, aware that education is a basic requirement for people's participation in the development process, has given high

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priority to basic and compulsory education, as well as supported the development of higher levels of education.

A survey conducted by the Human Rights Education Plan Subcommittee on the occasion of the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1998 reveals that human rights education in Thailand is not widely conducted. It is a mere subject in primary and secondary schools, and an optional subject in some universities. In government, human rights education is conducted only in agencies whose functions risk causing human rights violations. Most people are not aware of human rights, and they are not given the opportunity to learn and realize it or empowered to protect their own dignity and rights. Violations, therefore, both in government and the private sector, have been frequent and are becoming even more violent.

Curriculum Reform

Since the end of World War II, international cooperation through UN agencies, as well as regional and bilateral cooperation with other agencies and countries, made it necessary and relevant for the Thai people to learn more about the world, the UN system, universal values, and other cultures. School curriculums were reformed many times; textbooks and materials were changed, improved, or developed. The current national curriculum gives due emphasis at all levels of education to the learning of English as the first foreign language, as the language for world communication, and as a means to learn about other countries, the world, the UN, and universal values.

One strategy for UNESCO's Education for Peace, International Understanding, Human Rights, Tolerance, and Sustainable Development is the promotion of an international network of schools called the Associated Schools Project (ASP). The government, through the National Commission for UNESCO, supports

ASP. More than a hundred schools from the primary level to teacher colleges and higher educational institutions all over the country actively participate in ASP. Students and teachers from these schools are concerned with global issues and eager to learn about other languages, countries, and cultures. In recent years, the commission, which is based at the Ministry of Education (MOE), has increasingly involved these schools in many major international events, either initiated at the national level or organized by UNESCO and other international agencies. ASP organized meetings that sometimes coincided with UNESCO meetings held in Thailand. ASP students therefore learn not only from teachers and textbooks, but also from their experience and from interactions with each other and with the international community.

The member-schools of ASP and schools for children with special needs work in cooperation with UNESCO through MOE. They have brought many new ideas and inspired many changes and developments in the educational system.

Another type of school network, initiated by His Majesty the King of Thailand, involves Suk Sasongkrob Schools and Raja Prachanukrob Schools, which were established in remote areas to give educational services to children who are "hard to reach" or are in "difficult circumstances," such as the hill-tribe children, children in remotest villages of the poor and underprivileged, and children with special needs. Mostly free boarding schools, some of them organize self-sufficiency projects such as school agriculture for students' meals, and income-generating activities such as handicrafts.

The students learn that although they come from different tribes, villages, and backgrounds, they have to learn to respect one another, live together in harmony, and become citizens of the same nation.

The Constitution of 1997—A New National Context

The 1997 Constitution provides for an entirely new national framework for development in Thailand. It contains five articles that specifically state the “rights and freedom of the individuals” and mention the term “human dignity” several times. Article 43 states that all Thai people have the right to a 12-year basic education, to be provided by the state equitably and with quality. It is free of charge and gives due recognition to the participation of the local authorities and the private sector.

Article 58 provides for the right to public information, while Article 81 stresses that the state shall provide education and training, as well as support the endeavors of the private sector, so that education will emphasize both knowledge and values. Chapter 8 provides for the establishment of the National Human Rights Commission, whose functions include educating and informing the public on human rights.

In accordance with the Constitution, the National Education Act was passed in August 1999. Chapter 1 (general objectives and principles) of the act states:

Education shall aim at the full development of the Thai people in all aspects: physical and mental health, intellect, knowledge, morality, integrity, and desirable way of life so as to be able to live in harmony with other people.

The learning process shall aim at inculcating sound awareness of politics; democratic system of government under a constitutional monarchy; ability to protect and promote their rights, responsibilities, freedom, respect for the rule of law, equality, and human dignity; pride in Thai identity; ability to protect public and national interests; promotion of religion, art, national culture, sports, local wisdom, Thai wisdom and universal knowledge; inculcating ability to preserve natural resources and the environment; ability to earn a living; self-reliance; creativity; and acquir-

ing thirst for knowledge and capability of self-learning on a continuous basis.

The law also provides for the following:

- free, quality education for 12 years;
- student-centered learning and school charters, which are part of human rights education;
- timeframe for educational reform: an educational reform committee to be established within one year, all laws to be reformed within three years; and
- increased assessment of schools: schools shall conduct internal assessments and publish their reports so that the public can access them; schools shall be evaluated externally by each district.

Goals of Human Rights Education

Based on Thailand’s experience in education, the goals of human rights education shall be the following:

- Create a peaceful society.
- Create harmony.
- Promote sustainable development.
- Promote human dignity and development.

Trust, equality, cooperation, compassion, mutual support, and a continual review of goals, methods, and target audiences are needed to realize these goals.

Points of Discussion

To extensively promote human rights education, the following ideas shall be considered:

- Human rights should be taught as an extension of Asian philosophy and religion. Religious centers have been asked to establish preschool centers and playgrounds as part of educational reform. Human rights education may be included in religious instruction. After all, according to Buddha, “Everyone is equal under the same Dharma.”

- Human rights education requires the support of teachers and parents. Therefore, anyone who has anything to do with the school system should be educated on the importance of human rights and human rights education.
- In cases where there is a backlash against “human rights” for a variety of reasons (threat to status quo, Western origin of the concept, negative notion of human rights, etc.), human rights principles may be taught without using the words “human rights.”
- Target groups of human rights education shall be the students, families, communities, and the general public. Learning centers are expected to increase people’s access to information on human rights. (See draft national plan of action.)
- Human rights should be integrated into all aspects of learning, rather than remain as just a subject. This way, teachers and students simultaneously learn about human rights. Teachers have to learn to shift from a teacher-centered classroom to a student-centered classroom.

Education Reform and Human Rights Education

The current curriculums (revised 1990) for primary and secondary levels do not directly include civil rights topics but set content areas.¹ For Grades 1-6, the topics include family life, law, and rights and obligations of citizens in a democratic society with the King as the Supreme Head of State.

Topics in the secondary curriculum are part of compulsory subjects in social studies. They include roles of the family and community members in a democratic society, rights and obligations of citizens in a democratic society with the King as the Supreme Head of State, election laws, basic laws, and the present and past civil rights situation in other countries (especially on such issues as sexual abuse, child rights, etc. that have relevance to Thailand).

The curriculum also emphasizes learning strategies for solving social problems peacefully using ethical and moral principles.

In support of education reform, the following activities are undertaken:

- development of a national plan for civil rights education;
- experimental teaching of human rights in schools;
- preparation of a basic education curriculum on human rights; and
- publication of UN instructional materials on human rights and their distribution to elementary and secondary schools and other educational institutions to help administrators, teachers, students, and other concerned personnel better understand human rights.

Based on the requirements of the new education law, a Basic Education Curriculum is being drafted. The drafting committee emphasizes the development of human rights curriculum standards for each grade level. The curriculum aims to progressively introduce human rights concepts—in a simpler way at the lower grades, in a more complex way at the higher grades. (See Annex A for the draft standards and benchmarks for teaching human rights in primary and secondary school.²)

The National Commission for the Celebration of the Human Rights Declaration

In 1998, the government joined the world community in celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In January 1998, the prime minister created the national commission for the celebration, with the minister of justice as chairperson, and representatives of government ministries, academic communities, and NGOs as members. In April 1998, the commission set up a subcommittee to draft the national plan of action on human rights education. The subcommittee had the following tasks:

- Survey the needs of human rights education in Thailand.
- Draft the national plan of action for human rights education based on the needs surveyed.
- Submit the plan to the commission.
- Organize other activities deemed necessary.

The Subcommittee for Drafting the National Plan of Action for Human Rights Education

The subcommittee, which is an inter-departmental and interdisciplinary body, set up a working group to accomplish the following:

- a survey to assess the state of human rights education and to ascertain the need for human rights education at all levels in future programs;
- a draft of the National Plan of Action for Human Rights Education, which was presented in May 1999 to a focus group seminar made up of teachers, students, NGO workers, academics, and government officials for comments and reactions; and
- a revised version of the National Plan of Action for Human Rights Education, which was submitted in September 1999 to the minister of justice in his capacity as chair of the 50th Anniversary Celebration of Human Rights in Thailand.

Key issues Regarding the National Plan

The proposed National Plan of Action for Human Rights Education faces many challenges. Its successful implementation depends on the following:

- integration of the plan into the overall national policies and plans for development;
- integration of the plan into the National Plan of Action for Human Rights Education;
- ownership of the plan by all sectors;

- creation of a national coordination mechanism and resource center for human rights and human rights education;
- support and encouragement by the media;
- implementation by all agencies at all levels;
- creation of networks of human rights educators, teachers, and human rights schools and nonformal groups at the national and grass-roots levels; and
- monitoring, evaluation, and creation of a reporting system for human rights education at all levels.

Conclusion

Governments generally have never been known to be outstanding protectors of human rights or promoters of human rights education. International and national nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have always been the ones active in this area, and have often been critical of the action or inaction of governments on matters of human rights.

However, in the spirit of providing education for all—and in this context, human rights education for all—NGOs and the government should create a harmonious and effective partnership for promoting human rights education. Partnership, cooperation, and participation are the key to peaceful coexistence in a democratic society. The government, local administrators, individuals and families, community organizations, private organizations, professional groups, religious institutions, and other social institutions, must cooperate in order to successfully implement the National Plan of Action for Human Rights Education once it is approved. The ultimate objective of human rights education is the creation of a harmonious and peaceful society, where people from all walks of life live together under the rule of law, with due respect for each other's rights and dignity. This will take a long time—and a great deal of understanding, commitment, and continuous learning—to achieve. Hatred and violence cannot solve problems; they can only

destroy everything, including the noble ideals for which men and women have worked so hard in order to gain recognition for human rights as a universal idea.

Notes

1. This portion is taken from “Human Rights Education in Thailand,” a paper presented by Prapaipan

Kosaisunthorn of the Ministry of Education at the UN Intersessional Workshop on National Plans of Action for Human Rights Education in the Asia-Pacific Region, Tokyo, Japan, 17-19 January 2000, organized by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and hosted by the Japanese government.

2. Ibid.

ANNEX A

Draft Standards and Benchmarks on Teaching Human Rights at Primary and Secondary Levels

Standard Possessing knowledge, understanding, and awareness of one’s rights, duties, and freedom, and acting responsibly as a good citizen under a democratic system.

Benchmarks for each grade level

Grades 1-3 Being aware of one’s rights, duties, freedom, and responsibility as a member of the family, school, and community; behaving appropriately.

Grades 4-6 Being aware of one’s rights, duties, freedom, and responsibility as a member of the family, school, and community in accordance with the Constitution.

Grades 7-9 Understanding the reasons behind inclusion of personal rights and freedom in the Constitution; being able to assess the behavior one’s self and others in society.

Grades 10-12 Understanding the line of thought concerning universal human rights; being able to analyze the Constitution and national policies concerning protection of human rights and citizens.

Standard Understanding the characteristics of coexistence of members of society, powers and functions of government organizations and social institutions; knowing how to live peacefully with others.

Benchmarks for each grade level

Grades 1-3 Knowing that Thailand employs constitutional laws in governing the nation.

Grades 4-6 Knowing that constitutional laws constitute the basis of other laws; knowing about delegation of authority and accepting that one’s locality has to be administered by the mechanism specified in the Constitution.

Grades 7-9 Understanding the rationale, principle, and intention of some important articles of the Constitution relating to politics, governance, economic, and socio-cultural aspects as well as the implications of adopting the Constitution to the way of life of the citizens.

Grades 10-12 Understanding and analyzing relationships among various articles in the Constitution, emphasizing certain articles involving elections, rights, freedom, education, etc. in conjunction with social changes as well as the resulting status of the nation and the global society.

Standard Knowing, understanding, and being proud of the Thai culture; accepting diversity; and possessing good conscience in behaving appropriately in a democratic society.

Benchmarks for each grade level

Grades 1-3 Respecting personal rights, freedom, and properties as well as the rights of others in the school.

Grades 4-6 Respecting personal rights, freedom, and properties as well as the rights of others and public properties in one's community.

Grades 7-9 Respecting personal rights, freedom, and properties as well as helping maintain public properties in the larger national society.

Grades 10-12 Respecting rights and freedom; knowing how to protect one's rights and public properties; deciding to behave appropriately; and assessing behavior that will benefit the self, others, and the nation as a whole.