



An Analysis of Educational Policies, Practices, and Challenges in Thailand and Finland

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Abstract. As there is a growing demand for better education to prepare the young generation by reducing the knowledge and skill gap; thus, it is important that countries must look into their educational systems and analyze any pitfalls. Educational policies do not come from a vacuum but from the careful drafting of a group of stakeholders who want to bring about a positive change. Therefore, this research paper aims to analyze educational policies currently implemented in Thailand and Finland. The paper also critically examines the facets of Thai and Finnish educational policies, then compares the two countries' educational policies. Although Thailand and Finland vary in different aspects, especially in their geopolitics and cultural aspects, both countries are ambitious about becoming top-ranking countries for providing the best education. However, major hurdles lay ahead for both countries, and planning carefully to tackle those hurdles will bring significant changes to the educational systems in both countries. As this research paper drew the conclusion that Finland tops the list in providing quality education through its innovative pedagogy, it is recommended that Thailand learn from and adapt to the Finnish education system and introduce significant changes to the education system in the country.

Keywords: Educational Policies · Practices · Challenges

1 Introduction

Societies are changing rapidly with the help of technological advancement, and therefore, it is inevitable that governments around the globe should prepare children for a better future. To do so, education plays a vital role, not just typical education but quality education. Warnick [1] argued in his book that children share specific fundamental interests: the capacity to decide for themselves what values to uphold, learning the skills that will enable them to be financially independent as adults, being exposed to a variety of activities and experiences that will allow them to thrive in their personal lives and growing a sense of fairness. Therefore, providing quality education to make children better decision-makers has become essential for schools and educational institutions.

It is essential to look at the definition of quality education. There can be a plethora of definitions for quality education, and some may argue that quality education merely means better student achievements in literacy and numeracy, while others may disagree.

According to the UN's sustainable goal 4, quality education can be defined as a system to provide children with the opportunity to reach their potential [2]. Moreover, they reported on quality education as "a quality education provides resources and directs policy to ensure that each child enters school healthy, learns about and practices a healthy lifestyle, learns in an environment that is physically and emotionally safe for students and adults, is actively engaged in learning and connected to the school and wider community, has access to personalized learning and is supported by qualified, caring adults, is challenged academically, and is prepared for success in life."

Although the UN's goal is to provide quality education for all countries, the question remains: has it been achieved? Therefore, it is pertinent to look into the education provided in two specific countries: Thailand and Finland. Finland, located in Europe, and Thailand, located in Southeast Asia, have different demographics and geopolitical layouts; however, both countries are doing their best to reach their potential in becoming one of the best countries for quality education. Nonetheless, Finland has been a top country providing quality education since 2000, as reflected in PISA tests. On the other hand, Thailand has spent enormous sums of money to raise educational standards in the country through various teacher-training methods and by adapting other countries' educational systems; however, Thailand has not reached its full potential in achieving its world's education ranking.

2 Demographics Characteristics of Finland and Thailand

With a population of more than 5.53 million, Finland has an average density of 19 people per square kilometer (49/sq mi). As a result, it is Europe's third least populous nation, behind Iceland and Norway. The population is centered on a narrow coastal plain in the southwest, with a relatively uneven distribution of people. With 1.5 million people residing in the Greater Helsinki area, about 85% of people are urban or suburban dwellers [3]. On the other hand, Arctic Lapland has barely two people per square kilometer (5.2/sq mi). Finland is a nation with a mostly homogenous ethnic makeup. Although Finnish is the predominant race, there are historical minorities of Roma, Sami, and Swedes in Finland. Large populations of ethnic Russians, Estonians, Iraqis, and Somalians are now present in the nation due to recent immigration. 5.2% of people are foreign citizens, and 7.9% of people were born abroad. Finnish and Swedish are the two official languages; around 5.2% of Finns are native speakers of Swedish. From the 13th to the beginning of the 19th century, Finland was a part of Sweden.

Thailand's population is anticipated to reach 71,601,103 people in 2021. Thailand's population is overwhelmingly rural. It is mostly found in rice-growing areas in the central, northeastern, and northern regions. According to the National Economic and Social Development Board, its urban population—primarily in greater Bangkok—was 45.7 percent of the overall population in 2010 [4]. Accurate data are difficult to get because millions of Thais commute from rural areas to cities and then return to participate in seasonal field labor. They have a rural domicile yet spend most of the year in cities. The United Nations classifies Thailand as an "aging society" (one-tenth of the population is over 60), and it is on course to become an "aged society" (one-fifth of the population is over 60) by 2025. According to the Fiscal Policy Office, Thais aged 60 and older would

rise from 14 percent in 2016 to 17.5 percent in 2020, 21.2 percent in 2025, and 25.2 percent in 2030. There are expected to be 94,000 employees aged 60 and up in 2016.

3 Analysis of the Finnish and Thai Education Systems

The education system in Finland includes daycare programs, a preschool program, and an 11-year compulsory education for all. The Finnish government has made secondary general academic and vocational mandatory for all. During students' common education, they are not streamlined or tracked, which also consists of comprehensive education to minimize the low achievement of academics. Students can select either vocational or academic education after completing their secondary education. Once they have completed the academic or vocational track, they can opt for tertiary education, consisting of university and polytechnic education; therefore, the Finnish educational system emphasizes more practical-based learning.

Thailand's educational system differs significantly from that of Finland. The Thai government mainly provides education through the ministry of education, and like the Finnish system, Thai education is compulsory for nine years, which consists of six years of elementary education and three years of lower secondary school. One of the striking facts about Thai education is that the government has made education free for all until grade 9. Pupils can be enrolled in elementary school at the age of 6, and they continue their education until the age of 12. Free education stops at grade 9, and students can opt for either upper secondary schools or vocational schools.

Of all the students enrolled in the Thai education system, 99% complete their primary education, 85% complete lower secondary school, and about 75% move to upper secondary schools [5]. Therefore, both the Finnish and Thai education systems play a vital role in preparing the younger generation with the up-to-date skills and techniques needed for a better future.

Although Thai and Finnish education are constructed on different principles and policies, they both take the PISA annual test, which reflects the students' ability in numeracy and literacy skills. Compared to Thailand, Finland has remained the top-ranking country in providing the best quality education, often reflected in the PISA test, launched in 2000, and tests students' literacy skills. Finnish students' high literacy skills reflected on the PISA tests have gained a lot of attention from many educational institutions worldwide. Üstün, Ulaş & Eryılmaz, Ali [6] reported that Finnish students were highly resilient and spent the lowest number of learning hours, with just 31.5 h for all the subjects at schools in PISA countries. Whereas, children in some countries spend a significant amount of time at school, and their performance cannot be compared to Finnish students. On the other hand, Thailand, which has been paying a lot of attention to education, has not achieved its intended ranking for the PISA tests [7]. Therefore, it is time for the Thai government to awaken and analyze the major problems that the students and teachers encounter so that the government may put all its efforts and resources into improving the quality of education.

Although PISA tests may not entirely reflect students' outcomes and a country's educational quality, they may serve as an indicator for stakeholders to prepare for significant changes if students lack skills in both literacy and numeracy. Many factors affect the

quality of the education system in any country. These factors are not limited to teacher quality but also how a government shows its interest in developing a standard system for all stakeholders related to education. The major stakeholders are usually the educators, parents, and the community. On the one hand, many countries are spending much of their GDP on education; however, the results are not what one would expect. On the other hand, Finland, with its spending of just 1.2%, gets a lot better results. Therefore, it is important to analyze the major characteristics or factors that lead to better academic achievements for Finnish pupils.

According to Ahtee et al. [8], three main factors influence the success of the Finnish education system: decentralization, equality, and liberation. Therefore, the Finnish education system emphasizes equality for all pupils across its educational institutions. Accordingly, Thailand may adopt some qualities that the Finnish education system possesses.

4 Finnish and Thai Educational Policies, Practices, and Challenges

Educational policies introduced by stakeholders in the education system play a vital role in the holistic development of a country's education system; therefore, a careful draft is necessary to uplift the quality of the education system. The principles and policy choices that affect the field of education, as well as the body of legislation and regulations that control how educational systems are run, make up education policy [9]. Therefore, drafting educational policies should be both innovative and conventional, including all relevant stakeholders, as this will greatly impact the students, teachers, community, and the country.

Both the Finnish and Thai governments have revised their educational policies depending on the demand from different sectors; moreover, there is growing pressure on the education sector due to the influence of pandemics, automation, and rapid information sharing. To have a better grasp of the educational policies of both Thailand and Finland, one must look into the recent publications of the OECD. One of the major challenges the Finnish education system encounters is the underperformance of immigrant students [10]. The OECD reported that Finnish students' skills in literacy and numeracy are slowly decreasing; therefore, much emphasis should be given to students and the children of immigrants. To do so, immigrant students should be taught the local language to perform better in schools. Aside from the problem, another major issue confronting the Finnish government is the rising unemployment due to low educational attainment.

As there is a growing demand to address the major problems that Finnish education faces, the government implemented specific education policies to assist teachers and students. It requires ECEC (Early Childhood Care Centers) staff, at least one of whom must have a territory education. Moreover, the new policy stipulates that the staff-child ratio will drop to 1:7 in 2020 from 1:8. Moreover, to integrate the immigrants into the Finnish education system successfully, the government has introduced a preparatory program for immigrants in which they learn Finnish or Swedish as the second language and their native language for other academic subjects. It is evident that the Finnish education policy provides much importance to its immigrants or their children. By reducing the student-teacher ratio, engagement in the classroom can be increased [11]. Finland's

student welfare act also plays a vital role in promoting well-being among children; therefore, they provide free access to healthcare and social services. They also ensured that this free access prevailed during pre- and post-pandemic times, making them different from other countries. The new act also emphasizes gender equality by introducing gender equality in its curriculum to minimize gender bias.

The Finnish government has also introduced major changes for their teacher education centers, where the ministry emphasizes teachers’ updating their skills by focusing on three major areas: new pedagogy, new learning areas, and digital learning [12]. They have also established a national vision where equity and equality are important in education. In addition, the OKM introduced teacher-tutors, where teachers who embrace modern pedagogies digitalize their teachings, and it has received a lot of appreciation from the stakeholders. This also proves the importance of digital literacy among teachers and students, as digital learning was inevitable during the pandemic and helped students continue their studies. To effectively implement policies across all educational organizations, the government used a top-down and bottom-up approach in which power was decentralized to bring significant changes to the education system. Local governing bodies and stakeholder groups participated in the policy creation process.

Thailand’s 1999 National Education Act brought major changes to its education system. The act introduced a decentralized approach, which devolved the government’s control over education. Figure 1 shows the governing body’s structure in Thailand’s education system. Now that the government has realized the importance of decentralization for innovative policies, they have restructured the governance to limit the constraints.

As Thailand had already realized the importance of free education, it put free education for all in place, and the reformed educational policy in Thailand also put a lot of

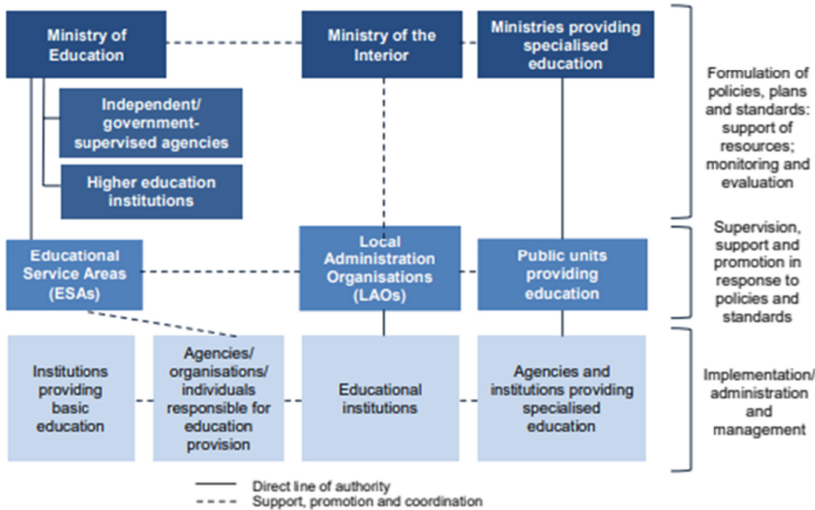


Fig. 1. Secondary Education Regional Information Base: Country Profile – Thailand. Source: UNESCO Bangkok [12].

emphasis on student-centered learning rather than teaching note-taking and rote memory learning. In order to achieve student-centered learning, teachers have been asked to update their skills in preparing new teachers with an emphasis on digital literacy and new pedagogy [13]. They have been asked to practice and implement the identification of potential among students in classrooms and nurture that potential to reach its peak. Although it appears daunting for many teachers, the ministry of education has provided assistance throughout its terms. As the country is rapidly moving towards industrial era 5.0, the government has also introduced ICT in education, where digital learning has been gaining much appreciation from teachers and students alike. The government called for participation in its education policy reform from different sectors of society to bring about significant changes. Despite the government's efforts to bring about positive changes, the Thai education system continues to fall short in many areas, as evidenced by national entrance exams and the PISA test.

5 Conclusion and Recommendations

As countries around the globe are introducing major changes to their education systems to prepare for the future workforce, countries like Thailand will inevitably make significant changes to their current education systems, which can prepare the younger generation for a difficult future. The recent O-NET (national test) results showed that the students lacked language and math skills and needed a lot of improvement. The 2018 PISA test also revealed that Thai children lack literacy and numeracy skills; thus, the government should be able to implement the changes it desires for the education system to alleviate the problems students and teachers face. Moreover, as Thailand aspires to be one of the major educational hubs in the ASEAN region, it should look into three major areas to better introduce major educational change: effectiveness, efficiency, and equity. Teacher training centers should ensure that they can nurture the potential of young teachers and effectively incorporate new pedagogies in classrooms. It is also important for Thailand to learn from other countries how decentralization is achieved in the education sector and adapt the current system to suit the needs of the children better.

Teachers play an important role in developing literacy and numeracy skills, so school stakeholders should focus on developing teachers' abilities to create more engaging and active student classes. As there is a rapid change in society due to technological advances, teachers should be equipped with the latest skills, and that is where educational policies come into effect. Educational policies that are carefully drafted to prepare the young generation for a better future will have a greater impact on children, which eventually will have a huge impact on the globe. Therefore, it is imperative that countries that are looking to improve their education system keep in mind the benefits that such policies would bring to the country, and this applies to both Thailand and Finland alike.

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