

Financial and Decentralization Policies and Measures For the Improvement of Educational Quality at School Level: A Case of Thailand

Annop Pongwat, Phetcharee Rupavijetra and Chettaphoon Wanapaisan

(Chiang Mai University, Thailand)

1. Rationale

Undoubtedly, a great many school and non-school factors account for quality education at school everywhere. And despite the existence of rigorous and well done research studies and findings indicating the determining power of certain, over other, factors, their explanatory power certainly does not hold in all situations. And what quite irritates or makes educators uneasy and unhappy is the fact that many powerful studies arrive at strong conclusion that non-school variables, e.g., socio-economic status of the family, actually or more accurately account for students' academic performance and achievement at school. At the same time, it does not stand to be contested either that many school people happen to believe the latter but still continue to harbor the faith working harder and better under their schoolhouses hoping that their school-based efforts will someday make a difference.

Thailand is no exception. In her quest for better quality of education at all levels, relevant bodies of the Ministry of Education have been actively proposing a myriad of plans, strategies and methods, currently under the banner of "the second round of education reform" or "education reform in the second decade" (meaning the first decade starting with the promulgation of the country's first parliamentary-processed national education act in 1999.). Certainly, these government-initiated reform efforts, unquestionably designed, among many noble goals, to improve educational quality across the board, have been being criticized by some independent academics and/or critics for their nearly total exclusion of the little consideration as regards the "people's sector" voices. Featuring among those proposed solutions to the "education illness" are the reform of budget allocation methods and processes earmarked for education and speedy decentralization of more educational management authority to educational service area offices and individual schools with those areas. And these two major proposals, in and by themselves and in association with others, are believed to bring about not only desirable quality educational delivery, better students' performance and learning, but also enhanced opportunities for many students, especially those in rural, deprived and usually difficult-to access schools, who will not be able either by chance or by choice to continue higher studies beyond basic education. Nevertheless, what remains to be seen is whether and when the desired results will materialize.

In the State of Thai Education Report for 2007/2008 released in October, 2008 by the Education Commission Secretariat, it was reported that "all 6 educational quality development

strategies” (including the two major proposals above) proposed by the Ministry of Education were those proposed during the last 10 year..” (p.14), and despite all other efforts during the 2007/2008 period plus the accumulated impacts of those undertaken years before the period, “The overall educational quality might have slightly improved or has not improved at all...” (pp.141-142). The gloomy conclusion was reached on the basis of careful and through analyses of generally agreed and adopted criteria and indicators by government and/or government-sanctioned authorities and/or agencies both at the international and national levels such IMD’s Competitiveness Ranking, World Economy Forum, OECD’s PISA Education Evaluation Project, Thailand’s Ministry of Education National Tests for Grade 6 and 9, Thailand’s National Education Testing Institute O-Net and Office of Educational Standards and Quality Assessment’s external evaluation.

Nevertheless, educators and non-educators who care deeply about the education enterprise simply cannot afford to idly stand in awesome despair. As we read about deteriorating quality of education across the board, we at the same time are being overwhelmed by a myriad of proposed solutions of all kinds including those contained in the National Education Commission’s annual educational reports, one of which referred to earlier. For the particular purpose of the Africa-Asia Research Group B assignment and within the Thai context, we need to identify possible and preferably field-tested/proved links between Thailand Ministry of Education’s financing and school-level quality of education their students receive or do not receive. In practice, such identification and verification methods are plentiful. In our team’s opinion, however one effective method is that of extracting possible “answers” from those directly involved in the field implementation of those policies and measures. And in this paper, those directly involved include educational service area (or school district) offices’ Directors and Deputy Directors, School Directors and teachers.

2. Objectives

1. To investigate the current situation regarding the decentralization of educational administration and management authority and financial policies and measures propagated by Thailand’s Ministry of Education.
2. To identify/verify the linkage between those financial and decentralization policies and measures and quality of education at school level.

3. Scope, Methodologies and Data Analysis

This research was originally conceived as a rather large and ambitious project. As Dean of large Chiang Mai-based University’s Faculty of Education between 2005-2009, one of our team members then had easy access to top-level educational administrators in the region where Chiang Mai University is located. A number of educational service area offices’ directors and vice-directors as well as school administrators and teachers were informed of the project and

promised to both be interviewed and respond to the questionnaire being developed at the middle of 2010.

However, a situational change later in the year drastically altered the research size and scope. This reduced project, nevertheless, still had as its main goal the identification and verification of the usually presumed linkages. A smaller group of 78 informants, comprising 1 educational service area office director, 4 deputy directors and 22 school directors and 52 teachers, were asked to respond to questionnaire items soliciting their perceptions and understandings of current legal and practical status of Ministry of Education's financial and educational administration and management authority decentralization policies and measures. Moreover, they were straightforwardly asked to judge whether or not those important policies and measures had any impact upon or anything to do with school-level educational quality regardless of their idiosyncratic definitions of the phrase. This was taken with full awareness of the apparent fact that whenever the issue of educational quality across the board was raised, it was almost always understood to mean "high" standard tests' scores, local, regional, national, or international. Given this clearly limited scope of the investigation, then responses from those informants were subsequently reported as such but coupled with some researchers' additional remarks. The face value indicated in the rather negative responses found in the study should not be taken to mean that no concrete or tangible connection whatsoever exists between financial policies, measures and resources plus decentralization efforts and schemes and the school-level quality of education. In their opinion and based on their long years of field experience, it is simply not there to be seen.

In addition, the original plan to identify and verify possible connections between financial policies, measures and resources and school-level educational quality was also unfortunately omitted. Only some remarks and comments were instead offered based on official statistics and documents as well as certain available scholarly writings.

4. Findings

4.1 The Financial Equation

At the beginning of the first decade of the present round of educational reform in Thailand (1999-2008), the Ministry of Education in its key document (The 12-Year Basic Education Provision: Policy and Plan, 1999), categorically states that In comparison with other countries, the budget allocated for education in Thailand was found to be quite low level. Thailand should increase it. However, past efforts of placing high hope on it have clearly demonstrated they barely succeed. A new idea is thus needed, the one which does not rely primarily on monetary resources but stipulates that although there is a limited budget, successful education provision is still possible on the conditions that there be more appropriate methods, innovations, better administration and management, diverse models and approaches. Then, money is to be thought of as a dependent variable. This must be so since it has already been proved that increased budget, number of teachers and other personnel, buildings and space, materials and tools, etc.,

have not brought about successful education, both quantitatively and qualitatively (P.47).

And contrast the above statement with the following comments made by researchers of the nation's most prestigious and trustworthy research organization, Thailand Development Research Institute or TDRI, at the 2011 Annual Academic Forum on "Revamping Thai Education System : Quality for All" on February 15, 2012 on the very same issue:

Thailand's education budget has increased but students' learning outcomes have gone down. Therefore, lack of resources is not certainly a prime cause of educational quality problem as has always been understood... (P.3)

At present Thailand's basic education budget is primarily of a supply-side budgeting/ financing nature covering school personnel, operations and investment costs which are not directly related the needs or number of students... resulting in the long route of accountability responsibility chain system, the very system not at all favorable to the improvement of school-level quality of education (p.21)

(The paper is entitled : "The Financing and Administration System for Forging Educational Provision/ Management Responsibility" authored by TDRI's Researchers, Somkiat Tungkitvanij, Supanat Sasiwuthiwat and Bank Ngarm - Arunchote).

What is being proposed here is the generally and at times naively held belief that only if more and more budget is allocated for education, most, if not all, vexing educational problems, including the quality one, will simply disappear. In the last fiscal year, October 1,2010 – September 30,2011, Thailand's education system received the share of over 20% in the national budget accounting for over 4% of the GDP. The country's Ministry of Education always enjoys the highest share indicating in essence that the education sector is constantly attached great importance. But again, the high budget figure itself does not automatically mean the quality of education provided across the board is guaranteed. As has always been the case, over 75% of the educational budget is used to pay for personnel's salaries, operational costs and school investment expenditure leaving very little, if any, for improving quality across the board.

And as we can recall, practically, few of our original questionnaire respondents stated they believed there was a connection between increased financial and other resources and higher quality at the school level. They are of course necessary but not sufficient. Higher salaries for both school teachers and administrators; their monthly administrative and academic rank remuneration; occasional salary raises and adjustment; special financial rewards for outstanding performances and/or classroom/school-based research projects; etc., have currently led to the popular belief and colloquial saying that basic education school people now earn more money than university professors. But, unfortunately and pitifully, they have not thus far been able to result in improved quality both at the school and system levels.

4.2 The Decentralization Equation

Like in the Financial Equation scenarios, the connection between this much touted administrative managerial strategy and higher/better quality of school education is still very much a fantasy rather than a practical reality. If it is there, it is because some administrators and teachers think it is there. It could really be there but very difficult to prove given the existing database in the Thailand's case. And in this section, finding on the issue will be presented.

Commenting on the impact of school-based management (SBM) one key decentralization of educational administration/management strategy originally initiated in the USA, Australia and elsewhere, Prof. Dr. Brian J. Caldwell, Professor and former Dean of Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne, Australia, had the following, based on his long years of experience, more than 30 years, on six continents, to say:

Experiences suggest that, no matter how strong the strategic intention, it will take many years for a shift in the balance of centralization and decentralization in favor of the latter to have impact on outcomes. It is one thing to pass legislation shifting power, authority, responsibility and influence from one level to another-such a shift is a change in structure. It is another thing to build capacity to have the desired impact on learning and to change the culture at all levels.

("School-Based Management and Its Potential to Enhance Decentralization in Education", a paper presented at the Third International Forum on Education Reform hosted by Office of the Education Council of Thailand, Ambassador Hotel, Bangkok, Thailand, 8-11 September, 2003, P.5).

According to him, "There has been little evidence that SBM has had either a direct or indirect effect on educational outcomes" (P.3). One can safely take these outcomes to mean student learning and equate them with educational quality at the school level discussed in this paper. His following qualification to this conclusion in the same page is both interesting and informative. He said:

However, much of the early research was drawing on information or opinion from systems where an impact on outcomes was never a primary or even a secondary purpose... Even when impact on outcomes became a primary purpose, it was difficult to draw conclusions on impact because of the weak database on student achievement.

It is interesting to note that Prof. Caldwell's synopsis above is now almost a decade old. SBM-related developments in the past decade could be more positive and encouraging elsewhere especially, in his evaluation, in Indonesia (P.4). Nevertheless, it is not at all certain the implementation of the broad decentralization policy in Thailand could be said with certainty to have had any tangible impact upon student learning, i.e. school-level quality. What is generally recognized is that there certainly exists a strong strategic intention of making decentralization an instrument for improved student learning. Moreover, the Ministry of Education in Bangkok and educational service area offices around the country seem to possess the rather strong database

needed for serious analysis and conclusion drawing. Even given these rather positive assets, our Thailand research team members are still of the opinion that without a carefully conceived research design and sophisticated research methodologies, it will be too premature to draw serious impact conclusions. Actually, what was attempted here is pretty much tantamount to “the early research” Referred to by Prof. Caldwell earlier, drawing on information or opinion from those directly involved in the implementation of decentralization policies and measures during the past ten years. The following ten tables show the number and percentage of 78 key informants responding to ten key questions constructed in straightforward language:

Table 1 Do you think decentralization of educational administration/management authority has concretely taken place since the promulgation of the National Education Act of 1999?

Answer	Number (N=78)	Percentage (%)
Yes	46	58.97
No	15	19.23
Uncertain	17	21.79

Table 2 In your opinion, is it the case that your Educational Service Area Office’s daily operations proceed autonomously, flexibly and smoothly without having to wait for the Ministry of Education’s directives/orders like before?

Answer	Number (N=78)	Percentage (%)
Yes	25	32.05
No	37	47.43
Uncertain	16	20.51

Table 3 Do you think schools’ daily operations proceed autonomously, flexibly and smoothly without having to wait for directives/orders from the Educational Service Area Office and/or Ministry of Education?

Answer	Number (N=78)	Percentage (%)
Yes	23	29.48
No	41	52.66
Uncertain	14	17.94

Table 4 In your opinion, has school-level administration/management become more flexible and smoother since the implementation of education reform and decentralization schemes?

Answer	Number (N=78)	Percentage (%)
Yes	32	41.02
No	31	39.74
Uncertain	15	19.23

Table 5 Which of the 4 administrative/managerial functions is the one you think the school can carry out most comfortably and autonomously?

Answer	Number (N=78)	Percentage (%)
Academic Affairs	40	59.28
Budgeting Affairs	13	16.66
Personnel Affairs	8	10.25
General Affairs	17	21.79

Table 6 Do you think school and school people agree with decentralization policies and measures?

Answer	Number (N=78)	Percentage (%)
Yes	62	79.48
No	16	20.51

Table 7 Do you think the Educational Service Area Office is here to help strengthen schools under its jurisdiction and foster their operational autonomy?

Answer	Number (N=78)	Percentage (%)
Yes	27	34.61
No	19	24.35
uncertain	32	41.02

Table 8 Do you think decentralization policies and measures actually and concretely promote teachers' quality classroom instruction?

Answer	Number (N=78)	Percentage (%)
Yes	36	46.15
No	18	23.07
uncertain	24	30.76

Table 9 Do you think decentralization policies and measures actually and concretely enhance and enrich student learning?

Answer	Number (N=78)	Percentage (%)
Yes	38	48.71
No	18	23.07
uncertain	22	28.20

Table 10 Overall, do you think decentralization policies and measures can bring about educational quality at the school level?

Answer	Number (N=78)	Percentage (%)
Yes	39	50.00
No	20	25.64
uncertain	19	24.35

5. Discussion

It is not to be denied that the questions posed were not that objective, nor did they cover all essential components of the decentralization issues. Informants' answers, on the other hand, were obviously arbitrary. Nevertheless, we still are of the opinion that they are quite important and fundamental. They seem to tell us that there exists a large gulf between original reform architects' beliefs, values and expectations about the worth and impact of decentralizing educational administration and management authority to Educational Service Area Offices, Educational Service Area Councils/Committees and schools within those areas, not to mention to local administrative organizations (see Articles 39 and 40 of the National Education Act of 1999 with revisions in 2002 and 2010 for the former and Articles 41-42 for the latter) and daily field perceptions of those educational personnel and their stakeholders directly involved in daily operations of schools and those offices. The fact that the national education laws, in fact, as well as the constitution of the country contain articles on decentralization of educational administration/management authority. From the central Ministry of Education indicates clearly the strategic intention of the reform architects despite occasional but persistent opposition efforts from certain governments from the beginning of the new millennium (See "Education Act Act 1999: A Workable Education Reform?," Chapter 3 of EDUCATION & KNOWLEDGE IN THAILAND: THE QUALITY CONTROVERSY, Edited by Alian Mounier and Phasina Tangchuang and published by Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai Thailand, 2010). And since reform implementation processes are everywhere always complex socially and politically, though technically simply and possible, field actors' perceptions and actual actions and behaviors may and can stray at any point from the original reform architects' intention and goals.

Based on these the following Tables' information, there is no doubt the majority of informants do agree with the Ministry of Education's decentralization policies and measures (Table 6). A little more than half think the decentralization has concretely taken place since the beginning of this millennium (Table 1).

And the good news seems to stop there. Information indicated in the remaining 8 Tables does not look that encouraging. Beginning with the Educational Service Areas around the country, 183 primary and 42 secondary, it is clear that only 16 of the 78 informants and one can safely assume they themselves are area office administrators, reported that their Office's daily operations proceed autonomously, flexibly and smoothly without having to wait for directives and orders from the central Ministry (Table 2) The No and Uncertain figures simply do not see it that way, that positively. In other words, after a decade of decentralization policies and measures, the majority of field actors still feel their Area Office's actions and behavior are not significantly different from those prior to the decentralization. The situation at the school level (Table 3) does not fare any better. And that is the place most educators and even non-educators think the real quality is produced. Combining the "No and Uncertain" responses, the percentage figure of those who feel quite negative about school autonomy after decentralization shoots up

to over 70.50%. If that is really the case, school people are not to be expected to truly devote themselves to the quality cause because the prevailing operational norm in schools of this nature will still be of the “do-as-you-are-told” type. As for teachers, this school culture is not at all conducive to quality instruction delivery.

Findings in Table 5 may be somewhat consoling and encouraging. It makes one feel good to hear that schools are quite free to handle their academic affairs task. After all this task is the heart or *raison d'être* of schools. But, even given this, only something 51.28 % think their schools are free to do their academic affairs job. Furthermore, without sufficient authority over budgeting and personnel matters, key instruments for effectively executing academic affairs work, school people are not again to be expected to dedicate themselves to the student learning quality cause. This finding seems to be buttressed by another finding in Table 8 which shows that only 46.15% of the informants think decentralization policies and measures actually and concretely promote teachers' quality classroom instruction. With other research designs, methodologies and undertakings, the figure could be either higher or lower. Whatever the case may be and at this stage in Thailand, we have no empirical way to know whether or not decentralization policies and measures have an impact on educational quality at the school level.

The last 2 Tables' findings (Table 9-10) leave us little room for optimism. Given the emphatical No and Uncertain responses to our key and most straightforward questions directly related to the topic of this research paper, the soundest conclusion cannot be otherwise except that on the basis of field practitioners' opinions, there seems to be little, if any, or vague connection or correlation between the ministry of Education's and government's decentralization policies and measure implemented thus far and the quality education at the school level.

6. Summary

As much as, we would like the world to be to our liking, what actually turns out at times contradict our preferences and disappoint us. In particular, wishing/expecting others to be, do, act and behave the way we want them to or wishing things to turn out the way we plan often meets with disappointment in one way or the other. Believing that increased budget for schools and related educational offices and expecting that by decentralizing more educational administration/management authority to those offices and individual schools under those offices' jurisdiction will bring about higher quality of some sort at the school level is also no exception.

Disappointments are plentiful but, it should be noted that these two issues, financing and decentralization, are not alone in failing many peoples' expectations. In reality, the entire education reform movement, the country's third starting with the promulgation of the first National Education Act in 1999 and now in its second decade, is itself the main culprit. The launching of education reform in the second decade, 2009-2018, itself, is clear manifestation of failure of that in the first decade, 1999-2008. Wherever one turns in the media world in Thailand, one will almost always find negative comments and criticisms of practically all aspects of the education reform, especially during the 2001-2006 period TDR paper cited earlier is the latest

of this genre.

In that paper and in addition to what has already been cited, the authors also make some comments in favour of certain conclusions made in our study. For example, as regards decentralization of educational administration authority to Educational Service Area Offices they say “ it has made a great deal of progress ” (P.14) But, in the following paragraph, they report, based on the Ministry of Education’s Commission on Education Secretariat report (2012), that “ in practice, most Area Offices are still being dictated by the center, ” the same conclusion as in Table 2. As regards the schools, the TDRI paper categorically states that “ their personnel administration authority and autonomy has been found to be quite limited ...Such a situation is not at all favourable to teachers’ accountability to the school. “ (P.14)

What then if all available assessment seems to suggest that there is little evidence that increased financial inputs of all sorts and decentralization schemes introduced in the past decade or so have had either direct or indirect effects on school-level educational outcomes/ achievement, i.e., student learning or quality ? Here are some sensible and practical things we recommend to all involved for further consideration if we wish to see both financial and educational administrative authority decentralization policies and measures and all the resources and inputs that go with them really achieve what they are intended to accomplish.

1. All possible stakeholders in the education reform bandwagon find ways and means seriously review whether, as indicated by Prof. Caldwell, direct impact on quality student learning outcomes at school is or is not a primary or secondary purpose. This is of almost importance. Those with reliable information and evidence for the linkage and purpose must try harder to honestly convince practitioners the connection is there and the impact is real.
2. If the impact issue is secondary or even tertiary, make it widely known. We all will not have to put the blame any longer on classroom teachers, school administrations and other educational Personal who have been being increasingly though gradually paid while the quality across the board has either been stagnant or deteriorating. We will no longer make a fuss about decentralization not leading to school-level quality learning outcomes. Because along the way, more educational personnel and field practitioners become happier and more satisfied with their work because of higher salaries and other remuneration schemes and because they have more freedom and authority in executing their assignments and responsibilities both at the Area Office and school levels. Eventually, their happiness and satisfaction might someday lead to higher levels of student learning and other educational outcomes.
3. It is probably high time we seriously and systematically started discussing and debating in order to redefine what we really mean by educational quality at the school level and across the board. Should we continue to adopt the same old key quality indicators, i.e., national or international test scores, or should we seek to come up with a variety of alternative sets of indicators to suit specific different and localities,

communities, provinces, regions and uniquely different circumstances.

4. Whether the impact factor is a primary or secondary and regardless of what we mean by educational quality at the school level or across the board, it must be noted that those financial and decentralization policies, measures and resources, alone will never bring about intended quality. To lead to such quality, they must be, when implemented, accompanied by successful implementation of other measures. As Prof. Caldwell presents in the case of his experience with school-based management and learning outcomes as follows :

Recent case study research has shown the direct and indirect links between school-based management and learning outcomes. These have highlighted the importance of local decision-making being pre-eminently concerned with learning and teaching and the support of learning and teaching, especially in building the capacity of staff to design and deliver a curriculum and pedagogy that meets the needs of students taking account of priorities in the local setting, including a capacity to identify needs and monitor outcomes. Also evident is the building of capacity of the community to support the efforts of schools. Expressed another way, the introduction of school-based management may have no impact on learning unless these measures, broadly described as capacity building and capacity utilization, have been successful (P.4).

And remember the reform complexity issue! Capacity building and utilization, even when successful, is in reality still one among “other measures”.

5. The debate or even proposal that demand-side financing be adopted replacing the current supply-side financing practice must be taken seriously. Whether one agrees or disagrees with it, we should all be provided with useful information and evidence to be convinced of its merits or demerits.
6. If necessary, the size and scope of this small-scale study should be enlarged to its original status. More rigorous research methodologies, questionnaire items and interview questions should be elaborated in order to accomplish what the present small study just accomplished.

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