

Education Reform Finds a Home in Khon Kaen

Guest Contributor: Lukas Winfield

KHON KAEN – Thirty-some elementary students pick through a mountain of trash, carefully selecting old milk boxes, discarded spools of yarn, broken necklaces and other landfill gems for an art project. They are students from the local Non Chai Municipal Elementary School who have been studying Khon Kaen's waste system which has led them inevitably to the overflowing mountain of trash known as the Khambon landfill, some 20 kilometers outside of Khon Kaen. They have come to see firsthand the impact of waste and the consequences of urban consumption.

Non Chai has a slightly unorthodox approach to learning. Rather than reading textbooks or listening to lectures like many of their peers, students here are taken on field trips throughout the year to learn through experience.

Non Chai is one example of a larger move in Khon Kaen towards alternative educational models. In recent years, the city's Mayor Peerapon Pattabapeeradech has been vocally supportive of this movement, often spearheading reforms himself.

Seven schools have opened "Big Picture" classrooms which are offered as an option to struggling students. These classrooms have the academic freedom to ignore national benchmarks and create their own integrated curricula based off of student interests. Five years ago, the Khon Kaen Education Initiative (KKEI) was founded and it soon began funding and providing resources to provincial teachers experimenting with and developing more student-centered teaching.

"[Alternative] education focuses on teaching students how to learn rather than just handing them information," explains Chuntinton Huttapanom, a vice-director working at Non Chai. She arrived at the school in October of 2011 and began pushing for reforms of the existing traditional model in favor of a more alternative model. For her, this is a radically different approach to education in Khon Kaen, where rote education is almost absolute. It is the norm for teachers to be seen as the holders of knowledge in front of whom students are expected to sit quietly and listen unconditionally.

Ms. Chutinton envisions a school that deconstructs the teacher-student hierarchy present in many Thai schools and, instead, prioritizes developing students' "learning skills" (i.e., critical thinking, problem solving, relationship building and more) over rote memorization and reading and writing drills. She hopes to ensure students' capacities for self-motivation so that they can continue their own education after they graduate. She points out, "just because you graduate doesn't mean you have to stop learning new things or new skills."

Ms. Chutinton cites her old classroom at Nong Waeng Municipal Elementary School in Khon Kaen as an example of a successful alternative education model. When teachers were having a hard time motivating students to attend classes, she decided to change her classroom environment as an experiment. In an attempt to make her teaching more relevant and engaging for her students, she decided she would liven up her math, science and English subjects by integrating trips to local gardens, camps and even the city landfill. The result was a rise in student attendance from an average of 70% to 95% and a class that was eager in their studies.

While the municipality has been supportive of the movement towards alternative education and at times has led it, direction from the municipal government has been inconsistent and, at times, even conflicting.

Schools have received heavy pressure to improve test scores on regional and national tests like the Ordinary National Educational Test (O-NET), on which [Khon Kaen province placed 47 out of 72](#) during 2010 for Thai language skills. In response, schools such as Non Chai have stopped teaching during their last period of the day and instead focus only on tutoring for standardized tests. Tutoring has even extended into the weekend with students coming to school on Saturdays.

Sanya Makarin, a high school teacher at Non Chai, complains that the focus on testing has restricted his ability to teach and his students' ability to learn. "It disturbs the class and it disturbs their learning process," he says. Mr. Sanya explains that the pressure is not just about standardized testing, but also about following the municipality's flagship school, Suan Sanook, which focuses on more traditional educational practices.

At Suan Sanook, teachers focus on literacy competence and student obedience. Students are taught through rote learning; teachers lecture, students are expected to listen. This approach has been successful as students here regularly test higher than students from other schools and, often, Suan Sanook's students rank within the top three places at academic contests.

Its success has made it a model for other schools within the municipality. The school has grown accustomed to hosting visiting teachers who have come to learn how to copy their successful framework.

"Suan Sanook students can read and write and when they compete, they win. The weakness [of this model] is that people have many different learning styles. And not everyone can be the winner, students must learn compassion" points out Ms. Chutinton of Non Chai school. While she acknowledges the strengths of the Suan Sanook model, Ms. Chutinton criticizes it for being too focused on test scores and says it offers little room for student participation.

While the city's Mayor remains a strong voice in championing educators like Ms. Chutinton and Mr. Sanya, the future direction of Khon Kaen schools remains unclear. With Mayor Peerapon considering retirement, possibly as early as next spring, Ms. Chutinton admits, "I am worried a lot, I don't believe that the next [mayor] will understand alternative education like [Mr. Peerapon] does."

Lukas Winfield has worked in the field of education for the past five years. He currently teaches and organizes professional development for teachers in Khon Kaen.