



**Creating Sustainable Change in Education in Thailand:
An Inside-Out Look at Nation Building, Regionalization and Globalization**

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By Professor Dr. Gerald D. Groves

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence is not an act, it is a habit!”

-Aristotle

INTRODUCTION

Change is not an easy process for individuals, organizations or nations. Yet, change is a necessary process which takes on increasing importance in our lives. Oren Hariri, a noted futurist, said, “What was good enough for yesterday is not good enough for today. What is good enough for today will certainly not be good enough for tomorrow.” The baseline of what is acceptable changes over time, yet individuals, organizations, and nations continue to use what worked in the past as a prescription for what must work in the future.

The American songwriter, Bob Dylan wrote in one of his songs “the times they are a changing”. If times are “a changing” then how can we continue to use the same approach to solve future problems as we did in the past? The time, the place, the context and the mechanisms and tools for succeeding at change are also “changing.”

Einstein once said, “problems cannot be solved at the same level of awareness that created them.” If our old way of thinking dug us into a deep hole, going back to our old way of thinking will not dig you out of the hole. It will only make the hole deeper. There is a time to “stop the digging” before you get in even deeper trouble than you were before. Despite this fact, we continue to use the same ideas, tools and techniques to solve new and emerging problems, not realizing or recognizing that our approach neither fits the problem nor the times.

PART I- WHAT EXISTS?

Today is much more complicated than yesterday. We need more advanced tools, skills and knowledge to address today’s challenges. For example, the international consulting firm McKinsey and Company noted “the USA would have achieved an additional \$1.3 - \$1.7 trillion dollars in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2010” “if its citizens were better educated.” This is a huge loss to our economy and to the millions of Americans who could have benefited from this additional employment. The problem has been as a nation and as individuals, the USA and other countries continue to under-invest in education, thereby putting themselves at risk in the future.

Thailand and its educational system is no different. In May, 2011 Ambika Ahkuja, a Reuters International News Service correspondent wrote, “While Taiwan, Singapore, China and India have poured billions (of U.S. dollars) into developing world class university education, English-language instruction and high value skills, Thailand has moved little beyond a decades old system that aims mostly to preserve national identity.” Reuters news service is a source for such global newspapers as the Wall Street Journal, the International Herald Tribune and the New York Times. This information is read by potential investors who would like to come to Asia to invest money in countries to establish plants and create jobs. The conclusion of this reporter is that Thailand looks “inward and backward” rather than forward and “outside the box.” Is this the message which Thailand wants to give to international investors?

There is nothing wrong with being proud of your nation, but if Thailand is worried about being adequately prepared for entering ASEAN in 2015, having a “backward oriented” view is not the message which Thailand should project to the outside world. Studies in strategic planning conclude “strategy is not about continuing the past. It’s about creating the future.” (Underwood). Unfortunately, many of the decisions and actions of Thailand’s educational system continue to focus too much upon the past rather than analyzing and critically accessing the country’s needs for the future. Thailand must prepare itself for tomorrow, not just exist in the moment.

A review of recent reports analyzing problems in Thai education by the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the United Nations, the Thai Educational Research Council and others identified the problems in Thai education which are contained in the two diagrams below. Thailand’s problems in education have existed in the past and continued to remain today. The troubling thing is many of these problems have neither experienced dramatic improvement nor have they been resolved, they continue to exist as before.

Ignoring a problem in the hope it will go away is called the “ostrich model for change.” Sticking your head in the sand might temporarily fool yourself into thinking things are better or the threat has passed, yet, in reality, this is not true. We need to identify our problems, accept and confront them if we are to overcome our problems and build a better future. Thailand knows many of its problems in the field of education. Despite this, Thailand either avoids addressing these problems or moves forward on other agendas rather than to solving the root cause of its problems in education.

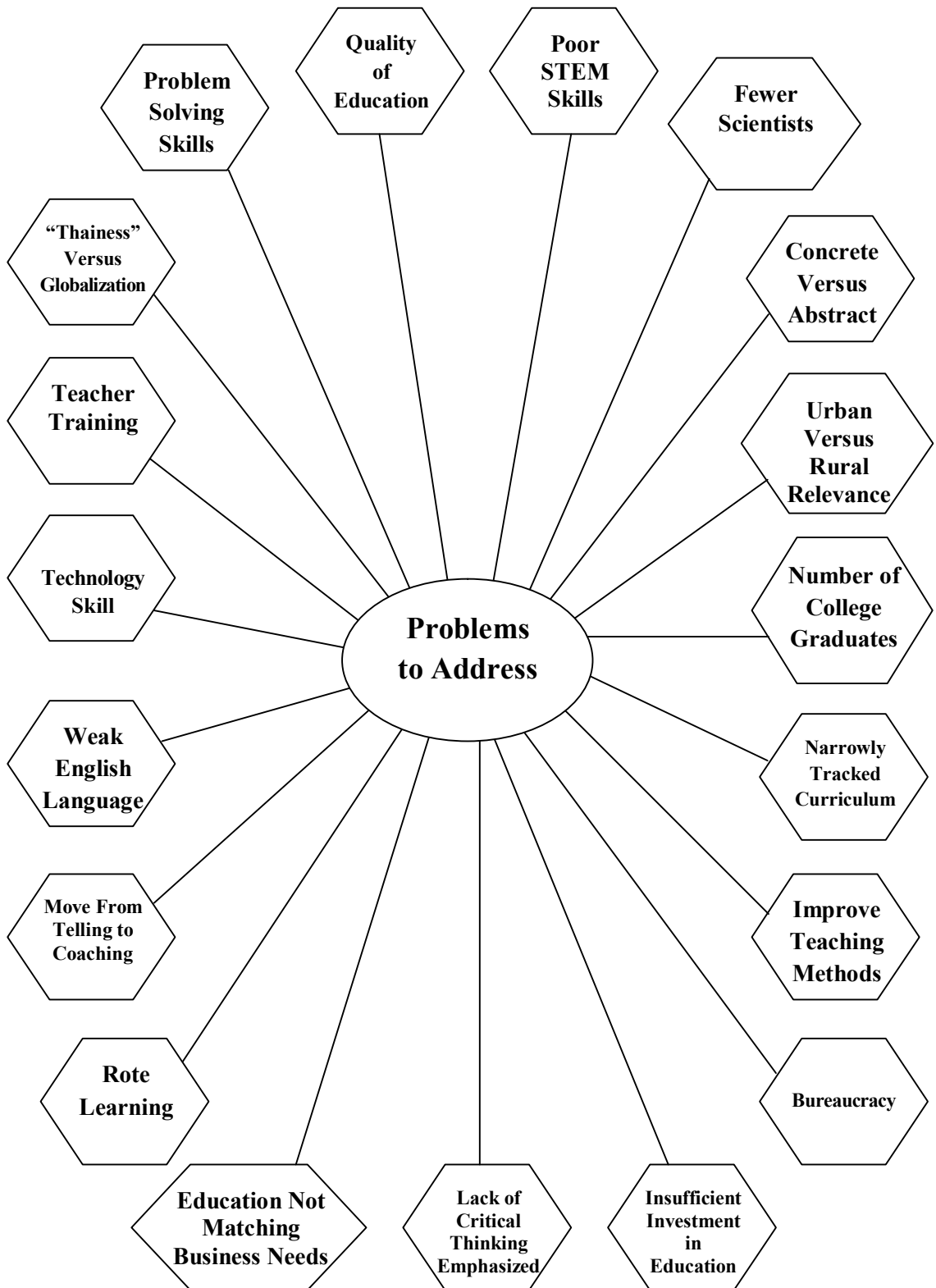


Figure 1. Problems to Address in Thai Education

While the list of problems is not complete, it provides a representative view of the problems facing Thailand's educational system today. This list seems horrendous, something which cannot be overcome. If, however, we examine the problems and apply a simple problem solving technique such as prioritizing, it is easier to isolate actionable problems and move towards some type of a solution.

One of the easiest prioritizing techniques is to identify the "weakest link". If you were to examine all the problems indicated the two diagrams and chose one or two key problem areas which are the most significant in stopping improvement in Thailand's educational system, what would these problems be? Once these are identified, we can then begin to focus on action.

We could go further by segmenting the remaining problems into three simple categories:

Category 1 - Must Do

Category 2 - Should Do

Category 3 - Nice to Do

Those problems which are in the "must do" category are basic, fundamental problems which must be addressed or future progress stops. Within this category, you could also rank the problem areas in terms of priority so we can understand a sequence in which issues need to be addressed. This sequence could be either factor weighted or simply put into three additional categories: (1) high priority, (2) medium priority and (3) low priority. Those problems which are high priority can do considerable harm to the country and its ability to attract foreign investment. Medium priority items are actionable but are not catastrophic in impact. Low priority issues can be addressed at a later time.

Problems which appear in Category 2 "Should Do" are those actions which need to be resolved if Thailand is to move forward and become more competitive for the future. Category 3 - Nice to Do- contains educational problems which, if addressed, help to add to a solid foundation, but which are secondary or tertiary in nature.

If we ignore what we "must do", we have no foundation to move to what we "should do". Actions therefore taken in Category 3 "Nice to do" become wasted effort or are merely symbolic - we "look modern" as a result of these actions but underneath we still suffer from the same problems we began started with. Painting your car has little impact if the engine does not work! Educational change is not just about taking action. It is about taking the right action at the right time. W. Edwards Deming, the creator of the Quality Improvement Technique once said, "it is not enough to do your best; you must know WHAT TO DO, and then do your best." This is the challenge facing Thai education today, knowing what to do, doing it well and doing your best throughout this change process.

PART II – WHERE SHOULD THAILAND GO FROM HERE?

Understanding the nature of the problem and accepting the need for change are the first steps in creating an enduring solution to a problem. This is what must first be done by the Thai educational community. The “ostrich model” has been applied in Thailand too long without positive results. The same problems continue to exist in Thai education. Events of the present and future tell Thailand it must change if it is to be competitive in ASEAN or on a global basis.

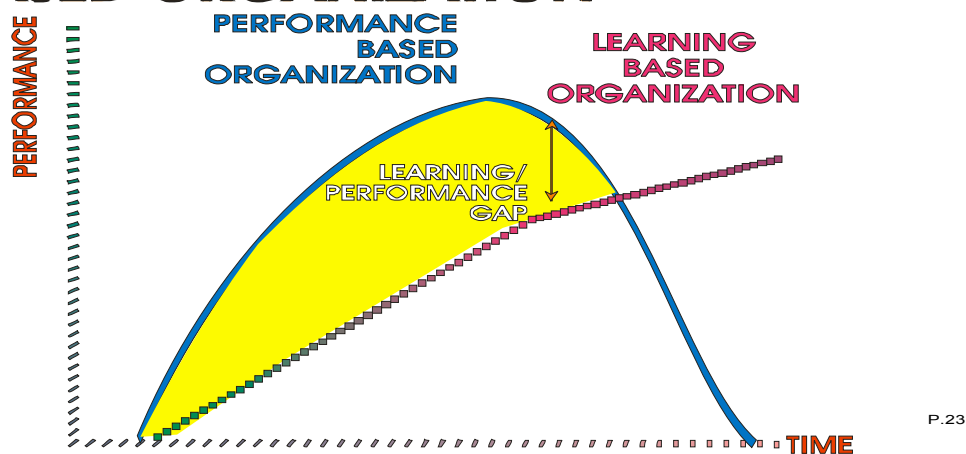
Thais must change their thinking to “Think Global, Act Local.” Unfortunately, for too many years the Thai educational system has “Thought Local and Acted Local”. As a result, Thai education has remained the same or gone backwards rather than moved the nation towards a more competitive future. The World Bank documented this fact when it wrote in a recent report “Thai universities offer narrow fields of study, making it difficult for (Thai) students to adapt to the Global Economy.” Is this true, Thailand will be marginalized as the region and the world move towards global standards.

Thailand’s neighbors have begun to examine their own educational systems and have also found them lacking. For example, Malaysia has recently noted that graduates from its universities often lack “the passion needed for creating excellence.” When students are asked why they lack passion for their fields of study, they respond “how can I be passionate about a career when my country tells me what to study and where. My interest and my desire was to study something else. Now my parents and the nation wonder why I do not excel as a result of my education.” Solving a problem is easiest before it comes a major problem, not after it grows and festers.

Education is more than a label, it is a means of thinking and moving to action. Education should contain tools for action. Education must equip us to meet the challenges of the present while preparing us for an uncertain future. Education does not end with a certificate or diploma. Education is a lifelong process. If our education is inadequate, so too is our approach to problem solving. As a nation, we should educate our sons and daughters to become stronger and prepare for the future. Instead, what we often find is that education merely “marks the time” rather than gives us competitive advantage.

Too often we focus on accomplishing only those tasks which are immediately in front of us. This is called a “performance orientation.” It helps us to complete current tasks but after the task is accomplished, often our energy and motivation are exhausted. The result is a decline in performance. Learning based organizations, on the other hand, lay a foundation for continuing to improve the knowledge and skills of all members in the organization. As a result, the base for taking actions is greater than what it was before. Learning organizations also do not suffer from the decline in motivation or performance because the base level of knowledge and skills increases from year to year. Combining a performance based orientation with a learning based orientation leads to stronger, sustainable performance over time. This is required to meet the challenges of ASEAN and globalization.

THE BENEFITS OF A LEARNING BASED ORGANIZATION



Source: Bob Guns. *The Faster Learning Organization*. San Diego: Pfeiffer and Company, 1996.

Figure 2. The Benefits of a Learning Organization

Some years ago, I attended a graduation ceremony on top of a mountain outside of Mbane, Swaziland in Southeastern Africa. The graduation ceremony was for government officials who completed management training offered through the Swazi Institute of Public Administration (SWIPA). When handing out the course certificates to graduates of the program, the Director of the institute said, “this certificate which you are receiving today is totally worthless. It is only paper and ink. But the certificate which you could receive one year from now if you do well in applying what you have learned is made from parchment and gold. The gold is the satisfaction of doing things well and contributing to the development of the nation.” These words were profound. We often look upon “pieces of paper” as symbols of accomplishment rather than examine the accomplishment and its application in real life. If our educational systems only emphasize the past, if they emphasize the number of graduates, test scores or majors offered, we should not expect our graduates to be competitive and do well in the future. We should be happy to remain where we are and let others move forward. Unfortunately, the pace of change is rapid, the times are challenging and “staying in place” is a recipe for disaster.

Whether we realize it or not, we are constantly facing change. In fact, we are at a time of Paradigm Shift. ASEAN is a wake up call. In addressing ASEAN, Thailand can either “choose to win” or “choose to lose.” The choice is Thailand’s to make. To address this choice, it is important to understand what we are talking about. Joel Barker said “a paradigm shift is

a change to a new game, a new set of rules.” Therefore, emphasizing “Thainess” or only doing what worked in the past will not make you competitive. It will only move you backwards rather than forward. If Thailand is only now putting the emphasis upon preparing for ASEAN, it is already too late. Your neighbors have been doing this for the past decade. The real challenge is globalization, not just regionalization.

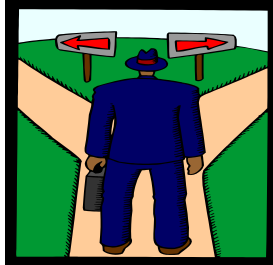
When my son was three years old, I taught him how to play the game of checkers. This is a simple board game with red pieces for one player and black pieces for the other player. It is a simple game to start introducing someone to the idea of strategy. You need to have a strategy in place to win. The moves you make are only steps for applying your strategy.

Like any game, checkers has rules regarding how to proceed. These rules define which moves specific pieces on the board can make. Unless you have been “kinged” (which means that a second piece has been added to one of your original pieces because your piece has moved across the entire board), you have limited moves and your options for winning are significantly reduced. If you are “kinged”, new options appear and your chance for success dramatically improves.

Once my son mastered the game of checkers, I taught him the game of Chess. When we played our first game, I did not teach him the new “rules of the game” for chess. I wanted to teach him something much more significant – that you cannot run into something blindly without understanding the basis for success. As we slowly moved through our first game of chess, it was readily apparent that I was totally in control and my son was losing quickly. He made a common mistake, he thought that since the board for the game was exactly the same as when we played checkers and since the number of pieces were approximately similar, therefore the rules must also be the same. This could not be further from the truth!

Each game has its own rules for success and unless you know and understand these rules, you set your path for failure. Strategies which helped my son to win in the game of checkers were precisely the strategies which led to his failure when playing chess. This is the lesson I wanted to teach my five year old son - you must understand the foundations for success if you are to win at the game of life. This learning was far more important than winning a single game of chess. This is the point at which Thailand finds itself today. If we look at many of its moves in terms of education and educational change, Thailand is still playing the “game of checkers”. ASEAN and the world have moved on to the “game of chess.”

“Life is the sum of your choices.”



-Ralph Waldo Emerson

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Figure 3. Life is the Sum of Your Choices

When things move slowly, you can make incremental change - you modify things slightly but mainly continue to do what you have done in the past. When things move more rapidly and the theater of change has moved from domestic (within Thailand) to regional or global, incremental change is a recipe for disaster. The diagram below helps to illustrate this case. Incremental change is slow, progressive and moves step by step in a systematic fashion. What is required today is not incremental change what is needed is a “quantum leap”. The change which we are facing today is not systematic, the change is discontinuous. This change is rapid, at times unpredictable and is based upon non-traditional thinking ---thinking outside the box rather than thinking inside the box. To be competitive, we need to be good at problem anticipation as well as problem solving. We need to be creative, analytical and challenge the past. These elements compete against traditional Asian values of stability, control and acceptance. To be competitive in the twenty-first century we must be willing to create the future, rather than expect it to model the past. To be competitive, we must make a “quantum leap” from where we are to where we need to be in the shortest time possible.

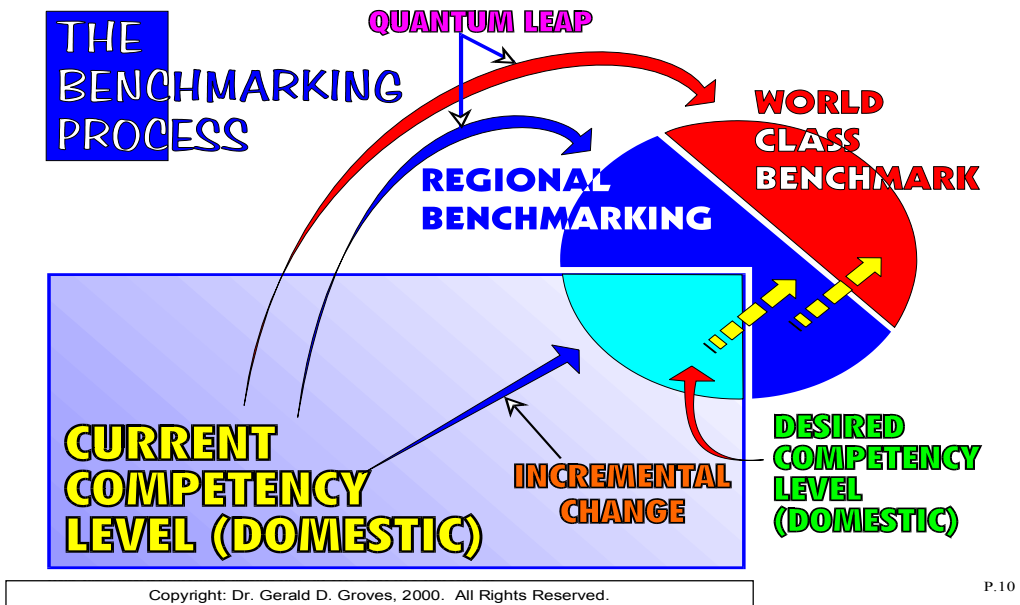


Figure 4. The Benchmarking Process

In past years, the change cycle took ten to twelve years to complete. That changed in 1997 with the Asian Financial Crisis. This was the tipping point during which change moved from an occasional happening to a continuous event. At the same time, the cycle for change moved backwards from ten to twelve years to two to three years. If an individual, company or a country is still in the “ten to twelve year change cycle”, they are operating at too slow a speed and will be easily overtaken by their competition. The diagram below illustrates this point.

SHORTENING THE TIME PERIOD INCREASES THE SLOPE OF YOUR CHANGE CURVE

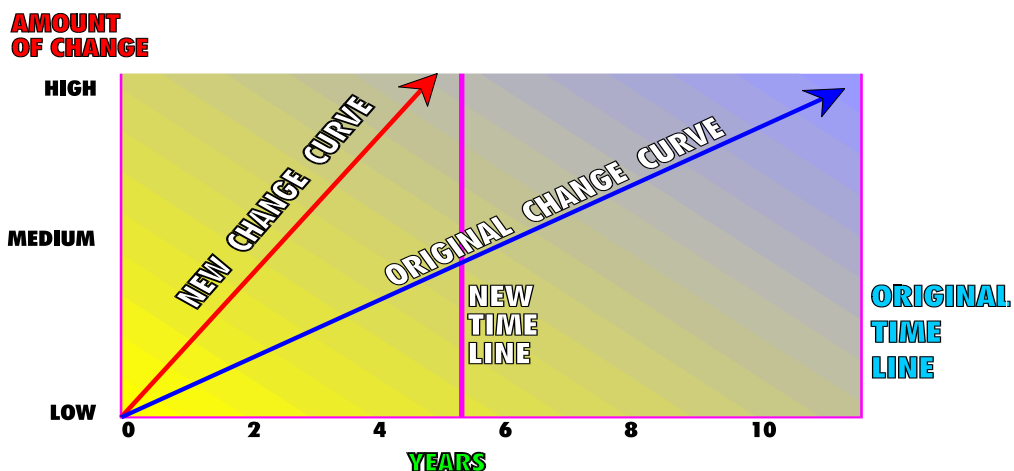


Figure 5. Shortening the Time Period of Change