
LEARNING-CENTERED LEADERSHIP FOR BUDDHIST MONASTIC EDUCATION IN THAILAND

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ABSTRACT

Monastic education is the oldest form of education available to common people in Thailand. It continues to this day in the education of monks and in the practice of temporary ordination. This report is based upon research done for Assumption University of Thailand and explores the possibilities for the improvement of monastic education. It analyzes the learning-centered leadership capabilities of the Thai *Sangha* educators and it provides suggestions for improving the educational standards and evaluation in monastic education.

Introduction

The history of monastic education in Thailand is a rich one and dates back several centuries. Traditionally it was one of the few opportunities for common citizens to educate their male children. Secular schools were mostly reserved for children of royalty, and operated within the gates of palaces. Common people sent their sons to become ‘temple boys’, to

receive instruction in reading and writing in Thai and to learn humility and piety by serving and taking care of their ‘masters’ in the monasteries. They usually spent a few years in the *Sasana*, studying and leaving after an appropriate amount of time had been spent on their studies. Hence, the tradition of temporary ordination into the monkhood became a part of Thai culture that is still evident today. Although there are 31,071 monasteries in Thailand, only a small percentage of these maintain schools. (McDaniel, J.T., 2008). Most monastic students in Thailand today study in *Pariyatidhamma* Secondary Schools that teach *Paliseuksa* (Pali language, liturgy, and texts); *Dhammaseuksa* (ethics, general Buddhist history and teachings); and *Samanaseuksa* (common or secular subjects).

Currently monastic education at the university level is available in Thailand through Buddhist universities such as Mahachulalongkon and Mahamakut, which require students to pass at least the third Pali level (*Pra Yoke 3*) in order to be admitted. These Buddhist universities, which were established by King Rama V, were initiated so that both laymen and monks could study religious and modern subjects together to gain an education. Some students upon pursuing their studies, become monastic scholars who return to their residential temples while others serve as teachers. These monastic scholars were thus supposed to be familiar with both the traditional monastic education of the temple and the formal education received in the university.

This report is based upon a study that has as its aim the improvement of monastic education by focusing on the learning-centered leadership capabilities of the Thai *Sangha* educators in order to improve educational standards and evaluation in monastic education. The study’s conceptual framework is based on the Eight Dimensions of Learning-Centered Leadership proposed by Murphy, Eliot, Goldring, and Porter (2006) and the desired Thai Sangha’s (monks’) characteristics that will lead to a Learning-Centered Leadership Model for Thai Sangha Education.

Background

Monastic education for the Sangha in Thailand is known as Phra Pariyattidhamma. It is a systematic institutionalized curriculum of teaching and learning divided into two forms: the study of the Dhamma and the study of Pali. This system of monastic education is usually limited to monks and novices because it is focused on the study of Buddhist scriptural text recorded in Pali language. Administration and management of Phra Pariyattidhamma schools is under the responsibility of the Sangha Education Council which consists of the Supreme Patriarch (*sangharaja*); President of the Board of Pali education (*mae kong pali*); President of the Board of Dhamma education (*mae kong tham*); President of the university council of the Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University; President of the university council of the Mahamakut Buddhist University; and other senior monks appointed by the Supreme Patriarch. The Sangha Education Council is responsible for controlling and supporting monastic education for monks. Approval of educational projects for Buddhist monks and curriculum development can be made only through the Sangha Educational Council. At most of the Phra Pariyattidhamma schools, the administration is the sole authority of the abbot, who is the head of the sangha within the individual monasteries. The schools usually select a learned monk as the head teacher to oversee the program.

In the past, Buddhist monastic education served two purposes: to educate and produce qualified Buddhist monks and novices to serve in Buddhist affairs; and as a path for upward mobility for the less fortunate. These purposes continue to modern times, especially for people living in rural areas of the country. Nonetheless, according to Nimanong (2003), several inherent problems plague the monastic education system at the university level resulting in educational inequality and inconsistency in teaching and learning. These problems include, but are not limited to: lack of clear educational policy and planning; insufficient governmental and Sangha support; and lack of integrative curricular design. In Thailand, even though some curricular reforms have been introduced in monastic

education in the past, specifically those that combined secular subjects with traditional monastic curriculum, conservative members of the Sangha have resisted change as the contents of the curriculum were very different from the general education that monasteries had provided and seen as Western influenced. The lack of consensus among monastic scholars on the definition of the objectives of monastic education has also contributed to problems with its reform (Dhammasami, 2007). Consequently, as it is still considered an important avenue for education, it follows that traditions of monastic education should be viewed through the lens of modern educational theories and practices in order to improve the educational experience for all those involved.

Assessment According to the Eight Dimensions of Leadership

Within educational science, a popular measure for educational leadership is the Eight Dimensions of Leadership developed by Murphy, et.al (2006). This model is divided into eight categories: (1) vision for learning, (2) instructional programs, (3) curriculum programs, (4) assessment programs, (5) communities of learning, (6) resource acquisition and use, (7) organizational culture, and (8) social advocacy. Monastic education, if viewed through this structure, could benefit from these educational reforms.

Vision for Learning. In terms of vision, Phra Pariyattidhamma school leaders need to devote effort into the implementation, articulation, and development of learning that is shared and supported by the community of the Sangha. School leaders are obliged to create a better school by facilitating the creative thinking that will contribute to the creation of a vision for school improvement. This also needs to reflect the standards of teaching and learning, personal and organizational performance at the appropriate level while also prioritizing the desirable goals that contribute to improvement. School administrators should articulate this vision through personal modeling and communicating with other staff in and around the school.

Instructional programs. Phra Pariyattidhamma school leaders must be constantly involved and invested in the instructional program. They need to demonstrate the model of the importance of teaching by implementing courses or programs of instruction. Leaders need to pay attention to teaching by observing classrooms, encouraging critical thinking, and involving teachers with regard to instructional methods. Leaders in Phra Pariyattidhamma schools need to make sure that students are well versed in their subjects and also encouraging more opportunities for input from the students. Sufficient opportunities for teacher development and regular counseling for underprivileged teachers is also necessary. Instructional programs should also be closely monitored by learning-centered leaders and aligned with the overall learning standards and objectives.

Curriculum Programs. The Phra Pariyattidhamma school administrators need to be thoroughly knowledgeable about and deeply involved in the curriculum. The current curriculum in Phra Pariyattidhamma schools should be revised to make sure that it meets the needs of the students in the current world environment. School leaders need to be committed in order to ensure a high quality and rigorous curriculum while also maintaining the standards set up by the Board of the Pali and Nakthamma Study Council. Individual attention to students and the ensuring of access to learning is also needed. A commitment to the monitoring and evaluation for the effectiveness of the schools' curriculum is also needed.

Assessment Programs. The Phra Pariyattidhamma school leaders should strictly implement assessment procedures. The use of a variety of data collection strategies and monitoring, both formal and informal are recommended. Assessment needs to be carried out to ensure that students meet both local and national standards for examination. Assessment needs to be age and level appropriate and well organized.

Communities of Learning. The creation of learning organizations should be a priority of Phra Pariyattidhamma school leaders as this fosters

a learning environment that can generate learning in the school. They should be able to nurture the growth of communities of professional practice and vigorous promoters of professional development, while also shaping the school in order to meet the principles of the community. The school should also form a Board of the Academy for Phra Pariyattidhamma schools that is able to oversee the teaching and learning of the school to ensure constant adherence to standards. Infrastructures such as proper residence housing, libraries, and first-aid facilities should be made available for all teachers and students alike. The Phra Pariyattidhamma schools must constantly be engaging in their own growth, being a model for lifelong commitment to learning and a motivator for their staff to follow.

Resource Acquisition and Use. Phra Pariyattidhamma schools need to focus deployment of the resources to support the missions of the school. School leaders must be aware that dimensions of work that occupy center stage in the school's administration-management, organization, and finance are no longer ends in themselves. Yet, it rather assumes an importance to the extent that they strengthen the quality of the instructional and curricular program and enhances student learning. In the meantime, the Phra Pariyattidhamma school leaders must make sure that the overall functions of the school are being properly overseen by the Board of the school. Teachers should undergo annual training to ensure that they are well-prepared for their jobs.

Organizational Culture. Phra Pariyattidhamma school leaders must be reminded that leadership is the key factor in explaining the presence of organization culture. Therefore, the school leaders must be committed to the creation of an environment for high performance school expectations including that of staff, students, and all other stakeholders. They need to create a clear school academic standard that brings about high expectations for all. In this manner, leaders must take a significant role in holding teachers and students accountable for learning. School leaders must be able to integrate internal and external accountability systems

by holding their staff accountable for building strategies that align teaching and learning with broader achievement goals and targets set by policy. The leaders of Phra Pariyattidhamma schools must recognize the importance of internal goal enforcement as well as strategies within their schools. All the monks and novices entering the community of the Sangha should be required to take Phra Pariyattidhamma education. In order to enhance their education, Phra Pariyattidhamma schools should seek special permission from temples where student monks are residing to relax some temple rules so that students may have sufficient time for their education.

Social Advocacy. In terms of social services, the Phra Pariyattidhamma schools should be more proactive in engaging with the community. The school must revise its approach to society to meet modern society and the outside world's needs. Students of Phra Pariyattidhamma schools should also be encouraged to participate and voice their opinions regarding the school. The school also needs to look after the welfare of the teachers, especially lay teachers, to make sure that they are compensated for their teaching and that compensation meets current living standards.

Conclusion

Monastic education, although it may have certain particular traditional characteristics, should have as its aims, the enhancement of education for its students. Viewing monastic education through the lens of modern educational institution, therefore, is necessary to ensure student learning and standardization of school objectives. Management of monastic schools or Phra Pariyattidhamma schools need to be in alignment with government educational policy and other national standards in order to ensure that it meets the needs of students of the 21st century. Even though the characteristics of the students may be atypical, in that they are monks or novices, modern-world issues, problems, questions are still relevant to these students as their training and education in the Buddhist religion

will enable them to understand, model, and disseminate proper Buddhist philosophy in alignment with the needs of the modern world. Although a monastic school, Phra Pariyattidhamma schools can be considered educational institutions that can benefit from leadership with learner-centered skills and outlook for the 21st century. The Phra Pariyattidhamma school leaders have a similar obligation to administer their schools for the benefit of the students, faculty, and other stakeholders. Realizing, accepting, and facilitating the necessity for learning-centered leadership is a major step towards meeting educational objectives.

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