Title of Project: Linking the Chain of Upward Mobility: Reducing Political Conflict in Thailand by Teaching Students How to Read Thai
Country where project took place: Thailand
Nominating Institution: Pitzer College
Designated project leader name: Kyle Greenspan, USA, Pitzer College
Associated project website: https://www.linking-the-chain-of-upward-mobility.com/

Summary

Linking the Chain of Upward Mobility aims to improve Thai literacy among elementary school students in Isaan (rural Northeast Thailand). Projects for Peace grant funds are used to hire existing teachers for additional time in order to provide workshops for students from multiple schools who cannot read Thai.

Project Description

In February of 2019, I volunteered for five weeks in Kamplapha Natawee, a village in Isaan. My job was to teach English conversation to students ages 7-13. One of the primary means by which I taught English vocabulary was through translation tools and written Thai. I observed that at least one third of my students in every grade could not read Thai. Through discussion with local teachers, I learned that there is a clear link between poverty and lack of Thai literacy. The students from the most impoverished households were the ones who could not read and would not graduate from high school. Inability to read Thai was a formidable barrier to upward mobility. Through my teaching, I developed strong bonds with my students. After this experience, I sought out opportunities to help those among them who cannot read Thai, which is how I decided what issue to address with my Projects for Peace award.

Linking the Chain of Upward Mobility has two major approaches. First, grant funds were given to my partner school, Kamplapha Natawee, to retain teachers for their single-school Thai literacy class. This is a new, regionally unique program that provides additional classroom time for students with limited to no Thai literacy. Without these funds, it is unlikely that the program could have continued, as these teachers are not paid with government funds like other teachers at this under-resourced school. Second, weekly workshops that welcome students from all local schools have been initiated. Every Saturday morning, students from four local schools gather at Kamplapha Natawee for three hours of Thai reading instruction. Attendance averages approximately 40 students, who are divided into three classes according to ability level, not grade or age. Grant funds are used to pay for teacher wages, learning materials, student transportation, and lunch for the students.

I chose Kamplapha Natawee because I had an existing relationship with the director of the elementary school from my time as a volunteer in 2019. This connection enabled most of the coordination behind my project. I also sought to help the students in the village gain further upward mobility than would have otherwise been possible.

My relationship with the school director made Linking the Chain of Upward Mobility possible. His work and the work of our teachers drove the success of this project. The school director provided me with a place to live, food to eat, and a reliable partner with which to grow the ideas of my project and make them happen. His relationships with other local directors and ability to gauge what feasibility were essential. Lacking the ability to read Thai myself, the teachers' time and dedication to helping the students learn to read Thai was also indispensable.

Initially, I was working with Bangkok-based nonprofit Thailand Gifted and Talented (TGT) to provide the weekend workshops. TGT has a network of high school students all over Thailand, many of which are in Northern Thailand near Chiang Mai. Between February and May of 2022, I planned weekend Thai literacy workshops at Kamplapha Natawee with one of TGT's directors. In short, a few of their high school students would travel to Kamplapha Natawee every other weekend to teach these workshops. I loved the idea of older students from other parts of Thailand teaching the younger students in Isaan.

Unfortunately, after my arrival in Thailand, their commitment to this workshop model diminished. TGT offered to provide less frequent workshops during weekdays that did not specifically target Thai literacy. I shared that I could not reasonably support such workshops given the stated purpose of my project and grant, so we parted ways. I believe the primary reason behind this change of heart was miscommunication that ran both ways. Because I could not accurately portray the difficulty of coordinating workshops in the remote region of Thailand that I was working in, they discovered this for themselves after running one general workshop for all students at the school. The new information gathered by this and one other planning visit led to their change of heart. Instead of TGT high school students serving as Thai literacy teachers, existing teachers at local schools were hired for additional time.

No additional fundraising efforts have contributed to this project to date. I have raised some money through a past blog for Kamplapha Natawee in 2019, though this is separate from my project. Through my website linked above, I plan to raise money via an upcoming blog post. I have spent the summer working on developing a readership base and now plan to offer an opportunity to my readers to support ongoing Thai literacy workshops.

Currently, Kamplapha Natawee has enough funds for two annual non-government teacher salaries and 12 additional weekend Thai literacy workshops. These funds were donated in the presence of the school director and most teachers at the school in three installments. The purpose behind each installment was understood by each person present, which allows for an additional measure of accountability beyond my trust in the school director. Thus, all students at Kamplapha Natawee School will be able to participate in Thai literacy classes at least through March 2024. Additionally, students at all local schools will have the opportunity to participate in weekend Thai literacy workshops through mid-November 2022, totaling four months of multi-school workshops funded by Projects for Peace. Any funds raised through my website will be contributed to additional weekend workshops. Finally, the workshops have gained renown throughout the province of Sakon Nakhon, and Kittichai is actively seeking out more schools who would like to start similar programs.

Reflection

I define peace as the ability for people of different backgrounds to be sufficiently included society's fundamental systems such that they are able to understand and help one another. For example, Isaan's poorest residents have been generationally excluded from a higher quality of life that could be afforded by more education. This imposes a barrier between these less educated, less wealthy people and the more educated, more wealthy segment of Thailand's population. Peace is built by specifically targeting that disadvantaged group because less conflict is likely to emerge between them under such a strategy.

In the short term of the first two months, a handful of students have seen remarkable improvement in their Thai literacy. In the medium term of a few additional months, more students will have had the opportunity to reap the benefits of recurrent attendance to the workshops. However, these changes in their ability to read Thai are difficult to measure. Lacking empirical systems to assess progress in their normal school curriculum, it is extremely difficult to quantify any change in ability. Subjective assessments of the teachers are the best feasible indicator of progress in this context. This is one of the key ongoing challenges of my project. In the long term of several years, I hope that many of the participating students can complete more years of high school than they would have otherwise. Lack of ability to read Thai leads many students to drop out after three out of six years of high school, or not attend high school at all. Thus, my long-term vision for Linking the Chain of Upward Mobility is to enable high school graduation for those participating students who would not have been able to graduate from high school without the ability to read Thai, building peace between them and their peers in the process.

The issue of Thai literacy in Isaan is firmly embedded in structural issues of Thailand's national education system. First, students are rigidly bound to their grade level classes. Allowing students to learn with their peers of equal ability would mitigate the learning challenges that lead to lack of Thai literacy. Second, teachers are assigned to subjects, rather than being responsible for a small group of students. At the elementary level, one teacher could teach all subjects for the same group of students. This would make the teacher responsible for that group and improve the incentives for them to be creative with their

teaching. Third, there is a national policy that states every student should be able to read Thai when they enter high school. However, reality falls far from this statement in Isaan and very little acknowledgement of the issue occurs. This is representative of a larger issue whereby schools must simply get their paperwork approved by government representatives, rather than have their teaching routinely assessed. Fourth, directors often move to a new school every two years, leaving under-resourced schools without responsible leadership or durable long-term plans.

Teaching Thai literacy by hiring existing teachers for additional time poses several key challenges. First, by hiring teachers that already teach the students, there is a risk of straying too close to replication of normal school curriculum. In an ideal world, teachers from outside the village would be brought in to teach Thai literacy workshops. Second, the workshops depend on the ideas that one student can read Thai while one cannot, and student A is better at reading Thai than student B. In classroom reality, abilities are a spectrum and diverse. Objective assessment of ability is impractical in this context. These challenges can be overcome to some extent by organizing students into classes by ability.

This project has enabled me to return to a community abroad to which I had already traveled. Returning to a community where I have existing connections was a new experience for me and one of the most valuable things about my project. Building on these prior connections with my host family, teachers, and students afforded me a better lens into Isaan life. By gaining this new perspective on life in Isaan, I was able to evaluate some of my ideas about international development work.

Projects that cast a wide net, doing the most good across a large group of people, often get commended. Economically, this approach makes sense. However, my collective three and a half months in Isaan over two trips has made me more skeptical about this wide net worldview.

To supplement this approach, I believe more time in a given community should be highly valued. Additional time will allow for a more nuanced understanding of the issues facing that community, the creative low-cost solutions that may address those issues, and, of crucial importance, more time will bring forth more input from the people who live there. While I do not know how this works into the vast web of international development work, I am now inspired to seek out opportunities that will allow for such an approach.

Personal Statement

"By implementing Linking the Chain of Upward Mobility, I have learned about the immense importance of making decisions based on local nuance in international development projects. The value of this project lies with the handful of students who will gain a higher level of education because of their improved ability to read Thai. I believe that at least a few students in these rural Northeastern Thai villages will be able to break free of generational upward mobility traps, finding success in new livelihood strategies because of the way Thai literacy supports other avenues of learning."

- Kyle Greenspan