The three UN Global Initiative priorities are very important and well thought out – put every child in school, improve the quality of learning, and foster global citizenship. Although Thailand offers free public schooling, there is still concern in the quality of this education, especially considering Thailand’s test scores are much lower than the average when compared to the rest of the world. Thailand’s current education policy is guided by the National Education Act of 1999 and the 15-year National Education Plan (2006-2016). The most recent plan “expresses the need to expand access to higher education and improve quality standards” (Clark, 2014).

Under the National Education Act, all Thai citizens are ensured 12 years of free public schooling, which correlates with the first UN Global Initiative priority of putting every child in school (Clark, 2014). Thailand education is divided into 4 ‘levels’. The first two years of school, the preprimary years, are optional and free, consisting of children ages 3-5. The primary years are for children ages 6 to 11. Primary school “emphasizes literacy, numeracy, communication skills, and abilities relevant to future occupational roles” (SEAMEO). Secondary education, the last level that is offered for free, is divided into two – each covering a period of three years. The lower secondary level “emphasizes on learner’s intellect, ethics morality, and basic skills” (SEAMEO), while the upper level “aims to provide appropriate academic and vocational knowledge and skills correspondent with the learner’s interests and aptitudes” (SEAMEO). After completing these levels, children may go on to attend higher education, such as college or universities. “The net enrollment rate for primary school age children increased from 81.4 percent in 2000 to 90.05 percent in 2009” (UNICEF). This also is the case for the net enrollment rate for secondary school age children – 55.4 percent in 2000, increased to 72.22 percent in 2009 (UNICEF). These numbers are not where they should be, although they have increased a decent amount, and will/have continued to increase.

The quality of education in Thailand is mostly problematic. In 2012, Thailand was ranked 50th in education when compared to the 65 developed countries in the world (Sedghi, 2013). As mentioned above, Thai students learn more than ‘core’ subjects – they learn communication skills, abilities relevant to future occupational roles, ethics morality, basic skills, etc. Then finally in the upper secondary years, they learn academic and vocational knowledge and skills that correspond with their interests and aptitudes. I think these are great skills to learn, and what better place to learn them while in school. After knowing this, it doesn’t surprise me that “studies have shown that the learning level of Thai children in major subject areas has declined over the past 10 years” (UNICEF). Results from the National Achievement Test have reported average scores for Grade 6 and Grade 12 students in core subjects below 50 percent (UNICEF).

Students in Thailand are also concerned for their quality of education. One Thai high school student, Nethiwit Chotpatpaisan, describes his teachers as “dictators” and stated that “school is like a factory that manufactures identical people” (Fuller, 2013). These students are being dictated, drilled to memorize information, and taught to never contradict their teachers. The United States-trained education minister, Phongthep Thepkanjana, stated “we don’t want them to photocopy knowledge into their brains; we want them to be individuals within reason” (Fuller, 2013). Not only does this demonstrate the poor quality of education in Thailand, it also shows a barrier on global citizenship. “Broad teacher development reforms are needed to ensure the uptake of new citizenship skills” (Global Education).

Many Thai universities offer an increasing number of international programs that are taught in English. Recent reforms have also made English mandatory one day a week in schools (Clark, 2014). This is extremely beneficial for Thailand in the aspect of fostering global citizenship. With English being the most common of the languages, it is very important Thai people to be able to communicate. Education must “give people the understanding, skills, and values they need to cooperate in resolving the interconnected challenges of the 21st Century” (Global Education). Having Thai students be enrolled in courses based on communication skills, their abilities related to future occupational roles, and basic skills shows that Thailand is on the right track for achieving global citizenship. “We must rethink the purpose of education and prepare students for life, not exams alone” (Global Education).

Thailand is on the right track when it comes to the three UN Global Initiatives, although there is still work that can be done. The quality of education in Thailand needs to improve; yes, students should be preparing for life, not exams, but that does not mean they shouldn’t be taught the ‘core’ subjects while in school – national achievement testing is still mandatory for most schools. Teachers also must be less like dictators and more approaching, knowledgeable and helpful. School should be a safe, comfortable place to learn, and Thailand’s teachers do not seem to make it that way. Thailand is on the right track of fostering global citizenship, but they still have a lot to work on.

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