

*The struggle against illiteracy
in Asia and the Pacific*

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THAILAND's
functional literacy programme:
a case study of activities in
Educational Region 8

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UNESCO REGIONAL OFFICE FOR EDUCATION
IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

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Educational Region 8

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FOREWORD

In the recent past several Member States in Asia and the Pacific have committed themselves to the task of eradicating illiteracy within their respective countries. Since a few of them have achieved considerable success, the Unesco Regional Office in Bangkok felt that it would be useful to disseminate the information regarding the national campaigns, so that they would serve as a guide and model to others. With this end in view the series entitled *The struggle against illiteracy in Asia and Oceania* is now being published. The first of the series, which is already in print, is entitled *The elimination of illiteracy in the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam*.

The present publication, the second in the series and entitled *Thailand's functional literacy programme*, is an in-depth study of the activities of the Ministry of Education in northern Thailand, particularly the area which comprises the Eighth Educational region. This region is of particular interest since it was here that the Functional Literacy Programme began as an experiment. The area lies on a higher latitude than the rest of the country and certain parts are dominated by minority tribal groups. In this study the author discusses the special problems of the area, like national integration and the improvement of socio-economic conditions, and shows how the Ministry attempted to solve these by the implementation of its Functional Literacy Programme.

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PREFACE

The government of Thailand began systematic efforts to combat illiteracy in 1940. During the few years before Thailand became heavily involved in the Second World War more than one million adults completed basic literacy courses and, as a result, were considered literate. After the war the enrolments in these and subsequent courses declined sharply and, in the past 30 years, only about 300,000 individuals have passed through the various basic literacy programmes offered by the government.

Moreover, results of research and other available evidence indicated that many of the adults completing these basic programmes and receiving certificates had not gained practical literacy skills. The reasons for programme shortcomings are varied and complex, but can be grouped into three broad areas. First, programme planners had assumed that adult learners were conscious of the value of being literate, i.e., aware of the immediate utility of such skills. Second, among these planners there was little early concern with content relevance. Later, when such concerns became widespread, they resulted primarily in inconclusive debate as to what was relevant or, how relevance could be determined. Finally, there were persistent and wide gaps between the programmes as concepts and the programmes in operation.

With the advent of the Functional Literacy Programme in 1970, planners in the Adult Education Division concentrated on these problem areas and sought to develop an approach that would: (1) create a consciousness of the value of literacy, (2) offer content based on learners' needs and, therefore, related to the learners' lives, (3) utilize techniques that would increase learner participation in the instructional process, and (4) provide opportunities for adults to enhance their problem-solving and occupational skills, to have access to current technical knowledge and information and, in the process, to develop literacy and numeracy tools. As a result, a programme that had been in effective for 30 years was re-suscitated. Although present enrolments do not match pre-war peaks, the situation today is rather encouraging.

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At present approximately 18 per cent of the Thai population over 10 years of age is considered illiterate, that is, unable to write their name or read a simple sentence in any language. While this figure is not too high when compared to rates in many other countries, it does amount to over five million people. More serious is the fact that this number includes significant numbers from all age groups not only from the older age groups. The question of functional skills too has to be solved. How many of these people declared literate on the basis of meeting the prescribed minimum standards, do, indeed, possess the literacy skills required to function effectively in contemporary Thailand. For example, how many can read and fill the forms at the district office? How many can read and understand instalment plans, government announcements, newspapers and instructions for the use of fertilizers or medicine? While studies of 'functional' literacy skill levels do not exist, it is reasonable to assume that an even greater percentage of the population does not meet any such 'functional' standards. This assumption does find some support in 1968 research data indicating that 33 per cent of the grade IV graduates relapse into illiteracy within a few years after leaving school.¹ For these reasons, then, adult functional literacy programmes in Thailand remain critically important.

Recognizing these difficulties, the government has recently stressed the need for a more equitable distribution of educational opportunities, and given a high priority to programmes designed to serve groups who have lacked traditional educational opportunities. For example, the 1977 National Education Scheme includes the following provisions:

"No. 14 - It is urgent that the state establish and support various types of non-formal education programmes in order to provide the population with opportunities for education throughout their lifetime. It is expected, in particular, that these programmes will be useful for those individuals who have never had the opportunity to enter the formal school system."

"No. 15 - The state should organize and support wide-ranging educational services for the poor and the physically, socially, and emotionally handicapped."

1. Thailand. Ministry of Education. Department of General Education. *Research report: the literacy status of Prathom (Grade) 4 graduates*. Bangkok, Ministry of Education, 1969. passim.

With respect to adult education these broad goals were translated into major programmes focused on specific objectives.

1. Increase the percentage of rural adult education services, until a ratio of 80 per cent rural to 20 per cent urban/provincial town is achieved, by establishing provincial lifelong education centres¹ which will utilize mobile units, walking teachers, radio correspondence and village level interest groups and reading centres to serve rural populations;

2. Expand functional literacy programmes and opportunities for non-native speakers such as the Malay-speaking population in the South and the hill tribe minorities in the North to develop Thai language skills and an understanding of Thai culture and society;

3. Increase the practical (functional) nature of second-chance, continuing education programmes at the upper primary and lower secondary equivalency levels;

4. Stress short-term vocational courses and activities for the rural population focusing on: (a) agriculture, appropriate technology, and other related subject areas that will enable villagers to upgrade their current occupational practices and supplement their incomes and (b) skill areas that will aid under-employed villagers to secure either more gainful employment or the basic pre-requisites needed to enter full-scale job training programmes.

Most of these adult education activities that are currently receiving significant attention and finances, draw many of their philosophical directions from the Functional Literacy Programme. Many, in fact, are conceived as supplementary or complementary to it. Given these circumstances, then, a case study of this programme takes on added significance. It is appropriate, too, that the case study is focused on activities in northern Thailand, particularly the seven provinces which make up the eighth Educational Region, for it was in this area that the Functional Literacy Programme began as an experiment.

1 An official English language term for these centres has yet to be established. A literal translation of the Thai term is People's Education Centre, but they are more frequently referred to as Lifelong Education Centres in the Division's English language materials.

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Before closing this preface I wish to express my deep gratitude to Mr. Somprasong Withayagiat, the head of the Functional Literacy Project Unit of the Adult Education Division and his staff for their assistance in compiling the data used in this study. My sincere thanks are due to my colleagues and staff who spent long hours on the translation and typing of this manuscript.

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Part I - BACKGROUND

A brief history of literacy education in Thailand

Adult education in Thailand has been organized and administered by the Adult Education Division, Ministry of Education, ever since the Division's inception in 1940. Since that time the goals and approaches guiding government-sponsored adult education literacy programmes have changed periodically. An overview of these programmes and their evolution can best be presented by describing events occurring in the following four periods; 1940-1945, 1947-1964, 1965-1967, and 1968 to the present.

Period I - 1940-1945

According to the census conducted in 1937 by the Ministry of Interior, 68.8 per cent of the total population aged 10 and above was illiterate.¹ In 1940 the Thai government embarked on a campaign to promote literacy and, at the same time, to inculcate a stronger sense of civic responsibility and democracy among the adult population. To spearhead this effort the government established an Adult Education Division within the Ministry of Education.

To carry out the campaign the Ministry of Education recruited all available teaching personnel from public (national and municipal) and private elementary schools to teach the courses it had designed especially for this programme. Other government departments were also involved as the cabinet instructed them to support the effort fully.

The full programme consisted of 'Preliminary' and 'Final' courses, each six months long. The curriculum emphasized Thai language skills (reading, transcription, writing, and composition), numeracy, civics, moral education, geography, history, and health. The classes which were conducted three to five days a week, and one to two hours each day were held in the evening to enable working people to attend. Second and fourth grade equivalency certificates were awarded to those adults who passed the final examinations of the Preliminary and Final courses respectively.

1. The standard used to determine literacy was completion of at least two years of primary education.

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During the first three years of the campaign the literacy rate increased by 20.49 per cent, as 1,409,688 graduates of the two-cycle programme were pronounced literate. However, while the initial results of the campaign were impressive, the severe economic depression that engulfed the country at the end of the Second World War forced the government to reduce the intensity of its effort and attendance subsequently declined.

Period II - 1947-1964

By 1947 the Thai Government resumed its efforts to promote adult education, adopting at this time Unesco's model of Fundamental Education. As defined by Unesco, Fundamental Education was to cover all the basic knowledge people should possess and include reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, history, civics and morality, and vocational education. In a sense, then, Fundamental Education was essentially elementary plus vocational education for adults. For this new programme the Adult Education Division set the following objectives:

1. promote literacy and occupational skills,
2. foster responsible citizenship in a democratic society,
3. improve living standards, and
4. encourage the profitable use of spare time.

As a result, the Division added vocational activities such as the following to the basic literacy programmes:

1. Agriculture - The topics covered included vegetable gardening, animal husbandry (including castration techniques and disease control) and basic horticulture (focusing on the care and propagation of fruit trees).
2. Handicrafts - Teachers could choose any handicraft practised locally. Among the activities were embroidery, sewing, basket-making, weaving, pottery, etc.
3. Home economics - Basic home-making and cooking.
4. Fisheries - Developing and maintaining fish ponds.
5. Commerce - Elementary accounting and marketing.
6. Any vocational training useful to the community.

In addition, the Division began to support adult vocational schools and academically-oriented general education programmes above the literacy level. Both these programmes were conducted in the evenings and utilized the facilities and personnel of the regular schools, both government and private. The system and the curriculum were identical to those of the regular school.

With respect to these programmes the Division provided little more than financial support to the principals and teachers and occasional supervision. The Division initiated programmes to establish public libraries at the district level and mobile audio-visual education/information services operating from the provincial capital. Both these efforts were designed to provide the rural population with up-to-date information on new developments.

Mid-way through this period the government established the Thailand-Unesco Fundamental Education Centre or TUFECS at Ubol Province in the northeastern part of the country. This centre focused its attention on rural development and influenced the Adult Education Division to concentrate its energies in the same direction. By the late 50s, the Adult Education Division had adopted the following programme objectives:

1. improve rural living standards;
2. provide vocational and general (academic) education opportunities for adults in co-operation with other government agencies;
3. promote educational opportunities for rural residents through mobile vocational units and expanded public education (audio-visual presentations) programmes;
4. operate public libraries and develop reading materials for adults;
5. produce and distribute audio-visual materials for use in education/information programmes;
6. develop responsible citizenship and occupational skills; and
7. conduct research and training programmes.

With respect to the Division's literacy efforts during this period, the Fundamental Education approach proved to be less than effective. Analysts attributed its weaknesses to a lack of necessary equipment and qualified teachers for the

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vocational activities. For whatever reasons evidence indicates that the teachers directed their efforts largely to literacy and civic education and neglected the vocational component. Nonetheless, during the 1947-1964 period, 170,730 more adults completed literacy programmes.

Period III - 1965-1967

Despite its operational handicaps the Fundamental Education approach to literacy and adult education continued. In 1963 the TUFEC lost its rural development training functions to the newly created Community Development Department in the Ministry of Interior and subsequently served only as a training centre for local leaders and under-credentialed primary school teachers.

In 1965 the Division embarked on a major reform and expansion effort in its post-literacy programmes in response to increased demands from urban and provincial town residents for a general education at higher levels, i.e., those equivalent to grades VII, X, and XII (elementary and lower and upper secondary school leaving certificates respectively). The courses developed had a heavy academic orientation and were organized as follows:

Table 1. Urban adult education programmes (1950-60)

General adult education level	In-school grade equivalent	Duration of study (months)
I	2	6
II	4	6
III	7	18
IV	10	18
V	12	24

This second-chance system served largely the young adults in the urban areas and provincial towns who sought the equivalency certificates which might lead to government service. In the rural districts and villages the Fundamental Education programme remained the primary education service provided by the Adult Education Division.

Table 2. Rural adult education programmes (1950-60)

Fundamental Education Course	In-school grade equivalent	Duration of study (months)
Preliminary	2	6
Final	4	6

Period IV - 1968 to the present

The change during this period was a direct result of a Unesco initiative. In November 1965, Unesco invited the Ministers of Education - including the Thai Minister of Education and his delegation - to a World Conference on the Eradication of Illiteracy in Teheran, Iran. The resolution of this meeting urged governments to add vocational training related to community needs to literacy programmes, arguing that only with such additions could a learner develop skills needed to improve his living conditions.

This work-oriented functional literacy model adopted at the World Conference did not, in fact, separate literacy education from vocational education as was the case with the fundamental education concept. On the contrary in this model literacy content and vocational training were to be interwoven and integrated. For example, if the learners were engaged in farming, lesson content would be drawn from that occupation. The learners, consequently, acquired both literacy skills related to farming as well as knowledge and information on farming.

The Adult Education Division, in response to Unesco's resolution, carried out an experiment in Lampang in Northern Thailand from 1 August to 31 December 1968. The work-oriented functional literacy class operated five days a week and two and one-half hours a day. Ten classes were opened in the capital district, another ten in Ngao District. The programme provides 452 more adults with an opportunity to develop literacy skills.

It was clear to Thai educators that the experimental work-oriented functional literacy approach was more effective than earlier efforts. Nonetheless, many difficult problems, new as well as old, were encountered. Among the most important were:

1. Teachers' ability to handle vocational instruction. As in previous programmes most of the literacy teachers were

not trained vocational educators and, were therefore unable or reluctant to teach the vocational subjects. For example, the planner's fears that teachers with little knowledge of or experience in agriculture would teach this subject to experienced farmers were unreasonable, particularly in a rural Thai cultural setting where teachers are regarded so highly for the superior knowledge they possess. Under such circumstance teachers were most reluctant to demonstrate their lack of knowledge of agriculture by teaching it to experienced farmers, and, consequently, concentrated their efforts on the literacy and numeracy components of the programme.

2. Shortage of resource personnel. Project plans called for inviting local resource people (e.g., the district agricultural extension agent, health worker, veterinarian, and community development worker) to teach vocational subjects related to their backgrounds and to give additional instruction in the literacy classes on these same subjects. In actual practice, however, such resource people were not available in adequate numbers. When they did exist, transportation was difficult to arrange and the resource people considered the trip to the rural schools too time-consuming and, since most of the adult schools operated at night, too risky. In short, there were insufficient incentives and too many disincentives within the proposed system. Moreover, as is the case in many other development efforts, local co-ordination between various government agencies was more easily planned than executed.

3. Textbook-orientation. Due to limited technical skills and knowledge and their inability to demonstrate techniques or give practical advice in the vocational subject areas, the teachers had to rely heavily on textbooks. The learners, therefore, received little instruction in vocational areas and had few opportunities to develop skills through practice.

Because of these and other limitations of the work-oriented model, the Adult Education Division began to develop a new model in 1970. The new model was constructed as a complete system, starting with the formulation of a working philosophy (including objectives) and a set of assumptions about adult learners and their situation in the Thai socio-cultural context. Principles derived from ongoing discussions of these matters and from feedback data provided and continue to provide the basis for developing instructional processes (and teacher-training strategies), curricula,