

บทความที่ :

Article :

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**การเมืองของอาหารกลางวัน: ข้อถกเถียงเรื่องการกระจายอำนาจ
การจัดการศึกษาขององค์กรปกครองส่วนท้องถิ่นในประเทศไทย**

**Politics of the School Lunch System: Debates over
Decentralization of Education Management to Local
Governments in Thailand**

[Received Date: March 7, 2020 / Accepted Date: May 4, 2020]

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้เป็นการศึกษาเชิงสำรวจเบื้องต้นเกี่ยวกับข้อถกเถียงเรื่องการกระจายอำนาจการจัดการศึกษาในระดับท้องถิ่นในประเทศไทย โดยนำเสนอความสัมพันธ์ประเภทต่างๆ ในประเด็นการกระจายอำนาจที่ไม่เพียงจำกัดอยู่ในกระทรวงมหาดไทยเท่านั้น บทความนี้เป็นความพยายามในการทำความเข้าใจการกระจายอำนาจการจัดการศึกษาโดยการมองปัญหาความขัดแย้งเรื่องอาหารกลางวันที่เกิดขึ้นในโรงเรียนรัฐบาลในสังกัดกระทรวงศึกษาธิการประเทศไทย บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์สามประการคือ (1) เพื่อสำรวจ สถานการณ์ปัจจุบันของการจัดการศึกษาในองค์กรปกครองส่วนท้องถิ่นของประเทศไทย (2) เข้าใจโครงสร้างการจัดการศึกษาขององค์กรปกครองส่วนท้องถิ่นของประเทศไทย และ (3) เพื่อศึกษาและอภิปรายเกี่ยวกับปัญหา การกระจายอำนาจการศึกษาท้องถิ่นในประเทศไทย

คำสำคัญ : การกระจายอำนาจการศึกษา; การปกครองส่วนท้องถิ่น; การทุจริต

Abstract

This paper is a preliminary survey study of the debates over the decentralization of education management to local governments in Thailand. It intends to present the different types of relationships in the issue of decentralization, other than just those with the Ministry of Interior. This paper attempts to understand the decentralization of education management by viewing it through the lens of a specific controversial issue: corruption within the school lunch system in Thailand. The purpose of this paper is threefold: (1) to survey the current context of education management in local governments in Thailand; (2) to understand the structure of education management in local governments in Thailand; and (3) to study the debates around the issue of decentralization of education management to local governments in Thailand.

Keywords: Decentralization of Education; Local Government; Corruption

Introduction

At the beginning of 2018, a video of kindergarten students sitting in a row and eating lunch in Ban Tha Mai district, Surat Thane province, southern Thailand, went viral because on their lunch trays, there were only rice noodles with fish sauce (ka nom jeen nam pla) and one small cucumber (Thairath, 2018). The ‘Ka nom jeen nam pla’ scandal drew widespread public attention. People on social media were angry and questioned what had happened to their children's school lunch.

What is more shocking is that this problem has occurred in many areas throughout Thailand, not only in Surat Thani province, but also in Nakhon Ratchasima province, Phichit province, Naradhiwat Province, and Lopburi Province. Each case of corruption in the school lunch system follows the same pattern, which is that the lunches provided for primary school students, both quantity and quality, are below standard. This can cause students to not receive the proper amount of nutrients. Student lunches are considered very important for children's growth and development because, at this stage, students should receive nutrients from all five food groups in order to achieve healthy growth and effective learning.

These viral cases show that such problems stem from corruption at the level of government primary schools, including the school director, teachers, and the procurement process. These problems lead to basic questions about the management of the school lunch system in Thailand, such as: ‘Why is the school lunch of such low quality in some areas?’

‘What is the real process of managing the school lunch budget in government primary schools?’ and ‘Who plays the dominant role in the management of the school lunch budget?’

The lunch budget for a primary school in Thailand is allocated by the Department of the Local Government of Thailand via the relevant local institution in each area. Interestingly, the school lunch budget is not allocated by the Ministry of Education, even though government primary schools are affiliated with the Office of the Basic Education Commission under the Ministry of Education. This point may help us to understand the debates over the decentralization of education and to explore the relationship between the Department of the Local Government of Thailand and the educational management of government primary schools. It is essential to study these issues in-depth, particularly through the political lens.

This survey study aims to explore the debates around the decentralization of education management to local governments in Thailand through two methods: (1) survey of relevant documents, such as news, reports, research, books, and information on the Internet, and (2) primary data collection from phone interviews. The informants are teachers and directors in government primary schools and local government officials from Provincial Administrative Organizations (PAO), Sub-district Administrative Organizations (SAO), and Municipalities. The main theoretical framework and concept used in this paper is political

participation, which is one of the most important factors in creating a strong and effective democracy, especially within local government.

As society consists of people who join activities together and interact with each other, all decisions affect every person. The current definition of political participation is divided into two main meanings, which include a narrow definition and broad definition. The narrow definition considers political participation as representative elections to push policies or policy agendas. The broad definition posits political participation as not only the selection of representatives, but also the method by which people determine the quality of their lives and the direction their society will progress in the future. (Thanet Charoenmuang, 2010)

Brief history and structure of the government school's lunch budget in Thailand

The primary school lunch program began in Thailand in 1952 in response to the government's intention to promote good health and reduce malnutrition for Thai children. At that time, the Department of General Education was responsible for budget allocation and management. In an effort to better manage school lunches, the government established the National Food Committee and the Subcommittee on School Lunch in 1953. However, the establishment of these two special committees did not have much success due to lack of

financial support from the government. Most of the funding came instead from international charity funds, which led to a severe lack of continuity.

Aware of the problem of malnourished children in many areas across Thailand, the government added food and nutrition into the fourth National Economic and Social Development Plan (1977). This plan tasked the National Primary Education Commission of Thailand with the responsibilities of procuring and allocating lunch budgets for every government primary school in Thailand. This made is mandatory for all government schools that provide primary education throughout Thailand to participate in the free school lunch program. The project was actively promoted as part of the 60th anniversary celebration of King Rama IX's birthday in 1987, proceeding under the slogan 'Celebrating the sixty-century of Maharaja Pra thom suk sa* will not be hungry'. The free school lunch program has continued ever since.

In 1992, the government implemented the Fund for the School Lunch in Primary Schools Act in order to establish a fund in the Ministry of Finance consisting of money and other assets. Its purpose was to establish working capital to support the response to malnutrition in areas with urgent problems. Later, in 1993, the board of directors of the Fund for the School Lunch bureau approved the allocation of the budget

* *Pra thom suk sa* refers to schools in Thailand that provide education for grades 1 to

according to the number of students in each school, at the cost of five baht per person for a period of two hundred days per year. This was increased to six baht per person in 1994. The first group to receive free lunch was a group of malnourished students.

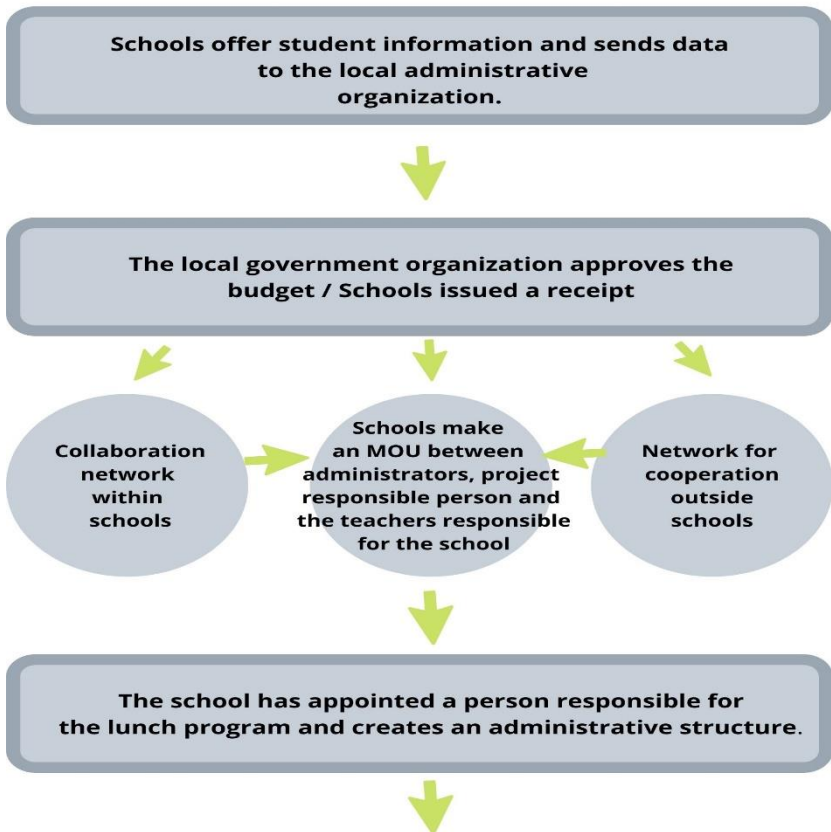
A major turning point occurred in 2001 when the Ministry of Education transferred the responsibility of managing school lunches in government primary schools across the country to the Ministry of Interior, in accordance with the 1999 act to decentralize some authority to local government organizations. Therefore, the school lunch project was transferred to local government organizations beginning in the fiscal year of 2001. In 2002, the Budget Bureau issued specific principles and regulations for budget management, which tasked the local government organizations with distributing and supervising the management of school lunches in their relevant areas.

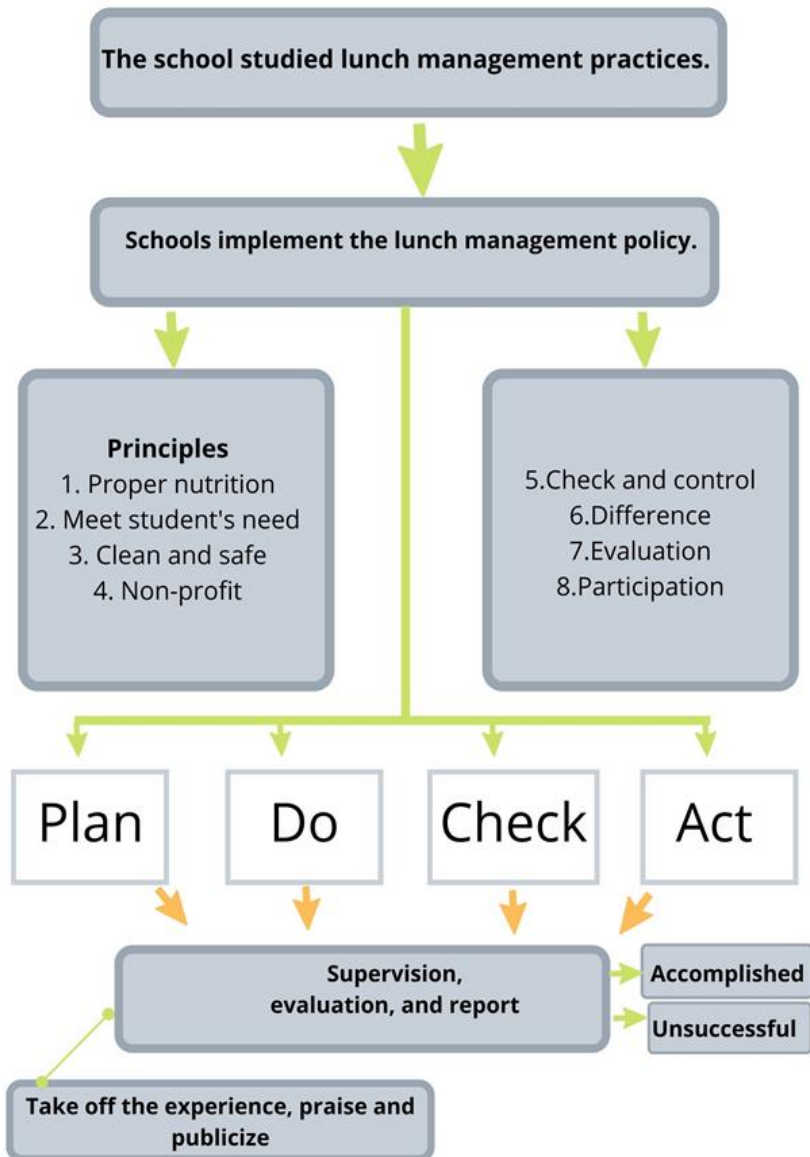
In 2008, the cabinet resolved to increase the subsidies for school lunches to ten baht per person, further increased to thirteen baht per person in 2009, and again to twenty baht per person in 2013. The rate of twenty baht per student is still being used today (The Secretary of Cabinets, 2013). However, the school lunch budget cannot be allocated for students above the sixth grade. This means that schools categorized as an opportunity expansion school, providing instruction for grades seven to nine, will not receive funds from this budget. (Interview, 2019)

The source of the budget for the school lunch program comes from three main sources, which are: (1) Subsidized budget by the local

government organization, (2) Funding sources that receive benefits from the school lunch project in primary school, and (3) Other sources, including donations (School Lunch Project Fund Bureau, 2016).

The process of implementing the primary school lunch program (School Lunch Project Fund Bureau, 2016)





The monitoring and evaluation system for the school lunch project is implemented by various departments, as follows: Office of the Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Education, Office of the Basic Education Commission, Education Area District Office, and the Lunch Board established by the schools. There are also external government agencies that help with evaluation and monitoring of each school's lunch program, such as the Department of Health, Ministry of Public Health, etc. Most of the government agencies mentioned above will inspect the school's lunch system by way of documentary evidence provided by the school, including photos of the food, receipts of disbursement, and online reporting of nutrition information for each meal.

Corruption in the government school lunch system

The 'Ka nom jeen nam pla' and other school lunch scandals are not easily explained by corruption, lack of awareness, or individual characteristics/ motives. Instead, such scandals must be reconsidered acknowledging various gaps in the relevant systems.

This study found that the local government organizations that distribute the budget to schools in their area are the Provincial Administration Organization, the Municipality, and the Sub-district Administration Organization. The school must provide these organizations with information about the number of students who qualify for the free lunch program. At this stage, the first level of corruption might occur. Some schools provide a fake number of students in order to receive more

funding (Interview, 2019). Systems are now in place to double check and confirm the lists of students, effectively reducing this form of potential corruption.

However, there is another problem that also regularly appears at this stage. Some schools have been found guilty of misusing their lunch subsidies by dividing the average lunch fee of twenty baht per person to also prepare food for Junior high school students. This type of problem often occurs in opportunity expansion schools, which are former primary schools that have expanded their class offerings from kindergarten to grade six, to kindergarten to grade nine (Siriwan Sripahol, 2014). Opportunity expansion schools were created to expand educational opportunities for students living in remote and low-income areas. This ensures that students who live in such areas don't need to travel far from home for the opportunity to study. It can be assumed that the students attending opportunity expansion schools also need the school to support the cost of their lunch, yet the directors of such schools, who have the good intention to provide lunch for students up to grade six, have been found guilty.

The school lunch project handbook created by the School Lunch Project Fund Bureau, Ministry of Education, provides guidelines for problem solving in an effort to support schools, in cooperation with the community, to receive lunch donations for secondary school students. Currently, there are many local government organizations providing financial support in this area (School Lunch Project Fund Bureau, 2016).

This shows that many local government organizations, such as the Municipality and Sub-district Administration Organizations, have sufficient financial resources to support other activities and provisions for schools within their administrative areas.

Once the local government organizations receive the list of students who qualify for the free lunch program, they will distribute the budget to each school located in their local administrative area. Every school has to create a lunch committee to witness receiving the budget. The lunch committee consists of the school director, teachers, parents, representatives from the local government, and people from the community. This committee works as an intermediary to ensure transparency of the budget transfer to the schools. In practice, however, the committee is usually appointed by the school and does not play a serious role in checking the quality of the school lunch.

In addition to setting up a lunch committee, there are other methods used to prevent illegal acts, supervise transfers, and ensure that the school lunch program runs smoothly. However, such methods are primarily documentation processes, including project proposals with detailed objectives, minutes of the School Committee of the Office of the Basic Education Commission meetings, letters requesting permission from local government organizations, detailed performance reports, detailed budget reports, and photos of the food. Even with documented evidence, unfortunately the problem of cheating student lunches, resulting in poor

food quality, still exists. Additionally, requiring this documentation further increases the workload for the responsible teachers (Interview, 2019).

Most of the school lunch problems that have occurred were due to the misconduct of the school, caused by the actual operations rather than the documentation and reports. Once the budget is withdrawn, the most significant problems are who the money will be sent to and how they will use it. From both interviews and news regarding relevant cases, the allocated lunch budgets, after having been withdrawn from the school's account, are typically manipulated and controlled by the person with the most power in the school at that time. Such authority to manage school funds always lies with the school director.

One of the informants for this study is a teacher in Suphanburi Province who was once responsible for managing school lunch. The school director used to pressure her to divide the budget by about half and leave the other half for him. The school director claimed that the remaining budget must be used for the other school activities that are not supported by the government. The teacher had to do as she was instructed, even without knowing where the money was being used.

The administrative power structure at government schools is complex and depends on many other supervising departments. However, the ultimate authority in managing various school matters is the director. Teachers and other staff are cautious of the director's power. As shown in the news, teachers are often aware that there is a problem with the children's lunch, but are threatened that if they give any information to

others, the director will not allow them to pass their evaluation (Matichon, 2018).

Another important factor is that the investigations and punishments in response to a reported offense are usually carried out by a government agency. The Investigation and Punishment Committee is often a government official, whether the director of another school or the director of the Primary Educational Services area office. In addition to investigating when a wrongdoing has occurred, general inspections of school lunch systems are also typically conducted by government agencies, such as the Education Area District Office, Office of the Basic Education Commission, or a representative of the National Primary Education Commission of Thailand. Whether documentation inspection or field inspection, this study observed that the gaps in the inspection process are due to governmental self-examination, without any system for checks and balances, such as additional inspection from the private sector or civil society. This gap is likely the main cause of corruption in the Thai primary school lunch system.

Of all the problems mentioned above, it should be noted that the inspection system of self-examination within a government organization may not be sufficient. As schools are the main institutions at the center of the community, a push for increased community participation may lead to effective change. Additionally, participation and public survey would be easier within a political system that follows the concept of localism.

Another factor that was mentioned in interviews and the news is that after the 2014 coup, the process of inspecting the management of the school lunch system was much slower. Changes in the structure of the Ministry of Education led to a lack of personnel available to observe the quality of school lunches in government primary schools (Thairath, 2018).

For example, local research data from 2007 found that after the establishment of the Sub-district Administration Organization, the Municipality, and other local administrative units, people feel preferred to work with the Sub-district Administration Organization. Most people understood the structure of the Sub-district Administration Organization, and felt as though it was more active than the other forms of local government. People felt least close with the Provincial Administration Organization, which further reflects that people tend to pay more attention to things that are close to them and are therefore more likely to participate. As the centralized government system in Thailand is quite robust and difficult to access, it would be more effective to allow local governments to exercise authority, as those activities would likely receive more attention and participation from local people. This also increases the possibility that the provided activities truly meet the needs of the people and are successful.

The structure of the government primary schools affiliated with the Ministry of Education and the source of lunch subsidies from the Department of Local Administration may lead to the question of why the

local government organization is the one who distributes the school lunch budget. In 2001, Dr. Thaksin Shinnawatra won the election for the Thai Rak Thai party, of which the significant policy platform was decentralization to the localities. The transfer of the lunch budget was part of a pilot program to initiate the transfer of some government agencies to local administrative agencies. Dr. Thaksin increased awareness of local government circles in Thailand, in both positive and negative ways (Alongkorn Aksaeng, 2019). The Thai Rak Thai government's attempt to decentralize was not only implemented with the Ministry of Interior. Other decentralization efforts remain, particularly in the provision of education, which will be further discussed.

Primary school administrative structure in Thailand and the debate over relocating from the Ministry of Education to affiliation with the local government

In late 2005, under the leadership of Dr. Taksin Shinnawatra, a resolution was passed to transfer government schools from the Ministry of Education to the local administrative units. The agreement was required to be unanimous between the government schools and the local governments. Accordingly, the local administrative organization that supervises educational institutions must be a large local organization and have sufficient financial resources in order to provide effective management. The issue of relocating the government schools is part of a large-scale project to decentralize authority to the local governments, in

accordance with the 1997 Constitution that set out to design the power relations between various organizations in order to improve political balance. The 1997 Constitution is the only constitution that gives importance to the issue of decentralization, including various principles for local self-management (Alongkorn Aksaeng, 2019).

The resolution to transfer government educational institutions led to backlash from many educational personnel. In November 1957, as many teachers under the Ministry of Education were dissatisfied with the resolution, they protested against the government by marching to the Equestrian Statue of King Chulalongkorn to call for an end to the transfer of schools to the local administrative organizations. The incident escalated to the point that two teachers drew their own blood in protest and six other teachers shaved their heads. These protests occurred throughout the country, not only in Bangkok, including a gathering of over one thousand teachers in the north. They even threatened to stop teaching (MGR Online, 2005). However, the protests did not stop the resolution and the transfer of administrative authority was officially announced. However, there were only a few educational institutions in Thailand that reached mutual agreements with the local administrative agencies to complete the transfer of authority.

The government reasoned that the transfer of government schools to the local administrative organizations would make management of the schools more efficient and provide them with more freedom. Many local government organizations at that time had the

potential to provide financial support to educational institutions. Local government organizations could also promote decentralization for communities, religious organizations, and private organizations, in order to improve education quality standards. The transfer of authority, then, would be beneficial to the students in the local area, as the budget to buy equipment would no longer be subject to such long processes and their needs could be addressed faster. Another benefit of the transfer is that local education could structure the curriculum in line with the local culture.

However, the teachers and educational personnel who opposed the resolution did so for the reasons listed here: (1) Administration: the school cannot achieve the educational goals of the Ministry of Education because the Ministry of Education is an agency that has expertise in education; (2) Academics: the local government cannot provide sufficient or effective support agencies; (3) The Department of Local Administration already has many tasks in managing the local government, therefore the inclusion of schools will increase its burden and ultimately lead to inefficiency; (4) The potential disunion of national education; and (5) Administrative maturity: working under a local politician causes discomfort for teachers and educational personnel, as those who opposed the resolution claim that local politicians lack morals and ethics. Also, as the schools are under the authority of politicians, the schools may be turned into political bases (Ministry of Education, 2017).

The arguments of those who objected the resolution show that transferring government schools is a change that impacts school authority. Moving to the local administrative organizations causes the school, administrators, and teachers to lose some of their power and status. Before, the examination and evaluation of school operations, whether for curriculum or the school lunch program, were often conducted by organizations within the government itself. However, in the local government system, the investigations would become more diverse, not just limited to governmental organizations. Such investigations may include both local politicians, as representatives of the local people, as well as local people themselves. Therefore, the potential loss of power was a great cause for concern, especially in regards to working under politicians, who are assumed to be lacking ability and credibility as supervisors.

Conclusion

This study is an attempt to present information about challenges in local education management and their relationship with the issue of decentralization by understanding data from the central government, local government, and government schools. According to the background and structure of the school lunch program, some government efforts were made to push for decentralized educational authority. However, in practice, this has led to many problems. One example is the problem of corruption as a consequence of gaps in the old systems of management.

Investigation of operations and documentation evaluation were unable to solve these problems. Therefore, an observation system is recommended to ensure transparency in school operations. Additionally, the transfer of some educational businesses that do not conflict with national security could help increase the efficiency of educational management, both in terms of flexibility and speed of operation.

This study is also an attempt to explain the ongoing structural problems of the Thai education system. The current Thai educational conditions, both in structure and in practice, demonstrate a serious lack of quality. The long-centralized structure of education might be one of the factors that have slowed the development of education in Thailand. Education today is a practice of importing knowledge sets from the central level to the local level. At the same time, knowledge from each locality is neglected. Therefore, decentralization of education is important for each locality to be able to provide education according to its specific context, geography, and culture.

Finally, the debates over the decentralization of education management should keep in mind the most basic questions, including: Who is the decision-maker? What are these decisions based on? Are decisions made according to an individual's interests? And how will these decisions impact students? In the end, such debates must keep in mind that the students are the recipients of the consequences of adults' actions.

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