



## Secondary Education in the Beungkum district

Ranking 15th in the DHL Global Connectedness Index 2012 ("We're Thai and we're connected!", 2013), measuring a country's integration in the world economy in regards to trade, capital, information and people (and 2nd in the Southeast Asian region), Thailand is quickly attaining global recognition as a progressive nation. In contrast, a developed nation, such as the U.S., even ranks lower, as the 20th nation. As a nation, Thailand is diligently seeking development in all areas and garnering international support towards that end. Education is not neglected in the pursuit of progress, but rather has been a notable topic of discussion and policy. Currently, secondary students are required to attend 1,200 hours of study per academic year, which ranks among the most on a global scale. UNESCO recommends only 800 hours per year as a suitable amount, causing the Education Ministry to make plans to readjust the national standard, removing 200 hours from an academic year (na Mahachai, 2013).

Consequently, as Bangkok serves as Thailand's model cosmopolitan capital, the face of modernity and international gateway, the economy has responded accordingly. For example, the Beungkum district was considered quite undeveloped even 5-10 years ago and notably contained a fair portion of land reserved for agricultural use, has seen remarkable economic development, especially in premium residences (over 22,000 households living in residences worth over 5 million Baht), shopping complexes and consumer purchasing (Worldwide, 2011). It is speculated that the Beungkum district has been the target of such development because of its abundance of undeveloped land and of because of its proximity to the Suvarnabhumi International Airport, which opened in 2006. Further, as Thailand prepares for standardizing with the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) network and increasing its international prowess, developers have been eager to buy and build in the district bound to catch economic trickle-down from the international airport. Poor residents are not unaffected in this process. In the Samaki Pattana community, a former squatter community with a long-term land lease with its landowner, recently saw its first rent increase since its contract was signed in 1998, raising it to 140%.

Thus, in the wake of current and impending development, secondary education is an interesting subject of attention for Beungkum. One of the most remarkable attributes of the economic landscape is its mixed character, that is, its lack of segregation. As informal settlement communities have popped up juxtaposed to middle-class, or even upper-middle class neighborhoods and are quite small (often between 50-600 households), much of public life, including the education system, comprises a wide range of socio-economic levels. Besides at the preschool level, there are no known primary or secondary schools in slum communities, neither public nor private. Furthermore, within Bangkok, any known informal, private schools (i.e. Duangprateep primary school in the Khlong Toey slum) have become government-run schools. Therefore, this ethnography will discuss the public secondary school system within the Beungkum district and the effects it might have on students from poor backgrounds.

## Six Public Schools.

The following six government-run public schools are attended by students residing in slum or urban poor communities within the Beungkum district. The public school system provides a degree of choice for schools when entering Secondary Grade “Matayom” 1 (M1, equivalent to 7th grade), though once enrolled, switching schools is virtually impossible. Therefore, the following six schools are stratified by popular opinion of quality and reputation.

### Bodindecha 2: Excellent

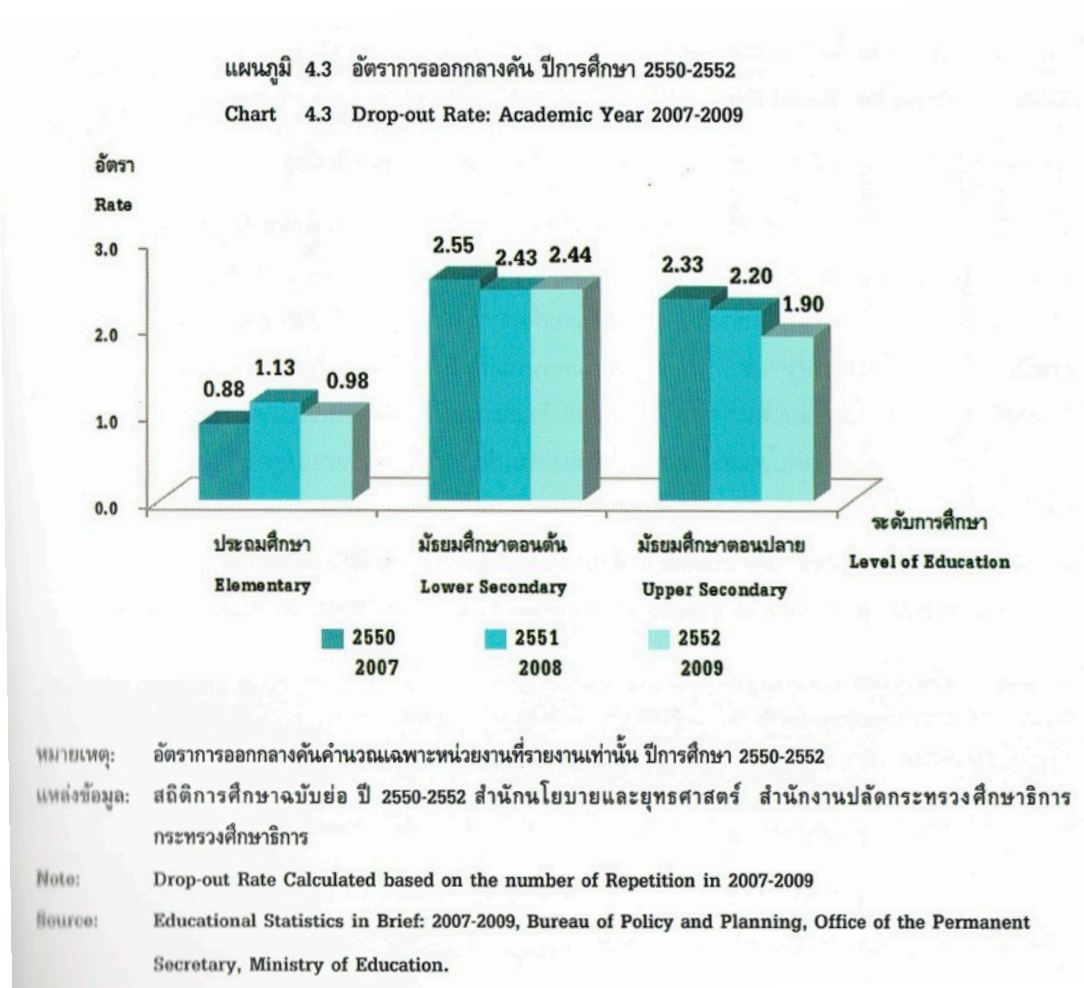
Opened as the second branch of the Bodindecha school after the original received honors and earned a reputation for excellency, this second school was established 25 years ago. It is extremely difficult to enter and all students must test to be admitted. All admission is based upon educational merit.

One major distinguishing factor for this school is its acclaimed EP, or “English Program,” where all curriculum is taught in English.

I am aware of one female student from a poor community who passed their admission test and enrolled.

The process of enrolling in secondary school is quite daunting. Because choice is allowed, there is significant competition to enroll in the best or most suitable school. There are three methods of enrolling in a school, and much of the process depends upon each individual school and their requirements. One can either live within the district and test in, live in an area outside the district and test in, or opt for the lottery. Each school has its own test and/or accept the national standardized test (administered at P6, M3 and M6), O-NET, and set its own quota for student numbers (also regarding how many students will be accepted based on the method of enrollment).

It is not surprising that the most drastic portion of student drop-outs occur between the jump from primary to secondary school.



Aside from needing to find and be accepted into an appropriate secondary school, M1 students can feel the pressure to begin earning income for their families,

especially if there are financial pressures (Office, 2011). Thus, low-income families tend to send their children to secondary school at lower rates.

## Baan Bangkapi: Very Good

The Baan Bangkapi school has received several awards and honors and has earned a competitive reputation. For example, an elite socialite chose this school to use as a prototypical model in her anti-illicit drug program “To Be Number One.” Subsequently, they have received additional funds and support for extra-curricular activities and the arts. These funds allow for the school to offer free uniforms and free lunches. The school is well-known for its dance, arts, and social impact, however, in recent reports, it has not demonstrated increased educational aptitude through O-NET testing. (Vohandi, 2011)

Most students from poor communities desire to enroll at Baan Bangkapi. In addition to its location, it is well regarded and has low-term costs.

Generally speaking, gender in the secondary school system for students from poor communities is skewed towards females. Males tend to drop out of school earlier at quicker rates mostly to begin earning income. Many male students who do choose to enroll and continue with secondary school will also choose a vocational emphasis.

## Sukum Nawapan: Middle/Decent

Sukum Nawapan is 17 years old and will often enroll students that are not accepted at Baan Bangkapi school. It, however, appears to emphasize academic subjects and regarding aptitude, on par with the national average.

Many students from poor communities enroll at Sukum Nawapan. It is considered an adequate school, though its school fees are relatively higher than Baan Bangkapi, they are on par with other government schools of its caliber.

Regarding school fees, each school receives a similar amount from the government. However, depending on the administration of each school, they may seek funding from non-governmental sources (foundations, organizations, awards) or request to collect extra school fees from families. These requirements must be first approved

by the district's education department and then families will be notified. So, while school is technically mandatory until M3, school fees can often be a deterrent for poor families regarding school choice as well as a continuing studies.

#### Sripreutha: Lower

Sripreutha has a low reputation, though mostly for its M4-M6 grades. Its M1-M3 grades are comparable, however, those who have studied at Sripreutha felt the quality of teachers and curriculum in the last three years of primary school were inadequate for preparing students for further studies at university, especially in the area of analytical and critical thinking skills.

Interestingly, Sripreutha has received a seal for being a royal sponsored program, which makes it appear to be a quality school. However, it is debatable whether or not this royal seal and endorsement has had any impact on the quality or function of the school. Administratively, Sripreutha does not support many extra-curricular activities, as well, unless students gain recognition through their own initiative, at which point the school administration may begin to recognize and support student groups and work.

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Regarding public school administration, principals are rotated every 4 years for unclear reasons. Purportedly, it is for standardization and leadership equality purposes. However, this practice of rotating managerial positions is common practice in Thailand in large businesses as well (i.e. The Mall Group rotates managers every 3 weeks). Their reason is more overt; managers are not allowed to build significant ties to subordinates and maintain distance for fear of favoritism or insubordination.

Teachers prefer to work for the public school system because of tenure (earned after 3 years) and valuable government benefits. Teachers who teach for private schools tend to choose private schools for the pay and opportunity for extra

income, since private school students are generally more affluent and will hire teachers to specially tutor.

#### General Equivalency Degree: Low or Alternative

For those who choose to leave the formal educational system and earn a GED, they attend classes for only one day per week and can earn up to an equivalent of a M6 degree.

There are three generally accepted causes for those who choose to study for a GED. 1) Those who study while working, 2) those who want to earn a degree for less schoolwork, and 3) those studying later in life in order to gain a degree for greater work/pay-scale opportunities. However, a GED is regarded as a lesser quality education and those who earn a formal M6 degree will typically be considered before those with a GED degree in a job application. However, one's marketability can be increased by furthering a GED education by a university education.

Many people from poor communities enroll in a GED program. It is considered very practical for those with limitations (for example, teenage pregnancy, necessity to work, or returning to school later in life).

**Poverty and Education**

Tina Jatong, a mathematics teacher at the Bangkapi school and a resident of a poor community, commented on students with poor backgrounds saying, “You actually can’t tell by the way a student performs, behaves or looks if they are from a poor background if the family is caring. More telling is a broken family background; those students, have a harder time with motivation, responsibility, and future-oriented perspective.”

Competition is intrinsically built into the Thai public school system. It is designed to stratify students according to educational merit and diligence. Those who lack motivation or encounter obstacles (such as economic pressures, family pressures, inconvenience) can be more easily discarded from the formal educational system.

It is currently quite popular for any one with means to hire private tutors or to enroll in special classes, which are often unaffordable for poor families. The lack of supplementary education can cause poor students to be at a disadvantage in the competitive atmosphere. And for families with a single income, children in school are a financial burden both regarding costs (school fees, additional costs) as well as a lack of an additional income. One student was forced to work when her father died so she could supplement her mother’s income and support her younger siblings’ education.

Further adding to the challenges facing poor families, culturally, males are encouraged to begin working and supporting family. Aside from a vocational concentration, the school system is also regarded to be quite female-oriented (as well as the work that an educated person is able to acquire), weighting education and economic opportunities towards females.

Tina later went on to talk about possible solutions for students. Her perspective is that students need a positive peer group, who could influence students to continue studies and offer encouragement in the face of obstacles. As a student who grew up in a poor community, she felt that the education system was accessible and navigable to poor students and provided valuable opportunities as long as a student could maintain motivation to remain (given he had the financial means). Especially for those students from broken family backgrounds, a positive peer group can provide the motivation and emotional support that a family might not be able to provide without applying too much pressure on the student.

It also appears that collaborative effort on an administrative level has proven quite effective, especially given the case of the Baan Bangkapi school. External programs such as “To Be Number One” or awards have provided enough to offer students free lunches, free uniforms, and a lower required school fee, making the school quite attractive. In addition, the extracurricular activities offered by these external programs make school attendance and participation attractive as well. Many students at that school commented on the great number of interesting activities they could participate in and that their closest friends were classmates rather than neighbors. They enjoyed going to school and expressed wanting to complete an education. It would seem then, that the upcoming challenge for these partnerships is then to develop and foster greater educational aptitude and quality. With student enrollment and cooperation, it would be a shame for their education to be neglected at school.





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