

Looking in, Looking out: Developing Roong Aroon International School

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Abstract

This was a submission for the third international Holistic Teaching and Learning Conference at Southern Oregon University, 2021: When Roong Aroon School decided to develop an international program, we expected challenges in merging our Buddhist, holistic, and traditional Thai values-based program with the IBO's international perspective and more western-values outlook. The ongoing project has continued to provide more growth opportunities, and self-reflection, than anticipated. As the initial driver of change of the program, Ms. James-Wyachai will reflect on her journey of collaboratively developing Roong Aroon International School with her Thai directors and the greater school community. Where coaxing integration of divergent thoughts and methodologies becomes a focus, many questions and opportunities arise.

Link to presentation slides with embedded video interviews with Sunisa Chuencharoensook, Victoria Subirana, Kupluthai Pungkanon (School Manager), Stacey Jones (Service Action and Personal Project Coordinator, PHE Teacher), Sharon Musiiwa (Training MYP Coordinator and Approaches to Learning Coordinator), Vijay Vardan Singh (IB Career-related Program Coordinator): <http://bit.ly/RAISreflections>

Keywords: *holistic education, international school, Thailand, Roong Aroon School*

Introduction

Roong Aroon School (RAS) is a long-standing, alternative Thai school opened in 1997 by K. Prapapat Niyom. I first joined the school in its development phase, with the goal of creating an English language program integrated with the Thai mainstream program. Today, RAS remains a uniquely holistic school in Thailand, dedicated to providing experiential learning opportunities to develop students as self-aware humans grounded in Buddhist principles, ready to meet the goals they determine for themselves. Dedicated to zero-waste and sustainable living practices, RAS also pursues phenomena-based field studies to help students develop deep understandings and values of local wisdom and communities. Even then, it was in my mind that it would be

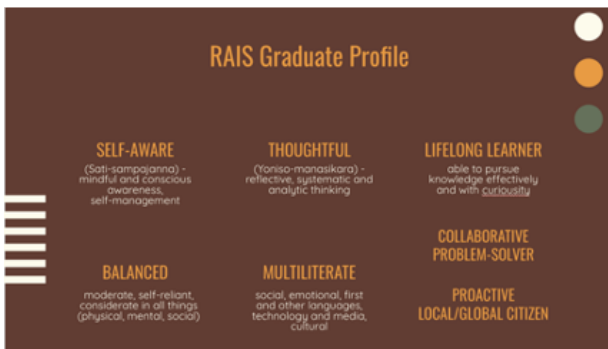
wonderful to have a school like this available for international students, as this kind of program wasn't common in any international schools at that time and in Thailand there wasn't anything else quite like it.

Over the years, the school leadership – Ajarn[1] Prapapat, K. Suwanna Chivapruk, K. Sunisa Chuencharoensook, and K. Sakunee Boonyabancha – frequently discussed opening either an English Program or International Program. After several years of research, the decision to do so was finalized in 2018. At this point, I had been working in International Baccalaureate (IB) schools for over 12 years, with experience as a Middle Years Program (MYP) workshop leader and unit plan reviewer. A series of coincidences led me to the

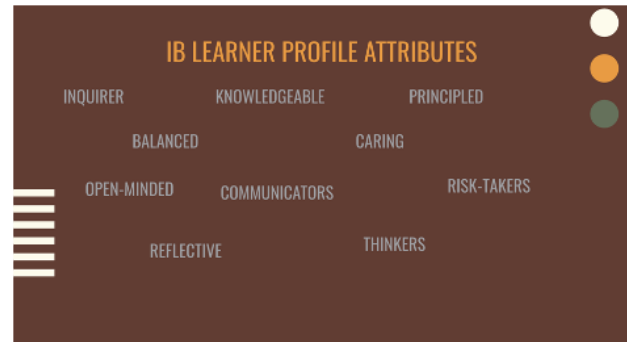
awareness that Roong Aroon wanted to add an international program, and I was asked to join the development team.

Process of foundational development

Although the international program is still a work in progress, the initial steps set an important foundation. We began first with important discussions about our core values and goals, considering how we might achieve our vision. K. Suwanna and I sat down to think deeply about what attributes we expected our graduating students to have – both at RAS and for the new program – and what we wanted them to develop within to take into the world with them. From these discussions, we determined seven qualities of a Roong Aroon graduate.



At this point, I had been working with the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO)’s Middle Years Program for multiple years, and the RAS leadership team had often looked into the IB programs throughout their research process. We could see a number of parallels between the IB program frameworks and the RAS pedagogical philosophy. While many people are aware of the IB’s Diploma Program (DP), which is very structured and exam-based, the MYP framework is quite different and one which aims to accommodate any curriculum. Both RAS and MYP develop critical and creative thinkers through inquiry-based learning and development of personal qualities. In the IB, these qualities are called “Learner Profile Attributes” and they correlated closely to the graduate profile we had outlined.



What I have observed in the IB schools that I have experienced either directly or as an MYP workshop leader, is that these attributes often come secondary to the academic instruction. However, our long-term practices at RAS base learning from the place of the student. This meant looking at the development of these attributes as essential and foundational to the academic learning process.

We next looked at our graduate profile, the IB Learner Attributes and the IB philosophy statement to consider our own school vision and mission. IB schools have to align with IB philosophy. Coming up with a clear statement to express our aspirations was not easy, but we could easily see how Roong Aroon either matched or extended much of the framework and pedagogical expectations of the IB MYP.



The second paragraph of our vision/mission statement is an essential understanding of our mission as a school to enable each of our students to transform. The idea of transformation – “from being a person who knows to being a person who is” – is intended for our whole school community. We are not just looking to actuate this transformation in students, but in all members of the community – teachers, staff, and even parents.

Ajarn Prapapat once advised us during a school-wide meeting, that whenever we have any situation, problem, or confusion with our students, it is important that we go back to our own practice, go back to ourselves, and reflect deeply

on what we are bringing into the classroom from within ourselves. Change must start from yourself. This is a core practice of our school and something we felt was important going forward; that everyone in our community – students, parents, staff, and teachers – be committed to these three points of self-development and community responsibility.

Next steps in creating our community

As you can imagine, finding teachers trained in holistic education and the IB Middle Years Program is not easy in Thailand. What is even more difficult is finding trained international school teachers who are willing to work in our very natural setting. Our school environment is a planned chaos of the jungle; we avoid using air conditioning and we also expect to be outdoors quite a lot doing community activities like cooking and cleaning. Our school buildings have an open plan which requires mindfulness to classroom sound levels, and we expect technology to be integrated meaningfully rather than used ubiquitously. A typical international school program, even the MYP, becomes very different when set in this enriched environment. Finding teachers who are willing to embrace the challenges is an ongoing recruitment refinement for us. We have to be quite clear and descriptive about our school setting, to the point that some prospective teachers have asked me during their preliminary interview, “Hey, are you trying to get me to join, or are you trying to scare me away?” Yet, we must be realistic about what teachers may face at Roong Aroon International School (RAIS) as there are physical, emotional, and psychological challenges to working in a sustainable, holistic, extremely collaborative, community-focused school. Some of our teachers might travel quite a distance to join us; therefore, it is critical that they understand our vision, values, ethos, and environment before making this commitment.



The admissions process is also undergoing development for similar reasons. Currently, the majority of our students joined us from RAS and so have grown up within this kind of

setting. That transition from the Thai to English academic program is mainly uncomfortable for them in terms of language and the different “cultures of doing” their foreign teachers bring. During admissions, we interview the students and their families to ensure they understand what we offer and will be able to persevere through the inevitable difficulties of learning a second language especially in a small-school setting. Soon, we hope to develop marketing to reach international families, as we feel we are ready to enlarge our community and integrate ourselves within the international community in Bangkok.

Creating opportunities for international mindedness to grow in our students is one aspect that has been very important for us. Because most of our students are Thai, it is not easy for them to experience the multicultural setting many other international schools have. The main way I sought to increase our global perspectives was by hiring teachers from as many different cultures as possible. While ideally a balance of different nationalities, genders and language backgrounds is what we aim for, our size, the applicant pool, our unique setup, and Covid-19 make this impractical to keep as a rigid requirement currently. However, we have been very fortunate despite these factors and have over ten nationalities represented amongst our teachers. Additionally, because English is an international language, different countries have adapted to their local needs, we seek out non-native English speakers who are fluent in the language and accurate in their expression – but retain their country’s accent, intonation and/or inflections in how English is used. In this way, students are able to learn how to understand the English of the world. Due to this variety, they can be flexible listeners, able to hear the English behind the accents, and thus truly be fluent in the language.

Finally, we also must consider what our students will be learning in Grades 11 and 12 because the MYP ends at Grade 10. While the IB Diploma Program (DP) is well known, it is very prescriptive and exam-based. However, their newest program, the IB Career-related Program (CP), provides students a blend of real-world experiences with typical in-class high school academic courses plus independent projects in language development and research into ethical dilemmas in their chosen field. The real-world connection comes through career-related studies consisting of university undergraduate courses provided by a number of colleges and universities worldwide, and the potential to develop partnerships with local universities as well. This is more aligned to Roong Aroon values and learning practices.

We are now in the process of developing this extension to our school program.

In process

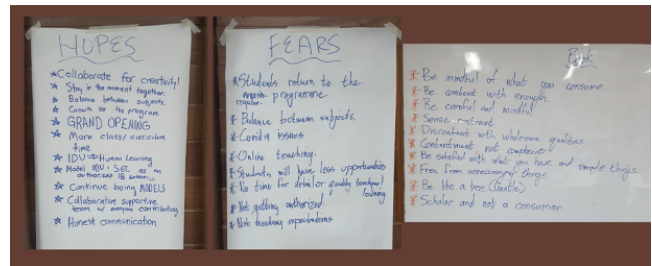
We opened Roong Aroon International School at the start of the pandemic; our first day happened during the first lockdown in Thailand. Schools around the world have had to cope with new learning formats, and for RAIS this presented even more challenges as our pedagogical practices are grounded in interaction, hands-on learning and community-based experiences. So, a lot of our goals continued to be aspirational as we moved through online, offline, and hybrid learning. The lack of field studies was keenly felt by all – field studies at RA, as noted earlier, are usually deeply connected to place and/or people, whether phenomena, activity, or project-based.



Because our field studies are very intense, often requiring students to immerse themselves in a village environment, and interact with people and take part in activities, we took our pioneer teachers on a few different field studies for them to immerse themselves in a similar experience and understand what the students would face. One of these took place at an area called “Khun Samut Jin,” which is actually sinking, not so slowly, into the Gulf of Thailand due to the effects of global warming and factories pumping aquifers. There, the teachers toured the village and temple to see the environmental and man-made problems and how the villagers and Thai government were managing them.

We also had many, many discussions with our teachers about their hopes and fears, trying to identify where we saw the school and what we wanted to see grow and improve, to create a shared mindset and understanding of each other. Our managing director, K. Sunisa, works closely with the teachers on mindset and daily life. One activity that provided a good understanding of core values was a shared reading of the book True Education Begins with Wise Consumption by

the monk Phra Brahmagnunabhorn (P.A. Payutto)[2]. The reading and discussion helped our teachers better understand daily life practices in school and our zero-waste practice, which includes many different waste management systems. When our students return in November, the teachers will have to work together with them to manage the recycling and composting processes.

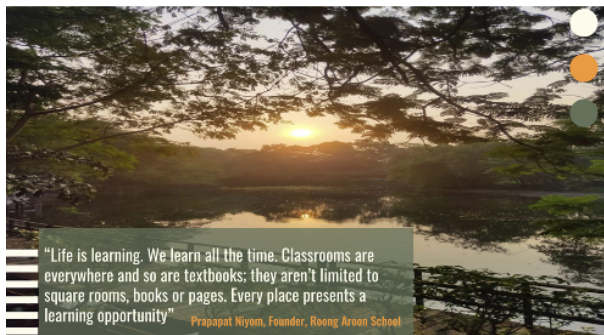


Added to the practical and personal practice side of teacher development, we had many official and school-based workshops on IB MYP practices so the community could understand different core elements of the MYP framework. As we are in the process of authorizing with the IB, there is much to come to terms with: requirements, terminology, processes, and practices. Overall, our teachers have had a very steep learning curve to take onboard the many different elements of our multifaceted school.

Although the school has a very lovely location on the edge of the lake, with our own sand area for the morning flag raising and chant, we are eagerly awaiting the completion of a new school building with our own library, science lab, and design studio. Even our architecture is mindfully planned. I recall when I returned to visit the school, remarking to Ajarn Prapapat that a new, five-story tall building seemed to counter her initial requirement that no buildings be taller than two-stories. She laughed, and told me “Well, Tamara, the trees grew.” At Roong Aroon, it is easy to forget that what seems like a natural jungle is actually a carefully planned environment aimed at providing students with different spaces for learning – from the lake where they can boat, get muddy, watch monitor lizards swim, and observe different water birds come to fish, to the playground surrounded by old growth banyan trees to climb in and sit on. Everything has been planned to provide areas for learning and exploration, inside and outside the buildings. There are even areas that involve a little danger so students can take risks and not feel like they are always in safely controlled spaces.

Developing shared personal practices

As RAS is steeped in Buddhist values and traditions, with many school events aligned with different Buddhist holidays and practices, it is important for us to consider how to create similar, non-denominational practices in mindfulness and what we call “mental maturity” within our international school. We recognize the value in how these practices help students and teachers thrive as individuals, and most international schools now include programs in what they call social-emotional learning (SEL).



I was fortunate that Ajarn Prapapat shared information about a teacher, Victoria Subirana, and a draft of her book *Pedagogy for Transformation*. During her more than 30-year career in education, K. Victoria created schools for disadvantaged children in Nepal. Her program involves a huge variety of very tangible, concrete activities which make the abstract concepts of emotions, ego, self-awareness, right speech, careful listening and self-observation accessible even to kindergarten students. We felt she could help us develop our mindfulness/SEL program and invited her to join our team.



Some of the activities we immediately put into practice were her “Ensemble for Evolution” which is a guided meditation and goal setting for personal improvement and integration. She also trained some of the teachers in activities for the students aimed at observing and managing our speaking, so we communicate truthfully from a place of usefulness and kindness. For this, she has an activity about changing

harmful messages until they are able pass three important stages of appropriate communication.

She also carried out an extended activity with our Grade 9 students called “The Iced Body” through which they explored the process of dying. As many cultures view the process of death and dying as a taboo subject, Victoria developed this activity to help students understand how knowing what happens in the mind and body during the end-of-life process is essential in helping us prepare ourselves to live our life fully, with compassion and joy, in readiness for that inevitable end time.

My favorite activity Victoria created is a way to understand how to analyze your thoughts. In this activity, one sits and observes one's thoughts, placing a black pebble for each negative thought and a white pebble for each positive thought. By training the mind to focus and not get caught up in these thoughts through this tangible action, it is easier to approach mindfulness of emotions in a way that is practical.

So, we actively look for ways to integrate these processes not just in homeroom time but also within academic subject teaching and learning. Mindfulness, self-awareness, interacting appropriately and with compassion – these are all considered important practices worthy of developing within all school activities.

Personal reflections & journey

When I was approached to give this presentation, I expressed how challenging it is for me to give any sort of finite report on the school project. I feel like I am swimming in the middle of a river – I can see the bank on this side and that side, but at the moment I'm just trying to stay afloat and move forward. William encouraged me to reflect on my journey through the development process, which helped me to pick up my head and look at the other people in this river with me. It was important to share their voices in the presentation as well, since this journey is not one I could take alone. I am extremely grateful for the people that have been with me, throughout my lifelong learning journey.

Roong Aroon is a place that allows you to grow – in fact, it really pushes and pulls at you to grow. Perhaps because of the emphasis on self-reflection, how we always “start with yourself” to make changes, it can be a very difficult place as well, emotionally. However, at Roong Aroon you are amongst like-minded practitioners: within the Buddhist tradition and our community, we believe in the idea of kalyanamitra, or “spiritual friend”, someone who will be with

you and reflect on your strengths and weaknesses with you. Each time I have been at Roong Aroon, I reach emotional breaking points because I am able to confront myself and have others reflect on this with me. My late husband used to ask me why I kept going back, having these experiences, but I believe it is because Roong Aroon is a community which expects that self-awareness and encourages continual self-development. It is okay that we are each still working through things. I know there are many things I haven't learned yet, and I feel I must get to the other side of many big understandings. I am grateful that Roong Aroon provides the space and community supportive of failure, exploration, and transformation.

My current journey with the RAIS project brought into focus an area that has been jumbling around my mind since college: the intersection of communication and culture. Many questions come into my mind during my work with RAIS: To what extent is our thinking a product of our culture? How much are we able to shift our thinking and communication? How does understanding another culture help us communicate better?

A presentation by Michio Kaku about humanity's survival being dependent on our becoming a global civilization made a big impression on me and highlighted for me that this global coming together would somehow hinge on communication and culture. At RAIS, most conflicts or misunderstandings come from our emotional response to something said or done in a different way from what we expected, or in a way that confronts or confuses our ideas of communication and action because of our different cultural identities.

Having a Thai husband and working in a Thai environment made me quite curious about the different ways the Thai and English languages are structured, how gestures can have different meanings, and the selection of information to be presented varies. I'm finding it interesting to observe how much the way we express ourselves can sometimes be almost opposite from the Thai or western perspective; how the language we speak and the culture we come from inform the way we think and respond. So, with our multicultural group of teachers, we are asking everyone to really change some foundational ways of thinking to find common ground in our understanding and communication styles.

For instance, Thai is a highly contextual language: how and what is communicated is informed on the where, when, and

who. The relationship of the speaker and listener deeply informs how you speak, and it is considered a non-confrontational culture in that problems are talked around rather than directly expressed and extreme emotions are to be avoided. Gesture, expression and what is not said are often more important than what is expressed. [3]

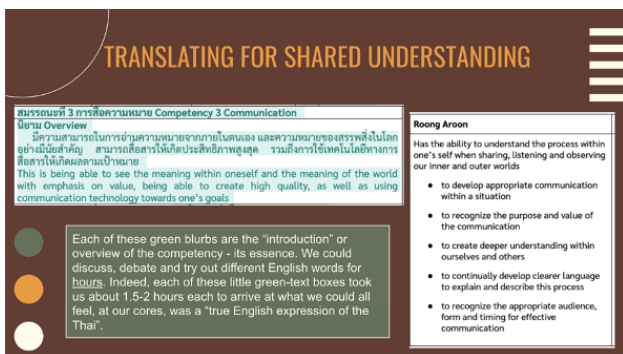
Please note, this is quite a generalized description based on my experiences and reading, and of course everyone – Thai or not Thai – is at their own place in terms of communication. Even when I say, "emotions are to be avoided", it is not exactly true in every instance, but it is more that when we receive or give communication there's emotion behind it which we need to be aware of and explore in order to not share negative emotion.

Western cultures communicate in a more transactional way. In terms of information sharing, we tend to be quite direct and often see confrontation as an acceptable way to challenge assumptions. We can get very emotional or push emotion with our communication – we are quite different in the way we frame our thoughts and develop our expressions.

So, one thing I've had to explore within myself is being aware of our language and where a response is coming from. I may say something with an intention of being clear and direct when, to another culture, that may sound aggressive and restrictive. The interpretation of terms and concepts vary greatly, too. What do we mean by "clean"? When we are working with the students to clean the classrooms, we teachers have to come and talk together to develop a shared understanding of what this means. This sometimes takes more than one discussion. I have learned that reaching a shared understanding takes a lot of time.

Even simple questions can create unexpected reactions. For instance, the question "Why?" can be quite loaded with emotion or judgment. An important mind shift someone presented to me was removing "why" and replacing it with "notice that". There is a different feeling between "Why are you doing it this way?" to "I'm noticing that you're approaching this problem in a different way than I would." Making that shift to more mindful communication, finding a gentler question to explore what it is that's being observed, is not easy but is so very, very important to creating a collaborative multicultural community.

One of the most meaningful activities I am grateful to have been part of was the translation of the new RAS competencies from Thai into English. RAS is shifting from grades-based evaluation to competencies based in Buddhist values and practices. We wanted to connect these competencies in the Thai school (RAS) with the IB Learner Profile attributes used in the international school (RAIS). At first, we all thought it would be simple – a rough translation then tidy that up, however, the concepts were quite deep and the meanings of the Pali terms in Thai quite complex. I asked for a meeting because I felt some of the terms needed discussion so a more accurate translation could be reached – this turned into several meetings. Sometimes, we could discuss one phrase for two hours just to reach a common point of understanding on the meaning in Thai and the correlating English word’s meaning.



This deep activity led to much more understanding about how we may have the same words yet understand them in completely different ways - even how the words have completely different feelings for each of us. Trying to fine-tune that understanding of the five competencies took a couple of months to arrive at an understandable English version that captured the core essence of the Thai version. I cannot adequately convey the physical sense of synchronicity felt when we hit a shared awareness of “yes, this is it”. It was such a meaningful experience for me, one which gave me a sense of belonging and collaboration that I don’t think I’ve ever felt before.

How we accommodate change differently is another point of interest that has been a focus during this project. I’ve lived in six different countries, with 42 different homes in 54 years of life – so, change is something that I see as routine even if uncomfortable. I am not afraid of a quick change. At Roong Aroon, changes happen at a slower pace, which was very difficult for me to accept at first. After time, though, I realized that it was because my Thai leadership wanted to thoroughly understand what that change meant, to reach

that shared understanding of the process and vision of the outcome. When a change happens in our community, it happens after deep understanding is reached. This means the change is likely to be more effective, long lasting and community owned. It is an essential shift of direction, with everyone coming to terms with the impact. It took me time to adjust to this different approach to change, but I can now appreciate the depth of intentionality behind the slower process.

Conclusion

In the 2022 Holistic Education Conference, David Marshak talked about the next evolution of humankind, and it resonated with this quote I used in my presentation, by Alan Watts:

“We seldom realize, for example, that our most private thoughts and emotions are not actually our own. For we think in terms of languages and images which we did not invent, but which were given to us by our society.”

This epitomizes for me the sense that we can be so trapped within our own language and culture that we might not even recognize it. Often, the discomfort we feel goes back to this, and we have to reevaluate those understandings and beliefs that we grew up with or that were given to us through our experiences.

The development of Roong Aroon International School represents for me a similar yearning and action to open up the understandings and beliefs we hold about education, about collaboration, about community, about responsibility, about self-awareness. We may still be “in the middle of the river” but maybe, just maybe, with time, patience and openness to being with ourselves and with each other, we will find our common humanity, we will teach to that common humanity, and we will instill in our students the hopes and collective wisdom they will need to ensure a more positive, compassionate, and sustainable future for humanity.

Updates: RAIS was authorized in January 2022 to provide the IB-MYP and in August 2022 to provide the IB-CP. The combined efforts and collaboration of our leadership, teachers, staff and entire Roong Aroon community made it possible for us to manage these authorizations in relatively short spans of time and during the Covid-19 pandemic. We have just opened for our third year, all back in school and working hard to keep our community safe so we can stay

learning in person. We have extended our Management Team and added a Head of School. It is an exciting time full of potential for growth, deeper learning and strengthening our community.

References

[1] “Ajarn” is a Thai term meaning “revered teacher” and is often used as a term of respect for those whose wisdom allows others to see more clearly and develop self-awareness.

[2] Payutto, P. A. (2016). True Education Begins with Wise Consumption (R. Moore, Trans.; 2nd Impression ed.). Phlidamm Publishing.

[3] My readings into the differences between communication styles began with this book: Holmes, H., Tangtongtavy, S., & Tomizawa, R. (1997). Working With the Thais: A Guide to Managing in Thailand (New Ed). White Lotus.

Acknowledgement

Tamara Louise James-Wyachai first worked with Roong Aroon School in 1996 to develop an English language program integrated with the Thai mainstream curriculum. Returning to the United States, she was accepted into the New York City Teaching Fellows and Americorps programs through which she received her MS Ed and teaching certification. In 2004, she came back to RAS to work with the high school English language program until it was clear that her daughter could not process her learning in Thai. At this point, Tamara began her journey into the IBO and her dream for an international Roong Aroon School. After 12 years with IB schools in Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia, becoming a workshop leader for the Middle Years Program and a curriculum reviewer for the MYP Building Quality Curriculum service, Tamara returned to Roong Aroon International School in 2019 where she is currently the Academic Director.