

A School of Heart and Spirit: A Dialogue with Prapapat Niyom and Paul Freedman

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Abstract

Prapapat Niyom is a founder of a gem of a school, The Roong Aroon School (RAS) in Bangkok Thailand. In many ways, RAS exists as a model for holistic teaching and learning for educators around the world. Here, *HER* Editor, Paul Freedman joins Niyom in dialogue about the school's history, core beliefs and practices. The first half of the text below consists of a written correspondence. The second half is the transcription of a subsequent video call. Please enjoy this glimpse into the charming humor as well as the deep wisdom that characterizes Prapapat Niyom's tremendous gift to the children of Bangkok and to the educators of the world.

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Paul: Could you tell a brief version of the origin story of RAS? Who was involved? What resources did you have?

Prapapat: Almost a decade prior to 1997, the year of Roong Aroon settling, the Thai education reform movement had been started. A number of senior influencers or leading scholars had strongly supported it at either the national policy level or practitioner level. According to their different backgrounds and roles such as medical doctors, senior monks or spiritual leaders, socio-cultural philosophers, community leaders, scientists; physicians and neurologists, and educators they recommended very interesting approaches from different angles which widely benefited the deeper learning practices. Fortunately, our corporate team under an umbrella of Plan Architect Company already had connections with some of those senior people to be advisors to our publication in early childhood development and a kindergarten school pilot project. The first investment of this kindergarten was the group of 99 shares who committed to handle this business for good. They didn't require a profit payback but expected to establish a dream

model of a good empathetic school for children. Later on as well as most businesses our company faced the global economic crisis of that time while we planned to settle a holding company on the new site, the existing site of RAS. We then decided to break down into several small separate companies as a self-sustainable business. This large plot of land rented from an Islamic foundation was agreed to invest for an expansion of the kindergarten to a basic education school. In the short-term RAS was supported from both academic and business visions and contributions from many well-wishers/partners whom we owed invaluable assets. The only way of payback was with promising gratitude to make their dream come true.

Paul: What was your initial inspiration for RAS ? You were an architect at the time, correct? What gave you the courage to pursue this audacious project?

Prapapat: Before the first start of RAS, I was teaching architecture at Chulalongkorn University for almost 20 years and was always wondering why my students could not manage their system thinking especially on the critical

design concept of their own imagination. In addition, my daughter who finished her middle school (grade 9) had no idea of her own interest to select any further subject at the high school level. She reflected the feelings of knowing nothing about her own wishes or any dream of her future life. What kind of schools were they experiencing through their long years of learning? Besides these two cases I even had direct experience with the most critical and challenging situation in my life, the case of my son. In his early years he was diagnosed as a slow learner by the Asperger spectrum, a part of Autistic syndrome. The doctors suggested to me to train and support him in each difficulty as well as with the unfolding of his ability in a very positive way in order to confirm the possibility of development. I tried to study from several resources and finally found remarkable books about the psychology of special education or how to support the learning deficiency of children by Dr. Pramown Dickinson, 1989. Her books mentioned about a miracle and unlimited power of the human ability to learn that could shape or transform one's life to reach an utmost goal. She also referred to and elaborated on Buddha's teaching in a very delicate way. I was inspired and simultaneously applied this method of learning through self experiences with my son. Astonishingly, I found myself able to learn to engage in empathetic listening towards verbal and nonverbal messages with agreeable understanding to each other. Certainly, our relationships were developed day by day even though I still faced some failures or obstacles related to my own irritable tempers. In accordance with this, I tried to study backwards into the self regulation since it seemed that the one major factor of learning availability should be the trainer's full awareness while another one be the learner's contemplation. Since then, I have been practicing mindfulness meditation and realized that I should contribute this valuable lesson learned to the other beneficiaries from the education system. Shortly, I've confidence and belief in the Buddha's words about a pair of factors in creating the highest stage of learning which is "an empathetic friendly teacher together with a contemplative-minded learner."

Paul: Initially did you have a clear vision for what you wanted to create?

Prapapat: Of course, I had a first rough idea and imagination about the school as a second home for children and a greenery experimental ground for them to expose into the wide natural world. Certainly, most architects were trained to visualize their thinking along with spaces and functions which need to be integrated with major conceptual interpretations of designed content. It meant the style of

learning process/ practices. During that time, my family and I had a chance to explore and visit several schools in the UK and USA in order to respond to my daughter's curiosity to see the different kinds of schools in a worldwide vision, before she decided to choose a Waldorf school in the UK for her high school studying. I also visited the Schumacher College in Dartington, UK, which was so impressive in a natural basis of learning with the living culture, and reminded me of the Buddhist approach to authentic meaning of education, "Life is Learning or Learning is Life." Actually, back to my early school life experiences, I was in a rather unique private school in Bangkok which unconsciously influenced my self-directed learning style by several routines and extra event activities. Amazingly, it was a small school with wooden buildings but having a blackout cinema house (a real one! with a piano on the front stage) and a large performing theater situated at the bank of the Chao Phraya River. Students were nurtured to be well-rounded or capable in relation to all things and persons. Accordingly, these valuable experiences were implanted into my subconscious mind and waited to revitalize whenever the right time would come.

Paul: How would you describe RAS pedagogy? Where did it come from?

Prapapat: The first core concept, of course focused on "Learning is life or Life is Learning" which was developed underneath faith in the utmost wisdom of mankind (homo sapient sapient). Such belief was interpreted into the complicated methodology referred to in the Buddha's words about highest state of learning, "Whenever the dawn (Roong Aroon) has appeared the following consequence of the highest rising sun is undeniable." In more details, the dawn or Roong Aroon was the metaphor of a set of 7 components, starting from an influential outer factor "Galayanamitta," an empathetic friendly teacher or message (7 characters : beloved, respectful, scholarly wisdom, being able to give a right speech at a right time and place, enduring and stable, capable in presenting or explaining complex messages to be easily understood as well as being whatever he/she teaches, being a righteous role model) and ending with an inside factor "Yoniso Manasikara," or skillfully directing attention or wise reflection (applicable through 10 methods: investigating causes and conditions, analyzing component factors, reflecting in accord with the 3 universal characteristics, reflecting in accord with the Four Noble Truths (used for solving problems), reflecting on that relationship between the goals and the principles of things, reflecting on the advantage of things and on the escape

from them, reflecting on the true and counterfeit value of things, reflection in order to rouse wholesome qualities, reflection by dwelling in the present moment, and reflection corresponding to analytic discussion). Accordingly, these root causes of learning methodology were applied into the RAS pedagogy by basing on the real-life situations and integrated learning holistically. It was aimed to the learner outcomes of interconnectedness or value-based competencies (values-skills-knowledge). This concept of learning was inherited into every learning unit either each core subject or integrated ones. In designing each lesson plan, every teacher has to contemplate with the first question to identify the valuable objectives, “why do students need to learn this, does it have any impact on the development of their lives in any dimension and how meaningful is it to them ?” Therefore, RAS played its role as a teacher training institute since then.

Paul: What were some of the earliest obstacles or surprises that you encountered in RAS’s early years?

Prapapat: Of course, the hardest task but not surprisingly that we faced in RAS’s early years was the teacher’s mindset as we were shifting from conventional teacher teaching to learner’s learning approach based on a value system of thinking. Imagine how difficult it was to recruit the ready-made teachers exactly matching to our pedagogy. There’s no choice but to recruit everyone who either shared the same dream of us or at least were willing to tryout and be trained on the job. RAS teachers’ job descriptions were very odd and difficult to understand especially for Thai teachers who were trained and graduated from conventional program of study. That’s why later on we selected those who graduated from other background subjects and trained them to work with RAS pedagogy and found the better short cut. Certainly, as long as we believed in the human capability to learn, ten years later we decided to start Arsomsilp Institute of the Arts and offered the Holistic Education program of study, in Diploma, Bachelor and Graduated programs in order to provide the training for RAS teachers and others from our networks. The program of study was mainly concentrated on the teachers’ inner transformative learning practices to encourage their core values of love and compassion and to share them to students through each lesson.

Paul: Describe the school today. Whom does RAS serve? Who are the key stakeholders?

Prapapat: Along with the RAS school vision and intentions to be “a not-for-profit organization” and to serve the betterment of the Thai educational development nationwide, today RAS is still managed in 3 major departments, Kindergarten, Elementary and Secondary school. The new and latest department, an “International Baccalaureate Program,” has just been settling this academic year. The whole organization was legally registered as RAS Company Ltd., while the main shareholder (over 95%) was the RAS Foundation. The foundation committee was legally approved and joined with the school board in directing and supporting the school mainly on visionary objectives, roles of contribution and development in all dimensions. They were composed of those renowned scholarly leaders, parents, and alumni representatives together with the 4 heads of the 4 departments.

Paul: Describe Arsomsilp and its relation to RAS?

Prapapat: Due to the first important goal of creating a special teacher training program of the so called “Holistic Education” or “Value-based Education” approach, RAS foundation decided to directly support an investment for Arsomsilp Institute of the Arts (ASI) in the higher education program, at its first anniversary. Besides its Holistic Education program, ASI also started the other programs of study for a broader social engagement; Architecture for Social & Environmental Development and Social Entrepreneur programs. Therefore the value-based learning method was further applied for the higher education in trans-disciplinary forms of the work-based professional program of study such as architectural design projects, including: single buildings, environmental concern real estate complexes development, a national parliament complex, community development projects in several approaches (resettlement, elderly health care, old town or cultural and environmental conservation, eco-tourism, etc.), several environmental friendly hospital complexes, a BKK central self-sustainable park and other urban development projects. Moreover, ASI also provides the pre-degree study program for those disadvantages such as the secondary school students in the rural area and self-sufficient social entrepreneurs.

Paul: How is Yoniso Manasikara “wise reflection” embodied throughout RAS?

Prapapat: The above explanation about the background concept of RAS pedagogy has shown the Yonisomanasikara played its important role of an inner factor to the highest

state of one's learning. An application of this methodology was inserted into every single lesson plan prepared or designed by every teacher in a pattern of O-L-E related system. In order to make sure that the value was interpreted from the very beginning in Objectives and was transferred to appear in the Learning activities/processes till the last stage of Evaluation formatively. Though this task in the first hand was found rather difficult for teachers but after a few Yoniso Manasikara practices they realized that every single thing has interconnection to all living beings as well as non-living things in this universe. After reflection in the group, their visions happened to move forward to self-actualization about one-own self that is not separated from others or things, all beings were interconnected and relied on each other's devotion. At that state of mind most of them have the feeling of gratitude and respect to the values of others. Their visions are broadened and able to identify the values behind each content of knowledge or skill to be learned meaningfully to students. Actually, this difficult process of lesson plan design needs collective or team working together. Accordingly, the support settings are created in the regular schedule such as PLC (Professional Learning Community) or CRC (Classroom Reflection for Changes) to assist the group working together in both preparing a lesson plan (Before Action Review - BAR) and in reflection after class (After Action Review - AAR).

Paul: What makes RAS absolutely unique? Does it have relevance for other schools/ districts/ provinces / ministries?

Prapapat: RAS has performed a uniqueness that emerged from the Buddhist Approach "Life is learning or Learning is life" which strongly advocated its physical appearances and learning culture, different from other schools. The natural environment is at the first sight an image which dominates the rest of the physical setting; buildings and ground waiting for students to explore into the unlimited classroom or vast learning space and activities. All kinds of routines happened even from the first stepping into the school that are considered accountable for the learning space and activities as much as the classroom learning units, contemplative arts wings, studios and labs. The zero-waste management including a wastewater treatment system, fertilizer station, and kitchenette at the back balcony of every classroom etc. are valuable training platforms which have resulted in everyone's (students, parents, teachers and all staff) behavior of sustainable living. Another signature of RAS is the real life / phenomenon/ problem-based learning projects which allow students to wonder elsewhere depending on their project theme; for instance, the grade 5

project of "a rice plantation in RAS plot of land and staying and learning with farmers in the villages" or another example of the grade 6 project of "from pipe water in RAS tracing back to the original source in the upcountry forest".

No doubt that RAS teacher teams on behalf of the RAS Foundation have been contributing their times and experiences for other schools through several training workshops, either regular open-classroom for visitors to RAS or spending weekends to different provinces throughout the country, including special training workshops for the monk teachers to teach Buddhism in government schools. The RAS classrooms, especially the kindergarten have regularly openings for the student-teachers from many different universities for their last year of real class practices. Of course, I and RAS leaders are always invited to join meetings or committees of some departments of the Ministry of Education and others. The ASI team is also always launching research in important issues of impact to the policy development for instance the "Development of the local organization in supporting pilot schools to develop their own school competency-based curriculum in 8 provinces under the government sandbox project of Innovative Area-based Education Promotion Act" funded by the Office of Research Funding for Area-based Development. In conclusion, both RAS and ASI are not solely stand-alone organizations but are engaging their hands with several organizations and networks for the purpose of holistically developing people and social development.

Paul: Where will RAS go from here? What do you hope to accomplish in the next quarter century?

Prapapat: The next generation of RAS should help reveal its future opportunities. I myself regularly prefer to spend more time for the mindfulness meditation in Payoa province, northern Thailand. This place is settled to offer the free training course especially for female practitioners. I was asked to be a chairman of this foundation and assist with the training activities. However, I believe that RAS still has advantages for keeping its life cycle in this rapidly changing world and could be able to sustain its structure, mechanisms and learning culture onward.

Video call: July 29, 2022

Paul: Thank you so much, Prapapat for your time today

Prapapat: Thank you. I have to thank you too for giving me this kind of special opportunity.

Paul: So, let's start today with... one thing I felt I wished to get more from you about is the feeling of Roong Aroon School, particularly...try this...as an experiment. Imagine you were a child, perhaps in the Kindergarten and you are entering the school on a school day. What is it like? What do you notice? What do you see and feel? What do you look forward to during your day? If you could give me a little texture...through the eyes of a child.

Prapapat: You have to understand my background, when I was a child. You know, I didn't pay much attention with the learning, with the subjects. But *play* you know... play all day!

Paul: Yes!

Prapapat: That was the great thing I had in my childhood. I played every day. So, if I entered Roong Aroon, you know, every place, every corner, invites me to play. (laughs)

Paul: Yes!

Prapapat: That is what encourages me to come to school.

Paul: Yes! I'm sorry to interrupt, but we as adults are so obsessed with school as the training for work, instead of allowing it to be the place of natural emergent joy! And play! And this is the time, you know, when children can fall in love... with learning, with one another, with their teachers, and we spoil it for them. (laughs)

Prapapat: (laughs) Yeah, we spoil this for children. And, you know when children play, they learn most. They learn best. And they learn as much as they love. So this is very important to me. To go to school to play. To play with everything. With animals, in the school... that's a big thing for children.

Paul: Are there animals at Roong Aroon?

Prapapat: Oh yes! A lot of... we have a big pond. So that invites several species of birds. And the alligators [monitor lizards]. (laughs). And children, they never are afraid of animals. They remember each one, and the specific habits of each animal. They give them names. Every animal has a name! And a flock of geese. They love to take care of these animals. And insects... everything.

Paul: Yes, it is really interesting the way in which animals, for humans, can be the gateway into observation, into compassion and understanding. I'm not sure why that is. Animals maybe are particularly not judgmental, not

threatening. They just accept you. And then you can accept them. Maybe.

Prapapat: Once, one goose, he was the head of the flock, and was very old and sick. The Kindergarten students tried to help him. They said that when someone is sick we have to bring him/her to the doctor, as well as this goose. The teacher asked them, how can you bring this goose to the doctor? You need to have some money. (laughs) They said, okay, we will prepare cookies for sale, a week later they did that and collected some amount of money. Then they brought the goose to the veterinary clinic in front of RAS. When the doctor saw a goose come in, he said, don't bring the goose inside, it will make things very dirty. He asked the kids, please go back and clean the goose first, and then come back again. So they brought him back and washed the goose. They took a big piece of cloth and carried the goose to the clinic again. The doctor gave the medicine and said that the goose was very old, so he can't move. He just stayed or sat still, as resulted to a wound below his leg, like a bed sore. The children brought it back to school and designed a cradle for the goose from using the long piece of cloth, Thai traditional multipurpose cloth. They cut two holes to let the goose's leg go down, so he wouldn't hurt his wound. This kind of play and learning activity created a close relationship between the children and the goose. They just have empathetic feelings to the goose, and like to take care, like a member of their family. They have learned a lot such as how to maintain their strong intention to help a sick animal, how to plan their activities, how to negotiate with adults for alternatives, how to face every obstacle and to collaboratively manage ways of solving these problems.

Paul: That's such a beautiful story; it's really sweet. Do you feel like that capacity that children have to care, to be empathetic, do you think that is naturally emerging in all children? Do you think something about RAS or school in general or teaching in general can cultivate that capacity for compassion? Or do we need to just leave children alone?

Prapapat: Yes, I think both sides! From the children it naturally happens, like that. Like they never discriminate against animals (laughs) and at the same time, our school mentioned the important role of taking care of creatures and environment. That's why this is a safe place for every creature, and why the teachers understand and encourage the students to go out and have relationships with all kinds of natural atmosphere and these animals.

Looking at this splendid moment of these three boys, about ten years old, learning of a natural wonder ecosystem. They came to me one time with a kind of amazement and excitement to tell this story to me. They found that the beetles, the red ones are the safe guard to a big tree from the poison fungi who is the enemy of the plant because these small fungi are the beetle's food. They proudly showed me how to put this kind of beetles settling on to the tree trunk. They found this phenomenon by themselves, and this was so cool. (laughs) They were so excited, to tell this story to me! This is amazing!! They learned by themselves.

Paul: Through presence and observation...

Prapapat: Yes. Yes. So I thought they should have a lot of time in observing this phenomenon much more than they're interested in the classroom (laughs).

Paul: Right, right! Yeah, it seems that at least in the children around me, increasingly at younger ages, they don't often observe with presence. They're very, we all as a society, are very distracted. We're on our phones, and we are playing our video games. And the children are obsessed with their television characters and so on. And so I imagine as we talk about what naturally emerges, *and* how it is cultivated intentionally by the school. And that you say both are true. That the school must consider that as valid and critical learning. That it's not a distraction from their studies.

Prapapat: RAS supports the teachers in doing this and encouraged them to bring the students in field study, all the time, at least 3 times a year. For example, the field study of grade 2 students is going out to the community around the school which is situated in a canal network. They went on the boats to visit the community people along the canal. The teachers have to design this kind of project by integrating into their lesson plans, social study, science or mathematics for the students to learn on their own interests. And children always unexpectedly investigate into some kind of intangible issue. (laughs) You know, not only the perspective of the physical image, but they usually have all kinds of imagination and figure out intangible issues behind. Like when they travel along the canal community, they saw a lot of garbage in the canals, and they asked the question, 'how do the houses along the canal manage their waste?', and 'how they communicate with the houses on the opposite side?' They ask these kinds of questions. The teachers should recognize this kind of learning and have them reflect on this issue together so they learn a lot from their own interest.

Paul: That's beautiful. So I'm capturing words and phrases from what you've said, and I have on my paper, "play," "imagination," "reflection," "community." These are very important to me and to all proponents of holistic education. "Empathy," "Compassion." Is there a role, and what is the role for what we would call traditional academics too: maths and reading and writing? Is that central to RAS? Incidental? Tangential? Integrated, as you say?

Prapapat: Yeah, we arrange our pedagogy in four learning areas: The first is the routine activities. These activities are the best practicing space for them to cultivate the self regulation habits. They have to look after their own classrooms and toilets, cleaning as well as daily cooking their own lunches and waste recycling management. Then, the second one is the core subjects learning area : Maths, languages, sciences and social studies. The third one we call the Integrated Learning unit in which we integrate the life experiences, the phenomenon around us or some big issues in our society, basing on the main theme of the year roughly planned ahead by teachers but be opened enough for students' interests happening on the way. The integrated learning units usually are the project-based ones, either problem-based, phenomenon-based or community-based in any authentic situations. This learning area is the most important requirement for offering students' space and time to explore into each one's own special caliber or capacities. The fourth one we call healthy mind and body. By the way, parents seemed to be worried of how far the core subjects cover the national/global standards. We have to ensure them and prove in students' achievement, both outputs and outcomes. Accordingly, RAS trains our teachers not to teach but to coach the students to learn by themselves towards self-directed learning. So teachers have to watch and interpret the situations that happen in our lives and post them to the students to analyze how this happened and in which kind of subjects they could recognize and combine to this real situation related to the content of each core subject. So it's a kind of "real-life based core subject."

You may have heard about the "open approach" & Lesson Study, a learning methodology from Japan. That's very interesting. We had a chance from Professor Dr. Maitree Inprasit, Khonkan University who brought our teachers to visit this process in Japan. This way of learning intentionally and systematic open learning space for each student to observe the posted situation and to analyze it into mathematics on one's own learning process or style. That's great!

Paul: Great, yes! I think mathematics in particular for many children becomes such an abstraction. There's nothing concrete about it. And I think if we can explicitly connect mathematical thinking and reasoning and analysis with something experienced, that can be very important.

Prapapat: I usually guide the teachers by asking one critical question. "Why do you have to teach mathematics? Why do you have to teach logarithms? Can you tell me how this kind of subject is meaningful for children. After having been asked this question, the teachers get back to find the answers. I also challenge them that if you cannot give me the answer... the proper answer, then just let the children play. Don't have them in the class to learn. (laughs)

Paul: That's great! What about art and creativity? How does that find its way into Roong Aroon?

Prapapat: Yes, that's very fascinating stuff in our school. We have very, very big art workshops in visual arts, such as pottery, weaving, wood cutting, painting, knitting, Thai traditional paintings and others. While music and performing arts join in RA-Pop Orchestra as well as Thai musical bands join with Thai traditional performance; "Khoan" or Ramayana pantomime. These arts activities spread in a large area and are exposed to everyone in the school. Each year teachers and students set up a large art exhibition. We invite very renown artists to come to the school to talk and demonstrate art work with the children. The exhibition programs are arranged in three weeks. The first week will be the work of the renown artists. The second week we will exhibit art works from teachers and parents. The third week will be students' work. Why do we have to put them at the last week? Because their works are just amazing and a big thing for us. If we put them in the first week, no one will come to the second and third week. (laughs). Every year, it's always great, a really, really prosperous one.

RAS has this key word "contemplative arts" as a guideline for the arts by practicing through inside reflection. When students work with the arts, they are normally concentrating with themselves. The teachers may notice some kind of difficulties students are facing. Teachers will guide them to self-reflection by asking simple questions, "how do you feel?" and "how do you react with that feeling of your own?" The students easily draw back into their own feelings inside, get in touch with that and mindful recognize as a kind of emotion in a short moment, then disappear. So these kinds of contemplative arts help them a lot to detach from

those uncertainty irritations. Especially pottery is more advantageous. Since the nature of clay never depends on you in an opposite way, you have to make a great effort to understand the clay and yourself otherwise you cannot make the pottery. (laughs). Never!

Paul: I feel like clay in particular of the different media in arts, is so, in its nature, kinesthetic and tactile and engages the body in an important way.

Prapapat: And you touch it. You touch it always.

Paul: Perhaps this is a uniquely American phenomenon, though I would guess you see it too. Sometimes we have parents who have chosen our school, and on some level they believe in what we're doing, but they also are skeptical. They have questions about attending to a goose as legitimate education, or all the time spent in art, or whatever. Do you ever have parents and families who are questioning a bit what you're up to, and how does that look?

Prapapat: Yes, some of them may have this kind of response, especially when their kids are coming up to the upper level. They're skeptical by the competition of standard test scores or are afraid of changing to other schools, even though they were also satisfied with their kids' ability to learn or whole child development. In responding to this controversy, firstly, RAS has to realize the parents' worries and their expectations with empathy and without conflict. Annually, we arrange the open house at the beginning of the academic year (or sometimes term) to present the parents with the learning roadmaps of every subject area, including the time table and the field study plan in order to grasp the whole picture and have confidence of those explicit contents. While at the end of every term (3 terms a year) we provide a students' presentation week which is created through varieties of catalysts that have resulted from the critical learning outcomes. We call this "a drop of wisdom" which are so meaningful to everyone in the school especially the students. They dedicate all their mights to this collaborative task: design and plan ahead, preparing every stuffs, rehearsal for the most powerful play, and etc. It's a wonderful and beyond expectation week. Certainly, parents realize how great are their kids' capabilities. Secondly, normally the children prefer to do the artworks after the school instead of rushing back home. And while the parents are waiting for them, they touch an atmosphere of the self-directed learning from their children. That makes parents understand something. The children can manage themselves, and never let the parents have tension on them.

Students have strong structure inside, they're quiet and stable. They can control – they have self-regulation. These are all factors to fulfill parents' satisfaction and understanding.

Paul: What else should I know? What would you like the world to know about your grand experiment in Bangkok and what you've learned? Are there lessons for other educators that you'd like to share?

Prapapat: Of course, I've learned a lot. The most valuable one and confirm my belief is that "Human's life is (Valued) Learning" which has no limitations for everyone to learn. Accordingly, school should be a holistic learning space for children, not a teaching space for teachers. I found from RAS that beyond being empathetic teachers, they should be role models of enthusiastic learners and ready to be learning partners with children.

During the past few years, I had opportunities to extend this concept and methodology to more than 400 of public and private schools throughout the country. Arsomsilp and RAS staffs joined as coaching teams in both research projects for Area-based Innovative Education (a government sandbox for education reform) using the "Whole School Transforming" interventions in two provinces and using "Empowerment Coaching" in eight provinces, and another big training projects initiated by the Office of Private Education Commission for the development of school based curriculum (basic education), from conventional standards based to competency based curriculum. I was on one of the committees in preparing the core curriculum framework. But it's not an easy task at all because despite the uncertain political will of the Cabinet, even though they tried to launch the national education reform strategies, the whole system still maintained an old one, especially their mindsets. So you can imagine how difficult it is to move through the dilemma.

However, after training workshops, most of the schools have been experiencing with the new mindsets of holistic learning which helped move their inspirations onward beyond the conventional ones. It seemed that we worked so hard in dedication to children, in turn, Arsomsilp and RAS benefited most valuable assets in exposing as well as reflecting ourselves and developed a meaningful engagement with the whole society. Finally, we realized that mindful self-awareness is the core powerful contribution in all training processes. The evidence was that we started off our broad mission from a few numbers of our team coaches, and at present there emerged large numbers of voluntary

coaches who were transformed to be champions from every workshop. They now willingly and happily joined us to be coaches in training the following groups onward. Although this collaborative team worked very hard on this big burden but the workshops were designed in a way of "learning together", sharing the great experiences from each other so the more we give - the more we gain. Each 3-day onsite workshop had 200 numbers of directors and teachers set for each region, from north to central and eastern to north-eastern and to the south region. In addition to those onsite workshops, the sequential online workshops still are waiting all through the year, probably for next year.

We found that the school personnel, directors and teachers were eager and willing to change. They just needed the inspiration and how to face "Do and Don't". In the workshop, coaches just didn't teach them but accompanied through series of hands-on activities to allow them to work on it, understand, reflect and realize by themselves on changing their mindsets. For instance, the laser boat sailing, it's a first time in their lives, being alone on board in the sea and the wind. Our late king Bhumipol who was a champion with gold medal award in Asian Games, once reflected that "Sailing a boat teaches one to think and to do by oneself since during the trail there's no guide to instruct how to do with such strong wind blowing and deciding whether to confront or wait otherwise the boat suddenly sinks. In an opposite way, the light wind teaches one how to sail onward as well as how to deal without wind. If Thai students can cope with sailing and learning to deal with the wind and be able to conduct the right direction, they will be able to apply to their lives in whatever activities or works without failure or loss because of understanding of using life skills nurtured from self-directed thinking and doing."

Later on, this group of directors became Super Coaches. They led the teachers' team to create their own school concept that they never had before, by analyzing their own potentials, the advantage context of their school and communities around, and the parents, then projected to the future scenarios of their children. They synthesized all these factors into a school concept and were very proud to design the school curriculum accordingly with a very clear end result.

Paul: Since we're onto the subject of the landscape, the other schools that are out there and how RAS might fit into that landscape, I'm just curious, it's a bit of a tangent from our focus today, but – In America, the disparity between private schools and public schools, and the funding sources;

and even within public education, there's a great range of capacities, of financial resources available. Particularly in cities, urban schools really struggle for funding. And so even the beautiful ideas of art space and access to nature feel inaccessible. And sometimes as I speak about holistic education, they seem irrelevant to the *needs* of some public schools. I wonder about in different places in the world, how that landscape might be different, or maybe that's just always the way it is with education. I wonder as you travel to the different regions in Thailand and speak to the private school communities for example, are there very different circumstances that educators are facing in Thailand?

Prapapat: Yes. Very different from each other and different culture and different language also. But however, we didn't raise the words of holistic, but we have to start from their own nature, their own interest, their own anxiety, whatever. And get into their mind. Human beings you know (laughs) love to be recognized and understand the relationship to each other. And I find the conventional style of the school, the directors and the teachers never work in a team. That's the big difficulty. So I just mentioned this to our team that we have to find some kind of mechanism or interventions to let them understand how much more profitable it is to work in a collaborative team and you will be happy. So we design this kind of activity in a small group. When we have participants in a workshop, like 130 - 200+ people, we break out into different small groups and they can discuss together. It's very different from previous atmosphere in that school. They never have had a group discussion. The principal/director of the school is very high and has the role of regulator and never works side by side with the teachers. So when they touch this kind of working together as a team, it just opens up their minds. One big feeling those conventional management schools found in common after training was the new school culture which we called the "Learning Organization". This might be called the Learning Ecosystem which easily aligned with the nature of "Human's Life is Learning."

Paul: I think in education, so much of the work, and maybe particularly for the teacher despite the fact that they are surrounded by people, specifically children, it can feel very isolating. You do feel like you're on your own, figuring this out. And I think the collaborative potential of educators together and certainly for the bureaucrats, for the managers and administrators, they must, they must talk to teachers! And see the reality as they're setting policies.

We're close to the end of our time. I'm wondering as you reflect back on RAS and its founding, and maybe you come for a visit next week, and you see the hum of what you have helped to create. Your sense of pride, your sense of accomplishment... what are you proudest of, what makes you smile?

Prapapat: Oh, our students. That makes me smile. A wide smile!! At the moment that I step into the school, especially the young students. They love to come to me and circle around me. And try to have a conversation with me. Sometimes questions, sometimes they have a story to tell me. They like to start a conversation with me. Even though they have a small vocabulary or limited language. But they try. And they try to find... one of the Kindergarten kids, she asked, why does Prapapat think very big like this? (laughs) And sometimes they ask, "Between you and your assistant, which one has more power?" (laughs). That makes me smile!

Paul: Yeah, the innocence, and lack of inhibition.

Prapapat: Right. And our teachers also, they are so nice and so dedicated to their work. I adore them. They grow so much. We rarely find this type of teachers like this in other schools, and I am so proud of them.

Paul: Most of your teachers are trained internally at Arsom Silp?

Prapapat: Yes, they get their certificate here. Mostly I recruit them. Most of them don't have an education background. It's strange, right? Because the graduates from the education practice, I think they have a limited imagination about life and many things around it.

Paul: Agreed. In America our system of teacher education is very much focused on managing children, their behavior, controlling their impulses. And delivering content delivering curriculum efficiently. And it is not educating our teachers to listen to be present, to be kind, (laughs) and these are important things.

Prapapat: So I recruited one who recruited one who graduated in mathematics, social studies, many many different backgrounds, even engineering, architect, every kind of background. And train them to be a unique teacher.

Paul: Thank you so much. It's lovely to spend a bit of time with you and just to celebrate your achievements at Roong Aroon.

Prapapat: Thank you so much, Paul. It's lovely to talk with you. And I hope that we can get in touch with each other in the near future.

Acknowledgement

Prapapat Niyom (taken from Soul of Ed) is the president of Arsom Silp Institute of the Arts and founder of the Roong Aroon School in Bangkok, Thailand. In the past, as a former architect, she taught at the Architecture University in Bangkok and served as a Deputy Governor of Bangkok. She holds an honorary doctorate in education and has served as a member of the National Reform Council on Education and advisor to the Minister of Education. For the last 20 years, she has created templates of holistic education, reflection-based practices, contemplative arts and value-oriented curriculum.

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