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A process of lifelong learning in Thai family culture

Naradee Soratana*, Archanya Ratana-Ubol, Parn Kimpee

Department of Lifelong Education, Faculty of Education, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok 10330, Thailand

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Abstract

The objectives of this study were (1) to develop a process of lifelong learning to enhance family strengths in Thai context, and (2) to develop the guideline for the process. Qualitative data were collected from in-depth interviews and naturalistic observations of fifteen best-practice of Thai families, and from two focus group discussions of seventeen selected experts. The instruments had content validity using expert judgment to evaluate the Item Objective Congruence Method (IOC), and had reliability measured by using two interviewers to observe and code for a pilot study of a strong family, and a try-out of five families for its consistency and reliability. All data were analyzed and synthesized using content analysis. The result findings were a six-step lifelong learning process. A guideline of the process can be practically applied to individual, family, school, and community. The six steps of lifelong learning process are as follows: understanding and accepting the situation, setting the goals & planning, setting the actual guidelines together, following the guidelines practically, recommunicating after practices, and evaluating and adapting. The findings also showed that family leaders with a sense of being lifelong learners make an impact in Thai learning way of family life, including a sense of family membership, and understanding one another in the family, both important in the process of lifelong learning in the family becoming successful. The research highlights that future study on Thai family strengths: lifelong learning, religious beliefs and Thai values should be conducted.

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Introduction

Lifelong learning in families is a treasured experience that families can introduce through guidance, inculcation, modelling, and closeness relationships from generation to generation, especially, in Thai family learning. In the extended Thai family, several generations live under the same roof including grandparents, cousins, and other relatives. They closely keep strong relationships with their family members, and they learn little by little inherently from the elderly and from one another in the families. However, family structure is becoming more complex through rapid changes globally. Thai family structure has also been changing with lower fertility with fewer children and longevity with more elderly (United Nations Fund for Population Activities [UNFPA], 2015). These changes have challenged Thai families to keep their families operating, managing and adapting through the difficulties they face, such as differences in the thinking of different generations.

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: naradees@yahoo.com (N. Soratana).

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This is why learning between generations is so difficult. However, there are many successful families in Thai society, therefore, lessons learned from a successful family can be a new body of knowledge. Interestingly, there has been little research on lifelong learning process in Thai family culture. This study led to questions on how lifelong learning in the family can be inculcated and become strong through generations, what a process of lifelong learning is in Thai families in order to maintain their strengths, how the process becomes successful during current rapid changes, and how the process can be used practically as a guideline. Therefore, the objectives of this study were to develop a process of lifelong learning to enhance family strengths in Thai context and to develop a guideline for the process of lifelong learning in Thai family culture.

Literature Review

A family is a small social unit in which contentment is the most desirable relationships most members wish for. Olson and DeFrain (2006) stated that marriage and family life are not always easy; they can bring both joy and terrible pain. Nevertheless, a healthy family can manage strengths during difficult times. They believed that three themes of Intimacy, Strengths, and Diversity are essential ingredients for developing and maintaining a strong couple relationship, marriage, and family life.

Many researchers from around the world have found a set of six qualities of family strength characteristics (DeFrain & Asay, 2007; DeFrain & Stinnett, 2002; Olson & DeFrain, 2006; Stinnett & DeFrain, 1986). The six qualities are (1) appreciation and affection (2) commitment (3) positive communication (4) enjoyable times together (5) spiritual well-being, and (6) the ability to manage stress and crisis effectively. Gilbert (2011) also had similar beliefs and explained that if families have high level of trust, commitment, and respect for one another, it will lead families to both physical and mental strengths.

The concept of family systems is a well-organized family's learning way of thinking. Bowen's family systems theory was one of the main theories to give a clear view of how to understand family learning in this study. Bowen's family systems theory was developed on an understanding of human emotional functioning as a natural system, and an emotional unit (Bowen, 2015). Bowen suggested that feelings, attitudes, values, and beliefs influence human social process and family process, which result in family relationships. Anxiety in the family is the main cause of family conflicts. Therefore, when anxiety in the family is low, members are less reactive and more thoughtful, but when anxiety occurs in the family, a member might temporarily get away from the family or consider cutting-off from the family for life, and this can be repeated unexpectedly through generations (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Bowen, 1994). In summary, the eight concepts of Bowen's family systems theory help family members to understand family system naturally. Therefore, the theory provides the best view of ways for family lifelong learning in order to learn to accept the fact of emotional situations in the family, avoid family conflict, and adapt themselves to become strengths.

Family functioning is another way of learning in families. Some interesting models of family functioning concepts were developed from family systems theory, and related to the strengths of families. For examples, according to Olson and Gorall (2007), three components such as cohesion, flexibility, and positive communication are considered well-functioning. Similar to McMaster Model of family functioning (MMFF), problem solving, communication, roles, affective responsiveness, affective involvement, and behavioral control were explained as family functioning factors (Epstein, Bishop, & Levin, 1978; Miller, Ryan, Keitner, Bishop, & Epstein, 2000).

Thai family culture has strong influence on Thai family's way of life. Cultural pride makes Thai family culture unique with a mixed-diversity of cultures, customs, and long history of traditions. The uniqueness of the mixed-diversity of Thai culture is shown through religion, language, etiquette, food, arts, dance, music, sports, architecture and family lifestyles, including Thai values. Respect for elders is one of the most important values in Thai society, as well as the values of Buddhism due to the fact that 95 percent of the Thai population are Buddhist (Cultural Atlas, 2020).

Some of the most mentioned Buddhism beliefs having great influence in family learning practices are "The Six Directions", "virtues for a good household life", and "qualities which make a couple well-matched". "The Six Directions" represent the six types of human relationships, for instance, as parents, they must show their love to their child, and as a child, he or she must minister to his parents. Therefore, as a person, one should have responsibilities in each of these roles. Virtues of truth and honesty, taming and training, tolerance, liberality, and generosity are explained as virtues for a good household life. Lastly, qualities to be matched in faith, in moral conduct, in generosity, and in wisdom are described as qualities which make a couple well-matched (Phra Brahmagunabhorn (P. A. Payutto), 2009).

Lifelong learning in Thai family culture with a long history of tradition plays a crucial role in family learning. According to Hospital, B. C. s. (2014), Family learning and lifelong learning as learning resources, families are important lifelong learning resources in which parents are both the teachers and the learners providing family social

capital, and family moral capital for members in order to build family strengths. In summary, lifelong learning in Thai family culture is unique, and the conceptual framework below as in Figure 1 can illustrate what the researcher aimed to find through the study, and to explain the natural progression of the phenomenon to be studied.

Methodology

Target Group and Research Instrument

In-depth interview and naturalistic observation

A multiple-case study, qualitative research design was used to interview and observe fifteen best practices of strong Thai families. The criteria for the population studied in this research was Thai family leaders and family members who were awarded as the best practice of family strengths. Purposive sampling was employed to select potential participants. Fifteen best practices of strong Thai families living in Bangkok, Thailand, who received national awards providing rich data in order to gain essential insight and discover necessary lifelong learning process, were recruited and placed into three types of family structures and into five categories of social status. The fifteen best-practice families were selected from three types of family structures such as nuclear family, extended family, and special purpose family, each of which was separated into five categories of social status: poor families, impaired families, famous and wealthy families, entertainment and media families, and general families.

The in-depth interviews were held using semi-structured interview questions. In addition, naturalistic observations were used to generate new ideas while observing the flow of behaviors in the setting of the interviews. The sample size was established by recommended data saturation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)

Focus group discussion

Two focus group discussions were conducted with seventeen selected experts from academic areas related to lifelong learning and education, and family members from the strong families: the first with ten selected experts, and the second with seven selected experts.

The instruments consisted of interview form, observation form, and focus group discussion questions. All instruments had content validity using expert judgment to evaluate the Item Objective Congruence Method (IOC), and had reliability measured by using two interviewers to observe and code for a pilot study of a strong family, and a try-out of five families for its consistency and reliability.

Qualitative Data Collection

For qualitative data collection, the fifteen best-practice Thai families were interviewed individually by using semi-structured interview questions. Participants were asked to give permission for an audio-recorder. The researcher and an assistant researcher recorded data separately, and the audio-recorded data from the interviews were transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. Naturalistic observations were recorded at the same setting of the interviews. The physical setting, verbal and non-verbal behaviors, interactions, and quotation from conversation were recorded and noted (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Focus group discussions were conducted twice in order to confirm and verify the collected interviews and observations data.

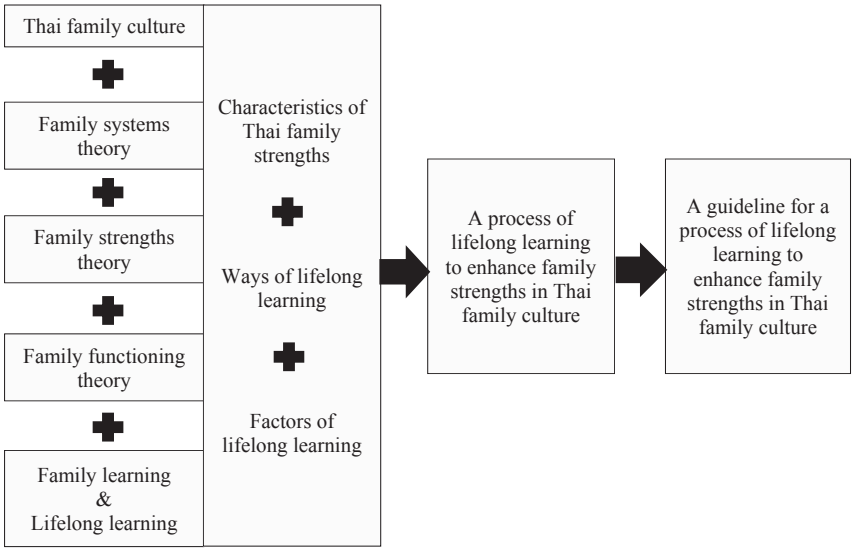

Figure 1 Conceptual framework

Data Analysis

Data analysis using content analysis was to analyze the content from the interviews and naturalistic observations, then bring the analysis to create a conclusion of findings. A process of lifelong learning was synthesized having experts confirm the emerging findings in focus group discussions: the first with ten selected exerts, and the second with seven selected experts. The analysis and suggestions from the focus group discussions were analyzed and synthesized with the collected data from the interviews and the observations.

Results

The process of lifelong learning in Thai family culture was analysed and synthesised based on the results of data collection and data analysis. The results showed that close relationship and effective communication in the family can help understanding and accepting one another. ("Telling stories of my day-to-day life to mom reduces misunderstanding and fighting between us…, and sometimes, I learn from her experiences and from her parents' stories through her stories telling during meal time").

Respect and gratitude to elders, and religious beliefs and practices were the most frequently mentioned values in the conversations of most participants while interviewing. One interviewee referred to his way of practice ("When my children were young, I usually took them jogging around our neighbourhood after school. Beside getting healthier, discipline is the key, …I taught them to 'Wai' in order to pay respect to the older in the Thai way, instead of just saying 'Sawasdi' - a greeting way of Thai…, this lesson learned makes my children have respectful mind and manners as of today"). An interesting finding from most interviewees showed characteristics of being lifelong learners of family leaders which could influence members' ways of life.

The results of data collecting and analysis were used to develop a six-step process of lifelong learning to enhance family strengths in Thai family culture as follows: understanding and accepting the situation, setting the goals together and planning, setting the actual guidelines together, following the guidelines and taking action, recommunicating after practices, and evaluating and adapting. The process is needed to be repeated if the objective is not accepted; however, the process can be flexible and skipped if each particular step is already understood and accepted by the members in the family. Additionally, the process can be done from internal and external supporters. Figure 2 shows a process of lifelong learning in Thai family culture.

Table 1 shows the results of data analysis and synthesis of an example explaining the six-step process of lifelong learning in Thai family culture.

Finally, a guideline for the process of lifelong learning is developed based on the results, analysis, and synthesis from two focus group discussions. The guideline consisted of two levels as follows: policy levels which are to enhance family strengths and to enhance lifelong learning policy by both public and private organizations, and action levels which are to involve concerned parties as families, schools, communities, and individual person. Examples for activities to make a clear view point in the guideline for the process of lifelong learning in Thai family culture are explained in Table 2.

Discussion

The analysis and synthesis of the data from the results of the in-depth interviews, naturalistic observations, and focus group discussions revealed that lifelong learning in Thai family culture can be inculcated and become strong through generations, and the process of lifelong learning helps maintaining their strengths during current rapid changes.

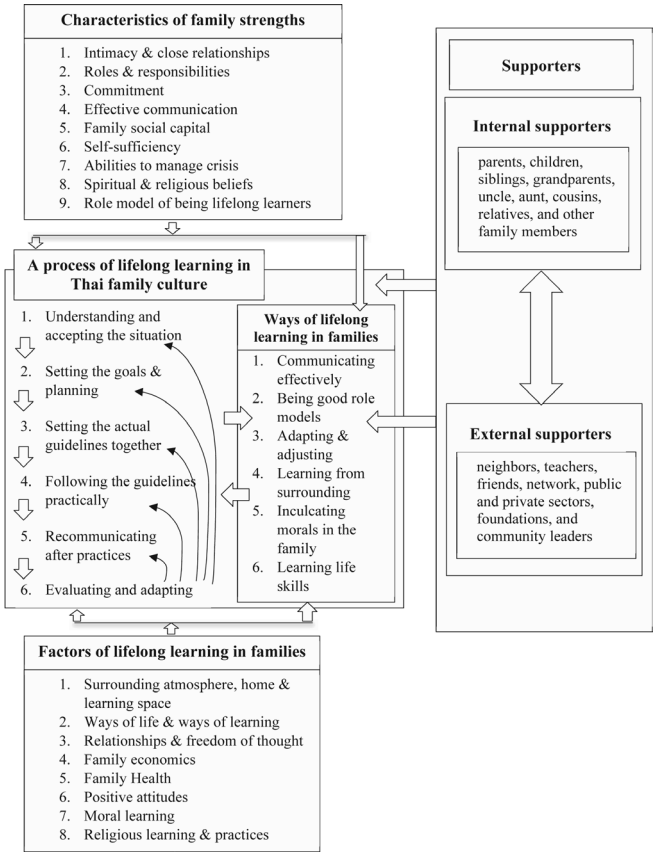

Figure 2 A process of lifelong learning in Thai family culture

Table 1 An example of the six-step process of lifelong learning in Thai family culture

The six-step process of lifelong learning	Objective:(to enhance effective communication)	Internal supporter: (members in the family)	External supporter: (school/ teacher/ community)
1. Understanding and accepting the situation	1. Understanding that effective communication can help a better family relationship by accepting the existing concern.	1. Parents raise a problem to members. Make a clear understanding about the same concern, and accepting the existence of anxiety and misunderstanding circumstance from communication.	1. Teachers introduce a learning content of positive attitudes towards effective communication in class.
2. Setting the goals & Planning	2. Finalizing an agreement on intention to solve the problem using positive communication.	2 Members exchange their view points to find needs, objectives and goals. Make an agreement of intention to solve the problem using positive communication.	2. Teachers set objectives of lesson plans by using positive attitudes and positive communication.
3. Setting the actual guidelines together	3. Setting an agreement and make commitments together, and giving some examples as guidelines	3. Members make an agreement and commitments to be open-minded, accept one another, and are ready for adaptation and changes.	3.Teachers and students set activities together and agree to follow the plans, (talk about experience using positive communication)
4. Following the guidelines practically	4.Ttaking action and making a better practice using positive verbal and non-verbal communication.	4. Members listen to each other, respect one another on ideas and comments, and do not cut-off conversation.	4. Teachers and students do the activities. Take action as planned.
5. Recommunicating after practices	5. Sharing and listening to opinions and advice	5. Members review the situation, discuss and share opinions. Make sure that all members have the same kind of understanding about a situation as others do.	5. Teachers and students share stories and listen to one another's comments.
6. Evaluating and adapting	6. Feeling good with each other, having trust, closeness and be comfortable to change and adapt.	6. Members evaluate themselves (reflexing their feeling after practice). If the adaptation is accepted, it means the process is complete and successful. But if not satisfied yet, the members may have to reevaluate and go back to repeat at any step of the process.	6. Teachers and students evaluate themselves. If satisfied, teachers can create the next one. But if not satisfied, the process needs to be repeated at the point of the unsatisfied step.

Table 2 Examples for activities in the guideline for the process of lifelong learning in Thai family culture

Levels	Enhancement	Activities	Concerned parties
Individual	Lifelong learning	1. Telling stories: sharing stories and family history during meals at the dining table can gain varieties of learning.	1. Individual member in the family
	Family strengths	2. SWOT yourself to bring out good and bad part of yourself (encourage yourself and change to a better attitude).	2. Each member can evaluate their own self.
Family	Lifelong learning	3. Hot Line You Should Know: it needs to be written down somewhere in the house where you can easily reach it.	3. Members in the family
	Family strengths	4. Rules (words) of the family can make pride and discipline.	4. Members in the family
School	Lifelong learning	5. Your duty & Your Rights are everyone's responsibility.	5. Teachers and students
	Family strengths	6. Group LINE or Facebook to build strong and effective communication	6. Teachers and students Teachers and parents
Community	Lifelong learning	7. Lifelong Learning Networks are best resources to learn and share learning experiences	7. Public and private organizations, communities, and neighborhood
	Family strengths	8. Healthy community can be a good campaign to start a good surrounding around neighborhood	8. Public and private organizations, communities, and neighborhood

The results demonstrated that close relationship and positive communication in the family can build trust and respect for one another in the family. Spielmann (2007) studied what attitudes children have towards Thai proverbs as part of inculcating, teaching and learning in Thai family. An example of a Thai proverb 'walking with an adult, dogs don't bite' reflect trust and beliefs that children have in their parents, and in similar value, parents show the sense of being leaders with being lifelong learners as wisely teaching their children to follow the adults' footsteps because the adults have more experience and are worthy to follow.

Good role models of family leaders are important characteristics in order to lead the family and other members. McCarthy and Edwards (2011) explained about relationships between grandparents and grandchildren in the study of Dench and Ogg in 2002 such as grandmothers with cooking and painting activities and grandfathers with sports, wood work, and engine activities. In conclusion, the study revealed that family leaders with a sense of being lifelong learners, a sense of membership in the family, and understanding one another in the family are important in leading the process of lifelong learning in the family.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The process of lifelong learning can be introduced both to build the strengths and to solve the problems in the family through activities conducted. In addition, the process of lifelong learning needs lifelong learning perception of internal supporters and external supporters to enhance family strengths in Thai context. The former is considered the closest relationship as parents and children or relatives and others members in the family. The latter includes people around neighborhood, schools, and communities. Ways of lifelong learning in order to enhance family strengths lead into practices, so it is important for supporters to set appropriate activities in the process of lifelong learning. In conclusion, Thai cultural practices of respect for the elderly and closeness in family relationships are still, however, strong bonds for the family, enabling it to cope effectively with a crisis (Soratana, Ratana-Ubol, & Kimpee, 2019). In addition to the important findings of this study, being lifelong learners in families can be a major influence to gain family social capital and family strengths. The research highlights that future study on lifelong learning and Thai Family strengths: religious beliefs and Thai values, should be conducted.

Conf ict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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