



Discursive practices of local curriculum development discourse: Perspectives of teachers and school principals under the place-based educational reform movement

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Abstract

This article aimed to study discursive practices of the discourse on local curriculum development in schools under Chiang Mai Municipality, using Critical Discourse Analysis as theoretical framework by focusing on the textual construal of ideology and the construction of ideology through discursive practices, which involved document analysis, in-depth interviews, and observations from key informants, including teachers and school principals in schools under Chiang Mai Municipality. The concept of agency also was adopted to conceptualize the real phenomenon. The results indicated that the state of local curriculum development in schools were entirely tied up with the extent at which teachers and school principals performed their role as active agency. However, teachers and school principals may not have an in-depth understanding of curriculum theory. Rather, they were active agency, living in the live world where they mediated themselves with discourse on local curriculum development, reproduced through the operations of authoritative governmental powers. Within discourse, these are conditions that influenced teachers and school principals, making them realize that it is important to determine curriculum in alignment with students, based on diverse cultural capitals and socio-cultural, economic and political contexts. This is critical to both students and communities under the place-based educational reform movement.

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Introduction

The challenge that has occurred and has been observed since the promulgation of the National Education Act 1999 to the current education reform policy is how to combine the national curriculum with the local-related knowledge. The reason is because the national curriculum framework is quite broad. Although it covers quite a lot of subject matter, there are certain weaknesses in practices, and that depends on the extent to which each school understands the concept of the local curriculum, and how it can be adapted appropriately and locally. For this matter, the Educational Service Area Offices (ESAO) across the country all play an important role in being a mechanism translating the national curriculum to local curriculum practices. ESAO also act as an intermediary linking the national curriculum to the creation of the local curriculum (Nakornthap, 2008; Thongthew, 2008).

When researching on the discursive practices on local curriculum development, it was found that designing local curriculum for students is a matter that stakeholders need to seriously analyze, so it is possible to determine body of knowledge, skills, and disposition through which they are able to handle with contemporary issues in their real life. However, students' sense of appreciation and belonging for local communities is not sufficient, because, in practice, they may not survive in the real world. Education scholars were aware of this fact and suggested a conceptual framework with the essence that local knowledge should go beyond the centering of one's local community, technically referred to as parochialism (Fawcett et al., 2002; Resor, 2010). Local should be considered as localization, which is a local community with the foundation of its own resources, history, development and socio-cultural movements in globalization (Jatuporn, 2021). At the same time, local is dynamic, full of diversity, complexity, and interaction among members, covering all aspects of society, culture, economy, politics and landscape. Local and external communities are inseparable at the regional, national, international and global levels (Smith, 2007). Therefore, local knowledge cannot be separated from global knowledge. Locality and globality are two sides of the same thing that are closely related to each other.

In reality, it has been immensely challenging and complicated to encourage schools to be clear on how to implement local curriculum in this manner. What really happened was that ESAO had prepared local curriculum framework, claiming that it was the result from the participation from all stakeholders, including academics, school principals, teachers, local stakeholders, and government representatives from various agencies, which together had defined the vision, goals, and emphasis on learner quality development. They had determined local learning content as well as assessment and evaluation guidelines, so that schools can use them as a guideline for local curriculum construction. Therefore, the process that actually took place was that local curriculum was principally developed according to the capacity of each school. (Nakornthap, 2008). ESAO, from the perspective of schools and local communities, were merely the steering agency that administered educational policies predetermined by the state. However, the policy was not actually put into action, and ESAO was unaware of the contested knowledge discourses in the spheres of public education.

The primary assumption was that a local curriculum framework, at the practical level, reflected the perspective toward the local community. That is, the Thai rurality as a community that is fertile, beautiful, simple and self-sufficient was only a reconstruction of the rurality, accorded with the concept of community culture that presented the rural areas on behalf of the social construction of locality and rural imagination (McInerney et al., 2011). In doing so, an academic narrative was used to create a new discourse, to highlight the values and importance of rural as space of hope and possibility. However, local curriculum, using the concept of community culture as a framework, is of great interest and may benefit the local community because the curriculum developers had clear goals to search for local knowledge as the foundation for educational provision based on the ideology of empowering local communities.

The author is interested in this phenomenon, thus, studied the details of such as to how the discourse on local curriculum affected the development of local curriculum, especially from teachers and school principals' perspectives, under the place-based educational reform movement. In addition, after the government promulgated the Education Innovation Area

Act 2019, the essence was to decentralize the power to schools, so they have legitimacy to develop local curriculum in line with the national curriculum. Such curriculum can be an area where experimental praxis with new educational innovations can take place, according to the educational innovation area policy. Thus, the present study aims at examining local curriculum texts and their discursive practices from schools under Chiang Mai Municipality, in order to obtain details of discourse on local curriculum development by adopting the Critical Discourse Analysis and applying a concept of agency to conceptualize the real phenomenon that will expectedly lead to the explanations of curriculum theory and educational reform, using the local community as a foundation.

Research Objectives

To study discursive practices of discourse on local curriculum development in schools under Chiang Mai Municipality.

Conceptual Framework

This research was conceptualized by using the concept of active agency derived from Bourdieu's theory of practice, to point out the correlation between the external structure and the internal structure that influence teachers and school principals. Such practice may be routine, can be previously experienced, or used as a critique or negotiation. At the same time, such practice reflected the role of external structures, as independent variables influencing the actors. The results of the action had emerged from practice of the actors, leading to the reproduction or modification of both the external and internal structures (Grenfell, 2019). The emphasis was given to the specific contexts; that is, the perspectives of teachers and school principals who were influenced under the place-based educational reform movement, and their interaction with the discourse on local curriculum and the socio-cultural, political, and historical contexts. The understanding of these issues would reveal the power structure relationships; the discourse on local curriculum was not only a structure constructing the discourse of local curriculum development, but teachers and school principals, as social actors, also played an active role in that practice as well.

Methodology

1. Research areas: Area selection and data collection were conducted by theoretical sampling, obtaining 11 schools under Chiang Mai Municipality (Potisita, 2016). Discursive practices of local curriculum development were evident in these areas. Also, there were phenomena of educational provision, using place-based education approach, under the policy implementation of Education Innovation Area Act 2019.

2. Data collection: By employing the Critical Discourse Analysis method, this aims at uncovering ideologies that are represented as non-ideological "commonsense" by discursive strategies in local curriculum texts (Fairclough, 2003). Therefore, textual construal of ideology and the construction of ideology through discursive practices, which involved document analysis, in-depth interviews, and observations from key informants, including teachers and school principals were investigated. The authors analyzed the data in two ways: (1) textual analysis by focusing on linguistic devices and sets of ideas linguistically represented and (2) discursive practices analysis through in-depth interviews and observations from key informants and then conceptualizing the real phenomenon by using the concept of agency.

Results and Discussion

The findings revealed the state of local curriculum development in schools under Chiang Mai Municipality. Such presentation is demonstrated through the analysis of local curriculum as text and local curriculum as discursive practices as follows:

Local Curriculum as Text

A textual analysis reveals that local curriculum in 11 schools demonstrate authorized texts on local curriculum. That is, these curricula not only transmit knowledge about local community but also construct students about their identity. The results are indicated in Table 1.

Table 1 The textual analysis of local curriculum and set of ideas represented

No.	Local curriculum as text	Textually-oriented critical discourse analysis
1	background information: local community history; socio-cultural and economic aspects such as language, folkways, beliefs, occupations and traditions; places and local natural resources such as temples, forests, fields and swamps	1. discursive material aspects of local community 2. representation of local community as static and discrete object of study
2	“ <i>Lanna-ness</i> ” local culture: Shan traditions – bird dance and lion dance; cultural diversity aspects of ethnic clothes, foods and festival; Tungs (Lanna paper cutting art); Pangprateep (small clay candles); silverware production; Fon Jeng (Lanna body movement); basketry	1. social construction of Lanna-ness 2. representation of selective tradition of Lanna-ness 3. commodification and depoliticization of culture for value-added and cultural productivity
3	local-global related issues: social, political, economic, educational, environmental aspects of local community such as Doi Suthep fire, air pollutions and polluted canal in urban areas	local knowledge as space of cultural politics and contestation

In terms of pedagogical texts, the implementation of local curriculum was related to the teaching process of teachers and related people, content, teaching materials, and local community-based learning activities, under the cooperation between schools and the community. Local-based educational provision should consider the body of knowledge surrounding students, especially the local resources. The curriculum should integrate global knowledge with local knowledge, and harmonize with the context of the curriculum. Students, expectedly, will then use those local resources to benefit themselves, the community, and to create local awareness and appreciation.

The implementation of local curriculum often emphasized engagement between teachers, community leaders, and students in the area. Emphasis was generally placed on the collaborative learning process that involved the school and community. Forums were organized to facilitate the exchange of local knowledge, traditions, in-depth interviews with people, field trip, data collection – from historical archives, documents, photographs, places – and to provide a platform for students to learn about the community’s way of life from past to present.

The process in which local curriculum was implemented has evoked more interest in local history, as local administrative organizations and communities utilized the obtained information to restore various places in the area, and to present them as tourist attractions and community learning centers. Many schools encouraged their students to learn from these places, and applied the information to their teaching activities, for example, in the form of a “local youth tour guide course.” Likewise,

community leaders and interested people have continuously used the information for their studies. Some groups of people began to ponder about themselves by studying the historical narratives from the past to the present.

Local Curriculum as Discursive Practices

From the findings about the state of Chiang Mai Municipality schools, it can be stated that administrative authorities provide provisional space for schools to construct their schools’ identity through local curriculum and culturally responsive pedagogy. Schools have been provided material supports, academic workshops, sufficient budget allocation, followed the government policy and set up activities directly related to the policy. Involved is the department of education under the directives of educational supervisors and educators by providing research, consultation and collaboration for schools. The collaboration allows teachers and school principals to apply their knowledge in schools and, at the same time, provides new knowledge and insights gained from school practices to be incorporated into educational policies of Chiang Mai municipality.

In addition, municipality schools are centers of socio-cultural activities in giving services to the community, and the community also gives a helping hand in the work of educational management. Thus, the implementation of local curriculum can be enriched through collaboration between schools and communities especially after the government announced the Education Innovation Area Act B.E. 2562 (A.D. 2019). This equipped teachers and

school principals with a great extent of academic freedom and authorities especially in the development of local curriculum and culturally responsive pedagogy in their own unique socio-cultural, economic, political and historical contexts.

The daily life of school principals, as active agency, became more evident when the author was studying the process of developing local curriculum. That is, human life is not the sole product of social structures, norms or rules (Ylimaki, 2012). Humans perform their social practices differently, to construct and express their identities, and to criticize the rules and traditions of society, as shown in the following interviews.

“We have never seen schools under OBEC that try to transmute schools into innovation. Schools under Local Administrative Organizations, especially around the year 2010 or 2011, were different. This school has been awarded the national top school for “One School, One Innovation,” for educational management model and Lanna local wisdom. We integrate Lanna ways of life into the educational provision. It has been clearly specified what the teachers are required to do, and what students have to do. What topics should be taught? All things are clearly visible.” (School principal, January 15, 2021)

“Some new generation teachers are interested in developing educational innovations through various concepts. These teachers tend to have new ideas, but some are still conservative. And, there are those who go for modern educational technology. It is important for us to adjust and combine the old with the new. The power of young teachers will drive our school forward, as seen from the curriculum innovation. But some of our teachers who have made contributions, with many types of awards, are retiring this year, which is the loss of qualified personnel. The new teachers will have to continue the responsibilities; they will have to learn and gain experience from senior colleagues. In conjunction with modern ideas and perspectives, the new teachers will make a change to a new teaching style.” (School principal, February 22, 2021)

In addition, daily life activities of teachers and school principals were about contestation and negotiation for the power relationship and revolved endlessly around everyday life. The characteristics of the active agent in daily life can be seen from the following interview excerpts.

“Apart from the government’s education policy that supports the use of place-based education approach in schools, there is also an effort to develop local curriculum using Gatekaram community as a base for conserving Chiang Mai-Lanna cultural wisdom. Previously, there was a local curriculum entitled “Chiang Mai Muang Ngam” (Magnificent Chiang Mai), operated in all 11 schools, but focused differently on the unique identities of each area. For example, Sri Suphan Temple focused on silverware, and here, we focused on making lanterns and Tungs. That was a very good curriculum. However, at present, we no longer have local curriculum because of the policy focus of the municipal administrators, that directs us to focus on academics and national educational tests.” (School principal, January 27, 2021)

“There were times that the teachers responsible for the Chiang Mai Muang Ngam curriculum didn’t have knowledge in specific areas to be taught, but classrooms were to be continued. At present, local curriculum is gradually weakening. But, if we decide to continue and still invite community leaders to teach, the whole process can go on. Sadly, most of the experts who taught how to make Tungs and lanterns here passed way. It is then a challenging task for us to manage meaningful curriculum. When students learn from local elders, they feel that they directly acquire knowledge from them. The students become more interested in studying with guest speakers than with their regular teachers.” (School principal, March 5, 2021)

“We had a meeting days ago to discuss how to create identity of our school. What we are looking at right now is that we want to support students to learn about Lanna cultural diversity. What we are planning to do is to integrate local knowledge into the learning unit. We have plans to develop local curriculum next year; incorporating the culturally responsive knowledge into our curriculum. That will make our school unique, reflecting multiculturalism of Shan, Burmese, Northern Thai people, and Muslims.” (School principal, March 12, 2021)

Apart from various agencies responsible for the local curriculum development, teachers are considered main actors in this matter. That is, the national curriculum was only a framework for education provision. Details about the contents, instruction, materials and evaluation were still missing. Teachers are critical agency in transforming policy text into curriculum

as cultural practices (Apple, 2018). The tasks of teachers started from crafting curriculum design, implementation and evaluation. These were the key elements of the curriculum. Teacher's curriculum practice was one way to develop curriculum since they developed curriculum by selecting culturally appropriated knowledge for students (Sahasewiyon, 2004). The success of the curriculum was, therefore, not coming from the authorized policies only, but also from the teachers as active agency.

“Social studies teachers are responsible for the cultivation of culture and traditions, guiding students to learn local wisdom from the community. That helps encourage students to learn about the community and expands the knowledge acquired in the classroom.” (Teacher, February 9, 2021)

“I teach children how to perform Bird Dance (Gingala), which the school wants to preserve. In the past, our school was frequently visited, and Northern traditional dance was not attractive enough. That's why we present the Bird Dance as new performance, more appealing. It is a local tradition that we should preserve. Take food as an example. When we present Shan food, people find it interesting and sometimes forget that this kind of food still exists. Then, we integrate this cultural diversity into teaching activities.” (Teacher, February 17, 2021)

Thongthew (2008) remarked about local curriculum as socio-cultural practice framework, that a curriculum should not be implemented as literally described in the documents, the content of which should not be treated as a technical product. Rather, it was a plan; the teacher, should use critical reflexive thoughts and make efforts to materialize the text to practices. Thus, it is very important to consider the social, historical, cultural, community contexts, group of learners, and the specific abilities and skills of teachers, etc.

“There used to be a local curriculum called “Chiang Mai Muang Ngam,” but the teacher in charge of the curriculum was transferred to Wat Muen Ngernkong Municipality School. The curriculum was not continued. Since the local curriculum focuses on knowledge of local wisdom based on the context of each school, without teachers, it will not be possible to continue teaching local knowledge.” (School principal, January 27, 2021)

“Our school will emphasize local wisdom and identity, so that students do not forget the Lanna way of life. They will learn how to conserve and cherish the local wisdom. These cultural assets, once lost, can never come back easily. The local knowledge is kept in senior experts, and will be lost if not passed to others. Through the dissemination and exchange of various local knowledge, there is a way to perpetuate them.” (Teacher, February 25, 2021)

Local curriculum may be considered as intangible. However, it is the dialectical praxis between teachers, students, knowledge and context. Thus, teachers should have critical understanding of their leadership role and should clearly know what society expects from the curriculum (Sahasewiyon, 2004). One of the roles of teachers is to encourage students to develop their ideas and apply those ideas in practice. There should be evaluation on learning process with students, and synthesizing the learning outcomes.

“Teachers normally integrate local-related contents into the teaching and learning process, according to their ability, of the local speakers, and according to the needs of students. The majority of this group of students is Shan children, so they are adept at activities they are familiar with, supplemented by teachers' integrated knowledge. For the next group of children, if there are not many Shan children, and we cannot find suitable local speakers, we will change to other activities, considering our capacity.” (School principal, March 8, 2021)

However, when analyzing the findings together with the previous research studies on the state of local curriculum development, local curriculum was not fully developed in accordance with the curriculum framework. Nutravong (2012) stated that the people involved in curriculum development still lacked a clear understanding of their roles and duties. They were familiar with the conventional practice, and the effort to change appeared only on documents, rather than in real practice. The Ministry of Education (2013) reported the results of research on the preparation of the national curriculum, revealing that schools had a number of problems related to curriculum such as teachers' lack of understanding about curriculum development process. Other shortcomings were loaded personnel, insufficient number of teachers, shortage of personnel with specialized knowledge, and teachers refusing to work on new curriculum policy. This was in line with Thongthew

(2008), investigating obstacles in local curriculum construction and reporting that school teachers lacked competence to develop local curriculum, they lacked skills required for field research. Most teachers were burdened with routine work, and, thus, were unable to complete local curriculum as effective as it should be. Therefore, local curriculum in Thai schools had not been satisfactorily implemented. There were two main obstacles, namely, the lack of cooperation in creating the curriculum of those involved, and the lack of required understandings of how to develop local curriculum.

Conclusion

The discursive practices of local curriculum development discourse are the space where socio-cultural practices can be witnessed. That is, the representation of the state of local curriculum development in public schools depended on the role of active agency performed by teachers and school principals. However, they may not have an in-depth understanding of curriculum theory. They, rather, were active social actors living in the real world, where they mediated with curriculum discourse reproduced through the operations of governmental powers. They devised strategies to contest with the authoritative powers that influenced their daily lives as demonstrated in Figure 1.

This also supported the studies on re-conceptualist curriculum theory, suggesting that curriculum should be viewed as a discourse with various discursive practices (Schubert, 2017). That is, binary opposition should be avoided by considering beyond the interaction between local as a representation of non-dominant knowledge and state as global knowledge of the hegemonic powers.

It pointed out the complex live world of the internal structure through the perspectives of teachers and school principals who live in schooling conditions by not ignoring the idiosyncrasies of educational milieus in diverse contexts. The internal structure mediated the relationship between the political economy of education reform as external structure and the local curriculum development discourse, and between the local curriculum development practices and the social, cultural, economic, political and historical contexts of that society.

In essence, teachers and school principals demonstrated their active agency through negotiation and contestation amidst the influence of external structures and the governmentality of authoritative social institutions. These are conditions that influenced teachers and school principals, making them realize that it is important to determine curriculum in alignment with students, based on diverse cultural capitals and socio-cultural, economic and political contexts. This is critical to both students and communities under the place-based educational reform movement.

Conflict of Interest

The author declare that there is no conflict of interest.

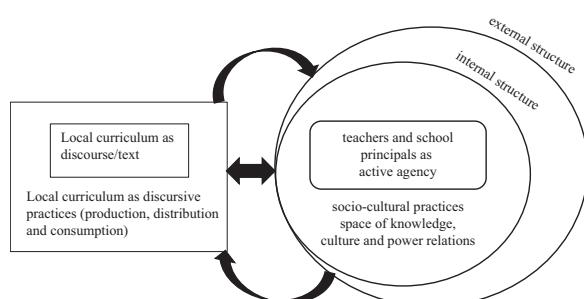
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Figure 1 The discursive practices of local curriculum development discourse



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