

The Child Friendly School Movement and Its Role in Promoting Stakeholder-driven Development throughout the Southeast Asia Region

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ABSTRACT

Child Friendly School programming has become a growing mantra throughout the Southeast Asia Region. In recent years, it has become increasingly identified with stakeholder-driven development models. This panel discussion traces how the CFS movement arose mainly as a reaction to the 'Effective Schools Movement', which in many developing countries had morphed into an economic model of educational development, focusing more on efficiency and numbers than on quality and children's welfare. Because of its emphasis on participatory learning and action approaches, this movement has become highly eclectic in character, manifesting different directions in different places depending on input from the grassroots. Nevertheless, there are a number of defining themes that do seem common to programs in most countries in the Southeast Asia region including a focus on holistic and rights-based programming, avoidance of stand-alone interventions, and a dimension-based assessment of educational contexts. The panel will discuss how CFS programming has promoted stakeholder-driven development focusing in particular on the dimensional aspects of CFS projects and how this context-neutral characteristic enabled but a short step to the idea of activity menus and contextualized programming. This in turn has facilitated the emergence of a common regional framework for countries to benefit from each other's experience.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Origins of the Child Friendly School Movement

Since the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by most of the world's countries, educators have been searching for practical ways to translate many of the Convention's ideals into concrete applications, particularly in the developing world. One of the movements that best capture a rights-based and participatory approach to educational development has come to be known as the Child Friendly Schools Movement. CFS Programming was intended 'as a way to give practical and easily understood meaning to the key principles of the CRC and the commitments of the EFA Dakar Framework of Action' (Bernard, 2005, p. 1). Since the beginning of the present decade and with support from UNICEF, this movement has spread rapidly to many developing countries as an important development approach in the education sector, particularly in Asia.



Child Friendly School (CFS) approaches have variously been adopted in many different places as a counterweight to the “effective schools” movement, which has been a powerful philosophy to improve school management and classroom practices during the last three decades. Although effective schools applications began originally in North America and the United Kingdom, its potential to improve education in developing countries was soon realized. But while applications of the effective schools movement in the developing world originally began as a means to improve participation among the most marginalized children of society (e.g., Lockheed and Levin, 1988), its co-option by economic models of educational development in many national programs has led to permutations that focus more on efficiency and numbers than on quality and children's welfare (Bredenberg, 2004).

In actual practice, the use of efficiency models in educational development, economically-focused or otherwise, has meant adopting top-down programming that is usually characterized by a prescriptive list of interventions such as teacher training, school

construction, and textbook distribution. While such approaches have been ‘successful’ in so far as results are measured in terms of educational efficiency indicators such as repetition and dropout, they have tended to promote minimalist educational goals and neglected various aspects of the child’s development and welfare. In particular, it presents local stakeholders with externally formulated programming inputs (over which they have little control) with limited or no contextualized relevance. Thus, the adoption of such programming does not promote contextualized development and undermines the feasibility of transfer of good practice from one place to another. When development is not connected to its context, is also not easily sustained when the project is completed. It is no wonder, then, that many educators have turned to CFS approaches as a means to put the emphasis back on quality, local participation, and child welfare.

1.2 What Are the Attractions of CFS Programming as a Means to Promote Contextualized Development

There is a growing realization that top-down development models of the kind discussed above have not been an effective means of improving education. There have recently been a number of iconoclastic treatises critiquing top-down development models noting their inability to connect to local contexts, identify realistic goals, or provide channels for feedback from stakeholders or accountability to the latter (e.g., Easterly, 2006). As we noted above, this is because such models tend to be prescriptive in nature and impose performance benchmarks, which are neither realistic nor relevant because they are externally formulated.

Since every context is different in often subtle ways, it is not logical to expect ‘one size fits all’ kinds of development projects to be able to respond well to the implementation contexts in which they find themselves. But this is exactly the assumption underlying prescriptive programming. When projects are prescriptively designed and implemented, they tend not to allow stakeholders to understand why they are doing what they are doing, but rather to mindlessly implement something that has been designed and mandated by removed program planners at more central level. Prescriptive programming in many developing countries is particularly damaging, because there is already a mind set among many stakeholders to follow orders from central level rather than to think for themselves; thus, prescriptive programs tend to reinforce dysfunc-

tional thinking and behavioral patterns in such contexts.

CFS programming has provided an effective alternative to prescriptive, top-down programming because it focuses on the development *process* as much as, if not more, than on product. It provides a structure in which stakeholders (including children) can define their own needs and identify interventions to meet those needs. Standardized project packages are strictly avoided, leading to a situation where the *stakeholders are given real choices and opportunities for decision-making in project design and implementation*. Thus, one of the key characteristics of CFS programming, developed further below, is the idea that ‘child-friendliness’ is locally defined by stakeholders and that interventions are identified locally rather than imposed from above. This provides

2. KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CHILD FRIENDLY SCHOOLS APPROACH AND ITS TRANSFER TO OTHER CONTEXTS

2.1 Locally Formulated Definitions of Child Friendliness

One of the paradoxes in describing CFS approaches to development is that they are not easily definable, since practical definitions are supposed to be *locally formulated*. As one CFS theorist has observed,

Perhaps the most critically defining characteristic of the child-friendly school is that it is not narrowly definable. It cannot be reduced either to a simple set of rules or a checklist. Such lists can be a useful means of putting on the table for discussion various perspectives on the attributes of a child-friendly school (this is especially when it is a task undertaken by community and school members themselves). There may, however, be a risk in assuming that such a listing of attributes (the "that" of child-friendliness) will somehow lead to a school becoming child-friendly. It may miss the critical need actually to work through the processes of getting there (the "how" of child-friendliness). (Bernard, 2000, p. 12)

In view of this characteristic, CFS programs usually begin with participatory exercises in which local stakeholders (including local educators) define a child friendly school in terms of local needs and requirements. This is followed by an intervention design process where specific ac-



tivities are locally identified to respond to local needs. As is true of any process, it is continuous in nature such that a locally formulated definition may change as stakeholders become more experienced and as school conditions evolve. Thus, CFS models support what is first and foremost a very *stakeholder-driven* development approach.

Because of its emphasis on *participatory formulations of child-friendliness*, the CFS movement has become highly eclectic in character, manifesting different directions in different places depending on input from the grassroots (Hopkins and Chaimuangdee, 2000). For example, local CFS programming in Cambodia has focused heavily on strategies to address teacher shortages while CFS efforts in Thailand (where teacher supply is left to market forces) have tended to highlight life skills programming as a key element in its programming.

2.2 Holistic Programming

In spite of the eclectic nature of CFS programming, there are a number of defining content themes that do seem common to programs in most countries. This refers in particular to a focus on *holistic programming*. CFS program models accept that the child's learning environment is highly complex. Stand-alone projects that focus on only one aspect of a child's learning environment to the exclusion of others (e.g., health education only projects, teacher training only project, etc.) often have muted impacts. This is because those aspects of a child's learning environment that are ignored undermine interventions in other aspects. Thus, a well-trained teacher will still have limited impact on learning if children come to school hungry or if parents do not provide support for homework when at home. This assessment is easily applicable to many development contexts. CFS programming models, therefore, provide a framework that ensures a *holistic approach* to educational development covering multiple dimensions of a child's learning environment. In general, CFS program frameworks define five¹ aspects or dimensions of a child's learning environment including:

- i. *Proactively inclusive*, seeking out and enabling participation of all children and especially those who are different ethnically, culturally, socio-

¹ In some countries such as Cambodia, a sixth dimension has been added that relates to improvements to School Governance as another important aspect of the child's learning environment. That is, effective administrative support for interventions is seen as an essential pre-requisite for the successful implementation of all other interventions.

- ii. *Economically and in terms of ability; Effective academically and relevant* to children's needs for life and livelihood knowledge and skills;
- iii. *Healthy, safe and protective* for children and their emotional, psychological and physical well-being;
- iv. *Gender-responsive* in creating environments and capacities fostering equality; and
- v. *Interactively engaged with student, family and community*, enabling their participation in all aspects of school policy, management and support to children's learning (Bernard, 2005)

The identification of five dimensions of a child's learning environment is based on the assumption that there are certain universal principles that govern a child's learning in school in the same way that there are certain universal rights to which every child is entitled. While the identification of these dimensions of the child's learning environment is standard, it should be noted that the actual content of interventions in each of these areas is still entirely dependent on decisions made by stakeholders and local planners, thereby ensuring a stakeholder-driven complexion for any CFS particular program.

2.3 Volunteerism

Another distinguishing feature of CFS programming refers to the central role of *volunteerism*. In many countries, participation in a CFS program is not coercive in nature but voluntary. This characteristic is consistent with the stakeholder sensitive stance of CFS programming. It conforms to the idea that *development is essentially about giving people the choice to make their own decisions*. The need for volunteerism recognizes that not all stakeholders may be equally interested in the development of their schools; where such engagement does not exist or interest is limited, there is little hope of building an effective program. That is, 'enforced engagement' is a contradiction in terms.

A child friendly school is context-sensitive so that 'creating and managing its dimensions need to take into account the realities of the specific community, school, and system' (Bernard, 2005). The conditions of successful CFS implementation, therefore, include *flexibility, building on the readiness of a community or school* to take the risk of change (i.e., to volunteer to become engaged), and *applying change incrementally* so that more and more people become engaged in the process (Bernard, 2005). To be

sure, this understanding of CFS programming has begun to breakdown in some countries, which have adopted the development of CFS environments as national policy. This has led to the anomalous situation where stakeholders are indeed forced by government to be ‘engaged.’

3. PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF CFS PROGRAMMING THAT ACHIEVE CONTEXTUALLY APPROPRIATE DEVELOPMENT

The common framework for CFS programs described above has provided a useful vehicle to effectively address the universal developmental needs of children in different contexts in a way that also accommodates the different needs of these contexts. For this reason, the content and complexion of interventions can vary considerably from program site to program site. In this way, CFS programming is considered to be an optimum implementation medium that ensures contextually appropriate programming by merit of its stakeholder-driven design.

There are a number of specific operational characteristics that CFS programs in Southeast Asia have adopted to ensure that programming is both contextually appropriate and stakeholder-driven. This includes (i) needs-based planning and local working groups who directly implement activities; (ii) the use of Activity Menus; and (iii) the use of school grants.

3.1 Needs-based Planning and Local Working Groups

As the first step to creating a stakeholder-driven program environment, CFS programs generally start with the set up of local working groups comprised of school and community representatives. To ensure the highest degree of decentralization possible, these groups are usually established at the level of the individual school. In some countries in the region where schools have been organized into clusters, a local cluster school committee comprising several schools and their associated communities may be the basic working group in a project. Working groups are then trained in needs assessment and problem analysis techniques. Based on the selection of key problems, the working group develops objectives and activities to achieve the objectives. This combination of problem analysis, objective identification, and activity selection takes the form of a school improvement plan. The plan is usually annual in its time frame though it may be longer.

The direct inclusion of children in the planning process at this stage is not recommended, particularly in societies where social relationships are quite hierarchical in nature. Such inclusion may lead to a tokenistic presence in planning activities. Rather, it is suggested that children have a special workshop where the presence of adults is sharply curtailed. Children are encouraged to express themselves about an ideal school through pictures, skits, posters or other means, leading to an exhibition that is shown to adults as a prelude to the planning exercise. This is usually a much more meaningful way to involve children in the planning process and ensure their input into programming content.

Local working groups may at first require considerable technical assistance to develop their 'own' school improvement program. There may initially be considerable technical reliance on project personnel to lead and facilitate planning activities of the nature described above. This is particularly true in education systems where centralized patterns of decision-making have been the norm for many decades and stakeholders have been conditioned to let others do the thinking for them. Consolidation is, therefore, an important consideration in the capacity building strategies used in the program so that local stakeholders can eventually develop their plans without outside technical assistance.

3.2 Menu-based Approach to Development

How do CFS programs operationalize the principle that development means giving people a choice in the programming decisions to be made when they may lack the broad-based experience that is a pre-requisite to making those decisions wisely? The use of *Activity Menus* has been a very common technique used to address this issue and that has transferred well from place to place. The use of the term 'menu' and the metaphor it implies with its counterpart in a restaurant is an important one. When people go to a restaurant, they order different foods based on personal preferences and needs. They are helped in making an order by all the possible options listed out in a menu. To bring this metaphor forward a bit further, it is also true that if one had never eaten Indian food, it would be very difficult to place an order for a meal in an Indian restaurant. The menu, however, addresses this issue effectively for the neophyte. The design of a development program is similarly governed by the same principle and device that is used in a restaurant, thereby achieving empowerment and the right to

choose by stakeholders, even if their experience is limited. The activity menu offers freedom of choice but within a fixed structure. Empowerment in turn ensures that stakeholder-working groups have ownership of their own implementation plans, which greatly helps to promote sustainable implementation.

Activity menus are usually organized according to the five domains or dimensions described earlier (e.g., inclusive education, psychosocial learning environments, etc.), so that programming is holistic in nature. When designing an activity menu, program planners can consult lists of activities from other countries and select activities that may seem appropriate to a local context; but ultimately, it is the stakeholders who decide which activities are the most relevant. Nevertheless, the potential for activity menus in CFS programs to promote neutral cross-transfer of implementation strategies within the region is very great.

Sometimes, seeing examples of activities in a menu also helps to *prime the pump* so that stakeholders get an idea for an activity that is not in the menu, which is also an allowable outcome. Requesting stakeholders to identify problems across all CFS domains ensures that they will also be sensitive to the need for a wide range of activities, thereby ensuring a balance of activities in local programming. This pushes forward the principle of holistic implementation in a stakeholder-driven manner.

Table 1: Exemplar of a CFS Activity Menu (Dimension: Health & Nutrition)

Dimension	No	Problem Domain	Activity Description	Nominal Resources	Illustration
Dimension 3: Health & Nutrition	23	Schools are not responsive to children's health needs	First Aid Kits: Schools <i>provide</i> a first aid kits to children to meet special health problems that occur at school.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Materials for first aid 	
	24	Children are hungry and malnourished	School Breakfast Programs: With WFP approval, local community committees <i>prepare</i> and <i>administer</i> breakfast to all children at rural schools.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Cooking materials ○ Cooks ○ Rice/Fish from WFP 	
	25	Schools are not responsive to children's health needs	School Latrines and Clean Water: Schools <i>build</i> wells and toilets to reinforce hygienic habits.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Labor costs ○ Construction materials 	

Source: Educational Support to Children in Underserved Populations Project (ESCUP), American Institutes for Research-World Education, 2007.

The design of a menu is such that activities are usually cross-referenced with particular problems such as low participation, high dropout, or bullying. Cross-referencing activities to problems in this way facilitates the movement from a needs identification exercise to planning for specific activities to address those problems. Stakeholders review possible activities to address the problems that they have identified in their local school or community. For stakeholders who have limited literacy skills, it is also a common practice to include pictures to help stakeholders better understand the meaning of a specific activity (see Table 1).

In summary, the process of activity selection by stakeholders using an activity menu creates a locally relevant activity set, which will nevertheless be contained within a fixed program framework. The philosophy underpinning the use of planning menus in project implementation can best be summed up by the words "freedom in structure." That is, CFS projects try to avoid a prescriptive development approach but recognize the constraints of implementation in stakeholder driven projects in the poor rural contexts. This speaks to the lack of experience and exposure of schools and communities to new ways of doing things. The use of menus provides latitude for empowerment within a structure that recognizes these local constraints.

3.3 Use of School Grants

School grants are another context-neutral technique in CFS programming that greatly facilitates transfer from context to context. Once again, the content of the grant is dependent on the stakeholders. The use of discretionary school grants goes hand in hand with the use of activity menus. School planning committees or local working groups that represent a broad grouping of stakeholders ranging from school directors, teachers, and community members are usually provided with a discretionary grant commensurate with their school size at the time that they develop *school improvement plans*. Depending on how well-endowed a program is, a grant may range in size from \$1,000 to \$5,000 per school.

After having selected a number of activities to address identified problems, stakeholders are usually provided with a unit cost sheet that provides approximate costs for all of the activities listed in an Activity Menu. With these unit costs, it is a small step to creating a costed budget of how big the activities they have selected will

be. Costing activities within a given budget also helps stakeholders to acquire the skill of prioritizing needs and activities to fit within the available resources. The multi-dimensional nature of the activity menu that is the basis for the grant allocation will also help to ensure that all areas of a child's learning are covered by the grant. As a further safeguard to prevent a bias in local funding for one particular area, program planners may suggest budget ceilings for each dimension in the activity menu. For example, funding for activities in Dimension 1 may be capped at 35% of total grant funds, 40% for Dimension 2, and so forth. This technique helps to ensure that stakeholders address all aspects of a child's learning with minimal coercion.

Upon the completion of a school improvement plan and budget, a central committee may review the plan and provide feedback based on agreed guidelines. The approval of a locally developed plan to utilize a school grant is thus a very negotiated process. It nevertheless leads to a locally relevant activity set that has been locally programmed.

After the approval of a plan, grant funds are released periodically based on local requests. These requests are generated in local meetings of stakeholders that occur once every four to six weeks. Consensus on monthly or quarterly spending plans is an important element of the grant disbursement process. Meeting minutes verifying agreement among relevant stakeholders is usually required as part of the submitted documentation to a central program office. Working groups at local level that request funds are generally trained in how to access and liquidate grant funds as part of an institutional building process designed to ensure local management and sustainability.

4. FUTURE CHALLENGES FOR CFS PROGRAMMING

Over the past decade, as CFS projects have been implemented in the Southeast Asia region and their experiences assessed, a number of interrelated lessons have been learned. Among these is the idea that Child Friendliness is a progressive concept and that there is no such thing as a completely child friendly school (Bernard, 2005). The core characteristics of child friendliness are not finite and cannot be easily quantified through checklists and other devices. This concept is often very difficult for national planners to understand. Indeed, the flexible formula required for successful CFS implementation has frequently been undermined by the desire to oversimplify its core

meaning for reporting and policy purposes. Thus, there is a danger of CFS programming becoming a victim of its own success, as policy-makers rush to make the child friendly school a mandatory, national policy. This is what is actually happening in some countries in the region such as Cambodia.

Providing a stakeholder-driven development model to interested stakeholders is almost a sure formula for successful implementation. The principle of volunteerism within the CFS model ensures that readiness and receptivity to the CFS approach is evident when selecting target schools and communities. The principle of volunteerism has, therefore, greatly increased the probability that CFS programming in any given location will be successful. For example, Thailand has been very successful in implementing its CFS programs, partly because the government has been very selective in the areas where it will support it. Even after ten years of implementation, there are only about 200 or more schools that are classified as CFS implementation sites. Yet, the voluntary principle in CFS programming is one, which appears to be on a collision course with national policy makers in many countries in the region. As noted above, policy-makers often feel compelled to enforce policies everywhere, thereby contradicting a fundamental principle that has ensured successful implementation of CFS programming. This will be an important challenge for CFS practitioners to overcome.

Nevertheless, in order to be sustained, it is important for key CFS principles to become fully integrated into the overall educational reform process in a given country, requiring *flexible institutionalization* and integration. To some, however, achieving flexible institutionalization is an oxymoron, a paradox that has not yet been achieved in the countries that have adopted child friendliness as a national policy.

An important limitation in the use of stakeholder-driven development models such as that embodied in CFS programming is that there is great variability among stakeholders with respect to their ability to understand the bottom-up development. Many stakeholders have been conditioned for many years to take orders from above and are often not receptive to this approach, underlining once again the wise inclusion of volunteerism in implementation. For many, however, the internalization of the CFS implementation approach is a long process that once understood, is tightly embraced. There are no quick solutions that a CFS program can provide and novice practitioners

should recognize that the first year of implementation may yield some disappointments. Many practitioners report that it takes at least two and sometimes three years for engaged stakeholders to catch on to the locally driven nature of the process. Thus, the task of any child friendly school project is not to achieve a quick product but rather to focus on the process of incrementally increasing child friendliness, sometimes imperceptibly, along a parabolic course that never reaches an absolute ending.

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