Academic Paper

Community Engagement in Rural School Management in Thailand

Phravinaithorn Worawuth Tejadhammo

Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Khon Kaen Campus, Khon Kaen, Thailand
✉: worawuth2018@gmail.com (Corresponding Email)

Abstract: Community engagement is a vital component of effective school management in rural Thailand, where resource limitations, teacher shortages, and economic challenges often hinder educational progress. This paper explores the role of community involvement in improving school infrastructure, governance, and student outcomes through case studies of successful community-led initiatives. It also examines the challenges that rural schools face, including economic barriers and limited infrastructure, and offers strategies for sustaining long-term community participation. The importance of government support is emphasized, with recommendations for policy improvements such as increased funding for community-led education initiatives and formal recognition of community contributions. Additionally, this paper highlights the potential of expanding successful models of community engagement to other regions of Thailand and leveraging technology to enhance communication and collaboration between schools and communities. By fostering strong community-school partnerships, rural schools can thrive, ensuring that all students have access to quality education.

Keywords: Community engagement, rural education, school management, Thailand, educational policy

1. Introduction

Education in rural Thailand faces numerous challenges that significantly impact the quality of education available to students. One of the primary issues is resource limitations—many rural schools suffer from inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, and insufficient educational materials. These constraints hinder the ability of schools to provide a conducive learning environment for students. Furthermore, teacher shortages are a persistent issue in rural areas. Many teachers prefer to work in urban schools where resources, facilities, and professional development opportunities are more readily available. As a result, rural schools often struggle to attract and retain qualified teachers, leading to larger class sizes and reduced instructional quality (World Bank, 2015).

Student performance in rural areas tends to be lower than in urban regions, with disparities in literacy rates, national examination scores, and overall educational attainment. These educational gaps are exacerbated by the socio-economic conditions of rural families, where poverty, labor migration, and limited access to health and social services further affect students' ability to succeed in school (UNICEF, 2019).

Community engagement plays a crucial role in addressing these challenges and enhancing the quality of education in rural Thailand. Local communities are key stakeholders in the success of rural schools. When community members, including parents, local leaders, and businesses, actively participate in school management, they can provide valuable support in terms of resources, labor, and expertise. Parental involvement is particularly important, as it has been shown to improve student motivation, attendance, and academic performance. Engaging the wider community in school governance and decision-making fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility, making it more likely that local schools will receive the support they need to thrive (Jenkins, 2013). Moreover, integrating community values and traditions into the educational experience helps create a school culture that resonates with students and encourages a deeper connection between the school and the community. This cultural integration can also make education more relevant to students' lives, increasing their engagement and commitment to learning (World Bank, 2018).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of community engagement in enhancing rural school management in Thailand. By examining successful community-led initiatives and identifying the challenges to effective community involvement, this paper aims to provide insights into how rural schools can harness the support of their communities to overcome resource limitations, improve teacher retention, and boost student performance. Additionally, the paper will offer policy recommendations for strengthening community engagement in rural education and discuss future directions for sustaining these efforts. Through case studies and analysis, this paper highlights the potential of community engagement to transform rural education in Thailand and contribute to broader educational equity across the country.

2. The Role of Communities in Supporting Rural Schools

Cultural and Social Influence: Local communities in rural Thailand play a vital role in shaping the culture and atmosphere of their schools. Schools are often at the heart of rural communities, serving not just as centers of learning but as hubs for social and cultural activities. The influence of the community on school culture is significant, as the values, traditions, and beliefs of the community are often reflected in the school's environment and teaching practices. For example, in many rural Thai schools, local festivals, religious practices, and cultural heritage are incorporated into the curriculum, helping to create a school experience that resonates with students and strengthens their connection to their community (Mulder, 1996). Respecting and integrating local traditions into school management can enhance the relationship between the school and the community. When schools honor the cultural identity of their community, they foster a sense of pride and belonging among students. This can lead to higher levels of student engagement and motivation, as students feel that their education is relevant to their lives and their community. Additionally, involving community elders and local leaders in school activities, such as teaching traditional skills or

sharing local history, can enrich the educational experience and ensure that cultural knowledge is passed down to future generations (Rigg, 1991).

Resource Support: Communities can also provide essential resources to support school infrastructure and educational programs, particularly in rural areas where funding from the government may be limited. Community members often contribute by donating materials, volunteering their time and labor, or organizing fundraising events to benefit the school. For instance, local businesses may sponsor school events or provide financial support for building renovations, while parents and other community members may volunteer to assist with maintenance projects or extracurricular activities. These contributions can make a significant difference in improving the quality of education and the learning environment in rural schools (Jenkins, 2013). In some rural Thai communities, villagers have come together to build classrooms, repair school facilities, and provide basic resources like books and uniforms for students. This collective effort not only addresses the material needs of the school but also strengthens the bond between the school and the community. When communities actively participate in supporting their local schools, they demonstrate a commitment to the education and future success of their children, which can inspire students to take their studies more seriously and strive for academic excellence (World Bank, 2018).

Parental Involvement: Parental engagement is another critical aspect of community support for rural schools. Research has shown that when parents are involved in their children's education, students are more likely to attend school regularly, perform better academically, and have higher levels of motivation and self-esteem. In rural Thai schools, parents can play an active role in school governance and decision-making through participation in parent-teacher associations or village education committees. These platforms allow parents to voice their concerns, contribute to school planning, and collaborate with teachers and administrators to improve the quality of education (Jenkins, 2013). For example, in some rural areas, parents have been involved in monitoring student attendance, providing feedback on school policies, and even helping to design extracurricular programs that align with the community's needs and values. This level of engagement fosters a partnership between the school and the family, creating a supportive environment for students both at home and in the classroom. When parents feel empowered to contribute to their children's education, it reinforces the importance of schooling and helps to create a culture of learning within the community (UNICEF, 2019).

3. Successful Community-Led Initiatives in Rural Thai Schools

School Renovation Projects: In many rural areas of Thailand, communities have come together to improve school facilities through collective efforts, including volunteer labor, donations, and partnerships with local organizations. One notable example is the community-led renovation of a rural school in Ubon Ratchathani Province. Faced with deteriorating infrastructure, local villagers organized a series of fundraising events, gathering enough resources to repair classrooms, build new restrooms, and provide essential learning materials for students. The project involved a collaborative effort, where villagers donated both money and their time to help with the construction work. This initiative not only improved the physical environment of the school but also fostered a sense of pride and ownership within the community, leading to increased student enrollment and better academic performance

(Jenkins, 2013). Similarly, in other provinces such as Chiang Rai, local communities have partnered with NGOs to renovate schools and improve access to clean water and sanitation. These projects highlight the power of community mobilization and the impact that local involvement can have on creating a better learning environment for students in rural Thailand. By addressing the immediate needs of the school, these renovation projects contribute to the overall well-being of students and set the foundation for long-term educational success (World Bank, 2018).

Village Education Committees: Village Education Committees (VECs) are community-led bodies that support the management of rural schools in Thailand. These committees, often composed of parents, local leaders, and educators, play a crucial role in school governance, fundraising, and monitoring student performance. In provinces such as Isan, VECs have been instrumental in mobilizing resources to support schools that face significant financial constraints. For instance, in a rural district in Khon Kaen Province, a VEC successfully raised funds to hire additional teachers and provide scholarships for students from low-income families. The committee also worked closely with school administrators to monitor academic performance and implement programs aimed at reducing dropout rates (UNICEF, 2019). VECs also contribute to improving transparency and accountability in school management. By involving community members in decision-making processes, these committees ensure that schools remain responsive to the needs of their students and the wider community. This participatory approach has been particularly effective in rural areas, where formal oversight from the government may be limited. VECs serve as a bridge between the school and the community, fostering collaboration and ensuring that local voices are heard in school governance (Jenkins, 2013).

Traditional Knowledge Integration: In several rural Thai schools, community engagement has gone beyond material support and extended into curriculum development through the integration of traditional knowledge. For example, in schools across rural northeastern Thailand, educators have collaborated with community elders to incorporate local agricultural practices and cultural heritage into the curriculum. This initiative is particularly evident in regions where farming is the primary economic activity. By teaching students traditional farming techniques and involving them in community agriculture projects, schools are not only preserving local knowledge but also providing students with practical skills that can benefit their communities (Rigg, 1991). In addition to agricultural knowledge, some schools have integrated cultural practices such as traditional Thai dance, local music, and handicrafts into their educational programs. These efforts are often led by community elders who pass down their expertise to younger generations. In Mae Hong Son Province, for instance, a school worked with local artisans to establish a traditional weaving program as part of the school curriculum. Students learned to create textiles using traditional methods, helping to preserve an important aspect of their cultural heritage while also acquiring skills that could provide economic opportunities in the future (Mulder, 1996). These examples of integrating traditional knowledge into the curriculum demonstrate how community involvement can enrich the educational experience for rural students, making education more relevant to their lives and helping to preserve the cultural identity of their communities.

4. Challenges to Community Engagement in Rural Schools

Economic and Social Barriers: Rural communities in Thailand often face significant economic challenges, including poverty, seasonal employment, and labor migration. These factors can severely limit the ability of community members to engage with their local schools. Poverty is a particularly pervasive issue in rural areas, where families may struggle to meet basic needs, leaving little time or resources to contribute to school activities or governance. Many parents work in agriculture or migrate to urban areas for seasonal work, reducing their availability to participate in school meetings or support their children's education. This economic instability not only affects parental involvement but also leads to higher student absenteeism, as children may be required to work or help with household responsibilities (UNICEF, 2019). Additionally, migration - both internal and external - can disrupt community cohesion and the continuity of support for local schools. When families move for work, schools lose not only students but also potential community volunteers and leaders. This constant flux can make it difficult to establish strong, stable community-school partnerships, which are crucial for effective engagement and long-term planning (World Bank, 2018).

Limited Resources and Infrastructure: The lack of infrastructure in rural areas further hinders community engagement in school management. In many rural Thai communities, basic infrastructure such as transportation, communication networks, and school facilities is underdeveloped. Transportation is a critical issue, as many families live in remote areas without reliable roads or public transit, making it difficult for parents to attend school meetings, participate in activities, or engage in governance. Poor infrastructure also affects students, who may face long and difficult commutes to school, leading to higher dropout rates and less parental involvement in their education (Jenkins, 2013). Furthermore, the lack of communication networks, such as limited access to the internet or mobile phones, restricts the ability of schools to communicate effectively with parents and the wider community. Without regular communication, it becomes challenging for schools to keep parents informed about their children's progress, upcoming events, or opportunities for involvement. This lack of connectivity can isolate rural schools and limit the flow of information, making it harder for communities to stay engaged (Rigg, 1991).

Community-School Relationship Dynamics: Building trust and establishing effective communication between school administrators and local communities can be particularly challenging in rural areas, especially in diverse or multi-ethnic communities. In some rural regions of Thailand, schools serve populations that are culturally and linguistically diverse, including ethnic minorities such as the Karen, Hmong, and Akha. These communities often have distinct cultural practices and languages, which may differ from those of the school staff and the national curriculum. This cultural gap can lead to misunderstandings and mistrust between the school and the community, making it difficult to foster a collaborative relationship (Mulder, 1996). Additionally, school administrators in rural areas may be seen as outsiders, particularly if they are appointed from urban areas or have little connection to the local community. This can create a sense of distance and detachment, where community members feel that their voices are not heard or valued in school decision-making. Effective communication is essential in bridging this gap, but it requires sensitivity to local customs, languages, and social dynamics. Schools that fail to engage meaningfully with the community

risk alienating parents and reducing their involvement in school governance and student support (Jenkins, 2013). In summary, economic and social barriers, limited infrastructure, and the complexities of community-school relationships all pose significant challenges to community engagement in rural Thai schools. Addressing these challenges requires targeted strategies that acknowledge the unique circumstances of rural communities, including efforts to improve infrastructure, enhance communication, and build trust between schools and local stakeholders.

5. Strategies for Enhancing Community Engagement in Rural School Management

Building Partnerships: Fostering partnerships between rural schools and local organizations, businesses, and government agencies is crucial for enhancing community engagement. One effective strategy is to establish public-private partnerships, where local businesses and schools collaborate on initiatives that benefit both parties. For example, local businesses can sponsor school events or provide internships and vocational training opportunities for students, helping to prepare them for the workforce while also supporting the local economy. Government agencies, meanwhile, can facilitate connections between schools and broader community development programs, ensuring that education is part of the overall strategy for rural development (OECD, 2016). Partnerships with NGOs and international organizations can also provide essential resources and expertise. In some rural Thai communities, international NGOs have partnered with schools to provide teacher training, scholarships for students, and infrastructure development. These partnerships often focus on long-term capacity building, ensuring that schools can sustain improvements even after the initial project has ended (UNESCO, 2018).

Capacity Building and Training: Providing community members with the skills and knowledge needed to actively participate in school management is essential for enhancing engagement. Capacity-building programs should focus on leadership development, financial management, and governance skills. For example, training in financial management can help community leaders make informed decisions about resource allocation, fundraising, and budgeting, which are critical for sustaining school operations and improvement projects (Barker, 2007). Leadership development programs, which may include workshops, mentorship, and peer learning opportunities, can empower community members to take on more active roles in school governance. In some regions, community members have received training in inclusive education practices, equipping them to advocate for all students, including those with disabilities or from marginalized backgrounds (Education Development Trust, 2020).

Creating a Shared Vision: Creating a shared vision for education involves engaging schools and communities in a collaborative process to define their goals and priorities. This process encourages dialogue between educators, parents, community leaders, and students, ensuring that the educational vision reflects both local values and national objectives. One successful approach is to hold community meetings and workshops where stakeholders can voice their ideas and concerns, contributing to a collective vision for the school's future (Fullan, 2001). By establishing a shared vision, schools can foster a sense of ownership and commitment among community members, which is vital for sustaining engagement over time.

In rural Thai communities, schools have worked with local villagers to integrate cultural practices and traditions into the curriculum, making education more relevant to the students' lives. These efforts help to ensure that schools are not only places of academic learning but also hubs for cultural preservation and community development (Sriprakash, 2010).

6. Policy Implications

Government Support for Community Engagement: The Thai government has implemented policies aimed at encouraging community involvement in rural school management, with a focus on decentralized decision-making and school autonomy initiatives. The National Education Act of 1999 laid the foundation for increased local participation in school governance, promoting the formation of school committees that include parents, teachers, and community leaders. These committees are intended to give local communities more control over school operations, ensuring that education is tailored to the specific needs of the community (Office of the Basic Education Commission, 2018). School-Based Management (SBM) initiatives in Thailand have also been instrumental in promoting community engagement by allowing schools greater autonomy in decision-making. This policy enables rural schools to allocate resources more effectively and implement programs that reflect local priorities. However, challenges remain, such as ensuring that rural schools have adequate resources and training to manage this autonomy successfully (Magdadaro & Sacramento, 2022).

Recommendations for Policy Improvements:

To further strengthen government policies that support community engagement in rural school management, several key recommendations can be considered: (1) Increased Funding for Community-Led Initiatives: The government should allocate more funding specifically for community-led education initiatives. These funds could be used for school renovation projects, extracurricular programs, and teacher training, all of which require active community involvement. Matching fund programs that incentivize local contributions could also enhance community engagement (Sangkong & Bunlertnirun, 2018). (2) Formal Recognition of Community Contributions: Establishing formal mechanisms to recognize community contributions to education can motivate further involvement. Awards and public recognition programs, as well as incentives for schools that foster strong community partnerships, can help create a culture of collaboration across the education system (Wata, Chatraphorn, & Traimongkolkul, 2015). (3) Capacity-Building Programs: The government should invest in capacity-building programs that provide training in leadership, financial management, and community engagement strategies. Such programs would ensure that both school leaders and community members are well-equipped to manage decentralized decision-making and work together effectively to improve educational outcomes (Dulay & Villanca, 2023). (4) By implementing these recommendations, the Thai government can create a more supportive environment for community engagement in rural schools, enhancing the role of local stakeholders in shaping the future of education.

7. Future Directions

Sustaining Community Engagement: Ensuring long-term community involvement in rural schools requires creating sustainable models for participation that can endure changes in

leadership, funding, and community dynamics. One way to achieve sustainability is by institutionalizing community engagement practices within the school's governance structures. This involves formalizing the roles of community members in decision-making processes and creating mechanisms for continuous involvement, such as regular community meetings, feedback loops, and established channels of communication. Schools can also form partnerships with local governments and NGOs to secure ongoing support for community engagement initiatives, which can help sustain efforts over the long term (Magdadaro & Sacramento, 2022). Additionally, capacity-building programs that equip community members with leadership and management skills are essential for sustaining engagement. By providing continuous training and development opportunities, schools can ensure that local leaders remain empowered to contribute effectively to school management. This investment in capacity building creates a foundation for long-term involvement, as community members become more confident in their roles and more invested in the success of the school (Sangkong & Bunlertnirun, 2018).

Expanding Successful Models: Successful community engagement models that have been implemented in specific rural areas of Thailand can serve as blueprints for other regions. These models can be adapted to fit the unique cultural, economic, and geographical contexts of different communities. For example, schools in northern Thailand that have successfully integrated local agricultural practices into their curriculum can share their strategies with schools in other regions facing similar agricultural challenges. By creating a network of rural schools, successful models can be scaled and adapted across the country, allowing for knowledge sharing and collaboration among schools facing similar challenges (Wata, Chatraphorn, & Traimongkolkul, 2015). The government can play a crucial role in facilitating the expansion of these models by providing resources, technical support, and opportunities for schools to learn from one another. Workshops, conferences, and online platforms can be used to disseminate best practices and foster collaboration between schools and communities in different regions.

Leveraging Technology for Engagement: Digital tools and social media present significant opportunities for enhancing community engagement in rural schools. Technology can bridge the gap between schools and communities by facilitating communication and collaboration, even in remote areas. For example, schools can use social media platforms to share updates, invite community members to events, and gather feedback from parents and local leaders. Online platforms can also be used for virtual meetings and workshops, enabling greater participation from community members who may not be able to attend in person due to geographical or time constraints (Dulay & Villanca, 2023). Moreover, mobile applications designed for education can help rural schools engage with parents and community members by providing real-time updates on student progress, school activities, and volunteer opportunities. These digital tools not only enhance communication but also make it easier for communities to stay involved in school life on an ongoing basis (Sriprakash, 2010). By leveraging technology, schools in rural Thailand can overcome the challenges of distance and limited infrastructure, making community engagement more accessible and sustainable over the long term.

8. Conclusion

Community engagement plays a critical role in the success of rural school management in Thailand. Throughout this paper, we have explored how partnerships between schools and local communities contribute to improving educational outcomes, especially in resource-limited areas. Community involvement supports rural schools by providing additional resources, enhancing school governance, and fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility among community members. Initiatives such as school renovation projects, village education committees, and the integration of traditional knowledge into the curriculum have demonstrated the significant impact of community-led efforts on improving school infrastructure, student performance, and overall school management. Despite the successes of community engagement, challenges remain, such as economic barriers, limited infrastructure, and the complexities of building effective community-school relationships. Addressing these challenges requires continued government support, including policies that promote decentralized decision-making, increased funding for community-led initiatives, and formal recognition of community contributions. To ensure that rural schools in Thailand continue to thrive, ongoing support from both local and national stakeholders is essential. Sustaining community involvement will require creating long-term, sustainable models of engagement that empower communities to take active roles in school management. Expanding successful models of community engagement to other regions, leveraging technology for enhanced communication, and ensuring that policies support community participation are all crucial for the future of rural education in Thailand. By maintaining a strong focus on community-school partnerships, rural schools can overcome the challenges they face and create learning environments where all students have the opportunity to succeed. With the right support and continued collaboration, schools in rural Thailand can serve as centers of both education and community development, benefiting future generations.

Originality & Body of Knowledge

Originality: This paper presents an original exploration of community engagement as a transformative strategy for addressing the unique challenges of rural school management in Thailand. It distinguishes itself by combining cultural, economic, and policy perspectives to propose sustainable models for community-school partnerships. By integrating case studies from diverse Thai provinces, the paper highlights innovative approaches - such as community-led infrastructure projects, Village Education Committees, and the integration of traditional knowledge into school curricula. These initiatives demonstrate how local cultural practices and collective efforts can drive educational progress, offering a unique lens on the potential of community engagement in rural educational development.

Body of Knowledge: The study contributes significantly to the discourse on rural education management by demonstrating the critical role of community involvement in enhancing school infrastructure, governance, and student outcomes. It expands the body of knowledge by analyzing successful models of community-led initiatives and proposing strategies for sustaining long-term engagement. Furthermore, the paper addresses the challenges of economic constraints, infrastructure limitations, and cultural dynamics in rural areas, offering practical recommendations for policymakers. By emphasizing the integration of traditional knowledge, leveraging technology for communication, and

fostering partnerships with NGOs and local businesses, this paper provides a comprehensive framework for improving rural education in Thailand. It also aligns its findings with global education policies, underscoring the importance of community engagement in achieving educational equity and sustainability.

Declarations

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Ethical treatment of experimental subjects (animals & human): The research was conducted in compliance with the principles of the Helsinki Declaration regarding human subjects, so formal ethical approval was not required.

10. References

Barker, K. (2007). Community Engagement in School Governance: A Capacity Building Framework. *International Journal of Educational Leadership*, 25(3), 201-218.

Dulay, L. A., & Villanca, A. A. (2023). Constructive Community Engagement: The Experiences of the Elementary Laboratory (ELS) Teacher-Extensionists. *Journal of Multidisciplinary in Social Sciences*, 19(3). Retrieved from https://so03.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/sduhs/article/view/274219

Education Development Trust. (2020). *Inclusive Education in Rural Areas: Strategies for Success*. Education Development Trust.

Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a Culture of Change*. Jossey-Bass.

Jenkins, M. (2013). Community Engagement in Education: Lessons from Rural Schools in Southeast Asia. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 33(4), 379-389.

Magdadaro, J. M. D., & Sacramento, N. J. J. E. (2022). Community Engagement in the Indigenous Education Discourse: Unravelling Policy Lessons from Lumad's Alternative School in Mindanao, Philippines. *Thammasat Review*, 25(1), 57–81. Retrieved from https://sc01.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/tureview/article/view/240103

Mulder, N. (1996). *Thai Images: The Culture of the Public World*. Silkworm Books.

OECD. (2016). *Public-Private Partnerships in Education: What is the Impact on Educational Outcomes?* OECD Publishing.

Rigg, J. (1991). *The Thai Village Economy: Beyond Agriculture*. Singapore University Press.

Sangkong, M., & Bunlertnirun, K. (2018). Dynamics of Social Engagement Illustrated by Area-Based Development. *Area Based Development Research Journal*, 10(6), 440-

452. Retrieved from https://so01.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/abcjournal/article/view/240345

Sriprakash, A. (2010). Child-Centred Education and the Promise of Democratic Learning: Pedagogic Messages in Rural Indian Primary Schools. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 30(3), 297-304.

UNESCO. (2018). *Partnerships in Education: Linking Education to the Broader Development Agenda*. UNESCO Bangkok Office.

UNICEF. (2019). *Thailand Education Report 2019: Addressing the Challenges of Education in Rural Areas*. UNICEF Thailand.

Wata, Y., Chatraphorn, S., & Traimongkolkul, P. (2015). Social Engagement in Thai Higher Education: Practice and Challenges. *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences*, 36(3), 465–482. Retrieved from https://so04.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/kjss/article/view/243413

World Bank. (2015*). Thailand: Quality Education for All - Challenges and Opportunities*. World Bank Group.

World Bank. (2018). *Community Participation and Educational Outcomes: Evidence from Rural Schools in Developing Countries*. World Bank Group.