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Unpacking the Narrative of Educational Failure:

Thailand in the Standardized Testing Era

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Abstract

This paper assesses standardized national exams as one of the mechanisms which the Thai state uses to apoliticize and rationalize educational reform. The National Institute of Educational Testing Services, or NIETS, uses standardized exams to show that Thai students, and subsequently the nation, are "falling behind." This narrative of failure extends from relative time periods and geographically, from the country level to ASEAN and internationally. Thai education is consistently found lacking, which necessitates increased focus on accountability, a global trend that means increased centralized bureaucratic control of teachers and schools. In this paper I will scrutinize the data that is used to produce a narrative of Thai students' diminishing capacity used to justify and support continuous emergency-style educational reform for the sake of international competitiveness.

Introduction

Within the international testing milieu, the Thai government has embraced the rhetoric of educational accountability, which is particularly evident in the way that national exam scores are interpreted. National standardized test scores are used each year to tell a story. If Thai students got an average of 46.51 percent on the national exam in 2011, but 33.49 percent in 2012, education must be deteriorating; students must not care as much as before. This is one of the narratives that pervades Thai education, inside and out.[1] Therefore, urgent and continuous reform is apoliticized because it can be framed as a natural consequence of measurable, and calamitous, failure. The explanation of annual Ordinary National Educational Test (O-Net)[2] results fit the narrative of "scandalized need for reform" (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004 cited in Rattana Lao, 2015, 5) and are flexible

[1] The newspaper *The Nation* reported that in 2011 the national average for the Grade 12 social studies [and religion and culture] section of the O-Net was 46.51 percent, but in 2012 it fell to 33.39 percent (Poor ONet scores 'could reflect, 2012).

[2] The O-Net was first administered to grade 12 (M6) students in 2005, replacing the National University Entrance Exam (NUEE), colloquially referred to as "Entrance."

enough to accommodate different data sets: even if the students' scores improve between years, this is not celebrated, but rather categorized as "still a failure." The 2017 newspaper headlines read: "Mathayom 3 students fail all five O-Net subjects," "O-Net exam failure rate still alarmingly high."

These claims made about the meaning of the O-Net exam scores are widely accepted as fact, as they support the primary narrative of Thai educational failure. Even in articles in which academics criticize the test and the testing service for being unable to accurately assess student learning, the articles still cite test results to prove the lack of student learning (Maxwell and Kamnuansilpa, 2017). Confusion reigns because the O-Net is testing some set of information, so the results must mean something, so these authors try to derive meaning from the scores. However, the test is not in line with the national curriculum (OECD, 2015) so it becomes an assessment of whether or not students can think like the test writers. My research question then becomes: how is the data framed and narrated in order to create meaning, what meaning is it given, and for what ends?

My methodology for this paper is to analyze government documentation of test scores and officials' interviews with the press regarding test scores to address what data is presented, how it is presented, and what is data is missing. The National Institute of Educational Testing Service (NIETS) does not distribute all O-Net data sets, so an independent statistical analysis of the results is not possible for this paper. Instead, I focus on the data that NIETS does collect and disseminate and how it is used. Average scores (means) are the primary data sets that government actors utilize in their documentation.

While the primary narrative of overall educational decline is splashed across newspapers, secondary narratives can be found in government analysis papers. Government organizations, such as the Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (ONESQA) utilize the O-Net scores to justify their increased involvement in school operations. ONESQA treats the test results as reliable, valid, and fair scientific measurements to pinpoint educational problems, but, as I have written previously in my master's thesis and subsequent article,[3] the exam contains not only errors and subjective questions, as are popularly denounced, but also specific biases that privilege certain demographics. Aside from the analysis of the test questions themselves, the meaning attributed to scores provides evidence of the neoliberal logic of competition, on an intra-national, regional (Asia, but especially ASEAN) and international scale. The use of standardized testing as a tool to ensure educational accountability shows a clear "quest for equity and empowerment in a neoliberal capitalist regime in an era of dramatic globalization" (Au, 2009, World Bank 2009, Bhagwati, 2004, Davis and Monk, 2007, Friedman, 2005, Rapley, 2004, Wirat, 1998, Witte, 2000 in Fry and Bi 2013, 291). This logic of being able to catch up to international powers by wielding the tool of education, if only it could be perfected, is actually quite optimistic. Within this optimistic frame, unrestrained government pressure and monetary investment are justified because if properly done education is understood to be able to solve all the country's problems.

[3] Goodman, J. (2012). Testing Thais: Establishing the ordinary In Thai national exams (Unpublished Masters thesis). Cornell University, Ithaca, NY. Goodman, J. (2013). The meritocracy myth: National exams and the depoliticization of Thai education. *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia 28.1*(2013): 101-131.

The narrative of failure, citing the O-Net as proof, remains focused on the national level. A pervasive, general failure of Thai education remains the dominant rhetoric. From taking the averages (mean) of O-Net results, NIETS issues proclamations to the newspapers that the national education system is either disintegrating or failing, without recognizing the changing nature of the testing variables. The nature of O-Net scores is erratic. In 2017 6th grade students averaged 34.59 percent on the English test with a standard deviation of 17.29. That may not be surprising to some readers because English language education is prioritized in some schools and not in others. However, the other subjects follow suit: in mathematics students scored a mean of 40.47 with a standard deviation of 18.78 (NIETS News, 2017). NIETS does not publish bell curve representations of student scores, but rather tables of numbers. Therefore, the top national scores of only one student in the nation receiving 67% on the arts exam and one student receiving 87% on the social studies, religion, and culture exam as the *highest scores received* in the country (Ministry of Education, 2011) do not define the narrative because the narrative is of the failure of the education system, the teachers, and the students, not of the test.

Comparing student averages between years implies a rational, linear notion of national education over the course of time. Although much of the rhetoric claims otherwise, the scores cannot measure generic Thai capacity or ability to learn. The exams only measure how well students can take this year's test.[4] The students who took the test in 2011 and 2012 are not the same people, and the exam is not the same exam. The O-Net format, the questions, and the students are not the same from year to year, so the NIETS graphs and tables that imply continuity between years are deceiving. The exam asks students different difficulty of questions with an inconsistent number of corresponding multiple-choice answers.[5] To illustrate, in 2011 the Grade 12 exam's questions provided only four answer choices—A, B, C and D—but in 2012 exam choice E was added to eighty percent of the exam.[6] In 2012 students had a twenty-percent chance of guessing right instead of a twenty-five percent chance, so between years students have a different probability of getting questions right, thereby producing statistically incomparable units. Teachers and students also report inconsistent question difficulty between years, yet ONESQA asks schools to compare its

[4] Assistant to Education Minister Chaturon Chaisaeng, Mr. Phawit Thongrot, told the Bangkok Post in 2013 "The Pisa results clearly shows Thai children are not good at thinking", (Thais fail in WEF, 2013) which is common language Thai educational authorities use to disparage Thai students in order to escape responsibility for educational failures.

[5] In 2016, two writing portions (write your own 4-7 sentence story based on a provided picture and summarize a paragraph in no more than 3 sentences) were added to the formerly all multiple choice Prathom 6 Thai exam, making up 20% of the points and extending the 50-minute exam to 80 minutes ('STS.' Sob O-Net adnai chan P. 6, 2017). According to Education Minister Teerakiat Jareonsettasin, "If the writing sections start bearing fruit, the testing service (Niets) will gradually expand them to other subjects," (Mala, 2017a). However, NIETS has not declared success or failure in reference to the open-ended questions, even though elementary students scored higher in Thai than in previous years with an overall mean rising from 49.33 in 2016 to 52.98 in 2017; the writing section disaggregated averaged 55.36 (Sarupphon, 2017). The higher score on writing should be a surprise to teachers who promote multiple choice with the rationale that it gives students a better chance at high scores since the dominant rhetoric states that students cannot write, think for themselves, or be creative. The scores improved. Moreover the positive washback (tests' affect on teaching and learning), although not yet reported or analyzed, will probably be substantial (Jianrattanapong, 2011).

[6] This trend likely stems from the global trends in the science of testing, as psychometric research revealed that five choices were optimal, and in 2005 the SAT began to conform to this number. (Personal email communication with the College Board Communications Coordinator, Katherine Levin.)

results between years and to improve from year to year, regardless of those schools' previous successes. The numbers of exams are also inconsistent. In 2015, NIETS dropped the number of tests from eight to five, eliminating health and physical education, arts, and vocational skills.

The results reported by NIETS are used in many government documents and newspaper articles, and I utilize such papers to demonstrate how the exam results are used to make claims about Thai education. Government organizations utilize O-Net scores to justify their involvement in the school operations of schools with average scores that are low.

Making a Case with Numbers

This mathematical approach to relating data about education, complete with statistics on O-Net results, is aimed at providing credible data for the Ministry of Education's systematic usage in evaluating schools in order to make improvements in the overall quality of education (OBEC*,* 2010, 3). In the district-wide booklets, the name of each district school appears in a chart with the number of students, the total points, the average raw score from that school, the average score in terms of percentage, and the standard deviation. Then the points are broken down into three quality categories: "needs improvement," "satisfactory," and "good."

NIETS does not prioritize test consistency between years because its gaze is on the international testing atmosphere, which is always changing. Every year NIETS changes the exam format, the number of total points, and the subjects tested or subject groupings, meaning that, for example, one year NIETS tests Thai and math in the same hour and a half, and the next year they are tested separately or in combination with other subjects.[7]

NIETS and ONESQA state that the exam results can demonstrate capacity, or *khwam samat*, without delineating to what the term "capacity" refers. Under scrutiny, the exam questions divulge their inability to test general student capacity. Aside from the content of the questions, which I have addressed in previous work, the exam preparation materials, and even the exams themselves, often have technical errors, from ambiguous answers to outright wrong answers.[8] Yet because it attempts to mirror the assessment tool like the British or Singaporean O-levels, even this controversial exam is widely believed to be better than no exam. Then, over the years, the exam can then be refined to

[7] The Grade 6 exam had three hundred points on it from 2008-2009, which became eight hundred points in 2010. In 2006 and 2007 there were a total of five hundred points on the twelfth grade exam, which changed to eight hundred for the twelfth grade exam in 2008. In 2008 and 2009 each subject was tested separately on the Grade 6 exam, but in 2010 subject were paired together in the same test booklet, Thai with math, social studies with science, art with vocation, English with health and P.E. So if students took too long on the Thai portion they would not have time to work on the math section. In 2011 the tests were regrouped into two exams: social studies with English and math, and Thai with science, health and P.E., art, and vocation. In 2012 the subjects were segregated again.

[8] These errors are well documented in both Thai and English sources. Examples include the grade 12 (M6) Social Studies exam question 63 given in 2016, "What was the first commercial agreement Thailand made with a foreign country?" Where the answer key says the Bowring Treaty, but a Ministry of Education certified textbook says the Burney Treaty, to "Which sentence has a similar meaning to 'Jimmy was a fruit seller for 10 years'?" where the answer key incorrectly chose 3) Jimmy started selling fruit 10 years ago rather than 4) Jimmy is not a fruit seller anymore. This was from question 42 on the Mathayom 3 English exam given in 2016 (Biggs, 2016).

become a more accurate measurement tool. That may be why the existence of the O-Net is not contested. Despite international organizations' calls for citizen engagement, the bureaucratic mechanism continues without civic intervention. "A sound system of student assessment can ensure accountability to members of the general public, providing assurance that investments are being well spent and providing a sense of where, as concerned citizens, they may need to intervene" (OECD/UNESCO, 2016, 134). Intervention by citizens has not occurred, however.

Whereas within the realm of international educational reform conversations about testing revolve around prioritizing frameworks such as adequate psychometrics, validity, reliability, and comparability over time, clarity of educational goals, coherence between levels, and consistency, Thai educational officers focus primarily on short-term solutions. These include eliminating embarrassing technical flaws on the exam and removing the subjects where the majority of criticism has focused. Long term planning is subverted for immediate results, as each political player has such a short time in office. "Thailand has had eight governments and 21 education ministers since 1999, Sompong [Jitradap] said, each of whom had about six months and 16 days to work" (Too many ministers, 2017). As many authors have written in regards to higher education, education in Thailand reflects the state of politics (Lao, 2015, Lavankura, 2013).

Educational reforms must show improvement in the short term so that the policy maker responsible will be appropriately credited. The PISA scores that "plunged" between 2012 and 2015 demonstrate outcomes of this short-term strategy. Athapol Anunthavorasakul of Chualongkorn University's Faculty of Education reported that "In 2012, we allowed students from the demonstration schools and Princess Chulabhorn college schools [to take part in the PISA test] and that is why we saw a slight improvement in Thai scores. But I think this time students in these schools may not have taken part, so our scores dropped again" (Mala, 2016b). In 2015 Thailand scored 54th of 70 countries' 15 year-olds, slipping from the 2012 position of 50th place of 65 countries (Ministry of Education, 2013). This may not seem a relatively far fall, however within the competitive testing atmosphere, and in light of the policies and committees designated to implement strategies to improve the test scores, hopes were high that Thailand's PISA rankings would improve.

An International Point of Comparison

Thailand is not an exceptional case, as it is one among many countries conducting standards-based evaluations that rely on exam scores. In the United States, each state is responsible for its own standardized exam in accordance with the nation-wide No Child Left Behind (NCLB) initiative of 2001. For example, Colorado's original exam was called the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP)."[9] State and federal laws require publication of these reports and schools that fail the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) objective for two years in a row are identified as "in need of

[9] Although any state would work as an illustration, I have a relatively better understanding of the Colorado system because Colorado it is my home state. I attended primary and secondary school there and I know many Colorado teachers. As of August 2011, the Transitional Colorado Assessment Program, or TSAP, has taken the CSAP's place in accordance with the new educational standards, but teachers are still making the adjustment. (Colorado Department of Education website, 2012).

improvement" and must write a school improvement plan. The stakes are high for American schools because they could lose federal funds. [10]

The Thai system of school evaluations clearly parallels the United States' history of evaluations, perhaps because many technocrats were trained in the United States. The United States AYP objectives created under NCLB (2001) are similar to ONESQA evaluations designated in 2002 in Thailand in article 49, amending the Education Act of 1999 (2542) (ONESQA, 2012). Four categories were used for the CSAP: "advanced," "proficient," "partially proficient," and "unsatisfactory" (Colorado Department of Education website 2012). On the other hand, in Thailand ONESQA uses five categories: "urgently needs improvement," "needs improvement," "satisfactory," "good," and "very good." If a school does not pass the evaluation in Colorado, it must create a two-year plan within *three months* of evaluation to remedy this (ESEA 2012). The case in Thailand is parallel; schools that do not pass the evaluation must also create a two-year development plan, but submit it to their local jurisdiction within *thirty days* (ONESQA, 2013, 39).

Colorado's assessment appears to be very similar to Thailand's ONESQA, but there is one major discrepancy. In Thailand's ONESQA no group is disaggregated. In the case of Colorado, to make the adequate yearly progress measure (AYP), the school must make AYP in all disaggregated groups with 30 or more students, including Native American, Asian, Black, Hispanic, White, English language learners, economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities (District Accountability Handbook, 2011, 18). In Thailand, however, students are not disaggregated and schools must meet ONESQA's progress indicator as a whole. The goal for the O-Net is not to reduce the gap between Thai citizens.

O-Net Results in the International Testing Context

The NIETS "Crisis of Thai Education" paper does not simply jump into O-Net test results (NIETS, 2010). First, the paper is framed in the context of international testing; only in this context can the reader understand the justification within which NIETS rationalizes the O-Net. It is a tool to make Thailand competitive as a nation. In the preface, NIETS spells out its logic in three paragraphs. The first of these poses that

> *In comparing the rankings of Thai educational capabilities with other countries, it is evident that Thailand was ranked low and is apt to stay among the lower rankings. Why is this the case? Who is the responsible party? And how can it be fixed?*

The first sentence positions Thailand as a country behind others as the focus of the testing issue. NIETS then poses questions of causality that are not directly answered or clarified in the document. The reader must infer the answers from the data set forth. NIETS and most readers assume that if Thailand is not moving ahead it might fall even farther behind, but this is not mentioned again or

[10] "Schools and districts identified for improvement face federal sanctions if they receive Title I funds." (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction website, 2012).

supported with evidence. This claim does not need to be supported by outside authors or citations because it is part of the hegemonic rhetoric.

The second paragraph of the preface continues by turning the focus to the NIETS role of using O-Net scores to inform citizens about the *capacity* of Thai students without specifying what they should have the capacity to do.

> *This document is a summary of results from the O-Net, I-Net and V-Net from October 2, 2006–September 30, 2010 during which time Professor Dr. Utumporn Jamornmann was the director of National Institute for Educational Testing Service (Public Organization). Aside from that, this document was written with the purpose of urging Thai citizens to realize the level of Thai student ability; if Thailand wants students who are capable, then how can the problem be solved and by whom?*

This implies that Thai citizens in general are not aware of the state of Thai education, and so NIETS collates the data to inform Thais of the state of the student capacity. NIETS uses the word *capable* in reference to students as a catchall term that treats citizens as an undifferentiated category and eludes critique because of its lack of specificity.

Lastly, the preface zooms in on the heart of the matter: that O-Net scores can speak to the state of the nation.

> *This document urges Thais' cooperation in taking responsibility and to paying attention to making schools strong so that the communities will be strong. Then Thailand will be strong. Let us work together so that our [primary and elementary] students, [college and university] students to have knowledge, morality, and ethics. That way our Thailand will have a chance to be ranked among the top of the rankings and our country will become a more advanced country.*

This final paragraph emphasizes that all Thais are responsible for the status of the education sector.

After the preface, the body of the "Crisis" paper paints a picture of Thailand as a country that is generally behind other Asian countries (NIETS, 2010). Thailand, as evidenced in the first eleven pages of the "Crisis" paper, is behind other countries in international test scores, and Thailand's face as a nation is at stake in these rankings.[11] The background for the O-Net is set on the country's "lower than" (*tam kwa*) status based on various international assessments, namely IMD, PISA, World Bank, and TIMSS. The scores on all of these assessments are listed from best to worst by country, and the people who take the tests are identified solely by their country and only as representatives of Thailand's performance. If Thailand is "underperforming" in the international circuit, then this implies that *the nation* needs to remedy this in order to test better. The scores that a small sample of students obtain are used as barometers of the *standing of the nation*.

[11] Government officials want Thailand to not only save face, but to also gain face in relationship to other countries. In September 2006, Dr. Utumporn dreamed to make NIETS eventually become the best test center in Asia. She hoped that the future of NIETS would be in organizing tests for countries such as "Burma, Vietnam, and Laos."

In the International Institute for Management Development (IMD) "scoreboard" in 2009 (2552) and 2010 (2553) Thailand was ranked twenty-sixth out of fifty-eight participating countries worldwide (NIETS 2010). NIETS compares the scores not in terms of ASEAN, but in terms of Asia as a whole, and only highlights data about the countries that outrank Thailand, not data about the countries that scored lower than it. Although Thailand is twenty-sixth and Japan is twenty-seventh and Indonesia is thirty-fifth, this is not part of the "lower than" construction of "what countries we need to beat," and thus not a focus. "As a whole [Thailand] scored lower than five Asian countries: Singapore (in first place), Hong Kong (second place), Taiwan (eighth place) Malaysia (tenth place) and Korea (twenty-third place)" (NIETS 2010, 1). In this way NIETS constructs an implicit argument that Thailand is behind other Asian countries and, if the idea is allowed to expand to the logical conclusion, should not be. This national rankings chart must mean something, but NIETS leaves the analysis to the reader who must extrapolate from the chart.

This neoliberal competitive construction assumes that education is a fixed and finite object of which some nations have more and some nations have less. It does not allow for different educational priorities and different kinds of knowledge sets or skill sets. When both PISA Program for International Student Assessment and the World Bank "World Competitiveness Yearbook" rank nations based on how a select group of citizens perform, they are essentially treating the nation as a homogeneous entity in which all students receive the same level of education because there is only one representative educational score. This misconstrues the findings.

NIETS provides two more international examples to persuade readers of Thailand's low standing in the competitive international testing sphere. Bar graphs illustrate the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries and participating countries in both the PISA and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) (NIETS 2010, pp.4-6). PISA tests student reading, mathematics and scientific literacy. Scores are divided into six rankings: lower than one, one, two, three, four, and five. In 2006 the majority of Thai students received a ranking of two in reading, or an average of 417 points, which is lower than the OECD average of 484 points (NIETS 2010, p.2). Thailand scored higher in reading than Argentina, Indonesia, and Brazil, but this can only be inferred from the graph; it does not appear in the text. The portion that appears in text supports the argument in the preface, that Thailand is educationally falling behind, which supports an alarmist national rhetoric. TIMSS from 2007 also depicts Thailand as having scored lower than the international average of 500 points, scoring 441 points in math and 471 points in science. The specific countries that Thailand scores behind are also highlighted in the text: Malaysia, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taipei (cited as if it were a country) all scored higher than Thailand.

Comparing countries by framing them as ahead or behind one another constructs a certain notion of nationalism in which education can be quantified and become a point of national pride. The "World Competiveness Yearbook" 2010 that the World Bank created (NIETS 2010, 7-9) reinforces this idea that education is a competition between nations and esteem rests not with mutual advancement and cooperation, but with outranking other nations.

Because the purpose of the "Crisis" paper is to call attention to the state of the education sector, it reflects a dismal scenario. NIETS shows that Thailand is failing in the rankings in regard to domestic and international standards. Yet Thailand educates most of its citizens and the literacy rates are very

high in comparison to other developing countries. In a 2015 estimate of literacy rates, 96.7% of people over 15 are literate (Central Intelligence Agency).

Ranking within the Nation

While the international scope provides the context for the O-Net results, the core of the "Crisis" paper addresses national exams. ONESQA uses the O-Net scores to evaluate each of the country's government funded schools, including private schools, which are largely government funded. ONESQA uses twelve indicators to evaluate whether schools have reached the benchmarks set. In the forth round of ONESQA evaluation from 2016 to 2020, schools cannot miss more than two indicators in order to pass the assessment.

Formulating the O-Net as a norm referenced assessment rather than a criterion referenced assessment creates automatic winners and losers provincially and between schools. Even with this intention, however, a clear winner and loser are not always evident. For example, NIETS compared schools that rank in the top ten and the bottom ten for three consecutive years from 2008-2010 and found that in Grade 6 (P. 6), *no schools* were strong or weak for three years running (NIETS 2010, 12). In comparing Grade 9 (M.3) school scores from two years (2009-2010), there were no losers, but there were four winners. All four top schools were high school prep schools.

The O-Net scores are portrayed as a national competition, creating a top 5 or 10 and a bottom 5 or 10, using averages (means). This competitive construct obscures intricacies in the data sets, meaning that in some cases student scores are even worse than averages can indicate. For example, in the 2010-2011 school year, the *majority* of 12th grade (M6) students in Thailand scored between 0 and 10% in mathematics. Sixty-seven percent was the top score on the arts portion, which only 2 students in the country achieved. That year no 12th grade student scored higher than 67% in arts (Ministry of Education, 2011). By using averages this data was obscured.

Class and the Urban/Rural divide

When the results are announced, the points of comparison have often been misleading, obscuring the exams' privileged categories. Before 2016, the discrepancies, such as urban versus rural divide, small schools versus large schools, regular schools versus esteemed institutions were not recognized by the testing agency's representatives. Coinciding, but not necessarily linked, with the 2016 UNESCO publication of *Education in Thailand: an OECD-UNESCO perspective*, however, the gap between some demographic sectors, but not gender or class, were publically recognized.

The illustrations in the NIETS "Crisis" paper, in the form of graphs and maps support specific categorical divisions that NIETS selects. The chosen categories demonstrate that high points are expected among students in well-known schools, privileged provinces, specific ministerial divisions, large schools, private schools, and in the central region. Therefore, the differences in O-Net scores are arranged as issues of administrative differences between bureaucratic bodies.

The way that each of the eight tested subjects (Thai, English, math, etc.) are lined up against each other on page 22 of the "Crisis" paper (pictured below) implies that each subject is an equivalent of the other. It also implies that the scores on the previous year's test are comparable to the current year's scores. Yet NIETS changes all of the questions from year to year and each year a new group of students is tested. These two variables, the questions and the students, are not fixed, but are treated as if they were interchangeable.

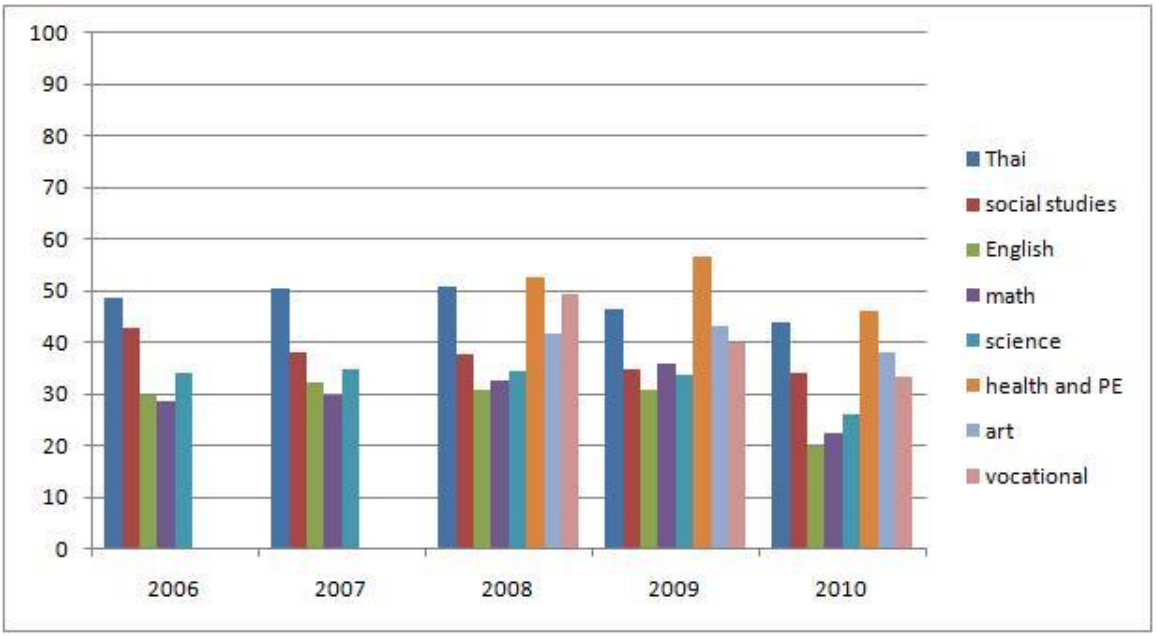


Figure 1 National average O-Net scores by year and subject, grade 12 (M6)

The individual schools that scored well were preparatory schools for a top university—there were two in Bangkok, one in Trang city, and one in the city of Hat Yai. Although presented as an administrative success case that can be replicated in the "Crisis" paper, it divulges a middle-class/urban bias.

Urban middle-class students are expected to score higher on the O-Net, and they do. Most rural teachers that I spoke with in both the north, Chiang Mai, and the northeast, Buriram, said that rural students cannot score as high as their urban counterparts because of their lack of resources. Private schools are commonly believed to enroll brighter, wealthier students with more access to educational tools such as technology and shadow education (private tutoring). It is commonly assumed that privileged students will score high on the O-Net, so higher scores confirm already held beliefs that their education is superior. However, the data depicted in the "Crisis" paper shows that while private school students score higher, the discrepancy is not as extreme as what Thai teachers and administrators might expect. This may mislead the reader to conclude that educational disparities in Thailand are not as prevalent as they are portrayed. This is not the conclusion I wish to draw. Educational resources, from the physical spaces to the teacher to classroom ratio to the level of training are not equivalent throughout the country (OECD/UNESCO, 2016, Fry and Bi, 2013). However, I urge scholars to question the authenticity of O-Net score reports as irrefutable proof of

preconceived deteriorating education because the data it represents is inconclusive. The minimal difference between private and public schools' scores, by subject, is illustrated in the graph below, which is from NIETS' "Crisis" paper.

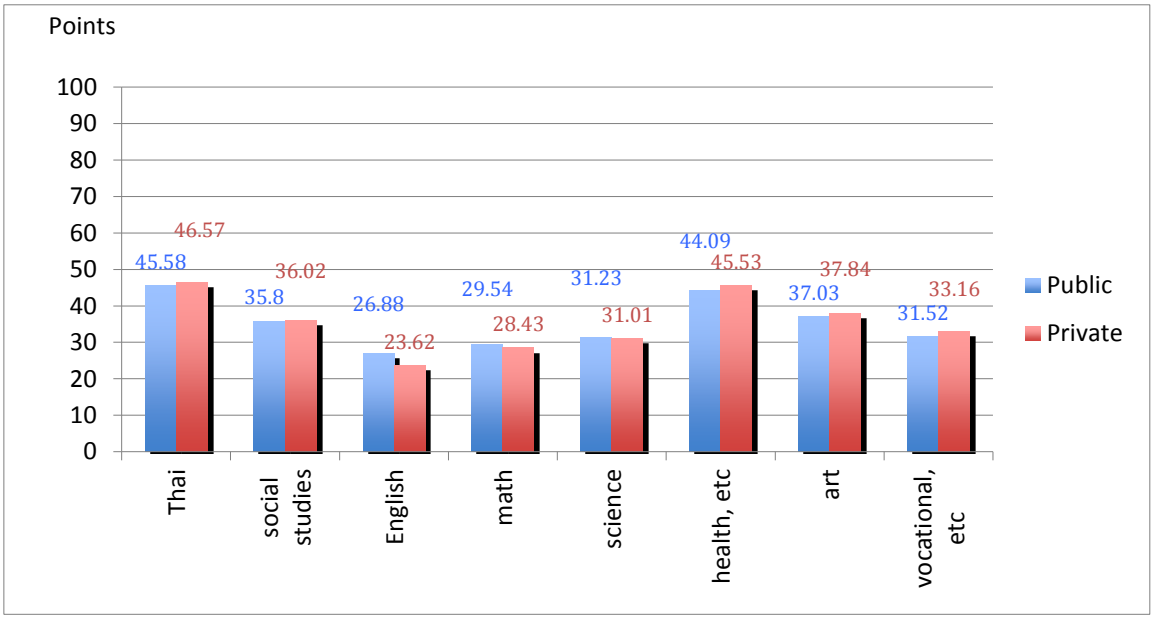
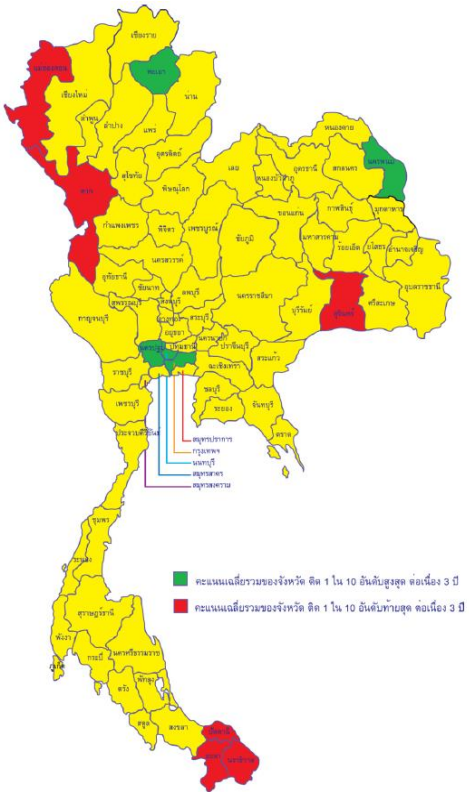


Figure 2 O-Net scores for Grade 12 in 2010 [2009-2010 school year] of private and public schools

The O-Net scores were then depicted by province on a map of the country. The map is color-coded: green depicts the top-scoring provinces, yellow for the middle-range provinces, and red for the bottom-scoring provinces. To achieve green status, provinces have to score in the top ten for a certain number of consecutive years. For example, Bangkok, Nakhon Phanom, Nonthaburi, Nakhon Pathom, and Phayao were the five provinces that had Grade 6 student scores the top ten for three consecutive years.

On the other hand, Tak, Mae Hong Son (west), Surin (northeast), Yala, Patani, and Narathiwat (south) are all in red, having scored consistently in the bottom ten for three years. All of these provinces are considered border provinces, are relatively poor, and have competing forms of local knowledge and identification. Tak and Mae Hong Son, for example, are positioned on the border with Burma. They have high numbers of hill tribe populations such as the Yao, Karen, Akha, Lahu, Hmong, Lisu, and Burmese migrants. These identifiers are often connected with competing belief systems, both religious and cultural. Minority groups in the north are often Christian, but may also believe in animism. Therefore, it may be because of this religious and cultural reason that they do not score well, in light of O-Net testing of Buddhist cultural indoctrination with specific focus on respecting hierarchies and respecting authority. Other possible reasons for these areas' poor scores include their use of a different mother-tongue at home than at school. Surin province is another one of the low scoring red provinces that is located in the northeast region, the poorest region in Thailand. Surin is known for heavy use of the Khmer Surin, or Cambodian dialect. People in the southernmost provinces—Yala, Patani, and Narathiwat—often speak in Malay.



Green: Province with a top ten average three years in a row

Red: Province with a bottom ten average three years in a row

Figure 3 Provinces regularly strong or weak: Grade 6 O-Net scores from 2008-2010 by province

All citizens—even the land itself— are implicated by the map color. The map requires provincial success cases and failures. Even if the entire country did almost exactly the same on the O-Net, give or take one percent, this map could still be created.[12] Through the colored map, NIETS makes the test scores represent the entire province and everything within that province, regardless of its connection to educational scores. This method ties every inhabitant inside the province to the negative or positive status found in the scores.

The visual connection between a province's educational success and its status within the nation is cemented in the reader's mind without requiring average score numbers or graphs to explain how these decisions were made. The map is floating without any bordering countries connecting it to the larger world. If the students, schools, districts, or service sectors were mapped in green, yellow, and red, the map would paint a different picture—it would be a kaleidoscope of color dotted all over the map. But by generalizing the provincial average for the color of the entire province, the map makes sense of the scores in a national way. Those provinces in red are of national educational and, as I argue, political concern. Those provinces in red are targeted as problematic areas, as compared to the good green areas and the average yellow ones. The red ones are especially targeted for education reform.

[12] If the average were, theoretically, 75.5%, provinces that received an average of 75% would be the failures, and those that achieved an average of 76% would be the success cases. This is the logic of creating winners and losers that ties test scores spatially to the province.

The red areas also happen to be areas that resist state indoctrination, not only in standardized education, but also politically. One clear example is the red clump on the above map at the southern tip of Thailand, which has been an area of political nonconformity and insurgency, especially since 2004. The map of the O-Net scores, and its red/green determination, oversimplifies the complexity of the historical political issue. The government deems some areas of the "geo-body" as problematic for central governance (Thongchai, 1994). The O-Net, like the map, is treated as though it were an objective mechanism. The policy documents use the map to make seemingly objective claims about territories, but they do so in ways that support specific political motivations. The insurgency and reaction to the insurgency in the form of bombings and shootings have prevented students from attending school regularly. "According to the 2003 census, 37.5 percent of the population in Yala, Narathiwat, and Pattani between the ages of six and twenty-four were not in school" (Abuza, 2009, 32). Thus a simple explanation of O-Net scores based on merit or quality of education is not sufficient to explain the intricacies of the political, economic, and religious situation in southern Thailand.

For those students who are able to attend school regularly, the school systems in these three southernmost provinces have competing forms of knowledge, often focusing on teaching Arabic, Jawi, the Qur'an, the teachings of Muhammad, Islamic history and geography, and Muslim law. In the southern provinces teachers teach this Muslim curriculum and Thailand's common eight O-Net subjects—Thai, English, social studies, math, science, art, health and physical education, and vocation and technology. Teaching both curricula is a lot to juggle for teachers, especially since teaching the eight subjects is already a struggle for many teachers in other regions.

The O-Net assumes that all students are Buddhist. Because the O-Net presumes that students have Buddhist-based knowledge, NIETS developed the I-NET, an Islamic version, to standardize what was taught in regards to Islam. As outlined on its website, NIETS determined three goals for the I-Net: 1) to test knowledge and student thinking according to Islam Education Act of 2003 (2546); 2) for the exam results to improve the quality of teaching and learning of the school; 3) to use the test results for other purposes.[13] Most standardized exams in other countries do not intend to inform the curriculum or to change the teachers' material or methods, and educators try to minimize this washback. Curriculum should influence the exam, not the other way around. In these I-Net goals, however, NIETS explicitly states that the exam is intended to improve the quality of the teaching, and for any other purposes that NIETS finds appropriate. Although there are students who take the I-Net in seventeen provinces, the number of Islamic students is concentrated in the south.[14]

[13] วัตถุประสงค์ของการสอบ I-NET คืออะไร 1.เพื่อทดสอบความรู้และความคิดของนักเรียน ตามหลักสูตรอิสลามศึกษา พุทธศักราช 2546 2.เพื่อนำผลการสอบไปใช้ในการปรับปรุงคุณภาพการเรียนการสอนของโรงเรียน
3. เพื่อนำผลการทดสอบไปใช้ในวัตถุประสงค์อื่น

[14] Provinces where the I-Net is administered include:1. Yala 2. Patani 3. Narithiwat 4. Satun 5. Songkhla 6. Nakhon Sithammarat 7. Krabi 8. Phuket 9. Trang 10. Chumpon 11. Phangnga 12. Surathani 13. Ranong 14.Phatthalung 15. Prachuapkhirikhan 16. Nonthaburi 17. Bangkok (NIETS, 2010).

Green: The average points in the province are higher than the country average

Red: The average points in the province are lower than the country average

Figure 4 Diagram of 40 I-Net points in 2010 by province

Unlike the similar diagram for the O-Net, this I-Net diagram shows that the southernmost three provinces (in green) score high in Islamic subjects. However, the diagram fails to depict the diversity among Islamic groups in the south. It is not evident above which areas teach only Islamic education courses and which areas include and basic education courses (the 8 subjects: math, science, Thai, etc.). This is important to note because low scores might simply evidence alternative priorities, and not poor education. Some schools in the provinces shown in red prioritize breadth of both over depth, managing both religious and basic education. However, these color-coded maps are not capable of and do not encourage a nuanced analysis.

The ONESQA Evaluation[15]

Although the National Institute Educational Testing Service (NIETS), the creator of the Ordinary National Educational Test (O-Net), does not mandate consequences for poor test results, they do assemble and distribute the results widely. The scores are reported to ONESQA. Consequently, exam scores influence schools' reputations and heavily affect their evaluations. If a school does not pass the ONESQA evaluation, this can have negative consequences. Their failure is made public, which shames the school. This shame has fiscal repercussions in terms of outside donations from local sponsors. Parents can move their children to other schools, and the administrators and teachers

[15] The ONESQA has to follow in accordance to the Education Act of 2542 (1999) amendments in 2545 (2002) article 49. This law designates that external quality evaluations for all schools at least 1 time every 5 years, counting from the last evaluation. In accordance to this law they must submit evaluations through the related offices and publically counting from the last evaluation. In this law, article 50 specifies that the school cooperate in preparing paperwork that has data about the school.

must do extra work to make a plan for improvements and follow through with them in accordance with the Ministry of Education jurisdictional branch in their area. The local jurisdiction must pay for the repeat evaluation, which does not ingratiate the school with local officials.

Many personnel who have a stake in the ONESQA evaluation, such as principals and teachers, think that the O-Net scores are *the* pivotal objective part of the evaluation. They believe that if their O-Net scores are not high enough, even though it is only one of twelve indicators, they will not pass the evaluation. The ONESQA manual defines the twelve indicators for basic education (ONESQA, 2012, 17-18). Indicator number five is based on the school's O-Net scores and it counts for twenty of the eighty total points. The O-Net, in educators' understanding, is the only measurable objective and the only part of the evaluation that is quantitative and not qualitative. Therefore, many administrators and teachers spend time and energy attempting to improve scores on this indicator rather than the other indicators.

This description of the indicators which ONESQA uses to assess each school heavily weights the O-Net scores. At twenty total points, O-Net scores have four times more weight to O-Net scores than both the efficiency of school administration (indicator 7) and the school's use of internal evaluation (indicator 8), which are only allotted five points each.

Indicator number five is only based on O-Net results, so they are pivotal for the external quality evaluation. Indicator number five, student academic achievement, is further explained in the ONESQA manual: *"A good level of student academic achievement* means that of the students that took the NIETS test (O-Net) the percentage is more than the educational group average for Grade 6, 9, and 12" (2012, 39, Original emphasis). Thus, schools must score better than their jurisdiction's average. However, for this to be the case, half of the schools in Thailand will fail this indicator. This is worth emphasizing. *Indicator number five demands that schools must score higher than the average of the educational group, so all schools that fall below average will fail that indicator regardless of their scores.* The manual continues by stating, "*Development of learning* means the school has a percentage of students that have national test results in every subject in the level of good and better when compared with the average from the last year*"* (ibid). So aside from scoring higher than the average, to get full points schools must also show improvement to receive full marks. Only schools that average 80% or over do not have to increase their averages (ibid, 41).

The ONESQA, charged with quality control, has itself been lacking in quality. The ONESQA underwent an external evaluation by the Office of Higher Education in 2014 in response to an order from the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO). The assessment found that the ONESQA "failed to reflect the actual quality of schools and universities it has evaluated" (Saengpassa, 2014). One reason for this may be the use of norm referenced scales rather than criterion referenced scales. Indicator five is structured to ensure that half of schools will fail it, even if they were meeting educational standards.

After the poor external assessment of the ONESQA's ability to assess quality of both basic and higher educational institutions in 2014, some university presidents called for ONESQA to be abolished, in light of the burden that it put on institutions. In fact, a Quality Learning Foundation (QLF) study found that basic education teachers spent 9 of 200 school days per year preparing documents for

ONESQA assessments: time that would have otherwise gone to teaching (Mala, 2017d). However, instead of ending ONESQA assessments, the assessors were encouraged to follow a set of Buddhist precepts to improve the accuracy of their evaluations. Somwung Pitiyanuwat, former Executive Chairman of NIETS, encouraged the idea that testing in Thailand should be "amicable" and the relationship between evaluator and school should be moral and ethical, in accordance with Buddhism (2005, 76).

The morality tests can be found in the *Manual for Assessors: The Third-Round of External Quality Assessment for Basic Education 2011-2015*, including 9 moral precepts and a table of both Sila (prohibition) and Dhamma (desirable practices), in accordance to Buddhist ethics (14-15). Including this Buddhist ethics portion to the manual does the apoliticizing work of Thaification, localizing the language to make it seem more relevant to Thai culture. Thai education is pulled and pushed between internationalization and localization, centralization and decentralization based on the needs of the administration.

Local and Individual Stakes

On the local level, Education Service Area Offices (ESAOs) under the Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC) develop lists to compare schools to one another; urban schools with more resources score higher. Of those on the local list, the highest scoring school in Trang was Princess Chulabhorn's College in Trang's provincial capital, and the lowest score was from Hat Samran Wittayakhom School, a rural school located 50 kilometers from the provincial capital.[16] Trang is not alone in this rural-urban split. In Krabi, Ammartpanichnukul school is in the provincial capital and it received the most points on the O-Net, scoring above the national average in every subject in 2011 (2554). In contrast, at Khlong Yang Prachanuson School the scores were lowest in the province. This rural school is on the island of Koh Lanta. At least in this instance of Krabi and Trang, both the highest and lowest scores follow a rural/urban pattern: the rural schools do not score as high on the O-Net as urban schools score.

On an individual level, the graduating seniors' O-Net scores can impact their chances at entrance in universities and could impact whether or not they graduate from high school. The exam can be called "high stakes": in high school graduation determinations it has reportedly had 20%, and starting in 2014 30%, impact, the other portion of which is determined by factors like GPA (OECD/UNESCO, 2016, p. 142). This may be theoretical, however, since, as with many centralized decisions, it would be difficult to discover whether or not schools adhere strictly to this graduation policy in practice.

On a school level, the stakes seem to vary between areas/zones. According to the OECD/UNESCO report of 2016:

[16] The results are tabulated on a national level for ONESQA use, but education offices also make them into ranking lists and distribute them to the schools. Trang-Krabi's Secondary Educational Service Area Office (SESAO) lists 44 schools' Thai, social studies, English, math, and science O-Net scores in 2011. This document is entitled, Phonkan todsob raddapchat khanphunthan (O-Net) chan mathayomsuksa pi ti 6 kha sathiti radap rong rian yek tam matrathan kan rian ru pi kan suk sa 2553 [2010] SESAO 13 jangwat Trang-Krabi.

> The data are used to 1) inform decisions about student retention and promotion, and grouping of students for instructional purposes, 2) to compare individual schools against district or national performance, or against the performance of other schools; 3) to monitor schools' progress from year to year; 4) to make judgments about teachers' effectiveness; 5) and to identify aspect [sic] of the curriculum that could be improved. (p.141)

In Buriram, O-Net scores impact schools' reputations, which can have very real consequences such as the ability to attract and retain quality teachers. Schools that receive scores in the bottom of the ranking receive assistance from other schools, but the efficacy of such assistance is questionable, especially because the lower scoring school loses face. In order to avoid being in the bottom of the ranking, principals in Buriram have asked teachers to go over old test exams with students, tutoring them and training them for the test for weeks before the test, to the detriment of both regular curriculum and other grade levels who are not testing. With this general feeling of the stakes being high, students and teachers have reported negative washback in the form of high anxiety levels and wasted time preparing for the test (Lunrasri, 2014).

Conclusion

O-Net results are examined and utilized to make specific claims about high scoring and low scoring populations. The results of the O-Net cement hierarchies of Thai citizens by using the numbers to produce data that seem objective. NIETS creates tables and charts based on numerical scores to support claims about specific populations. These statistics appear objective and support widely held beliefs about the state of education. Once in charts the numbers appear to signify student *ability*, and they become distanced from what kind of ability they measure. In *The Nation* article "Poor O-Net Scores 'could reflect [sic]", an education official attempted to blame students for the decrease in average scores: "some of the students who sat the O-Net probably did not pay much attention to the test as they did not need the scores for university admissions purposes" (2012). He blames the low scores on students' lack of interest, not on the host of other potential factors obscured by the hard evidence presented in convincing chart format of averages.

O-Net scores, although inconclusive on their own terms, are utilized to craft and support specific claims about schools', provinces', and regions' responsibility to score well on the exam, as evidenced in the charts and accompanying rhetoric. The O-Net is supposed to be a training mechanism to improve Thai students' scores on international tests, but the efficacy of this is questionable: neither the subject matter nor the question style is consistent between exams like the PISA and the O-Net. Instead of illuminating critical disparities between sectors of society, the graphs produced in government documents conceal them. If exchanged for graphs depicting O-Net scores showing a bell curve of national scores or dividing students by their religion, ethnic group, family income, city size, or mother tongue, the data would tell a different story. The government's explicit goal, however, is not to rectify disparities between Thais, but rather to "scandalize" education outcomes to justify continuous monitoring and legitimize emergency-style reform and intervention through government organizations like ONESQA.

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