



# Growing Under Pressure: A Thai School Learning How to Prosper While being Different

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## Abstract

*This paper describes the evolution over the past decade of the Darunsikkhalai School for Innovative Learning (DSIL) near Bangkok, Thailand. Established as a constructionist school, DSIL aims to be a concrete model for Thailand to better develop its educational system. Daring to be drastically different from conventional schools, DSIL had to endure immense pressure from concerned parents and authorities. In order to sustain, DSIL adopted the principle of organizational learning. This approach allowed DSIL to evolve and carry on while still maintaining its core values. Key aspects of such process are described to show how the school managed to respond to scepticisms regarding curricular content and assessment.*

## Keywords

*School, Learning Organization, Curriculum and Assessment*

## A School that Nobody Understands

When DSIL was established in 2000, there were less than ten schools in the whole country that were considered “progressive”. Even with that small number, progressive was used conservatively. Therefore, DSIL was something drastically different from what Thailand, and perhaps most anywhere, is used to. At the time, the Suksaphat Foundation, the school’s founding organization, had worked with professor Papert and his team at the Epistemology and Learning Group at MIT for four years trying to seed changes in Thailand’s rigid learning system. Disappointed by the resistance to change (Papert, 1997) and failed collaborations, the foundation decided it needed to create a new learning space from the ground up that can be a Constructionist school from day one.

The Suksaphat Foundation is funded and run primarily by the private sector that came together realizing that the ability to learn is key to the country’s competency in the modern world. Thus, Papert’s vision about “learning how to learn” resonated well and has made Constructionism (Papert & Herel, 1991) the foundation’s main guiding principle. Schools, at least at the time, did not share this same ideology. DSIL’s approach towards learning such as no grade levels, student-driven long-term projects, relatively very little “teaching”, was highly questioned. The initial thirty students belonged to parents who were either business owners or were highly educated—the minority of parents who can foresee the potential benefits of DSIL over the traditional education. Also, many made their final choice based on the good name of the foundation. More



than a decade has passed. DSIL now has seventy seven students ranging from primary to high school levels. DSIL is still drastically different from other common schools but the perception is much more positive.

The main focus of this paper is based on the fact that DSIL did not start off knowing exactly what to do. Constructionism was a guiding principle, but translating it into day-to-day actions was extremely challenging. With only four years working with Papert and zero experience in running a real school, DSIL had a great deal to learn as an organization. The greatest challenge was how to keep the school adaptive while not being neutralized by the pressure from the traditional school system.

## A School that Learns

DSIL has a culture of accepting change. It uses “learning” as means for a sustainable development of the school. As an official member in the Society for Organizational Learning (SOL), DSIL has adopted a “Learning Organization” model. Founded by Peter Senge from MIT’s Center for Organizational Learning, SOL is a not-for-profit organization that focuses on the development of people and their institutions. By being part of SOL, the school was able to adopt useful principles to help govern the organizational learning process. Teachers (or more commonly referred to as “facilitators”) participate in daily and weekly meetings to discuss and reflect upon their actions. The discussions are guided by the following Learning Organization Disciplines (Senge et al, 2000).

- 1. Personal mastery:** Facilitators set their own goal of how they want to improve themselves. The meetings allow them to reflect on where they are and how to fulfil their goal.
- 2. Mental models:** Facilitators are encouraged to be open-minded, ready to accept and learn from each other, and develop trust in each and every member of the organization.
- 3. Systems thinking:** Understanding the structure of a system enables more effective planning and problem solving. It enables the facilitators, staff, and students to work together to “see” the causes, develop, and test solutions.
- 4. Shared vision:** The vision and strategy of the school is shared and anybody can participate in the development or refinement of such goals.
- 5. Team learning:** DSIL has a strong culture of sharing and collaborating. Every member participates in a “show and share” session, which allows teams to emerge to either solve problems or branch off into new directions.

## Results

The following are some results that illustrate how DSIL has evolved and sustained itself.

### Learning at DSIL

Students at DSIL, especially at the primary level, spend a great deal of their time working on projects that were initiated together between the teachers and students (see Figure 1). The projects are closely monitored and guided by the teachers. The teacher to student ratio is approximately 1:2.5, which has remained the same since the early years (12 teachers and 30 students in 2001 compared to 31 teachers and 77 students in 2011). The idea of reducing the number of teachers often come up especially during financial difficulties, but the school as a



whole (school managers, teachers, and others who are involved) decided that it is more important to keep the level of support students receive.

After the initial six years when students at DSIL started secondary school, there were more pressure from parents concerning whether their child could perform well at the national tests. A project based learning approach did not give the level of assurance many parents needed. This concern caused fear that did not exist in the primary level. Every year, a significant number of parents relocated their child to other schools because of this reason.

Driven by this concern, DSIL had to adapt in order to build up trust. The school established a special session to help students master the materials needed for the exams while still spending a significant amount of time working on projects. Figure 1 shows how high school level students allocate a fifth of their time, most of which used to be project time, to study the core subjects needed for the exams. The important point here is that this decision was not made by an individual; it was decided by the school community. Students were part of the discussion and they together decided on what to do. This is an important example of the value of a learning organization. Everybody understood and felt ownership over the decision. We believe that this ownership has made DSIL students perform well (see next section) at the national tests while still spending time on project-based learning.

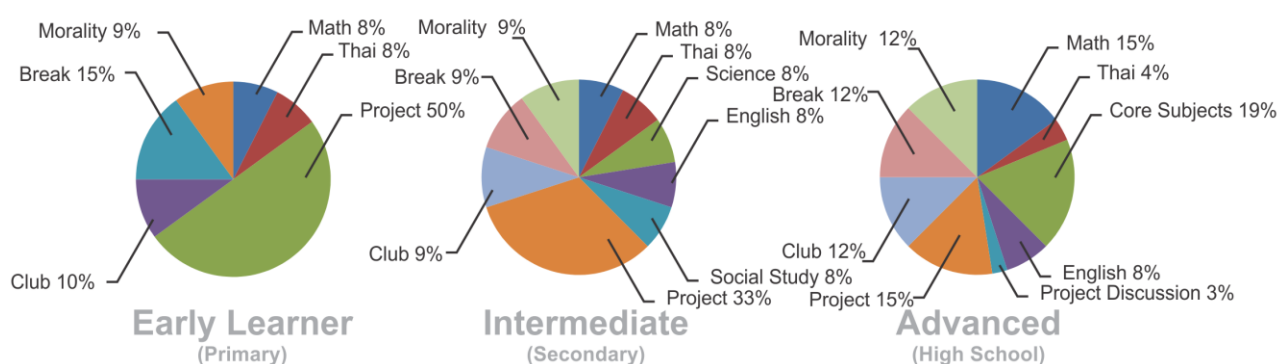


Figure 1. The average time allocated to different activities based on a 40 hours per week period.

## Assessment and National Tests

One of the first challenges of DSIL was to figure out how to satisfy the national curriculum while being a project-oriented school. DSIL could lose its school credentials if it cannot cover all the curricular subjects. This issue was managed by adopting a curricular mapping scheme. Every project was dissected and each component mapped to items in the curriculum. The school has developed a tracking system where this information can be entered and tracked on-line by teachers and parents (See figure 2). The system was used in the self-evaluation process by students where they can then discuss the necessity to study or organize projects to cover the missing parts in their portfolio.

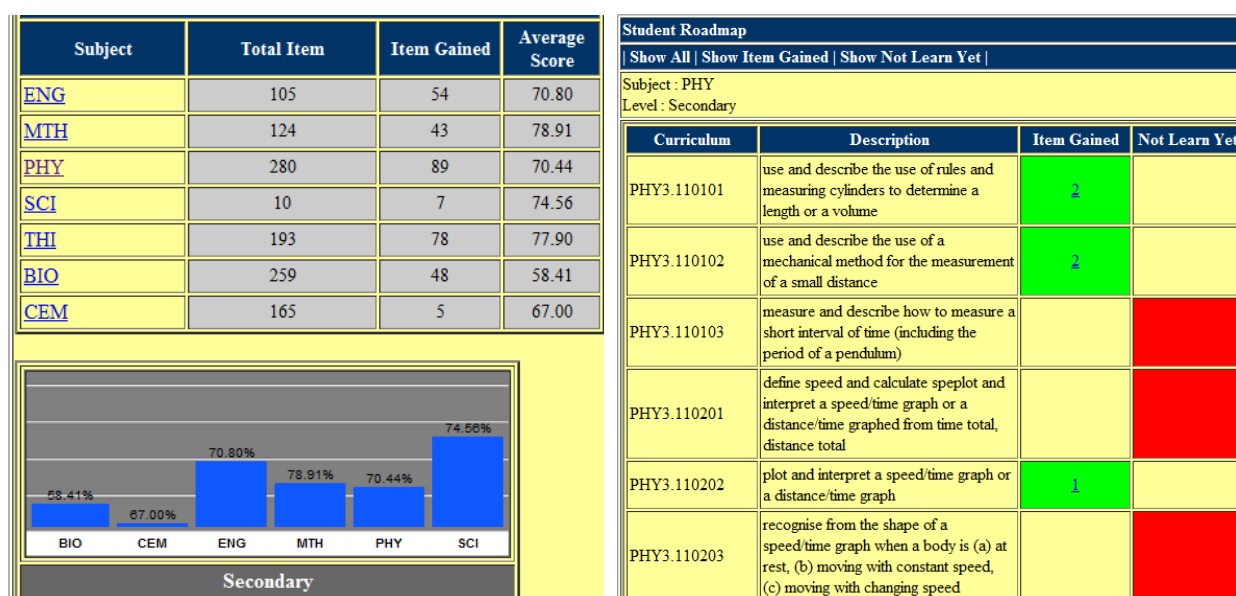


Figure2. An online tracking system helps teachers, parents, and students to evaluate their progress towards fulfilling the curricular subjects mandated by the Thai school system.

In the recent years, when the first batch of students are nearing their high school graduation, DSIL had to prove to parents that it can do well at the national test. Thailand is known for having one of the world's largest tutoring industries. How can a school perform well if it spends only a fraction of its time on exam preparation? It turns out that DSIL students can manage the exams well. Figure 3 shows that the scores are all above the average. The school ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> place in the regional district in 2010. Although DSIL values other deeper aspects of learning than that offered in test scores, this outcome demonstrates that a constructionist school can perform well in the traditional system.

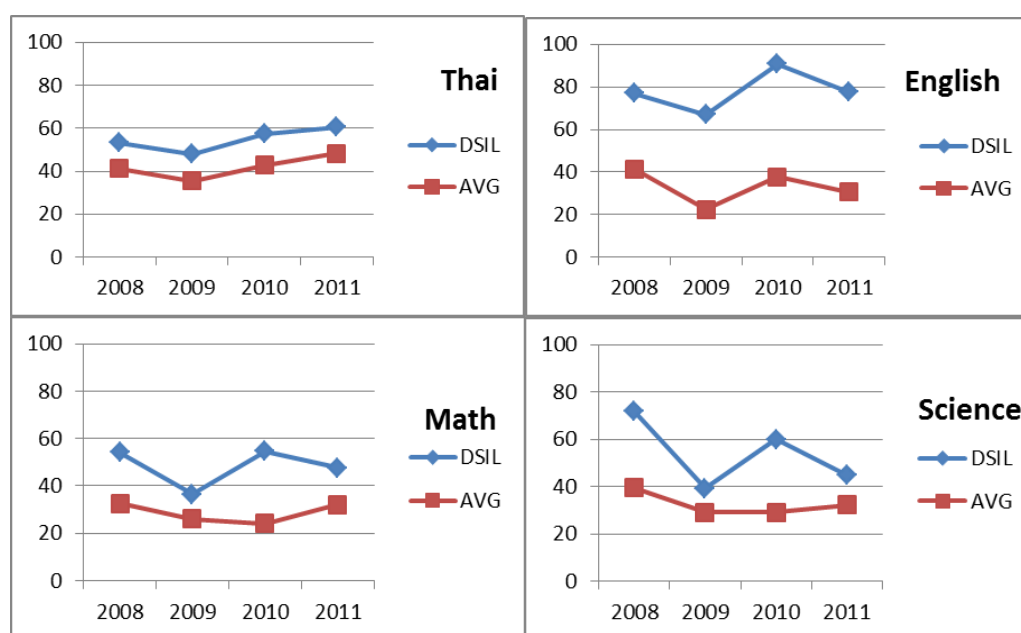


Figure3. Graphs showing how DSIL students have been able to perform well at the national tests.



## Public Acceptance

DSIL's twelve year existence is, by itself, a proof that it is not just a short-lived experimental school. DSIL has benefited from the increase in the public's awareness of alternative education driven by the educational act established in 1999. The act shared many values with DSIL and has created a stir in the school system. Although the educational act is arguably a failure in practice, but what goes on in DSIL became more familiar to the general public. Moreover, now that there is some evidence that student can perform well at the national tests, the stress has eased. However, the shift is still not strong enough for most parents. The enrolled students remain children of parents who either own a business or have gone to graduate schools as shown in Table 1.

Year	% Parent owning a business	% Parents with graduate degrees
2001	62.5	35.7
2012	77.3	40.9

Table 1. Parent profile in 2001 compared to 2012 remains similar

## Expansion

DSIL remains a drastically different school. There have been five other schools that have adopted parts of DSIL's approach in the past five years but they are not at an organizational level. A rather surprising impact, though, is in the private sector. Through the Suksaphat foundation, many large cooperations such as the Siam Cement Group, Petroleum Authority of Thailand, and Bangkok Bank have become interested in the learning methodologies at DSIL. A number of courses are now being offered to company employees and are popular as means for human resource development. These courses often include DSIL students acting as facilitators. DSIL perceives this interest as an indication that it is developing the right skills needed in today's competitive world.

## Conclusions

This paper has described how a constructionist school has been able to grow under immense pressure from parents and the traditional education system. The possibility of parents withdrawing their child has been the greatest threat. Being able to learn and constantly adapt to the situation at hand was key. Through this process, DSIL has proved that it is possible to focus on "learning how to learn", while being able to help students fulfil the expectations of the traditional system.

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