

# the sold project

An overview of  
Education as Prevention of Child Exploitation



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## ***INTRODUCTION: THE THAI EDUCATION SYSTEM***

In Thailand six years of education are required, so all children have access to free education from the age of six to twelve years of age. Public primary schools accommodate children from the ages of 6 to 11 and are supervised by the Ministries of Education. After primary years the attendance rates drop nearly half due to the school fees and families' lack of financial resources. It is estimated that about 50% of all students in Thailand drop out of school once primary school is over; before 7<sup>th</sup> grade. (Kanchanachitra 2002). Instead of further education, children often seek jobs to help financially support their families. Due to their low level of education, many do not qualify for jobs and end up in a life of exploitation. According to the US Department of Labor, only about 30 percent of eligible Thai children enter high school. UNICEF estimates that 15 percent of students drop out before completing primary school, and that the majority of dropouts are from ethnic minorities and the poor. (UNICEF 1994). In this paper, I intend to analyze how effective education is in prevention of exploitation of children in Thailand, and if a holistic educational program is necessary.

## ***SEXUAL EXPLOITATION IN THAILAND***

Although commercial sexual exploitation of children is illegal in Thailand, it is a widespread practice. In 1993, the Ministry of Education (MOE) conducted a survey of Thai sex workers in Thailand and abroad to uncover information about their hometown, age, education, reasons for becoming a sex worker, the channels

used to find work abroad, and so forth. Eight provinces in the North of Thailand (Chiang Rai, Lampang, Phayao, Chiang Mai, Prae, Mae Hong Song, Lamphun and Nan) were identified as the target area, since they were the highest risk areas for girls entering the sex trade. These provinces also had high HIV/AIDS rates, as well as a high percentage of girls (43 percent) who stopped their education after finishing grade six. (Kanchanachitra 2002).

Poverty is the principle reason why children in rural communities in Thailand are driven into the sex trade. For survival, children from impoverished families are forced to drop out of school in order to help their parents earn a living. For many children, their fate is sealed when they enter the labor pool early in life. It becomes more difficult to break the cycle of poverty without an education. Robert Chambers acknowledges, “that education is a massive priority, especially for those children who are denied it, that it has a huge potential to liberate, especially girls and women, that it can open up opportunities and a wider world of experience, that it can empower and support social and economic development.” (Chambers 1997).

Research conducted by the Office of the National Commission on Women’s Affairs in 2000 indicates that there are between 22,500 and 40,000 girls under the age of 18 engaged in commercial sex work. In a Thai study of 1,012 adolescents and young adults being prostituted, 90 per cent of respondents felt disappointed in themselves, hopeless and trapped, 50 per cent felt that society showed contempt for them, and 26 per cent stated that they would commit suicide if they knew that had contracted AIDS. (Green 1994). Children do not want this life, and often join the trade because 1) they are trafficked, 2) they feel

an obligation towards their family to provide financial support, or 3) are sold by their parents (Kilbourn and McDermid 1998).

### ***EDUCATION AS PREVENTION***

Creating a holistic scholarship program in the context of Thailand is one piece of the puzzle in helping prevent children from becoming exploited. Amartya Sen points out that “expansion of health care, education, social security, etc., contribute directly to the quality of life and to its flourishing. There is every evidence that even with relatively low income, a country that guarantees health care and education to all can actually achieve remarkable results in terms of the length and quality of life of the entire population.” (Sen 2000). Amartya Sen believes the cause of poverty is lack of freedom, and one factor that makes people ‘less free’ is lack of education (which leads to a lack of income, lack of access, oppression and exploitation). Quality education is a key element in breaking the vicious cycle of poverty and achieving a lasting difference. A study by Dr. Dusit of 20 education programs in 5 Asian countries, including Thailand, concluded that the most successful educational programs were those that took children’s specific circumstances into account by providing practical information that is useful in the day-to-day life of children and changed parents’ perceptions that education is worthless. (Glind 1999).

## ***DEFINING 'HOLISTIC' EDUCATION***

Holistic is defined as “emphasizing the importance of the whole and the interdependence of its parts.” (Houghton Mifflin Company 1993). Developer Jayakumar Christian sees the poor household at the center of a complex framework of interacting systems. These systems include cultural system, biophysical system, social system, spiritual system and personal system. The poor become entangled within this trap of systems, as each contributes to the disempowerment of the poor. (Christian 1994).

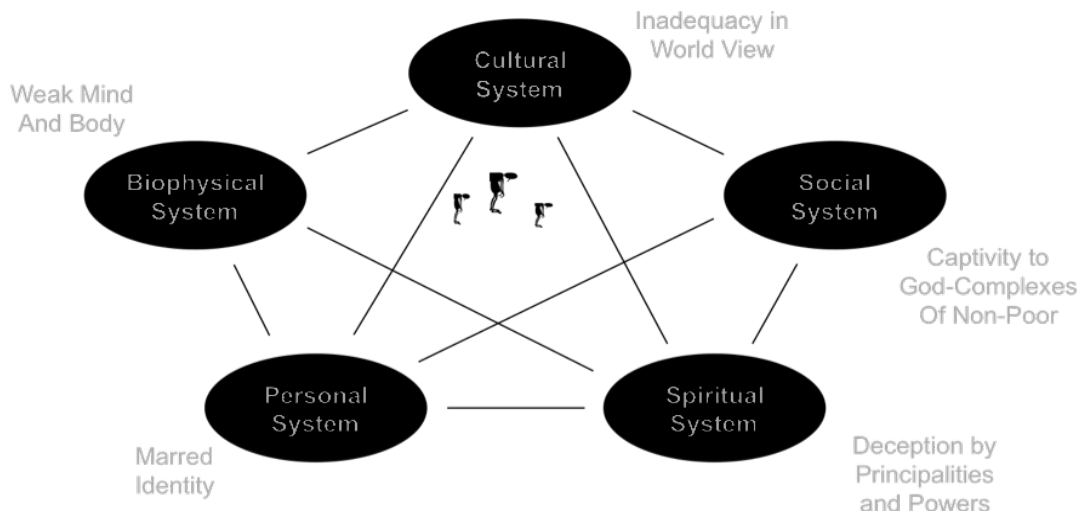


Figure 1

### **CULTURAL SYSTEM**

To understand how to develop a scholarship program or system of education that empowers the poor and creates sustainability, we must first

acknowledge their cultural system. For Jayakumar Christian, “powerlessness is reinforced by [what he calls] inadequacies in worldview.” (Christian 1994). Understanding and acknowledging the cultural practices and traditions that are imbedded within a community assist the developer in addressing the parts of culture that otherwise may be taken for granted or overlooked. “Every culture has beliefs that disempower people, discourage change, and label oppressive relationships as sacrosanct and ordained.”(Myers 1999: 75). Identifying these cultural beliefs are what Paul Hiebert calls the ‘excluded middle’. (Hiebert, Shaw et al. 1999).

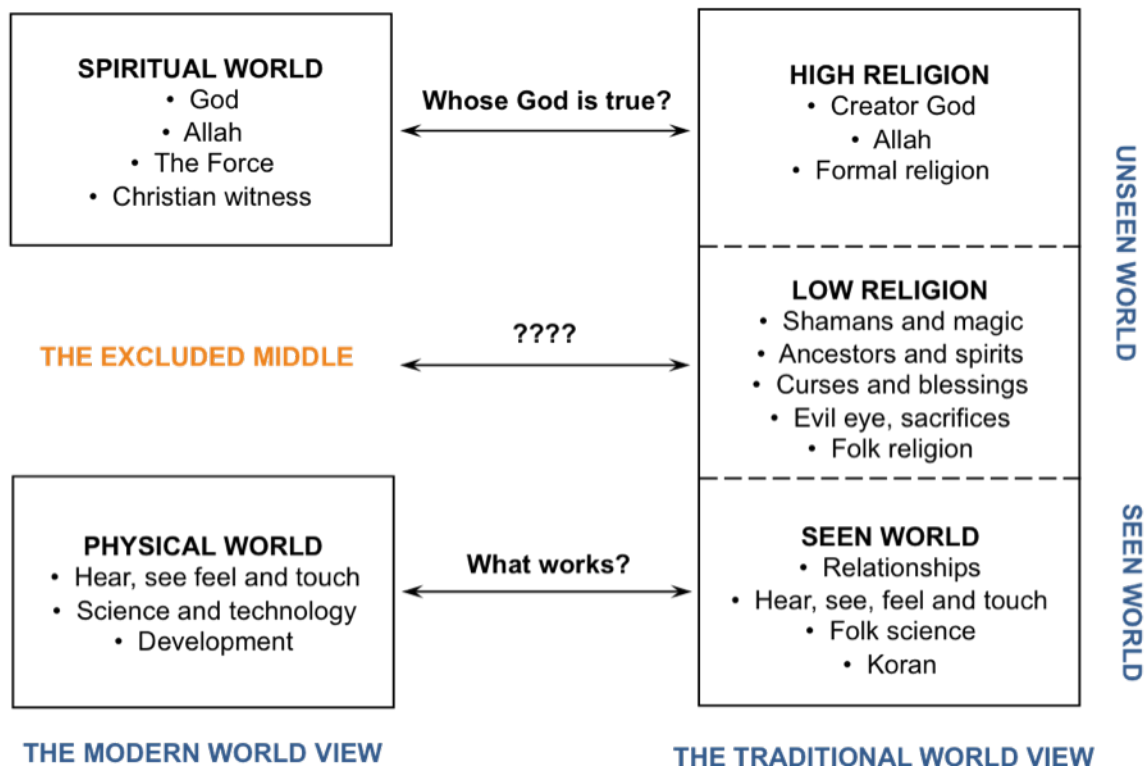


Figure 2

Hiebert acknowledges that development is more than just problem solving, that developers need to go beyond the things that fit our framework. In Thailand, indigenous people worship spirits on three different levels. This would be an example of the unseen world, or the excluded middle.

In Thailand, Buddhism dominates the religious backdrop. Buddhists strive for spiritual perfection, or nirvana, in various reincarnated life cycles. It is believed that struggles in the present life are self-inflicted by the choices and sins in past lives. Therefore to reach enlightenment, a person must accept their pain and sorrow, and in this way, religion justifies forced prostitution or exploitation. Additionally, “women are seen as less spiritually refined because they are attached to the very unspiritual, material world by their basic reproductive functions. A woman is thought to have been born as a woman because of bad karma.” (Brown 2004: 40). To reverse this cycle, girls believe that they must care for their family as a form of penance in hopes of receiving better karma or being reincarnated as a male in her next life. It is this mentality that, in many cases, justifies a life of prostitution as a means of making a living to support their family and fulfill their lot in life.

Culturally, the solicitation of prostitutes is somewhat socially acceptable. In Thailand, the demand for prostitutes among Thai men is not a recent concept. Until 1910, Thai kings kept a harem of concubines, some of whom were elevated to statuses like “Royal Mother” or “Minor Wife”. This tradition still exists today: wealthy men seek “minor wives”, and less wealthy men seek prostitutes, or temporary wives, as an equally valid option. Studies have shown that up to 90

percent of Thai men profess to have had their first sexual experience with a prostitute. (Bales 2004: 44).

By understanding the Thai cultural system in which education opportunities are being offered, we see that 1) education must contribute to the furthering of a child's job security 2) job opportunities are very important to children of impoverished communities and 3) learning an applicable skill or trade is of best use of educational time. In developing an educational program, it is also important to look at microfinancing or ways to use both education and small business practices hand in hand to provide income through education. Vocational training for children who may want to move to the city may encourage computer skills or communication tools. Lastly, educating children on the risk of exploitation through trafficking is important so that at least children are able to make a conscious decision and protect themselves through knowledge of identification of potential traffickers.

### **BIOPHYSICAL SYSTEM**

The biophysical system is made up of mind, body and spirit, and this is diminished by poverty and powerlessness resulting in hunger, illness and lack of education. (Christian 1994: 200). When a person is physically weak, lacking strength because of poor health and inadequate nutrition, that person becomes completely dependent on those around them and in turn susceptible to the world.

Consistent health care within an educational system is necessary to achieve educational goals. It would be very difficult for a sick child with no access

to health care to attend school and be expected to meet the scholarship requirements. World Vision has a 'tier of needs' that they use to identify the various states of development needed within a community: 1) clean water, 2) secure food supply, 3) health care, 4) educational opportunities and 5) micro-finance. When assessing the development needs of a community it is important to pin point where that community lies on this tier. For instance, in Chiang Rai, Thailand, villages frequently have clean water and a secure food supply, some health care, and are in need of more educational opportunities. Lastly, the microfinance sector in Thailand is very small but there is a small presence of NGO's. In this case, strengthening educational opportunities would be the biggest need of the community. That said, maintaining clean water, a secure food supply, and keeping the mind, body and spirit healthy results in more successful educational opportunities which will ideally lead to micro-finance opportunities in coming years.

## **SOCIAL SYSTEM**

When the poor are excluded from social power, their powerlessness is reinforced. John Friedman describes poverty by focusing on "powerlessness as lack of access to social power." (Friedmann 1992). Social power can be defined as "social networks, information for self-development, surplus time, instruments of work and livelihood, social organization, knowledge and skill, defensible life space, and financial resources." (Friedmann 1992: 67). Jayakumar Christian digs deeper into this thinking by explaining the 'god complex' of the non-poor as they

seek to play God in the lives of the poor. The non-poor express their god-complexes through influence over the poor, not sharing power with the poor, etc. Therefore, in seeking transformational development in the lives of children through education, working with local staff and village teachers can help diminish the 'god-complex' and instead build on empowering the poor.

The question that arises when providing scholarship opportunities for the poor by the non-poor is the question of sustainability. However, this is addressed by going back to World Vision's 'tier' of development needs. Once an educational system is in place, the next step for a community's development is microfinancing. Here is where education pays off as vocational skills begin to bring in profit for the family, and the community ideally finds sustainability.

### **SPIRITUAL SYSTEM**

Jayakumar Christian acknowledges what most Christians will point at as the main poverty trap: sin; by acknowledging the role of sin and evil in poverty. Sin comes in the form of greed, exploitation, sexual immorality, etc.

One example of the effects of sin in Thailand is greed within poor communities and a desire to 'live up to the Jones'. In recent years, a desire for consumer goods has increased in Thailand and the economic prosperity in the cities of Thailand has created a greater disparity between the urban areas and rural villages in the northern hill country. (Brock and Thistlethwaite 1996: 61). Families are pressured to keep up and while seeking the appearance of prosperity will sell their daughters to purchase a refrigerator, a television, or an air

conditioner. (Bales 2007: 40). In Thailand, families become quickly enticed by the idea of wealth, and will go as far as to sell their own daughters into prostitution in order to meet the pressures and expectations of the non-poor.

God's response to these deceptions is that we are all created equal in his image. Yet in congruence with Buddhist beliefs, men are justified in taking advantage of young girls because of their less equal status and the social habit of having multiple partners. The vihaya, or rules for monks, essentially encourages men to have multiple wives as it describes ten different kinds of wives, including ones purchased with money, ones to live with, and ones for occasional enjoyment. (Bales 2004: 38).

### **PERSONAL SYSTEM**

The identity of the poor becomes marred when the poor believe that they are less than human and are god forsaken. This 'marred identity' is a result of deception, inadequacies in worldview, and becoming captive to god-complexes. The first way in which the poor are marred is when they are expected to have nothing to offer (usually by the non-poor). Secondly when the poor come to believe that they are valueless after a lifetime of internalizing their suffering and the messages sent by the non-poor. "When the poor accept their marred identity and their distorted sense of vocation as normative and immutable, their poverty is complete." (Myers 1999: 76).

***CONCLUSION: EDUCATION DOES CONTRIBUTE TO PREVENTION***

Jayakumar Christian's model of 'Poverty as Disempowerment' is a web of complexities that contribute to the role of poverty in a household's life. All of these interact, and it is impossible to fix one and assume everything else is going to be fine. In a system, if you push one part of the system, the rest of the system adjusts. For this reason, education plays a strong role in the prevention of exploitation of children in Thailand, but only remains a strong preventative measure when part of the bigger, more holistic picture. The Thai Government has acknowledged the importance of education in prevention and has taken on a two-pronged approach that focuses on the simultaneous pursuit of education and the creation of legitimate employment alternatives. (Tourism Authority of Thailand)

By assuring that children, especially girls, are able to receive an education, you are ensuring that these children will eventually be able to support themselves and are decreasing the risk of vulnerability to pimps and others who may try to coerce them into the sex trade. Education in Thailand is one act of prevention for exploitation of children; therefore, a holistic educational program that values empowerment and sustainability is necessary.

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