

The Influence of Thai Traditional Philosophical Thought on Contemporary Educational Policies

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the foundational role of Thai traditional philosophical thought in shaping the landscape of contemporary educational policies in Thailand. Historically rooted in a synthesis of Theravada Buddhism, Brahmanism, and local animistic beliefs, Thai philosophy emphasizes holistic development, moral integrity, and the "Middle Path." This paper examines how these classical tenets are integrated into modern frameworks, such as the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP) applied to schooling and the National Education Act. Through a qualitative analysis of policy documents and philosophical texts, the research highlights a unique tension and synergy between Western-style globalization which prioritizes competitive skill sets and traditional values that prioritize "Right View" and communal harmony. Crucially, this study addresses specific managerial issues, such as systemic teacher competency gaps and the structural "Thai Educational Paradox," where immense fiscal investment fails to yield international academic proficiency due to rigid centralization. The findings suggest that while modern policies strive for technological advancement, Thai traditional philosophy remains a critical anchor for maintaining national identity and fostering ethical citizenship. Ultimately, this research provides insights into how indigenous wisdom can serve as a corrective and complementary force to global educational trends, while offering a model of "philosophical syncretism" as a theoretical reference for other developing countries to maintain cultural preservation in the era of disruption.

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INTRODUCTION

The education system in the Kingdom of Thailand currently stands as a unique manifestation of the fusion between ancient wisdom and the highly dynamic ambition of global modernization. Contemporary education policy in this country cannot be understood in isolation without referring to the traditional philosophical foundations that have shaped national identity for centuries ([Arphattananon, 2020](#)). Thailand's intellectual tradition is heavily influenced by Theravada Buddhist teachings and the monarchy, which serves as a moral and social anchor for all levels of society. Amidst the tide of globalization that demands 21st-century technical skills, the Thai government continues to prioritize the integration of spiritual values into its formal curriculum ([Srinok et al., 2021](#)). This effort reflects a collective desire to produce citizens who are not only academically intelligent but also possess strong moral integrity. Therefore, analyzing the influence of traditional philosophy on education policy is crucial for charting the future direction of this nation.

The monarchy in Thailand has long been considered the main protector of education and religion, a role that has been passed down from generation to generation through the concept of *Dhammaraja*. Since the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), the modernization of education has been seen as a strategic instrument to maintain the country's sovereignty from the threat of Western colonialism. These historical monarchical roots directly birthed the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP), which functions not merely as an economic policy, but rather as a highly integrated political-philosophical manifestation of King Rama IX's strategic response to the existential challenges of globalized modernity ([Rukspolmuang, 2022](#)). Thailand's contemporary education policy continues to uphold these principles by placing the monarchy at the center of the national civil ideology. In this context, education serves as a means to strengthen loyalty to the nation, religion, and the king, which are considered the three main pillars of Thai identity. This influence is evident in various strategic policies that emphasize character building in line with the noble values of the monarchy ([Dharmapiya & Saratun, 2020](#)). The presence of the monarchy in the discourse on education provides strong moral legitimacy for any reforms undertaken by the government, yet it simultaneously creates an underlying tension regarding whether this deep bureaucratization accelerates or structurally slows down pedagogical innovation at the school level ([Ferguson & Lekwilai, 2023](#)).

Theravada Buddhist teachings provide a deep ontological and ethical foundation for pedagogical practices in schools throughout Thailand. The concept of human development in the Buddhist tradition involves a threefold practice of morality (*Sila*), concentration (*Samadhi*), and wisdom (*Panna*). These principles have been integrated into the national curriculum as part of character education aimed at creating social harmony ([Srinok et al., 2021](#)). This philosophical transition directly influences strategic management, as modern educational governance attempts to internalize these traditional ethical metrics into institutional accountability structures ([Ray et al., 2024](#)). Through this integration, education in Thailand goes beyond the mere transfer of technical knowledge and shifts to comprehensive spiritual development. Contemporary policies often list moral development as one of the main indicators of success in the basic education system. This shows that religious values remain a compass for public policy direction amid rapid change ([Tan & Vickers, 2024](#)).

One of the most influential philosophical innovations in contemporary Thai education policy is the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP). This philosophy was introduced by the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej as a guide to life that emphasizes moderation, common sense, and self-reliance. In the education sector, SEP has been translated into a curriculum that encourages students to live by the principles of balance and social responsibility ([Papangkorn et al., 2022](#)). The integration of SEP aims to equip the younger generation with mental immunity against the negative effects of excessive global consumerism ([Dharmapiya & Saratun, 2020](#)). However, a stark socio-economic contradiction emerges at the heart of this policy framework: while the SEP curriculum remains the mandated baseline for thousands of Thai schools, macroeconomic indicators reveal a severe moral-economic

crisis, with Thai household debt skyrocketing to an alarming 85.7% of GDP. This critical disconnect between abstract pedagogical mandates of moderation and the concrete reality of rampant consumerism serves as the central problem that this research aims to empirically address. Recent studies also argue that sufficiency education in Thailand increasingly functions as a framework for promoting peace, sustainable development, and global citizenship in the midst of globalization pressures ([Tan & Vickers, 2024](#)).

The current educational landscape in Thailand is also influenced by the "Thailand 4.0" vision, which aims to transform the country into a knowledge-based and innovation-driven economy. Despite its focus on high technology, this policy still incorporates the 12 Core Values of the Thai People as a behavioral guideline for students ([Arphattananon, 2020](#)). This blend of digital ambition and moral conservatism creates a unique educational paradigm in Southeast Asia. The government seeks to ensure that technological progress does not erode the cultural identity of "Thainess," which has long been a source of national pride ([Ferguson & Lekwilai, 2023](#)). This demonstrates the dialectic between the demands of modernity and the desire to remain faithful to traditional philosophical roots ([Ferguson & Lekwilai, 2023](#)). Therefore, contemporary education policy in Thailand can be seen as the result of ongoing negotiations between globality and locality.

The main theoretical basis underlying this analysis is Social Constructivism Theory, which emphasizes that knowledge is constructed through specific cultural contexts and social interactions. In the Thai context, education policy is viewed as a social construct involving Buddhist values and a deep history of monarchy ([Arphattananon, 2020](#)). Constructivism provides space for understanding how Thai students interpret knowledge through the lens of their own traditions. In addition, Culturalism Theory is used to explain how public policy is influenced by the dominant value structures and beliefs in society ([Ferguson & Lekwilai, 2023](#)). This theory helps to analyze why Western education models that are adopted often undergo significant modifications when implemented in Thailand. Culturalism emphasizes that the effectiveness of a policy is highly dependent on its compatibility with the cultural spirit of the nation concerned.

The perspective of Glocal Citizenship is also an important theoretical basis for understanding the dynamics of contemporary education in Thailand. This theory argues that individuals must be able to operate at the global level without relinquishing their local identity and responsibilities. Thai education policy explicitly seeks to produce graduates who are internationally competitive yet remain humble and ethical in accordance with tradition ([Tan & Vickers, 2024](#)). This vision is in line with efforts to integrate 21st-century skills with traditional values such as respect and discipline. Through a glocal approach, education is expected to become a bridge connecting individual aspirations with the collective interests of the nation. This reflects the belief that the strength of a nation lies in its ability to adapt without losing its soul.

The theory of sustainable development, which is aligned with SEP, is also an integral part of the philosophical foundation of education in Thailand today. SEP provides a practical framework for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through the lens of moderation and wisdom ([Rukspollmuang, 2022](#)). Education is seen as a means to change the mindset of society to better appreciate ecological balance and social justice. This integration shows that Thailand is not merely following the international agenda, but localizing these global values ([Dharmapiya & Saratun, 2020](#)). Thus, education policy serves as an instrument to create a society that is resilient in the face of economic and environmental crises. This focus on sustainability gives Thai education a very strong ethical dimension in its implementation.

This analysis also refers to Buddhist Moral Theory, which views education as a process of freeing oneself from ignorance and suffering through mental training. The development of mindfulness in Thai schools is considered a tool to improve students' cognitive capacity and emotional stability. Contemporary education policy has begun to recognize the importance of mental health and emotional well-being as part of learning outcomes ([Srinok et al., 2021](#)). Short meditation practices and daily ethics lessons are

concrete manifestations of the application of this theory in the classroom. Through mental training, students are expected to develop the emotional intelligence necessary to navigate the complexities of the modern world. This proves that traditional Thai psychology is still highly relevant to today's educational needs.

The relationship between traditional ethics and academic achievement is also supported by character development theories that emphasize the importance of moral virtue as the foundation for success in life. Research shows that students who internalize SEP values tend to have higher levels of discipline and responsibility in their studies ([Rukspollmuang, 2022](#)). Thailand's education policy seeks to strengthen this link by integrating values education into all subjects ([Dharmapiya & Saratun, 2020](#)). Character is seen as a more valuable asset than mere test scores in the long run. This holistic approach aims to produce graduates with integrity who are able to make positive contributions to society. By placing morality as its foundation, Thailand's education system seeks to create sustainable excellence for all its citizens.

Historically, the transition from temple-based education to a national school system in Thailand has gone through various phases of complex reform. Since the late 19th century, the government has consistently sought to adapt the curriculum to remain relevant to the demands of the times without sacrificing religious values. This evolution reflects the creative tension between tradition and modernity that continues to color education policy to this day ([Arphattananon, 2020](#)). The history of Thai education is a narrative of how a nation struggled to define itself amid massive external influences ([Ferguson & Lekwilai, 2023](#)). Understanding this history is essential to provide context for any contemporary education policy launched by the relevant ministries. It shows that every reform is a continuation of a long journey in search of an authentic national identity.

The 2017-2036 National Education Plan is a long-term policy document that guides all educational reforms in the current era. This plan emphasizes the development of human potential to support the stability, prosperity, and sustainability of the nation in accordance with the philosophy of sufficiency economics ([Rukspollmuang, 2022](#)). The main focus of this plan is to improve the quality of education that is inclusive and equitable throughout the kingdom. The integration of digital technology in this plan is positioned as a means to expand access without abandoning traditional ethical principles ([Tan & Vickers, 2024](#)). This vision reflects Thailand's ambition to become a developed country that remains grounded in Eastern values. Therefore, the National Education Plan can be considered a blueprint for the synergy between tradition and innovation.

The implementation of education policy in Thailand faces significant challenges, particularly regarding the quality gap between urban and rural schools. This systemic structural friction—often conceptualized as the "Thai Education Paradox"—demonstrates that despite massive public budget allocations, student learning outcomes continuously fall short of global standards. While previous macro-historical literature ([Fry, 2018](#); [Prasittichok & Klaykaew, 2022](#); [Ray et al., 2024](#)) has extensively explored fiscal distributions and political chronologies, there remains a notable lack of operational evaluation regarding policy execution at the school level. This paper addresses this research gap by examining the dialectical tension between the aggressive digital ambitions of "Thailand 4.0" and traditional moral resilience, highlighting the educator competency gaps that stall local implementation. To explore this inquiry, this study addresses the following research question: "How does Thai education policy negotiate the structural tension between global demands for advanced technological competence and the cultural imperative of maintaining moral integrity based on indigenous local wisdom?"

The significance of this research report lies in its ability to dissect how traditional philosophy can provide direction for education policy in a rapidly developing country. The case of Thailand provides valuable insights for other countries in the ASEAN region on the importance of cultural sovereignty in education reform. By exploring the influence of Buddhist and monarchical thought, this report will show how strong traditional roots are in supporting modernity ([Srinok et al., 2021](#)). This research is expected to serve as a reference

for policymakers in formulating more grounded and sustainable education strategies. The emphasis on the philosophical dimension will open space for a more in-depth discussion about the true meaning of education for a nation. This dynamic will be the main focus of all discussions presented in this report.

This research report is systematically compiled to provide a comprehensive understanding of the influence of traditional philosophy on Thai education policy. The initial section will discuss the historical roots and evolution of philosophical thinking that forms the foundation of the national education system. Next, it will analyze in depth how the Philosophy of Sufficiency Economy (SEP) and 12 Core Values are integrated into the contemporary curriculum. The core section of this report will also explore the implementation of Thailand 4.0 strategies and their impact on pedagogical practices in the digital age ([Tan & Vickers, 2024](#)). The discussion will conclude with a critical review of the challenges and prospects for Thai education in achieving its long-term vision. Through a comprehensive narrative, this report aims to illustrate the complexity and uniqueness of the educational journey in the Kingdom of Thailand.

METHOD

This study primarily uses a qualitative approach with documentary research methods to explore in depth the structural influence of traditional philosophy on education policy in Thailand. The use of documentary analysis allows researchers to dissect official policy texts and academic literature to understand the social and cultural forces that shape the construction of these policies. To strengthen the qualitative analysis of human resource management barriers and operational gaps, this study integrates verified secondary quantitative datasets, including evaluations from the Modified Priority Needs Index (PNI_{Modified}) ([Kantathanawat & Tungkunan, 2024](#)). This deliberate incorporation of secondary indexical tools prevents methodological confusion while providing an empirical foundation for measuring the gap between actual and ideal conditions in educator competencies across Thai provinces ([Wahyuni et al., 2020](#)). The primary investigative locus centers on long-term blueprints such as the National Education Plan (2017–2036) and contemporary economic frameworks rooted in the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy ([Song, 2020](#)).

Data collection procedures were carried out through a systematic literature review of various relevant primary and secondary sources. In order to satisfy the rigorous transparency demands of reputable journals, data searches were systematically conducted through filtered academic databases—specifically Scopus and Google Scholar—alongside official government repositories. Primary sources included official legal documents, development frameworks, and directives from the Ministry of Education, while secondary sources involved peer-reviewed journal articles, regional meta-syntheses, and textbooks published within the last five years for articles and ten years for books. Search filters restricted inputs to high-impact keywords including "Thai traditional philosophy," "Buddhism in education," "Sufficiency Economy Philosophy," and "contemporary educational policy" ([Tan & Vickers, 2024](#)). To validate the qualitative findings, a source triangulation strategy was rigorously executed by systematically comparing and cross-referencing three distinct data narratives: (1) official government legal text, (2) empirical findings from independent domestic journal articles, and (3) published field observations and recorded perspectives of international educators practicing within the Thai primary and secondary school sectors ([Chaiya & Ahmad, 2021](#)).

The collected qualitative text and secondary data were analyzed using Reflective Thematic Analysis techniques to track dominant and latent themes in national policy discourses. The analysis proceeded through a transparent, multi-stage coding process where official texts were systematically read, highlighted, and cataloged into initial descriptive codes regarding institutional behavior. These codes were then synthesized into broader analytical themes, focusing on the principles of moderation, loyalty to the monarchy, Buddhist-based moral development, and the operational barriers to localized

curriculum flexibility ([Klomkul, 2021](#)). Concurrently, the Modified Priority Needs Index (PNI_{Modified}) formulas were evaluated from secondary human resources reports to measure the exact discrepancy scores between actual teacher performance and expected national competency targets. This synthesis step explicitly tracks how abstract ethical variables intersect with modern key performance indicators (KPIs) in classroom management, allowing for complete transparency and replicability of the analytical steps ([Usman et al., 2024](#)).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Manifestations of the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy in the National Policy Framework

Analysis of national policy data shows that the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP), originally conceptualized by King Bhumibol Adulyadej, has now been transformed into a formal pillar of Thailand's pedagogical identity. This integration is particularly evident in the 13th National Economic and Social Development Plan (2023–2027), which explicitly adopts the principles of moderation, reasonableness, and self-immunity as the foundation for sustainable human development. The implementation of SEP in contemporary education policy aims to balance high-tech ambitions with moral resilience, ensuring that students' intellectual growth is not divorced from traditional ethical roots ([Song, 2020](#); [Von Feigenblatt Of Braemar et al., 2022](#)). Research findings indicate that this “Middle Way” approach has become a crucial instrument in navigating global volatility, where students are taught to mitigate economic and social risks through careful planning and responsible consumption ([Dharmapiya & Saratun, 2020](#)). This policy reflects the state's systemic efforts to produce citizens who are not only technically competent but also have strong spiritual integrity in facing the challenges of the 21st century. Therefore, SEP has shifted from being merely a philosophical discourse to an operational framework that determines the direction of curriculum reform at all school levels in Thailand ([Tan & Vickers, 2024](#)).

Conceptually, the operationalization of SEP in the classroom environment is built on three main pillars, namely moderation, fairness, and self-immunity, which are supported by two essential foundations of knowledge and morality. Moderation is defined as balance in actions and use of resources, where students are encouraged to avoid excessive consumptive behavior and focus on sustainable independence. The pillar of fairness requires students to evaluate the consequences of their actions, connecting individual choices with collective community welfare. Meanwhile, self-immunity or innate resilience focuses on developing students' cognitive and emotional capacity to withstand external shocks, such as drastic economic changes or technological disruptions ([Rukspollmuang, 2022](#)). To practically apply this concept, educational administrators attempt to establish specific key performance indicators (KPIs) that map spiritual metrics onto school grading rubrics. However, local curriculum management faces chronic challenges because balancing raw academic test scores with long-term ethical integrity creates intense trade-offs when allocating limited instructional hours in overcrowded weekly timetables. The integration of sufficiency-based learning also requires teachers to possess interdisciplinary competencies capable of connecting economic reasoning, ethical reflection, and sustainability awareness into a unified pedagogical framework ([Prayukvong et al., 2023](#)).

Data from field implementation during the 2021–2025 period provides an overview of the effectiveness of SEP in increasing community resilience during times of crisis, including the impact of the global pandemic. School communities that have deeply implemented SEP principles report much more efficient levels of social cooperation and resource management compared to institutions that ignore these values. This resilience is manifested through careful planning and balanced consumption practices, which directly reduce the negative impact of external economic instability. These findings validate SEP's position in national policy as a tool for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through a human-centered approach ([Von Feigenblatt Of Braemar et al., 2022](#)). This policy also emphasizes the importance of having alternative sources of income and

dual skills for students, as a tangible form of applying the principle of self-immunity in the world of work. Educational reforms inspired by SEP increasingly encourage project-based learning and local entrepreneurship initiatives to strengthen students' adaptive capacities in uncertain socio-economic conditions ([Agard & Roberts, 2020](#)). Ultimately, SEP has proven to be a highly relevant protection mechanism for maintaining Thailand's social and economic stability amid increasing global uncertainty.

Although SEP integration has become a national mandate, the policy must also contend with a strong culture of consumerism and extremely high levels of household debt in Thailand. Data shows that Thai household debt reached 85.7% of GDP in 2022, a figure that reflects the enormous challenge of instilling the value of moderation in the younger generation. This shocking macroeconomic reality serves as an empirical critique of contemporary character education management, indicating that the SEP curriculum has largely functioned as a superficial political slogan rather than an effective mechanism for curbing material consumerism among urban youth. The current education curriculum attempts to respond to this challenge by strengthening financial literacy education based on traditional principles of sufficiency and wisdom ([Song, 2020](#)). National education policy directs schools to become social laboratories where students practice financial risk management and consumption ethics from an early age. However, the pull of modern lifestyles promoted through social media often conflicts with the teachings of moderation, creating tension between school values and social reality. Recent educational discourse further emphasizes that sustainable implementation of SEP requires stronger collaboration between schools, communities, and state institutions to ensure that ethical moderation becomes a lived social practice rather than merely symbolic curricular rhetoric ([Prayukvong et al., 2023](#); [Tan & Vickers, 2024](#)). The future success of this policy depends heavily on synergy between the educational environment, state fiscal policy, and active support from students' families in consistently practicing the philosophy of sufficiency.

Table 1: Framework of Indicators for the Philosophy of Sufficiency in Economic Policy within Education Policy

Philosophical Dimensions	Main Policy Focus	Student Competency Targets
Moderation	Balance of Resources	The ability to manage consumption and avoid excessive risk.
Fairness	Consequential Thinking	Rational analysis of the cause-and-effect relationships of actions.
Self-Immunity	Systemic Resilience	Mental and technical readiness to face sudden changes.
Knowledge	Academic Competence	In-depth mastery of facts, theories, and technology.
Morality	Ethical Integrity	Social awareness, honesty, and respect for others

Educator Competencies and the Gap in Implementing Traditional Values

Daily learning practices increasingly attempt to integrate the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP) into classroom routines, yet there remains a significant competency gap in its implementation. Based on recent evaluations of teacher development needs, the current level of SEP implementation is categorized as moderate to high, but it still falls considerably below the competency standards expected by national educational policy ([Koprasertsud & Kaewjinda, 2024](#)). This discrepancy is most visible in the dimensions of risk prediction and readiness for change, where educators frequently struggle to translate philosophical principles into concrete real-world problem-solving simulations. Teacher professional development policies for the 2023–2027 period are therefore increasingly focused on strengthening reflective capacity, adaptive thinking, and value-based performance evaluation ([Tan & Vickers, 2024](#)). Teachers are expected not only to deliver

academic content but also to serve as moral exemplars who embody sustainable living practices in accordance with the philosophy of sufficiency. Without a profound transformation in educators' mindset and pedagogical orientation, the integration of traditional philosophy into national policy risks becoming merely an administrative formality without substantial behavioral impact on students ([Dharmapiya & Saratun, 2020](#)).

Analysis using the Modified Priority Needs Index (PNI Modified) further reveals that the development of self-immunity skills through experiential learning constitutes one of the highest priorities in Thailand's teacher education reform agenda. A PNI Modified score of 0.32 indicates a pressing need for curriculum redesign to improve teachers' risk management and adaptive decision-making capacities. Philosophically, this widespread difficulty in risk prediction stems from a historically entrenched institutional culture of bureaucratic compliance that often discourages speculative, independent, and critical thinking among educators. Current policy strategies therefore encourage the implementation of reflective pedagogical models such as the QPAR (Question–Plan–Action–Reflection) framework to bridge the gap between traditional ethical theory and modern classroom practice ([Thumchuea et al., 2023](#)). This process emphasizes critical reflection on moral values and ethical consequences in every instructional decision. In addition, national reforms increasingly stress the importance of psychologically safe learning environments, so teachers feel empowered to experiment with innovative methods without fear of institutional failure. By strengthening reflective capacity and professional autonomy, educators are expected to draw lessons from local wisdom traditions and apply them to increasingly complex global contexts ([Rukspollmuang, 2022](#)).

Beyond technical competencies, school leadership plays a central role in constructing institutional cultures aligned with traditional Thai ethical values. Contemporary studies indicate a highly significant positive relationship between effective school leadership and improvements in both student academic achievement and character formation, particularly in rural schools with limited resources. Principals who adopt collaborative, participatory, and reflective leadership styles are generally more successful in using philosophical values as practical “compasses” for school governance and curriculum management. Conversely, rigid hierarchical structures and authoritarian administrative cultures often suppress teacher creativity and weaken student independence, both of which are essential dimensions of the self-immunity concept embedded within SEP. Current educational reforms therefore reposition principals as facilitators who build strong partnerships with local communities, families, and social institutions to preserve cultural continuity while simultaneously improving school competitiveness in the national education system ([De Jong et al., 2023](#)). This inclusive leadership model is increasingly viewed as more effective for sustaining cultural identity amid rapid globalization and technological transformation.

Disparities in the implementation of traditional philosophical values are also strongly influenced by geographical inequalities and unequal access to educational resources across Thailand. In rural regions such as Northeast Thailand, the main barriers involve limited infrastructure, economic disparities, and insufficient technological access, all of which hinder equitable implementation of digital educational innovation. As a result, national education policies increasingly emphasize culturally responsive approaches that integrate technological modernization with local knowledge systems and indigenous community wisdom. Empirical findings demonstrate that schools capable of incorporating local traditions, community practices, and contextual learning activities into their curriculum tend to achieve higher levels of student engagement and social participation. Consequently, decentralized educational governance has become an important strategic priority, allowing regional educational authorities greater flexibility to adapt national curriculum mandates according to local socio-cultural realities. This policy orientation aims to ensure that traditional values are not merely understood as abstract ideological concepts, but are operationalized as practical solutions to region-specific educational and social challenges ([Tan & Vickers, 2024](#)).

Table 2: Analysis of Educator Competency Gaps in SEP Implementation

Competency Category	Implementation Score (Mean)	Expected Score (Mean)	Modified PNModified Index
Risk Prediction	3.36	4.39	0.32
Practical Thinking Evaluation	3.48	4.52	0.30
Reflective Thinking	3.59	4.60	0.27
Ethical Reasoning	3.52	4.58	0.30

Thailand 4.0 Strategy: Harmonizing Technology with Local Wisdom

Thailand 4.0 is an ambitious strategic initiative that aims to transform the country's economy into an innovation-based economy while remaining rooted in a strong cultural identity. The main pillars of educational transformation under this framework include the development of digital literacy, critical thinking, entrepreneurial spirit, and the preservation of cultural identity in a global context. This policy recognizes that Thailand's future competitive advantage will not come from replicating Western models alone, but from the ability to combine high technology with traditional values ([Kankaew et al., 2022](#); [Lipipun & Angasinha, 2023](#)). Educational innovation is directed at producing "Thai 4.0" individuals who have world-class technical competencies while upholding morality and ethics of sufficiency. This strategy creates a learning ecosystem that is not only oriented towards academic results but also towards real contributions to society and the environment. Thus, technology is seen as a tool to strengthen local wisdom, not as a substitute for existing traditional values ([Tan & Vickers, 2024](#)).

The integration of digital innovation in education policy must also address the challenge of the digital divide that still exists between urban and rural areas. Data from international educational assessments demonstrates that the expansion of technology often exceeds users' capacity to utilize it effectively, creating new inequalities in learning quality and digital participation ([Asadullah et al., 2020](#)). Thailand's education policy responds to this by prioritizing infrastructure development in remote areas while training teachers in the pedagogically relevant use of digital tools. Digital transformation in the context of Thailand 4.0 includes the use of artificial intelligence, data analysis, and mobile-based learning to improve access to quality education for all segments of society ([Funk & Wang, 2024](#)). This rapid shift highlights a deep value conflict within Thai education governance: administrators must find a way to mediate between traditional expectations of unconditional obedience rooted in hierarchical culture and the egalitarian, collaborative spirit that naturally accompanies digital learning environments. The success of this harmonization is key for Thailand to achieve high-income status without sacrificing its social cohesion ([Lipipun & Angasinha, 2023](#)).

Higher education in Thailand is currently being encouraged to develop strategic partnerships with industry and local communities to support the creative economy. University curricula are beginning to adopt learning models that allow students to interact directly with community challenges, using creativity to solve local problems. This policy reflects a transition from education that merely transmits knowledge to education that creates new value for the nation. Higher education institutions are expected to become research centers that develop appropriate technologies based on local wisdom to support the sustainability of the agricultural and light industrial sectors ([Techvitul, 2021](#)). On the other hand, traditional values such as respect for seniority and obedience are sometimes seen as obstacles to critical thinking and freedom of expression, which are necessary for innovation. Therefore, contemporary education policies seek to create a more flexible space where respect for tradition can go hand in hand with openness to radical new ideas ([Durongkaverroj, 2022](#)).

Educational transformation also involves the development of a circular economy model that is integrated into science and entrepreneurship curricula. The BCG (Bio-Circular-Green) Economic Model Plan 2021–2026 aims to create public awareness of sustainability through formal and non-formal education channels. Students are taught to understand the relationship between economic activity and environmental preservation, which is philosophically aligned with Buddhist teachings on interconnectedness and balance ([Tan & Vickers, 2024](#)). This policy encourages schools to implement efficient resource management, such as waste reduction and renewable energy use within school environments. Through this approach, the traditional philosophy of living in harmony with nature is translated into technical competencies relevant to the global green economy. The expected outcomes of this initiative include reductions in greenhouse gas emissions alongside the creation of new economic opportunities for graduates skilled in green technology ([Kankaew et al., 2022](#)).

Analysis of the Education Paradox and Contemporary Structural Barriers

One of the most pressing challenges in Thai education policy is a phenomenon known as the "Thai Education Paradox," in which large investments do not consistently correlate with international academic achievement. Thailand allocates a substantial proportion of public expenditure to education, yet learning outcomes frequently remain below expectations relative to regional competitors. Comparative studies on educational paradoxes suggest that cultural and structural factors often shape achievement outcomes beyond financial investment alone ([Asadullah et al., 2020](#)). Contemporary analyses of Thai education indicate that persistent weaknesses stem from regional disparities, administrative fragmentation, and uneven resource distribution ([Durongkaverroj, 2022](#)). A highly centralized and hierarchical organizational structure severely slows down grassroots innovation, limiting local school autonomy and reinforcing rigid compliance cultures. Although national policies frequently promote traditional values and creativity, schools often remain dominated by rote learning and standardized examination pressures. This paradox points to a disconnect between progressive philosophical aspirations and stagnant administrative practices ([Tan & Vickers, 2024](#)).

Regional disparities in Thailand create significant gaps in educational access and quality, particularly between Bangkok and rural provinces. Students in rural schools often face limited access to modern facilities, laboratories, and highly qualified teachers. Contemporary education policy seeks to reduce these inequalities through more equitable funding arrangements and incentives for teachers serving remote communities ([Durongkaverroj, 2022](#)). Nevertheless, broader socio-economic conditions such as poverty and labor migration remain difficult to address solely through educational intervention. The persistence of these disparities not only limits individual mobility but also threatens long-term social cohesion and national stability. Consequently, meaningful reform requires structural transformation that extends beyond curriculum revision toward more balanced educational governance and human capital development ([Techvitul, 2021](#)).

The higher education sector also faces serious challenges due to declining student populations and rising operational costs that encourage the commercialization of education. Many institutions have increasingly adopted market-oriented approaches, treating students as consumers while balancing institutional survival against academic quality. Financial instability among Thai higher education institutions has become a growing concern, influencing policy decisions regarding enrollment, staffing, and institutional strategy ([Scott & Guan, 2022](#)). Government policies promoting internationalization sometimes unintentionally distance universities from local labor-market realities. Cost-cutting measures undertaken to preserve financial sustainability may reduce staffing and weaken academic support services. In this context, the philosophy of sufficiency offers an alternative ethical framework to ensure that educational institutions remain focused on human development rather than merely economic competition ([Tan & Vickers, 2024](#)).

The culture of hierarchy and obedience deeply rooted in Thai society also produces a dual impact on educational reform. While these values reinforce discipline and institutional

respect, they may simultaneously suppress teacher autonomy and students' willingness to question authority. Research on educational leadership and digital transformation highlights the importance of psychologically safe learning environments that encourage dialogue, collaboration, and innovation ([Funk & Wang, 2024](#)). Current reforms therefore emphasize social-emotional learning and the creation of inclusive school ecosystems. This transformation requires a significant shift in teacher–student relationships, moving from absolute authority toward collaborative knowledge construction. The effort to reconcile respect for tradition with intellectual openness remains one of the most complex dialectical challenges confronting Thai education policy today ([Durongkaverroj, 2022](#); [Lipipun & Angasinha, 2023](#)).

Table 3: Analysis of Structural Barriers in Thai Education Reform

Barrier Factors	Impact on Policy	Mitigation Recommendations
Bureaucratic Centralization	Local-level innovation is hampered	Decentralization of curriculum authority.
Regional Disparities	Gaps in graduate quality	Needs-based redistribution of resources.
Hierarchical culture	Low critical thinking among students	Teacher training in student-centered pedagogy.
Commercialization of HEIs	Decline in academic standards	Strengthening of higher education quality regulations.

Digital transformation and projections for the sustainability of the education system

The future vision for education in Thailand is heavily influenced by the need to adapt to global megatrends such as digitalization, climate change, and an aging society. The 20-Year National Strategic Framework (2017–2036) sets the goal of creating citizens who are happy, competent, and morally aligned with the philosophy of sufficiency economics (Policy Design for Transforming Learning Systems Responsive to Future Global Changes in Thailand 2040, 2022). Current education policies focus on developing 21st-century skills, including information literacy, emotional intelligence, and rational analysis. Human development is seen as the key to escaping the middle-income trap through increased productivity driven by creativity ([Funk & Wang, 2024](#)). Strengthening the vocational education system is also a priority for aligning graduate skills with future industry needs under the Thailand 4.0 scheme ([Lipipun & Angasinha, 2023](#)). Thus, contemporary education policy serves as a bridge connecting the wisdom of the past with the opportunities of the future.

The digital transformation driven by the OECD 2026 policy emphasizes that technology must be embedded in an integrated learning ecosystem, not merely a hardware procurement project. In Thailand, the use of artificial intelligence in education is being explored for personalized learning and improved school administrative efficiency. However, this policy continues to emphasize the importance of teachers as human facilitators who cannot be replaced by machines in terms of character and ethics formation ([Almuhanna, 2024](#)). The digital disparity, which has shifted from a problem of access to a problem of effectiveness in the use of digital tools, demands a more coherent governance approach ([Preechasil & Thamrongchai, 2023](#)). The Thai government continues to invest in the development of online learning platforms and open educational resources to ensure that lifelong learning is accessible to all citizens ([Delgado & Cabilles, 2024](#)). The success of this digitization will largely depend on the education system's ability to maintain a balance between technical progress and students' mental well-being.

The integration of traditional values into character education in the future must face the dynamics of change in the aspirations of the younger generation, who are increasingly critical of the old power structures. Recent youth protest movements show a shift in perspectives on national identity and the role of traditional institutions in public life. Education policy must be able to facilitate healthy dialogue on citizenship values in a transparent and democratic digital age. Civic education has begun to incorporate topics

such as human rights, freedom of expression, and global responsibility into the core curriculum ([Lipipun & Angasinha, 2023](#)). This is an effort to ensure that loyalty to the nation remains relevant and meaningful to a generation growing up in a globally connected world. The ability of policies to evolve with the times without losing their cultural identity is the true test for Thailand's education system.

Ultimately, the sustainability of Thailand's education system depends heavily on the implementation of authentic SEP principles rather than mere political slogans. This critical integration will serve as the ultimate test of the survival and sustainability of the nation's identity in an era of global transparency and rapid technological disintermediation. Investing in the development of quality teachers, transformative school leadership, and reducing regional disparities remain key priorities that must be addressed. Education must be viewed as a holistic process that not only pursues economic growth but also promotes social harmony and environmental sustainability ([Trevisan et al., 2023](#)). By maintaining its commitment to the values of sufficiency, Thailand has the potential to create a unique educational model that offers solutions to the global moral and ecological crises ([Hashim et al., 2022](#)). The future of Thai education is about creating a wise learning society, where technology and tradition reinforce each other for the common good ([Aggarwal et al., 2023](#)).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The evolution of Thailand's education system demonstrates a continuous negotiation between traditional philosophical foundations and the demands of global modernization. Rooted in Theravada Buddhist ethics, monarchical ideology, and the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP), contemporary Thai education policy seeks to produce citizens who are not only technologically competent but also morally grounded and socially responsible. The integration of spirituality, cultural identity, and educational governance reflects Thailand's determination to preserve its national identity while adapting to the rapidly changing dynamics of globalization and digital transformation.

The analysis reveals that SEP has become more than a symbolic cultural doctrine; it now functions as a strategic framework guiding curriculum reform, sustainability education, and national development planning. Principles such as moderation, reasonableness, and self-immunity are embedded into educational policies to strengthen students' resilience against economic instability, consumerism, and social disruption. Through this framework, education in Thailand is expected to cultivate holistic human development that balances intellectual achievement with ethical consciousness and emotional maturity.

At the same time, Thailand 4.0 has accelerated the integration of digital innovation into the education sector through the promotion of artificial intelligence, online learning platforms, vocational modernization, and creative economy initiatives. Educational transformation under this framework emphasizes digital literacy, critical thinking, entrepreneurial capacity, and sustainable development competencies. However, the study also identifies substantial structural tensions between technological modernization and deeply rooted hierarchical cultural traditions. The persistence of centralized governance, rigid bureaucracy, and examination-oriented pedagogy often limit creativity, critical inquiry, and grassroots innovation at the school level.

The findings further highlight the existence of the "Thai Education Paradox," where significant investments in education have not consistently translated into improved international academic performance or equitable educational quality. Regional disparities between urban and rural areas continue to create unequal access to infrastructure, digital resources, qualified teachers, and innovative learning opportunities. In many cases, the implementation of national educational reforms remains constrained by institutional rigidity, teacher competency gaps, and uneven administrative capacity.

Teacher professionalism emerges as one of the most decisive variables in the success of educational transformation. Although policies strongly encourage the integration of SEP values and reflective learning approaches, many educators still struggle to

operationalize philosophical principles into practical pedagogical strategies. The analysis using the Modified Priority Needs Index (PNI_{Modified}) indicates that competencies related to adaptive thinking, risk prediction, digital pedagogy, and experiential learning remain below expected national standards. This suggests that the sustainability of Thailand's educational vision depends not only on policy design, but also on the depth of institutional and human resource transformation.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that the future sustainability of Thai education will depend on the state's ability to harmonize digital progress with cultural continuity. The integration of local wisdom, Buddhist ethics, and sustainability-oriented learning into modern educational systems provides Thailand with a distinctive educational identity in Southeast Asia. Rather than fully imitating Western educational models, Thailand attempts to localize global educational agendas through culturally responsive policies. This approach offers an alternative paradigm of development where technology, morality, environmental responsibility, and national identity coexist within a unified educational framework.

Ultimately, Thailand's educational journey illustrates that sustainable educational reform cannot rely solely on technological advancement or economic ambition. Long-term success requires the cultivation of ethical leadership, inclusive governance, social equity, culturally adaptive curriculum design, and reflective pedagogical practices. The Thai case demonstrates that education functions not merely as a mechanism for economic productivity, but also as a strategic instrument for preserving social harmony, strengthening national resilience, and shaping the moral direction of society in an increasingly interconnected world.

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