

Introducing a new book by
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The Rising of Lotus
Flowers :
Self-Education of Deaf
Children
in Thai Boarding Schools
Charles Reilly & Nipapon
Reilly



“The beautiful, pure flower arising from the murky depths reminds its admirers that one can rise above circumstances and achieve a higher state.”

The Rising of Lotus Flowers

Self-Education of Deaf
Children
in Thai Boarding Schools

At the root

- ◆ The generative power of the isolated mind
- ◆ The daily lived experience of deaf schoolchildren
- ◆ Children's activities and micro-social structure, and the influence on their learning

Why study child-driven activities?

- ◆ Teaching and learning is embedded in everyday interaction
- ◆ Unconstrained in communication, children reveal themselves more fully.
- ◆ Free of adult expectations and organization, children give clues about how they prefer to learn and to be taught.

Why study residential schools?

- ◆ “Even more so than for the hearing child, the residential school is the very heart and soul, the veritable center, of the social experience of deaf children.” —Joshua Fishman
- ◆ Still dominant in deaf education worldwide
- ◆ Its popularity falls or rises with little grounding in empirical study of child learning and experience.

When Pinna et al. (1993) interviewed deaf school graduates as part of an attempt to fully reconstruct the history of a deaf school, they got “a great deal of information of a different kind.”

They noted graduates’ recollections of “tales, part reality and part imagination, of escapes from the dormitory and pirate raids into the giant attic” (358).

“The miniature social system and the frequent upheavals and readjustments of the system were some phenomena that occurred constantly under the eyes of the caretakers but were never recognized by them” -Victor Galloway

The Research Inquiry

Our starting point

- ◆ Isolated children who entered school with little language and within a few years were using TSL fluently.
- ◆ In school, great psychological distance between signing-only children and speaking-only teachers.
- ◆ Children who were communicating about everything, and teachers seeing little value in it.
- ◆ On the streets, cliques of deaf adults from the same school, bound together by their shared childhood.

Research Questions

1. What kinds of group interactions occur among these deaf children? What are the properties (or form, manner) of these activities?
2. What function does each type of group interaction have in the learning of language, knowledge, and social norms? What value do the children themselves see in these interactions?
3. How does a child's intellectual and linguistic condition relate to his or her social standing in the student body? What are the varying interactive opportunities available to children of different ages and gender?
4. How does the structure and climate of the boarding school affect interaction and learning among students?

Design

- ◆ Main case: Largest and most isolated of deaf schools in Thailand. 2 other schools. (1991-92)
- ◆ 7 months full-time data collection: Participant observation, Videotape & photography
Interviews, Children involved in analysis (explained videotapes)
Follow up: visits-1994, 1999; Interviews of key informants in 1997, 1999, 2003, 2004.

Selected findings

- ◆ The deaf children in the school formed a critical mass of visually oriented people using a sign language to create a fully accessible setting for all.
- ◆
The new pupils, often languageless when they enrolled, received from other students the kind of intensive interaction that was necessary to rouse their innate language capacity.
- ◆ The rural setting brought a variety of stimulating events, from thunderstorms to puppy births to secret escapades across the bridge to town.
- ◆ For the first time, these children got the chance to use language in tandem with their experiences every moment of every day

- ◆ The great size of the student body offered a wide range of social activities. For example, a ten-year-old student had more than forty same-age peers with whom to socialize.
- ◆ Freed of the stultifying communication gap that bedevils instruction, deaf children revealed how they prefer to communicate, to teach, and to learn.
- ◆ In the process, they created a sophisticated social hierarchy that provided a pathway to specific kinds of group activities as each child grew up in the school.

The cultural context of Thai Deaf lives

- ◆ Thai society, demographics, educational history & goals, Expectations for hearing and deaf pupils, Purpose of various boarding schools (hill tribes).
- ◆ Shows how a traditional society shapes the opportunities to learn by deaf children.

School life

- ◆ detachment from family.
- ◆ “shut in” -rarely leaving school grounds
- ◆ limited information from outside world.
- ◆ alienation from non-signing teachers.
- ◆ regimented daily schedule with duties.



Social hierarchy of the mind

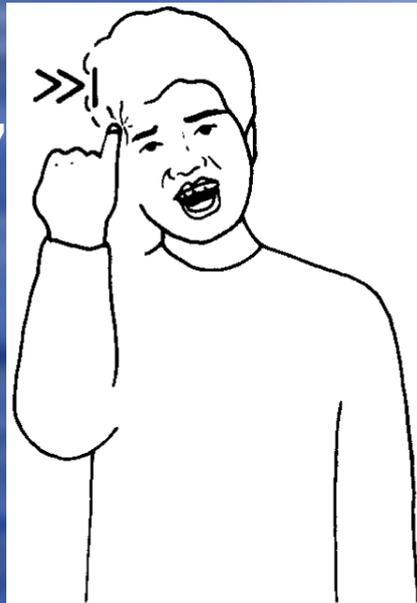
- ◆ Senior
- ◆ Regular
- ◆ Newcomer



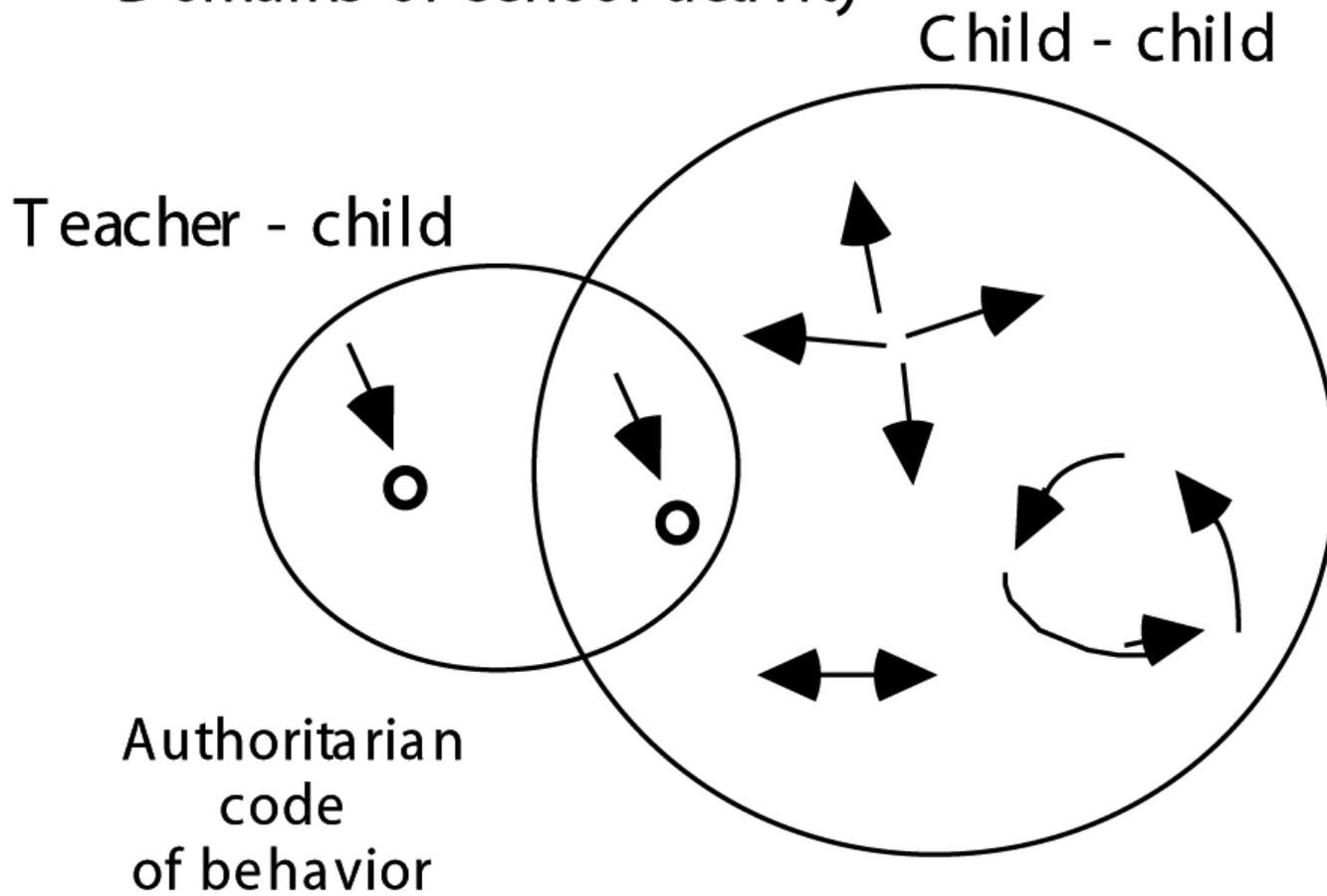
Social status not by age

Exceptions that prove the
rule:

- ◆ Sign masters
- ◆ “Numbskulls”



Domains of school activity



Free-time activities

- ◆ Elaborative narratives
 - ◆ Storytelling
 - ◆ Broadcasting
 - ◆ Interpreting
- ◆ Participatory gatherings
 - ◆ Conversational circles
 - ◆ Verbal dueling
 - ◆ Games and sports.

TABLE 7. *Overview of Creative Narrative among Deaf Children*

Narrative Form	Cognitive Function	Social Function	Form (from Henry 1976b)
Storytelling	Sign and concept modeling as well as learning enrich understanding	Relieves boredom, marks groups	Creative dramatization tailored to the audience
Broadcasting and Interpreting	Requires grasping a framework of new information	Fuels debate; provides shared reference	By telling and by watching

TABLE 8. *Student Social Participation*

Participation	Cognitive Function	Social Function	Form (from Henry 1976b)
Conversational circles	Better understanding	Intimacy, status marker	By group discussion, problem solving
Verbal dueling	Quickness of wit, exercise of vocabulary	To establish status	By use of humor and banter, ego-deflation
Games and sports	Judgment	Status	By doing in play

Sustaining sign mastery

- ◆ The craft of sign mastery has been passed down over generations of deaf schoolchildren as an honored practice.
- ◆ All sign masters recall their mentors, and all have apprentices.
- ◆ Its contributions are remembered into adulthood.



Creativity vs. Authority

- ◆ Only two of six sign masters of correct age assumed supervisory roles. Two sign masters managed to satisfy the demands of both creative and overseer roles.
- ◆ Thanthep became a kindly supervisor of Dorm 3, who gave primary attention to creative leadership. He frequently quarreled with Wieng, the lead dorm supervisor. He complained that the storytelling and broadcasting (“yucking it up”) was disturbing. Consequently, Thanthep often slept (and told stories) in Dorm 4.

Learning pathway: “newcomers”

“In first grade we know-nothing,
in second grade we still know-nothing,
then in third grade we start to become
able to think.”

—A girl in fifth grade at
Bua School for the Deaf

Learning pathway: “newcomers”

- ◆ Restricted language used during repeated routine tasks (under teachers & students in charge).
- ◆ Excluded from many activities, must draw upon in-group resources (repeaters).
- ◆ Allowed to observe, rarely mentoring.
- ◆ “Move up” only when their internal gains are recognized by student body.

Thai residential schools

- ◆ Wide range of real-life activities and natural events.
- ◆ Unconstrained use of the indigenous sign language.
- ◆ Freedom of association among children of different ages. Engagement in play and in joint physical tasks.
- ◆ Sufficient children at each age level so that individuals are drawn into varied and evolving relationships (“critical mass”).
- ◆ Students have roles in the functioning of the school, dorm, and student body.

Conclusion