

Association among the Students

During the twenty-year history of the school, the children have developed an array of educational activities by themselves. Their use of creative narrative and participatory groups reveals their ability to devise social gatherings to fulfill their intellectual, social, and emotional needs. Their adoption and modification of authoritarian codes of behavior imposed by the school indicates their ability to negotiate complex social demands. Older students tend to become either authoritarian supervisors or leaders of free-time (creative, participatory) activities, roles that reveal their ambivalence about the values of hearing, adult educators as they translate those roles to their own peer culture.

EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES CREATED BY STUDENTS

To build a “social base” (Whyte 1955), I initiated the study with a broad, sweeping observation of the daily school life and visited all classes, dorms, and activities. The early findings supported the initial assumptions. School life was bifurcated into a formal and an informal domain, clearly separated by time, site, and leader (see table 5). The activity periods were easily distinguishable by the clothing: uniforms during school affairs and loose fitting shorts and tees during after-hours. Teachers asserted their control and involvement only during the classroom hours. After classes were finished, the students were largely left to their own devices, with minimal supervision. During the free time (informal domain), I had expected to find typically child-like responses to the relaxation of authority—playing games, conversing, and doing whatever children do befitting their age and gender. After all, the binding forces of families were far away, the teachers were off-duty, and numerous peers were at hand.

Interaction among children of different ages is only minimally impeded by adult-created barriers in the structure of space and time. In nations with age-graded and highly organized school systems, children of different ages are kept physically segregated. Younger and older children occupy

TABLE 5. *Division of Schedule into Formal and Informal Aspects*

Features	Formal	Informal
Participants	Teachers with students	Student body alone
Site	Classrooms and assembly areas	Dorms and playgrounds
Time	8:00 A.M.—3:00 P.M. on weekdays	Before breakfast and after 3:00 P.M. on weekdays, All day and night on weekends
Leaders	Teachers	Older pupils

separate classrooms, if not entirely different school buildings. Schedules are arranged to keep children of varying age groups apart, even during meal times. Children's freedom in establishing their own relationships across age groups is reduced by this kind of structure.

In the Thai boarding schools, youth of all ages are in extremely close physical proximity to one another. The circumstance encourages togetherness, partly by giving them few choices and little privacy. During the tropical days, the children gather in the shade under the open-air halls and the trees. The evenings are spent under a few bare light bulbs in open dorm rooms. Students are within eyesight of one another far more than in modern Western institutions. Gender separation is enforced only during evening hours.

I quickly made an unexpected and puzzling observation: the free-time hours were dominated by authoritarian activities created by the pupils themselves. During the times when play had the potential to be paramount, I saw, instead, youth standing frozen in lineups, drilling in formation, and watching didactic lectures, even when no adults were in evidence. The seniors ordered the youngsters about as if in a boot camp. The evening regimen in the dorms was lengthy and strict. Typically, students formed a lineup at 7:00 P.M. downstairs during which the students did drills with their arms as long as the dorm head wished. Before bed, students attended dorm meetings that involved strident, repetitive lectures emphasizing propriety and cleanliness.

I also saw some bizarre acts such as enforced recitation and echoing (choruses of the deaf, truly) and mass self-punishments. Student leaders reinforced their displays of power by wearing militaristic garb. Older students commonly made demeaning statements about the younger children's intellect. However, the reader should not get the wrong impression.

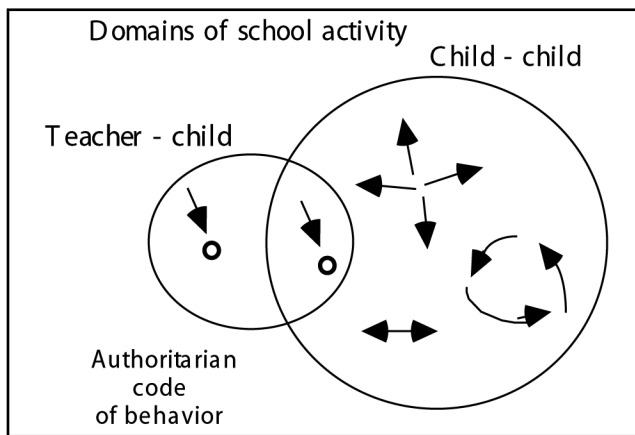


FIGURE 2. *Revised scheme of interaction in the school*

This exercise of remarkably strict control by older over younger students was strict but not mean-spirited. Only on a few occasions did we see any physical force or malicious intent. (We also occasionally saw teachers act this way.) In general, the goal of the authoritarian approach was to supervise the younger children and to keep them from harm. The older students felt duty-bound to keep order, and the younger students usually accepted the situation.

The teachers' strategy of delegating authority to older students successfully extended the adult sense of order into the private time and places of the youth. There were striking similarities between teacher-dominated and peer-dominated activities. The assumption involving separate adult-child worlds was shattered. My observations made apparent the error of two initial assumptions: (a) that the children were learning little from their teachers and (b) that informal interactions among peers would be devoid of influence from the school climate. This early discovery in the field compelled a rethinking of my assumed model of human relations within the school. The data confirmed Gerald Grant's statement in *The World We Created at Hamilton High* (1988, 7): "Every school can be seen as a network of authority relations shaped by cultural influences, an external policy matrix, family and social-class factors, and the moral and intellectual authority of faculty and staff." Figure 2 shows a revised illustration that more accurately portrays the patterns of communication in the school.

Even though the school segregated the deaf children from normal social experience, it transmitted society's norms to its borders through its

climate, discipline, and the students themselves. The deaf children not only were learning adult norms—a skillful feat given the circumstances—but also had become proxy socializing agents. Older youth were integrally involved as actors in the transmission of norms to younger students. The surprise here was that deaf children learned anything at all from the hearing adults. Jules Henry (1976b) wrote about the strong, innate propensity of human beings to learn many things at once (polyphasic learning). The extent of learning through vision alone may be a useful lesson about how socialization occurs and the relative role of the sensory channels.

When this extension of imposed authority was discovered, it showed that the formal-informal distinction was useless for predicting the nature of the social interaction. Although the daily routine was divided cleanly into school-hours and after-hours periods, the nature of interaction could not be predicted based on the time, site, or actors present (adults with children, children with children). This realization verified the original impetus to do first-hand, extended observation.

The implications for the field work were clear. Because the goal was to understand all acts of teaching and learning among children, the scope of the data collection was widened to encompass authoritarian activities, including some focused study of teacher-children relations. The research questions were applied to both the authoritarian and the voluntary free-time activities created by the youth. The dualistic construction of student life became a subject of inquiry, in particular, how the demands of authority coexisted alongside the indomitable urge for social creativity.

A dialectic of imposed authority and creative expression shaped the educational experience of the students. The norms of authority and free-time activities constitute a complex set of rights and responsibilities about daily life in the school. Becoming familiar with this body of normative knowledge was a student's first major learning task. Perhaps closed institutions are intrinsically more complicated than ordinary childrearing settings because so little separates the sets of actors, times, and spaces, which, thus, attenuates the clues about expected roles. Boarding students must master a repertoire of skills to cope in their environment. These deaf children are able to move between the official activities and their own informal diversions with alacrity. The complexity of this learning needs to be appreciated.

After-Hours Activities

At the end of the official school day, the teachers relinquish their claim on the students without hesitation. These bureaucrats' sense of obligation does not extend outside civil service hours (8:00 A.M. to 3:00 P.M., Monday to Friday). Oversight responsibility for the pupils during off-hours falls to rotating duty teachers and unmarried teachers who live in the dorms. Practically, children and adults have very little to do with one another after-hours. In the dorm—the children's "home"—the older youth are the homemakers with near-total responsibility for child rearing and upkeep. The following description of a typical evening provides an introduction to a child's activities outside the classroom. The goal is to highlight the dialectic of authoritarian and creative activities carried out by the students themselves.

Released from the classroom at 3:00 P.M., the pupils re-join their friends. The path back to the dormitories takes them past the sweet shop, which is run for profit by the teachers' cooperative. Many youngsters stop to buy a cool drink—their final transaction with adults until morning. A duty teacher may occasionally pop in, but the night belongs to the children. Dress style is a clear sign of the shift in foci of control between teacher and student. The discreet uniform of the school day has been stowed away in favor of comfortable clothing that expresses their personal preferences. Poverty has put many youngsters in faded and ill-fitting secondhand clothing. But no one cares about the younger children's dress, least of all themselves. They are free to ramble and run as they please.

For senior students, the free time is a chance to display their looks and tastes to their peers. Most girls older than the age of ten make extra efforts in their appearance, wearing crisply ironed blouses and putting bows in their hair. Lads cherish sporty T-shirts, although capable sneakers are their real (and rare) treasure because those shoes enhance their ball playing. The norms of the institution and current Thai fashion are influential; the dress tends to be largely conservative and discreet, with a dash of flair and color. Fragrance of body is highly valued by older youth.

The end of the day brings to the older pupils a flurry of heavy chores such as hauling supplies, tending gardens, or scrubbing clothes. At half past four, the grip of authority begins to tighten again as suppertime nears. Older pupils nonchalantly drift in to the living areas, only mildly interested in the proceedings, unless they are obligated to organize them.



A code of silence is enforced by older students on the walk to supper.

Their deputies, fifth to seventh graders, handle the mundane supervisory chores. In turn, the deputies use younger runners to call residents back to the dorms. Minute by minute, the screws tighten until lines form by the seven dorms. They arrange themselves by shortest to tallest individual. The newcomers are pulled into place. Enforced imitation of others is the dominant form of peer instruction.

During the march to supper along the dusty lane leading from the dorms, the lineup loses its rigid shape but still reflects the hierarchy. The younger children must walk packed together with their arms crossed to prevent talking. The older pupils meander behind at their own pace. At the canteen, there are more drills, especially among the girls, whose leaders value their dorms' public image. Every mealtime features a similar routine as well as mutual cooperation of seniors and teachers in impressing discipline. To get their food, the children must perform satisfactorily for their elders. The cool of the evening beckons the children to rush through supper and onto the playing fields.

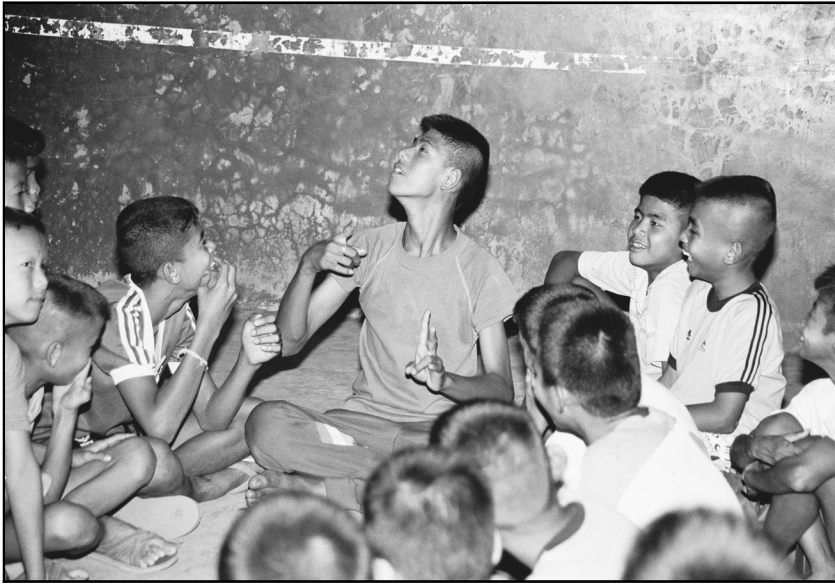
Until dusk, the boys and girls of all ages are free to associate as they wish. Signing deaf children are physically and communicatively unhindered in sports and games. On the left of the playground is a group of five girls demonstrating their hopscotch technique for the benefit of a

few smaller girls. This scene is unusual because most gaming events are open only to students with equal knowledge of rules and approximate skills. Nearby, the boys have formed three soccer games by skill level. The big boys have the big field and the best ball. The junior players are smashing around in a crammed sand pitch. Although these boys hope to move up to the big field, only a rare talent will move ahead faster than the orderly succession of age groups. The small players and those with lesser skills kick a wobbly green ball around on the hard volleyball court. They learn by playing with novices and by watching the elders.

In the bleachers sits a cluster of older girls. They stop signing when approached and pause to look around to ensure that they are not being spied on. Girls vigorously defend the privacy of their intimate groups, even to the point of expelling members who violate the trust. It is difficult for outsiders to learn about these private groups. This study acknowledges the critical role of these friendships in childhood but does not deal directly with them.

Boys and girls are permitted to mingle. Forays by tiny boys into the girls' areas lead to wild chase, not dialogue. The matched skills of preadolescent boys and girls produce challenges and displays of bravado. Occasionally, a boy jumps hopscotch or a girl rolls her marbles in the boys' circle. Senior boys and girls sit and talk together, but always in groups. We were aware of rumors of sexual activity within and between the genders, which could occur during the laxity of adult supervision in the evenings. But the children assert their own sense of propriety with respect to one another, which is often quite conservative. A tug-of-war was nearly scuttled because of the taboo on touching the opposite gender. Because the students had no long rope, they had one team member grip the short length and the other members grip the waist of the person in front of them, like a human chain. Then they realized that girls and boys are not supposed to touch. They held an animated discussion and tried different ways. Finally, they got the idea of gripping teammates' clothing, and the tugging continued once more.

On a concrete slab against a backstop sits a storyteller named Winai, a lanky teenage boy, watched by a dozen youngsters. His cheeky satire about people in the institution has everyone in stitches. Like the other master storytellers, he has a handful of protégés and admirers whom he orders to attend performances. More than most storytelling, his are truly public gatherings and open to all. Boys and girls are welcome to come and go as they please, and they do. The composition of the audience of



Winai spared no one in his satire, including teachers and the researchers.

each storyteller is set according to one's ability to understand, one's gender, and one's social status. This practice is similar to others (which will be described later in the text) in which, by including and excluding individuals, the children open and close learning opportunities.

As the pupils squeeze out the final minutes of play in the light of dusk, the dorm leaders send their runners to call them to line up. The evening regimen has begun. The children go to the dormitory, their home away from home. The agenda of institution and the urge for a home life meet under the roof of the dorm. Bathing is followed by a morals lesson and a free-chat period before lights-out. In the absence of participating adults, older pupils are charged with the care of younger pupils and oversee the lineup, the clean-up of the dorm, a disciplinary lecture, a prayer, and the awakening at dawn the next day.

Negotiating the Boundaries

An illustrative example of how the students apply norms to different situations is seen in their approach to school boundaries. The youth not only grasp the difference between the official Ministry rules and the tacit, more lax agreements with teachers but also create and enforce their own

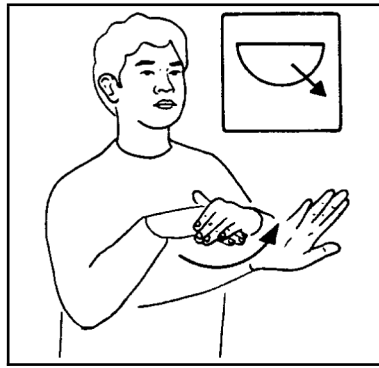


FIGURE 3. *The Thai sign for “sneak out” or “slip out”*

laws. Their variable application of these norms to individual students serves as an introduction to the later discussion on social status. Many older pupils wish to partake in the life of the town. They hanker for new sights, smells, and tastes, as found in the bustling farmers market. Because the staff members do not arrange town excursions, the pupils resort to their own devices. The Thai schools for the deaf have a tradition of porous boundaries. The gates are rarely barred; the walls have gaps. Leaving the school without permission is referred to by the children as “escape.” An “escape” includes a quick run to the corner shop for sweets, a late-night trip to the cinema in town, and running away from school. The children use the sign depicted in figure 3 for this concept.

Only those adventures that endanger life or limb of the venturesome child are unanimously opposed by adults. Most educators are tolerant of daytime jaunts into town by children whom they deem to be sensible. Through the teachers’ differential treatments, they acknowledge that their charges are individuals who have varying levels of capability and judgment. They also demonstrate their own flexible interpretation of central Ministry regulations. This informal policy, interpreted and enforced also by senior students, is the operative “border law.” At its root is a Thai belief system about the hierarchy of age and gender in terms of personal freedom.

In short, newcomers (“know-nothings”) and girls are much more confined and regulated than older boys. Total physical confinement is a basic condition of the newcomers. Even a five-minute sojourn earns those deemed “too-young” a stern reprimand and even a mild caning. Every responsible guardian, including older students, cooperates in their confinement and in

their intensive instruction about rules. For most students, the inevitable increase in age brings a gain in linguistic skill and normative awareness and, thereby, increased status and mobility. After a few years, the supervision is lightened. The “just-old-enoughs” may walk a few meters outside the gates and buy sweets, but may go no further.

Girls can never escape their subordinate position relative to boys. The divergence in treatment and standards of behavior between boys and girls becomes evident once youth have moved out of the newcomer status. In Thailand, while all girls are felt to be vulnerable, speechless girls are assumed also to be prime sexual victims. Thai adult deaf women report many assaults to their confidants.¹ Deaf girls are warned endlessly from an early age to stay inside the school and to beware of inappropriate advances by a male. The concept of vigilance to thwart a faceless menace is taught unceasingly in many forums. Most pertinent to this study is the self-instruction among girls. As will be detailed later, every girl grows up seeing normative messages repeated nightly during long-winded lectures by elder girls. Girls are exhorted to conform to conservative standards of dress and behavior. They are encouraged to report on one another’s escapes and indiscretions (and they do so more than boys). Only very senior and reliable groups of girls are permitted rare departures from the grounds in daytime.

Boys become “qualified” to leave school at a younger age than do girls. Boys are kept on a looser leash because the general agreement is that they cannot be restrained anyway, especially once they get wanderlust. Their violations are treated less severely, with a “boys-will-be-boys” attitude. A proof of individual daring among the boys is to sneak out at night. The river is spanned at this point by only a narrow suspension bridge. Teachers, who live on the grounds, frequently zip back and forth to town, crossing the bridge on their motorbikes. The youths’ talk of meeting a teacher on the bridge echoes like tales of the headless horseman and Ichabod Crane.

Traversing the bridge over the River Ping is an act of passage from junior to senior status among boys. Success separates the big boys from the little boys. The counterpart to bridge-crossings among the girls is sneaking out at night to stay with girlfriends in a nearby dorm. These escapades are equally noteworthy within each gender group. Owen Wrigley noted that the stories that the youth tell about their escapes are themselves a vehicle of instruction. Like mythical tales, they can help youngsters grasp the idea of the expanse and bounds of their universe

and their position in it. They are differentiated as individuals by their failure or victory to cross the bridge.² Both the effort and the social recreation of the adventure by recounting it to peers are educational. The children are creating their own set of meanings to deal with their conditions, and they teach these to others.

Senior pupils go on jaunts to town, with and without permission. Apparently, the child who has learned the unwritten rules, especially about avoiding incidents that cause trouble for teachers, earns the freedom to leave the school. The relaxation of rules is concurrent with a pupil's assuming supervisory authority on behalf of teachers. The reward is a limited right to re-join the community outside the walls. Because seniors run the dorms, they interpret and modify rights of escape as they see fit and decide whether and how to mete out punishment for violations. The usual form among girls is criticism in public gatherings. Girls are taught to care deeply about how they are judged by their fellows and teachers. Head boys usually overlook escapes, unless they are enacted by the youngest members. Like the girls, the head boys conduct discipline according to the expectations held for their gender. They are very strict about matters that concern their own quality of life, such as the cleanliness of the bath house.

Sometimes, they exert control over school boundaries as a way to demonstrate their power. In an after-hours meeting of Boys 4 dorm, those youth who had left the school without permission were called to the front of the bunkroom.³ More than half of the fifty residents eventually voluntarily stepped forward or were identified by others. Their "crimes" were denounced with great flair by the dorm head, a ninth-grade boy. He paused melodramatically to ponder punishment. Without explanation he paired each offender with another about the same size. Pair by pair were handed a stick and told to administer beatings to each other. The scene was handled in a whimsical way, like a game whose rules were being invented as it went along. The first boy whipped his partner on the buttocks and then they reversed positions. The number of strokes was determined whimsically on a case-by-case basis by the dorm head. This ritual of mock-punishment embodies the spirit of "boundary law" as a matter of status enforcement.

Running away from school is an inexcusable form of escape to teachers and peer supervisors. The older students and deaf aides punish runaways, partly because they themselves are held accountable. The public chastisement of a runaway was videotaped at Dok Khoon.⁴ In the videotape,

Mrs. T, a deaf aide, stands in the playground and holds the preadolescent boy by the arm. She pushes children away to give our video camera a clear view. Mrs. T exclaims, "You know, you must stay inside. We love you. Stop running away. Enough already." In a melodramatic aside to me, Mrs. T laments: "This boy always runs away. Makes me regretful." Older boys stand around like a choir of vigilantes, echoing her rebukes. Again she demands of the boy, "Do you know? Stop running away. Stay in." He looks down sheepishly. She shakes him gently. To the camera, Mrs. T says: "Sheesh. He's run away six times!" She pushes the boy away with a defeated look. An older boy holds up fingers and ticks off the names of runaways. Mrs. T recites her own list of escapees, which includes different people. This vignette suggests differing definitions of a serious escape—and hints that perhaps even a deaf adult does not learn of some incidents.

Most deaf students at Bua accept their captivity in school without protest. Only those who are closest to life outside (i.e., the new pupils and the near-graduates) express anxiety about being inside. The newcomer feels wrenched from the arms of mother and tossed into a cruel and unfathomable place. Some newcomers cry day and night, but mother does not return. Youth who themselves entered only a few years ago often are extremely kind and soothing to the newcomer, who can be communicated with only through pantomime. When the tears have eventually dried, the soothing manner becomes commanding; the slightly older pupils take charge for monitoring the newcomers. Ten years later, the school is home and familiar, and the now senior students face a return to family and society. How much colder the family hearth looks now, where few can communicate with them. These students may sense that their best years of human fraternity are behind them. Many migrate to the big cities and form deaf cliques. Meanwhile, for the majority of pupils, the school is the center of life. The labor is lighter and the food more abundant than in some homes. They have others with whom to speak. "I'm lonely among hearing people" is a commonly expressed feeling. Many hasten back to the school after holiday because "there is no one to talk to at home."

This sense of the institution as the proper place to be stands in sharp contrast to the feelings of children who are institutionalized because of their ethnicity. Mydu Indian children in Northern California took great risks to escape from the boarding schools (Dobkins 1994). In Oklahoma, Native American children displayed a variety of reactions toward the

Chilocco boarding school, including escape but also forbearance and even appreciation of the place (Lomawaima 1994). William Stokoe wrote in a set of papers on the boarding school experience:

[A] major difference was most salient. In an alien culture, that of the school, the Native American children wanted to leave (for life on the reservation, restricted as that was) so desperately that they would risk their lives. But . . . for Deaf children—at least in those that allow scope for children to interact in their own sign language—the children were and are reluctant to leave when their school years are over, and even to leave their companions during vacation periods and visit home where no one uses their language. (1995, 86)

The deaf students have accepted being inside as a normal and moral situation. Minor escapades are a rite of status, but a real escape is not normal. The few youth who run away are considered by their fellows to be maladjusted. To run away is to turn away from camaraderie and shared understanding with others. Most students at Bua School find this course of action an undesirable one, which accounts for the rarity of runaway escapes. Nevertheless, some deaf children wish to be elsewhere than locked away in the school.

A SOCIAL HIERARCHY OF THE MIND

At Bua School, a child's intellectual and linguistic condition is a key to his or her status in the student body and, thus, to his or her opportunity to engage in its interactions. Social status is a complex concept used by the children to structure their everyday relations with one another. Status determines which activities the child will be privileged to join and what the nature of their participation (role) will be. At its root are the children's ongoing assessments about individuals' intellectual condition and linguistic skills. Age, gender, and personality also influence status assignments.

This study is not a full explication of the students' social organization. The focus here is on the intersection of an individual's cognitive skills (including language) and social status. This study is an attempt to suggest a theoretical perspective on the case of Bua School using available data, my prior experience and that of my assistant, as well as interviews with deaf people. The process of intellectual and social growth by specific children was not directly studied. Still, a typical "learning pathway" is

TABLE 6. *Major Social Groups of Deaf Thai Children*

Status Level	Years in School	Grade Level	Physical Age (in years)
Seniors	8-10	7-9	15-19
Regulars	4-7	3-6	9-14
Newcomers	1-3	1-2	7-11

suggested, including how children are treated educationally at each status level. Particular attention has been given to the cognitive breakthroughs on which promotion to the higher status level depends.

Pupils at Bua School have created a three-tier social organization, which is illustrated in table 6. Every pupil is ranked in the hierarchy as a newcomer, a regular, or a senior. The school's delegation of authority to older youth bolsters the relationship between age and social status. Higher age brings greater rights and responsibilities to older students. Younger students are disadvantaged by their nascent learning of language, smaller body size, and lack of experience in the school regimen. In general, the greater the gap in social status, the rarer and more authoritarian are face-to-face encounters between the oldest and the youngest children. Seniors talk to newcomers only when they must, and they often chase youngsters away from their conversational circles. During dorm meetings, the heads tend to step in only after deputies have reduced the lively mass to a docile, subdued lineup. These type of "distant" encounters tend to involve didactic and restricted language.

When interactions do occur between members of different social groups, they tend to be between adjacent levels, that is, seniors with regular students and regulars with newcomers. In authoritarian settings, seniors and deputies confer about disciplinary strategies. The deputies will then order about the youngest group during a task. Also in keeping with this pattern, most storytellers are just a few years older than their audience.

The social organization serves a useful role in promoting rich interactions among children *within* each status level. Children are "kept in their place," and their associations are turned inwards to their peers. From the perspective of the youth's social organization, each status level is a class of children who share common intellectual and physical characteristics. However, by looking at the individuals within each level, their diversity in intellectual, linguistic, and experiential domains becomes evident. Each level contains children with a range of ages; thus, elaborate and

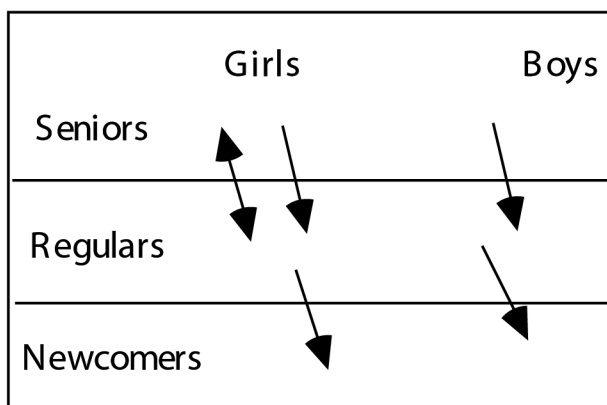


FIGURE 4. *While the children were free to associate with each other, they usually interacted with those about their age.*

two-way interactions are often carried on between children who vary in age but who have only moderately different experience and skills. This intra-group diversity is a key advantage; it seems to provide teaching and learning opportunities that help children acquire the skills needed to move to a higher status level.

The pattern of limited interaction between children at different status levels was well-illustrated during a Scouts exhibition. The older boys built working models of field apparatus such as water wheels and pulleys, which they displayed on tables under the trees. This fixed location allowed placement of an unmanned videotape camera to capture the comments of the curious student body. The public display drew children of all ages. Little interaction occurred between children of different age groups. Clusters of children wandered up to an exhibit of model stick buildings. Usually, only one age group surrounded a display at a time. When there was a mixed group, members of one group seldom talked to members of the other. Rare cross-age interaction was often one-way, from older to younger child. Only the girls engaged in dialogue between different ages, and that interaction occurred between regulars and seniors (see figure 4).

The downward direction of communication mirrors the patterns of interaction seen between older and younger Thai people in formal settings. Younger people are expected to be silent unless asked to respond.

There seem to be clear markers of passage between status levels for all children. These markers can be seen as thresholds of skill in language and intellectual areas that the children judge to be important. Thus,

each of the three status levels, newcomer, regular, and senior, has a corresponding intellectual state of its individual members. The terms that the children themselves use are “know-nothing,” “becoming mindful” and “to be smart.” They place those who have mental limitations in a fourth category that they call “numbskulls.” The following brief discussion of these states of mind, or, rather, transitions of mind, will demonstrate the intellectual basis of status distinctions among the students and how these distinctions fundamentally shape their learning experience.

“Know-Nothing”

Older pupils refer to new pupils as “know-nothings,” literally, “mind know-not.” The sign, made on the head, refers to both these students’ linguistic and cognitive development (see figure 5). A know-nothing, in the eyes of the older students, is someone who has little or no language, lacks reasoning skills, and is ignorant of school procedures. All deaf children now enrolled in the Thai schools that have been studied have hearing parents and have been isolated from sign language.⁵ A few have slight ability in the spoken language, which fellow students disregard because it has no function in their informal life.⁶ A small minority of newcomers are surprisingly communicative, alert, and curious. Yet many seem dazed, hapless, and younger than their age, perhaps because of the stultifying effects of poverty in which many are raised. Despite this diversity, all newcomers are treated together as a class that is utterly ignorant and dependent.

Youth who had recently entered the “regular” status validated the notion of a discernible pre-linguistic period. While asking the question How old were you when you entered school?, I was unable to make the question comprehensible for a group of fourth graders. A boy named Prem conducted the query on my behalf by asking, “Back when you knew nothing, when you first came to school, how old were you?”⁷ Four of his peers, also new regulars, were then able to answer the question without much hesitation.

Older pupils understand that the newcomers are in a period of adaptation—to the lifestyle of the institution, to being away from home, and to the sign language. Having passed through this stage themselves, the older students know that it takes time before the adjustment is complete. This expectation of upward growth is an implicit recognition that it is the conditions of home life that are the cause of this know-nothing condition.

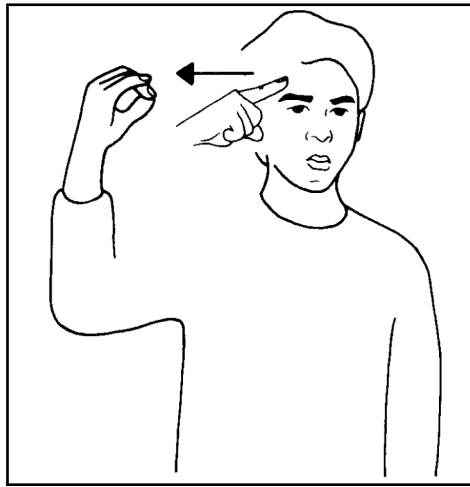


FIGURE 5. *The Thai sign for “know-nothing”*

Older deaf youth have their own ideas about how to raise understanding in young deaf children, and their “theories” of education are seen in how they treat the younger children during free-time periods.

The first public act by older students toward the newcomer is to give him or her a personal name in the sign language. Shortly after school opened, two newcomers were observed signing their new names to each other. Their names had been based on their physical attributes: one was tagged as “bad-eye” and the other as “hair-parted.” They seemed proud of their new names, which they repeated again and again. Naming marks the beginning of individual identity within the student body. In fact, more differentiation of each individual occurs through the creation of a name-sign than through the spoken names. Among the four hundred students, several had the spoken name Maliwan or Prasit. Even though each child’s name is stitched on his or her uniform pocket, this information is used only by adults. The older students ensure that each child has a unique name-sign, which fosters student community. The assignment of a name-sign is an important ritual because it signals the entry of a new member.

Despite this ritual to acknowledge the individual, newcomers were treated like objects and made to “act in undifferentiated unison” (one of Henry’s [1976b] categories). From the first day, they are integrated into the regimen of drills and duties, being prodded and pointed into place. Emphasis was placed on the protocols of lining up, eating, and hygiene. Newcomers were didactically taught what they needed to know within

concrete settings—and no more. This approach may be a rough attempt to provide a “scaffold” for learning, which would be in line with cognitive theory by Vygotsky (Berk 1994). The lessons were repeated endlessly in simple language. Pupils just a few years older handled training, still being watched over by senior pupils. Living side by side with more experienced children, the newcomers learned concept and language by watching and by participating.

Peers and teachers assertively shape the range of possible experience of the young children and of all the girls. Within the Thai culture, the classification of youth as dependent reduces their opportunities for dialogic interaction. Ironically, those who have the most to learn are those for whom communication is most restricted. The treatment seemed overly restrictive, yet the repetitive activities with matching vocabulary quickly produced a new responsiveness to communication in most of the children. Clignet has written, “assimilation also enhances familiarity effects and accordingly accelerates the appropriate extraction of the critical visual or verbal features of the task” (Clignet 1981, 338). The new students first recognize their names and the signs referring to regular activities such as bathing, eating, and lining up. For the first time, the child was understanding language and, possibly, using it. This breakthrough derived from simple participation in highly structured activities and from unvarying accessible language usage.

The youngest children managed to find a little fun in the most arbitrary and restrictive strictures. This “grin-and-bear-it” philosophy was evident throughout the rural school’s populace. Boys grinned ear to ear while doing push-ups, as if grateful for attention of any kind. One little tyrant had a series of “water tortures” that he put young boys through at bath time. They bore his brutality with stoic courage. The facial expressions of a few boys seemed to show a feeling of appreciation for being there. Perhaps it is a feeling of satisfaction at being treated like everyone else. Deaf children are often treated differently from their siblings at home: being either over-protected or neglected. The strong bonds among members of each cohort in the deaf school may derive from this mutual, intense experience.

Although older pupils anticipate steady language gains by newcomers, they are not willing role models of elaborate language and two-way dialogue. During free time, older pupils ignore newcomers and, thus, give them time to learn at their own pace. They exclude newcomers from participation in older children’s activities. Consequently, the know-



Excluded from the affairs of older students, new students entertain themselves.

nothings form a group among themselves that is based on shared exclusion and common treatment. The newcomers watch a lot, say little, and wander freely, trying to make contact with other people.

Unexpectedly, this shared exclusion results in a communicative environment that supports learning at their level. The class of know-nothings includes both newcomers and students who have been around as long as three years. Newcomers thus are compelled to associate closely with other children who are a year or two ahead of them in terms of sign language acquisition. These comrades are capable of providing language and knowledge within the newcomers' "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky 1978). The slight variance in age seems to produce motivated, mutual accommodation between "teacher" and learner. Thus, the intellectual banishment that these know-nothings share engenders mutual teaching and learning among them.

During the rare instances when older pupils act as mentors for younger children, the older pupils seem to adopt a specific manner of communication. The videotape of the Scouts exhibition contains an excellent example of mentoring:

"Older Boy" is in second grade. "New Boy" is a newcomer. The two boys tour the exhibit together; Older Boy always has his arm around

New Boy or a grip on his wrist. Older Boy points out things and makes comments. He uses simple signs in short phrases. He does not expect an answer; New Boy never says anything. It seems to be a gentle relationship. The two boys come up beside a boy named Prem (fourth grade) and crouch down to examine the models. Older Boy speaks to Prem using much more rapid signing than when he signs to New Boy. Older Boy signs to New Boy, "Look there. Very thoughtful. Very clever, really, really." He escorts New Boy away. Older Boy and New Boy arrive at a table with a model of a watchtower. Older Boy demonstrates how men climb to the top by making the sign for "climbing" on the miniature ladder. Suddenly New Boy slips away from Old Boy to move beside an older youth who immediately threatens New Boy with a raised arm, "Go away! You're disturbing me." New Boy returns to the side of cordial Older Boy. Observer Comment: Older Boy makes statements and demonstrations that require no reply from New Boy.

The precise effect of guided assistance in sign language development was not studied here, but the research assistant and other deaf adults presumed that it led to precocity in favored youngsters. This type of mentorship in the creative and participatory mode is nowhere more evident than in the authoritarian settings. In supervision, senior youth use the processes of teaching-learning among younger students to their advantage. Older pupils communicate with newcomers by means of slightly more advanced children (i.e., first and second graders), perhaps communicating, "It's time to eat, go round them up." Similarly, older pupils direct the questions they might have about a newcomer to a slightly older pupil. A dorm supervisor held a newcomer by the shoulder and asked a nearby, slightly older child, "Where are her socks?" The nearby child retorted, "She threw them away!" Their deputies, usually in fifth and sixth grade, are capable and motivated to make the necessary conceptual and communicative "translations" between more- and less-advanced language levels.

Becoming "Mindful"

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

Within three years, most pupils have moved out of the newcomer status into a "regular" status. Individuals have made a series of internal

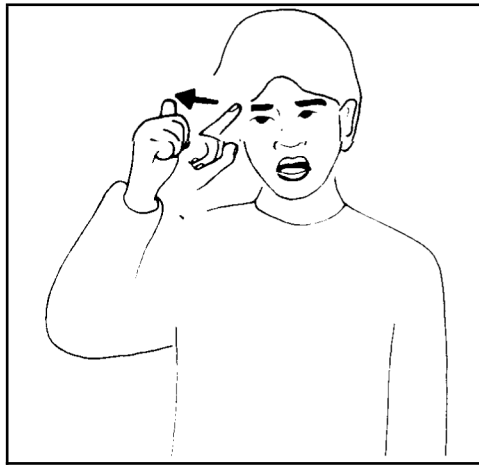


FIGURE 6. *The Thai sign for “mindful”*

gains in language skills and cognitive awareness before they receive recognition by elders. Exposed chiefly to restricted codes of language (Bernstein 1964), the newcomers gradually developed abstract and extended forms of language. In their own ways, the know-nothings acquire knowledge about the sign language, the norms of behavior, and the rules of games. An early display of language competence involves telling the name-signs of peers. Jesada, a nine-year-old boy, was shy and had a club foot, which left him ostracized. Still, he named two dozen fellows from photos. Unbeknownst to his fellows, he had learned basic knowledge for dorm life.

The graduation to a higher status level is not an achievement that is under the control of the individual but, instead, is a communal recognition of the individual’s intellectual and linguistic gains. Pupils who achieve this higher status level are then said to be “mindful” (see figure 6).

The sign for “mindful” is made slowly to indicate the process of learning. Alternatively, pupils make reference to this group’s functional signing ability, using a sign that literally means “able-to-sign.” The idea is that the child is now able to think and to converse. Asked to describe their intellectual history, Nipapon Reilly and two older students, Supoj and Supapon, each spoke of initially “knowing nothing,” then a slow learning period, the dawn of understanding, and finally feeling comfortable in conversations by fourth grade (a period encompassing five years or more after they enrolled). Supoj recalled “watching and remembering more and more until, ah-hah, the spark of understanding.” He made the

final sign with his head thrown back and his mouth open. Others used the sign that translates as “sign, knowledge got-better,” which is made with a slow motion to represent slow increase in skills. A boy named Patipol recalled his early years:

RESEARCHER: How long did it take you to “become mindful”?

PATIPOL: A few years, like second grade.

RESEARCHER: You mean that you didn’t understand the signs when you were in first grade?

PATIPOL: Yes, I didn’t know. I knew only speaking then. I didn’t know the teachers or anybody. I went home in tears.

RESEARCHER: Speaking?

PATIPOL: Yes, I had hearing which was cut off later, when water got into my ears.

RESEARCHER: And gradually you learned sign and by second grade you understood a little bit and gradually improved?

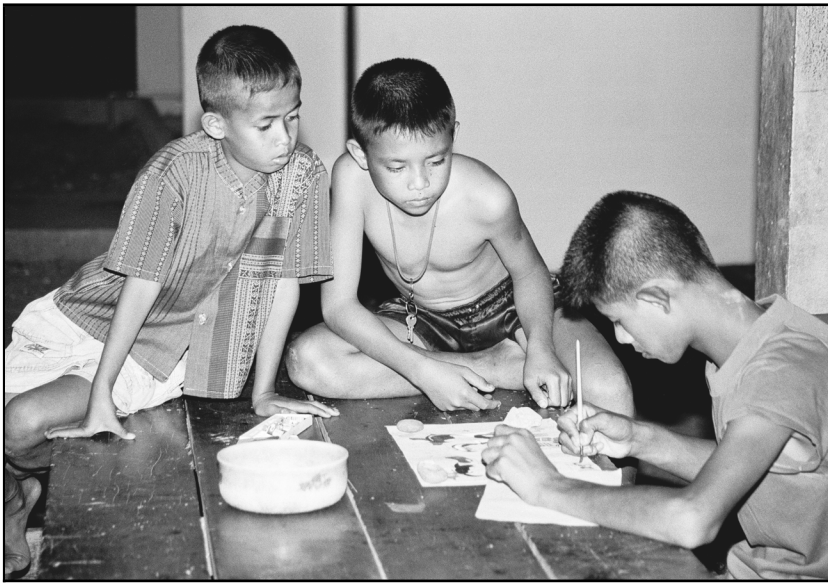
PATIPOL: Yes, that’s right, I tolerated it. The teacher taught me signs like “chicken” and “monkey.” In second grade I knew a little. I began to watch the older signers. In third grade I began to converse in signs. By fourth grade I could sign fluently. I was able to defend myself in sign.

RESEARCHER: Well, what did it mean to “become mindful”?

PATIPOL: I watched signs of older pupils in dialogue and took it in (“learn-through-the-eyes”) and signed privately among my intimate friends. Then I began to sign publicly.

The last sentence by Patipol states the basic strategies of child-child learning: the watching of older children and practicing with peers. Whether in games, stories, or drills, the younger students simply watch, without any accommodation made by the various presenters, who ignore the newcomers or chase them away. Occasionally, there are rare and cherished individuals who like to teach youngsters. Sometimes, they make subtle accommodations.

Once a child earns the “regular” status, he or she is given access to more activities. The children at this level most intensively engage in creative narrative, a type of interaction that is described later. They yearn to use their new fluency to receive connected, elaborate information, be it true or make-believe. They continue to be subject to the discipline of older youth. Because these regulars can understand instructions, they are the chief providers of labor and service to older pupils and teachers.



Winai allows the younger boys to learn through watching. This willingness to allow observation of one's technique is why there has been an unbroken chain of skilled Thai Deaf artists for over fifty years, even while art schools are inaccessible to them.

They assume the rights and responsibilities of membership in both the student social organization and the Thai official school culture. The regular group is quite diverse, comprising members within a swath of childhood from about the ages of ten to fourteen years old and including barely proficient signers to fluent, institutionally savvy pupils. The life of a regular student is complicated by its own internal hierarchy that involves not only age but also the strictures of and attractions to association with the opposite gender. The children carefully choose members of their storytelling events, conversational circles, and games. Supapon spoke of being denied access to the very best story circles until she had “reached the upper level.”

Additional distinctions that the children make among themselves are not explained here. These involve personality (assertiveness brings respect), gender (boys valued over girls), and physical prowess. For example, the boys place high value on the personality trait of self-assertion as a basis for moving beyond mere regular status to a position of respect. Patipol explained how he became “an equal” in the eyes of fellow youth.

RESEARCHER: Back when you were little did you get picked upon or intimidated by older pupils?

PATIPOL: Yes, I was picked upon until I could sign back. You must be able to reply. I watched movies and got some ideas. One time I said, "Go take the orange medicine." That was thought real funny, it spread all over the school. [Comment: Although I was unable to grasp the humor (though it likely directed an offending person to go take a substance that was deemed horrible by most students, the equivalent of "go jump off a cliff"), it is clear that P's gibe helped earn him a reputation as one who should not be a target of derision.]

RESEARCHER: How much bigger were the children who picked on you?

PATIPOL: There were some fifth graders. You have to be able to sign something to get them to step back and leave you alone. When you come back at them they think, "Hmm, leave him alone."

The child's access to enhanced social participation within the school is based on his or her achievement of a "mindful" state. A mindful state allows a child to begin to express his or her unique qualities and thereby gain status and respect.

Being "Smart"

At the pinnacle of the social hierarchy of the mind are those whom the students call "smart." Although the sign is made at the head (an index at the forehead rapidly changes to a thumbs-up handshape), the term is not entirely synonymous with intelligence. The common attributes of "smart" youth were the ability to grasp and express ideas well and the daring personality to do so in public. After Winai finished a satiric tale, some of his audience enthusiastically came up to him and made the "smart" sign right on his head. Patipol then bubbled on about how his smart friend could repair mechanical devices. In practical terms, the smart child is an outstanding member of a group.

The quality of being smart is in the eye of the beholder. That is, groups of boys and girls at the regular and senior status levels variously bestow the term on those with whom they associate. As their cohort ages, these students often retain their respected positions, even into adulthood. Some, but not all, smart students achieve notoriety not only within the larger gender or dorm group but also within the whole student body. Considerations of age and gender are often suspended when a child is identified as

smart. On numerous occasions, the older students pointed out precocious youngsters who had impressed them.

The youth value mental ability in many forms, using the sign SMART for the few youth who excel in academic skills.⁸ Given the choice, they will bestow authority on those who do well in the official realm of knowledge. At Kulaab and Dok Khoon Schools only academically successful youth won the student elections. Pornthip Wannuwinn of Dok Khoon recalled:

RESEARCHER: Would someone who ever flunked be a head?

PORNTHIP: Not that I know of. . . . They picked who they liked, who wasn't lazy. . . .

RESEARCHER: Suppose there was an older pupil who was an orderly person, who wasn't lazy, and who had a good heart. Would the children pick that person if they failed [academically] repeatedly?

PORNTHIP: No, they had to be smart.

Those who have played the academic game well are allowed to mediate between the school and the student body. When girls do well academically and have a tolerant personality, they can do well in student elections. In 1991, the students elected a girl as president against the wishes of teachers, who thought a boy would better maintain tough discipline. But the students favor intelligent and good-mannered official leaders, even if that preference contradicts adult gender expectations.

Outside the realm of academics and supervision, the children in the smart category are often at the center of public student gatherings. In these creative and participatory settings, they are alternatively described as "signs-well." These highly articulate "sign masters" function as storytellers, broadcasters, and interpreters. Sign masters are creators and sources of knowledge in an institutional life that has little stimulation. Whether explaining or fabricating, they are imaginative and rely on colorful language and verbal twists. Some sign masters are chiefly entertainers whereas others are broadcasters and interpreters of information. Above all, they are natural teachers who help make experience meaningful for their fellow students. They talk about happenings outside the institution and about the intrigues of life. Their interpretations of speech from the television screen help youngsters understand the actions of talking people. They create new signs that nurture the conceptual and vocabulary growth of the younger pupils.



This former student was a mentor for the current cohort of storytellers at Bua School. When she visited the older girls watched her technique intently.

The sign master is central to the intellectual development of deaf youth in Bua School. Other Thai deaf schools also show evidence of this role. The craft of sign mastery has been passed down over generations of deaf schoolchildren as an honored practice. And its contributions are remembered into adulthood. Kampol Suwanarat (personal communication, July 2003) recalled a sign master named Thongchai Sanitphan when in the first cohort of Thailand's deaf students in the 1950s:

KAMPOL: Thongchai would sit and we'd gather around and watch him. He could sign about anything. We had no meaning. Thongchai did. We had no way to sign anything. He did, for every concept, sign by sign. Sure, we could sign the regular things but Thongchai was extraordinary. Amazing. He showed us signs like we had never seen before. He opened my mind and threw things in. I have never forgotten what he did for me. I am sorry he moved away. My eyes miss him.

RESEARCHER: What do you mean?

KAMPOL: Out-of-sight, it's a real loss. When we graduated from Sethsatian School, the Principal, Kamala, sent him to school to teach. She had noticed that he was always surrounded by people

who always watched him. He could talk to everyone, old and young people. I can't do that! Thongchai would make his signing easier for young ones and encourage them to sign.

RESEARCHER: Is he taken care of now because he was a true teacher? (Thongchai has gone blind.)

KAMPOL: Yes, yes. I, too, go and visit him and take him around. We are grateful for him opening our minds and throwing many things in. It was only him. We can't talk to hearing people. There was only Thongchai.

Children who were deemed smart because of their sign mastery were rarely top students. Teachers often perceived these students as frivolous or immature. Winai was a skilled satirist and popular among children of all ages. Yet, he was uninspired by the drudgery of the classroom and mocked the inarticulate signing of his teachers. Consequently, they held him back for two years in the upper grades. Most pupils were held back for one or two years in their first years in school; this slow start was the norm. But those who failed an upper grade were singled out by teachers and peers.

So the boys in the graduating class teased Winai about being left behind. He did not mind at all because he was a respected creative leader who reveled in his ability to make people laugh. He fretted that the outside world held no opportunities for his talents. Winai told us that he did not look forward to leaving the school. He wondered where he could find another meaningful situation in which he could understand and be understood.

His peers, however, hankered to join the larger world. Their anxiety was centered on finding a job or further education. Jum echoed this sentiment, "By the time I was in secondary school, I was bored with school. My friends and I really wanted to broaden our horizons. We wanted to get out and see what was happening in different places." Nowhere was the difference between the fulfillment provided by student life in the residential school and the communicative void in the mainstream more starkly delineated than in the dilemma of the smart deaf child.

"Numbskull"

Mentally deficient youth are denied ascendancy to regular standing in the student body. The class of social outcasts include the mentally

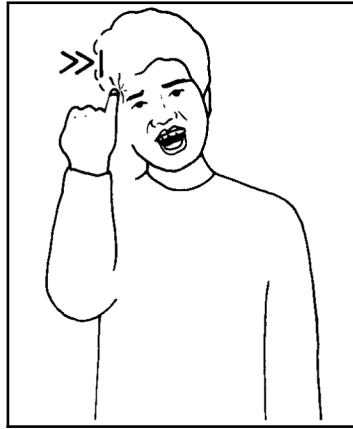


FIGURE 7. *To be ignorant, unlearned, unintelligent*

handicapped and those who never escape the retarding effects of years of communicative deprivation at home. To this group of children, the older students apply a sign that translates as “weak-headed” or “numbskull” (an alternative translation is “pea-brain”). Figure 7 shows this sign.

The older students had an astute ability to discern the difference between a child who was in transition and one who was not learning at a normal rate. Intellectual incompetence is treated like an age reduction, with a diminishment of respect. For example, when the top seventy-five children were away for ten days during the games, a third grader was chosen for leadership of Boys Dorm 4, although he was younger than many of his charges. Nipapon interviewed him (Boy D in the following excerpt). Pointing at an eighteen-year-old boy who was still in first grade, she asked whether he was a dorm head:

BOY D: He helps. He helps collect clothing. During free time, he watches, he’s good, he watches, and gathers people and things. [The boy on right says “helps.”]

NIPAPON: Why is he not a Head?

BOY D: He flunked Grade 1. He’s not yet out of Grade 1. He is a “know-nothing.” He’s a failure (thumb-down). [He grins for a long time.] Failure. [The boy on the right says that the Big Boy “can’t get ahead in school.” Boy D tells him to desist.] Let it go. Don’t be ambitious. To each his own. We don’t want to make him embar-

arrassed. Be careful. [Boy on right repeats that Big Boy has failed and hasn't improved.]

These slow youngsters are often harassed and ridiculed by their fellows, including both boys and girls. (Several brutal incidents evoked the scene from W. Golding's novel *Lord of the Flies* where the marooned boys smash the fat boy's glasses.) Their "victimization" is a key example of how the student hierarchy is built on assessments of cognitive capability. To the researcher's knowledge, all of the victimized youth had a mental, not physical, handicap. An albino boy at Dok Khoon School might also have been a target of antagonism, yet he was a youth supervisor and was respected for his mind. Two of the teenage boys were so small that they stood at the front of the line with the little boys, yet both were clever and could "talk-the-talk" of their age group. Although they were shoved about, they nonetheless were treated as near-equals. The students might have taken advantage of "different" youth such as those who are gay, physically handicapped, or deformed. Children with these characteristics were sometimes singled out but were spared the unceasing degradation reserved for the dimwitted child. The classification as a "numbskull" is a status assignment based on properties of the mind alone; age, size, gender, nor personality make a difference if the child is lacking mental acuity.

NOTES

1. This statement is based on information garnered during my long work experience in the National Association of the Deaf in Thailand and my marriage into a Thai family with three deaf daughters.
2. Interview with Owen Wrigley, November 1991, Tak, Thailand.
3. Observed on June 6, 1991.
4. Videotaped on January 1990. These encounters hint of the vigilantism described by Jules Henry (1976a, 170). He describes classrooms where teachers support children's intra-group criticism as exhibiting a "Witch Hunt Syndrome."
5. Since the schools opened in 1953, only one case is known of a deaf student who had deaf parents. In other countries, children from deaf families often learn sign language fluently at home and have a distinct advantage in communication and academic readiness over children from nonsigning families.
6. In a deaf school where most students commute daily across a big city, they may value speaking and hearing among peers more highly than at isolated

Bua. This observation is the researcher's impression from three years in an urban school for the deaf where students had regular contact with hearing people.

7. Interview with Grade 5 at Bua School, October 5, 1991.

8. "He's smart, really smart!" exclaimed a group of younger girls at Dok Khoon when they saw me using a sign language. They were too far away to judge the content, so their opinion may have reflected their recognition of someone who broke out of the "muteness" of most nonsigning visitors.