Applying the citizens’ dialogue process to educational strategic management of local administrations

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ABSTRACT

The objectives of this research paper were: 1) to assess the viability of applying citizens’ dialogue techniques for strategic management of education programs among local administration organizations; and 2) to identify the key factors for successful educational administration at the local level. As educational administration in Thailand is still largely centrally managed by the Ministry of Education, the research team looked for the experiences of seven other countries, namely Australia, England, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, and South Korea, as the basis for constructing several management scenarios. Scenario building was followed by group discussion. The study found that, through shared knowledge and common understanding among stakeholders with diverse views, citizen dialogue demonstrated its potential of being a viable tool for strategic management of education at the local level. However, before the technique can be utilized effectively, a rigorous program of staff development must be in place, along with a strategy for mobilizing community resources from various sectors.

Keywords: Citizens’ dialogue, Education strategy, Local administrations, Stages of implementation.

Statement of the problem

Strategic management is an important tool for local administrations to use in educational management, as it can help them to have a clear direction and to determine strategies in line with changes in the internal and external environments. It also helps to translate the strategy into action and to increase the effectiveness of local administration (Block, 1995). Once practiced, it can also be used as a tool for monitoring progress and evaluating the educational management of local administrations (Nedelea and Paun, 2009).
The key factor that will promote local administrations to utilize strategic management effectively is to first create for the stakeholders a shared vision arising from sharing common beliefs, the same values, clearly agreed objectives, and needs (Pielstick, 1996). This shared vision that fosters genuine commitment and enrollment, rather than compliance to share pictures of the future, will inspire them to carry out educational management as a team or partnership (Senge, 1990; Weisbord, 1987; Pielstick, 1996). Most importantly, a shared vision creates a common focus and leads to achieve the vision (Harris, 2011; Block, 1995; Senge, 1990) and the higher organizational performance (Leopolda et al, 2009) within local communities, through which their problems could be solved. It is also conducive to instilling confidence in, and commitment to, the organization (Senge, 1990; Wilkins, 1989) and enabling the stakeholders in all sectors to mobilize administration resources for joint educational management (Denton & Wisdom, 1898).

The external environment is changing dramatically in economic, social, and political spheres because of technological advances. Local adaptation alone is not enough to face these changes. In this regard, continuous learning is vitally important. Forward-looking, proactive work requires a vision in determining direction, which should not be determined by any single individual, but should derive from all sectors. If local administrations are not able to have all stakeholders in education to share a common vision or a goal, the people will work individually, without coordination, and this will eventually lead to conflict (Thomson et al., 2011), which will limit discussion of identifying problems and finding ways to solve them systematically (Smith & Maretzi, 2000). This, in turn, will affect the quality of educational management or the quality of public services that the people receive. In order to provide stakeholders with a shared vision, it is necessary that local administrations make a concerted effort and build an effective network, which is considered a critical element of effective leadership in organizational management (Roueche et al, 1989). The key is to monitor, evaluate, and participate in decision-making.

There are many ways to create a shared vision. At the minimum it is through one-way communication, such as the posting of notices or the preparation of exhibitions, newsletters, or even the print media, television and electronic media. When these means are used, the public does not have the opportunity to voice their opinions or make suggestions, and they may find that information as it appears in the news deviates from their requirements. The people will not feel any ownership of it (Wongthanavasu and Peerasit, 2006). To maximize
people participation in the building of shared vision, it is recommended that a public meeting and a public hearing should be convened.

**Public meetings**

This method is employed by local administrative organizations to present or announce information to the people, an example of which is a briefing by the local administrative organization staff. It is intended to explain such things as the organization’s role in implementing a project. This is considered two-way communication, which differs from the first method in that if the people do not understand the information that has been presented, they can ask questions. However, this method encourages a very basic stage of public participation, in that the people merely receive the information given by the local administration (Vatanasapt, 2003).

Another, better, way to help the people feel a sense of involvement in the project is for all of the involved sectors to work together as members of an advisory board of the local government. By participating in this implementation, the people have the opportunity to express their expectations and consider the solutions jointly, which will lead to continuity in the work. However, these methods may have limitations on the variety of groups that can join the working team, because those who are invited are apt to be the ones that are acceptable to most of the people. Those who are kept far from the center of development are often neglected, or are not invited to participate in local development (Vatanasapt, 2004).

The public hearing is another approach to creating a shared vision, but it will not be very effective if the people who are affected do not understand the issues sufficiently. Although the public hearing is a forum where people can come together to express their points of view, it is not an effective tool in building public participation, because it is often a forum by which people show support for the group they agree with. Those who favor the proposal will find evidence to explain why it is useful, while the opposing group will likewise gather facts supporting their opposition. The public hearing will thus eventually become a platform for each party to highlight its position. There is no mechanism allowing for all sectors to have a joint discussion, and so it will inevitably be a forum of debate (Vanchai, 2004). Sometimes a public forum or hearing is held to comply with certain regulations or laws, rather than to create a common understanding among the people. Moreover, a public hearing takes place only if the project is nearing completion, or after a decision has been
made by the central or local government executives. A public hearing cannot resolve differences in attitudes or ideas, and is likely to be inconsistent with the people’s problems and needs. It might even cause strong conflict, eventually leading to violence.

**Citizen dialogue**

There is another means mentioned, by Smith, J., and Maretzki (2000), that enables people from all sectors to have a shared vision, leading them to resolve problems together. Because it gives everyone the opportunity to discuss issues face-to-face, get to know each other, and learn from each other, it is called “citizens’ dialogue.” This method was developed in Canada to help build knowledge and understanding among stakeholders under the principles of equality and equity. It is also known as “deliberative democracy”, in that it brings together all sectors and leads to formulating a vision, commitment, and development strategy. It is considered an important element in strategic management. Citizens’ dialogue has proved to be successful in Canada in building the learning power of all sectors, leading to the creation of a common vision in determining the direction of development over the next ten years. However, whether or not local administrations will be able to use it in their educational management is uncertain, because its success depends entirely on the participation of all sectors. In order for all the sectors to take part in educational management, they must have a shared vision. Therefore the potential of applying this process to strategic management is an important issue, which will be discussed in this article.

**Stages of implementation**

The method of citizen dialogue, as presented in this paper, consists of three stages:

- **Stage one** is the synthesis of information to formulate a way for group members to learn the citizens’ dialogue process. At this stage the researcher synthesized knowledge regarding educational management in seven countries, namely Indonesia, England, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, Japan and Malaysia. This information was to be used in creating a visionary scheme for exchange and shared learning by those who participate in citizens’ dialogue.

- **Stage two** consisted of applying the visionary scheme derived from the first stage to the process of citizens’ dialogue in a group comprised of people from various sectors who came to exchange ideas and learn from one another. It was hoped that this process would lead to mutual understanding, interweave a common vision, and formulate strategies for
educational management, based on the cooperation of all sectors, with an emphasis on supporting each other in a partnership.

- Stage three consisted of assessment of the citizens’ dialogue process through observations, in-depth interviews, and relevant group processes, in order to answer the question, “Can this process be used to enhance learning and create mutual understanding among the citizens’ dialogue participants?” In the citizens’ dialogue process, about 30-40 people of the target group participated; they came from the following sectors: 1) executives of the three types of local administrations, i.e. provincial administrative organizations, municipalities, and sub-district administrative organizations; 2) school executives and representatives from the offices of education in the area; 3) teachers from the schools of all levels affiliated with the local administrations and the Ministry of Education; 4) representatives of the students’ guardians (such as parents) from each occupation; 5) students of both primary and secondary levels; 6) monks; 7) representatives of the mass media, merchants, and businessmen; and 8) the school administration committees. They were further divided into four subgroups, each of which had ten people. The main group included two group process experts and two facilitators.

The citizens’ dialogue protocol

The citizens’ dialogue process opened with a welcoming speech from the meeting chairperson and advisor to this research project, who presented the history and objectives of organizing the event at this time. Then the audience had the opportunity to introduce themselves and meet each other, as well as to state their expectations. Next, the chairperson explained the rules of citizens’ dialogue and the importance of using key learning skills that emphasize the technique of attentive listening. Without using attentive listening, individuals would have a difficult time understanding each other and reaching an agreement.

The chairperson then asked the researchers to present the academic data, which was an alternative (visionary scheme) synthesized from three research works of the Office of the National Council Members (2004), including a presentation of the executive summary of educational management of the seven countries mentioned above. It described the strengths and weaknesses of the three visionary schemes for the participants, so that they could exchange ideas and learn from each other. After that, the meeting was divided into subgroups, in which the members had to determine each person’s role. These roles included a chairperson, who would conduct a panel discussion urging all members to express their opinions for the sake of exchange and learning, and
set a time limit for each person to speak (sometimes the chairperson summarizing the issue), as well as a panel secretary, whose role was to record comments made by the members or summarized by the chairperson or the panel speaker who would present the group’s work. In each panel there were two facilitators. The subgroup members sat in a semicircle, so that everyone could see each other and speak face-to-face on an equal basis.

After each subgroup determined the roles of its members, they discussed “the characteristics of the dream school wanted by the people,” using citizens’ dialogue to find a consensus. The chairperson urged all of the members to speak out and voice their opinions. Everyone had a chance to present his/her idea to the group within the time limit agreed upon earlier. One of the facilitators kept urging all the group members to express their opinions, while the other took notes of each issue, presented on a white flip-chart with a big magic marker so that it was clearly visible. Some subgroups summarized the issue by drawing a “mind map” on the flip chart. This panel process took about an hour to an hour and a half.

Upon completion of the panel meeting it was time for the large group session, where the representative of each subgroup presented its consensus. While presenting it, the project’s principal researcher and associate researcher helped summarize the issues presented by each subgroup, on a computer-monitored VDO projector. This allowed the participants to see it and check its accuracy and to see the contents presented by the subgroups. Additional material could be added to make the contents more complete.

In summarizing the issue in this main group, the discussion leader helped to consider similar or analogous issues, before writing an executive summary. This meant that the discussion leader had to understand the issues determined by the citizens’ dialogue. In case a subgroup presented a different opinion, before the discussion leader held the meeting for the final summary, all members of the large session were given the opportunity to consult or express suggestions or opinions in order to have true consensus within the group. The issue agreed upon was summarized and put on one side of the mind map, and the contending issue on the other side, without the discussion leaders’ personal opinion or bias regarding the groups’ opinions.

Once the summary and consensus of the large group were obtained, all of the participants returned to their original subgroup to engage in citizens’ dialogue on the issue, “How would a dream school be run to achieve characteristics determined earlier, and who or what agency should run it, and where would the budget come from?”
Once the consensus of the subgroups was obtained, the chairperson asked each one to present the consensus to the large group once again. The conduct of this session was the same as the large meeting in the morning session, that is, while the representatives of each subgroup were presenting, the discussion leader and his assistant summarized the issues and allowed them to make suggestions or express additional opinions. In this way the summary would be complete and consistent with the essential ideas presented by each subgroup. When everyone agreed, it was regarded as the panel’s consensus. After this process was completed, the chairperson let everyone voice their opinions and feelings regarding the citizens’ dialogue process, such as satisfaction or dissatisfaction with this method, and ideas or experiences received from participating in the process. There were also interviews with the participants, principal researchers, associate researchers, and facilitators, to assess the potential of applying citizen’s dialogue in educational strategic management of local administrations.

**Assessing the potential of applying the citizens’ dialogue**

The assessment of the potential of applying the citizens’ dialogue method covers the following four aspects: 1) academic, 2) administrative, 3) social, and 4) economic.

**Academic potential**

In this study, the method was tested by the researchers to build common knowledge and understanding in educational management. It is an essential tool for local administrations to take action on, according to the rule of law. The process of creating knowledge and understanding of these stakeholders was based on the principle that knowledge of local development is derived from a combination of explicit knowledge and tacit knowledge. These two kinds of knowledge are considered important inputs for strategic development in local development, which is based on knowledge and wisdom in those areas. At the same time, it is consistent with the changes brought by globalization. Therefore the study of citizens’ dialogue began with a review of public education strategies in various countries, where this kind of research has been carried out in order to synthesize the research results as a visionary scheme for sharing and learning by all stakeholders. It is aimed at building a database of knowledge for common sharing and learning, which will lead to a consensus of diverse sectors in cooperation with local governments regarding educational management.

In addition to reviewing the literature, theories, and educational management of different countries to create a visionary scheme, interviews were conducted with the
executives of local organizations who participated in three forms of citizens’ dialogue, asking them if local governments can do it alone. Their answers indicate that they cannot act on this alone, because most personnel have expertise and experience in professions such as policy analysts, financial officers, or material supply officers, rather than as scholars or researchers. Consequently, there are still limits to analyzing and synthesizing the knowledge. It is probable that the synthesis of research and creation of visionary schemes depends on technical agencies or educational institutions collaborating as a network, together with the local administrations; otherwise, it would not be technically feasible. This means that the executives of local administrations must have the potential and ability to draw upon administration resources, such as networks, to join in local development. The most important network includes educational institutions in the neighborhood, or researchers from various departments who are interested in educational management, to conduct the research analysis or synthesis.

Administrative potential

In a feasibility study, the researchers considered the potential of administrative management, beginning with determining the issues the local administrations wanted to develop, or around which to build a common understanding. The issues that are to be shared and learned together should be those that might lead to conflicts between local people or might not be understood by the locals. Such a conflict occurred in 2006 over educational management, in which there was a debate between two groups, that is, local administrations and the Ministry of Education.

Once local administrations have determined the issue for citizens’ dialogue, the next step is planning for personnel to take responsibility for organizing it. This planning includes specifying the roles and responsibilities of those individuals, beginning with reviewing relevant literature and research to synthesize them into a visionary scheme for the citizens’ dialogue process, and identifying the target group who are the stakeholders in the issues to be taken for sharing and joint learning. For instance, the stakeholders in educational management must be identified. The plan must cover a random sampling of the target audience in order to extend its scope according to their needs, which should be the right size for the process of citizens’ dialogue. In each dialogue that takes place, there must be about 40 stakeholders, so that the group will be divided into four subgroups, with not more than 10 people in each.
Once the target group is randomly sampled, the next step is to coordinate and make an appointment to let the members know the exact schedule in terms of day, time, and venue for the citizens’ dialogue event. This means that the local authorities must work with others and prepare the site, as well as liaise with the target group to get ready. In planning and coordinating with this group, local authorities should consult with the scholars who have served as secondary data researchers to have target groups or stakeholders who are relevant to the issues being discussed. Apart from planning and coordinating with stakeholder groups, local authorities must plan and select a process expert and a training facilitator to act as a stimulus for the stakeholders to express their opinions and knowledge equally. They should also coordinate with experts in training to enhance the knowledge and skills necessary to be a process expert and a facilitator for the process of the citizen’s dialogue. In the issues mentioned above, executives of all local governments participating in citizens’ dialogue are still concerned that they may not able to do it well.

**Social potential**

Social potential in this study was assessed from the social acceptance of local governments participating in citizens’ dialogue in order to see if this process is beneficial to the strategic management of local governments. The assessment was carried out by interviewing the executives of sub-district administrative organizations and representatives and personnel of local government agencies. Data obtained from interviews indicates that all these target groups see the importance of citizens’ dialogue as a tool to help increase the local stakeholders’ knowledge and wisdom, so that they can share and learn from each other. It is also important to modify ways of thinking by enabling the individuals to think in a new way. This leads to sharing a visionary scheme in the field of educational management. It leads to a set of guidelines for action to achieve the desired vision, together with individual understanding. Not only can this process help to build mutual understanding, which is an important foundation of strategic development, but it can also lead to a reduction in the conflicts that occur within the organization, or between the organization and external society. This can be seen in the words of a local administration president who participated in citizens’ dialogue:

Formerly, we used our community forum for people to share thinking and doing as well as monitoring and evaluating the local administration’s performance by having those raise their hand to show their approval or disapproval of the project. This
method was regarded as having the potential to lead to conflict between the group that supports the action and the one that opposes it. If we relied on a particular answer that we got, it seemed like the group that opposed it had to accept it. However, in using citizens’ dialogue, it is only a question in the sense that if the alternative offered is not accepted; the group will think of a better way and can offer suggestions. We will have a consensus that all parties agree on (Mayor 2006).

**Economic feasibility**

Economic potential can be measured by the extent to which the local government is ready to allocate a budget for the process of citizens’ dialogue. The budget (each time) includes the following items: 1) the speaker’s remuneration and travel expenses; 2) remuneration in case the local government has delegated someone to research, analyze, and synthesize previous research, or to set a budget for research and strategy development if the issue had never been researched before; 3) remuneration for a process expert and facilitator; 4) the costs of coordination with the stakeholders; 5) the stakeholders’ travel costs, including snacks and lunch; 6) the costs of materials; and 7) the costs of renting a site in case the local government has no suitable place to accommodate the process. When the seven items are added up, the total of the costs will amount to 50,000 baht (US$1,670).

As for the costs the local government has to pay if the local administration must organize the citizens’ dialogue, unstructured interviews with the executives of local administrations who participated indicate that those from large local administrations, such as Nakhon Municipalities, Mueang Municipalities, or Tambon Administration Organizations, are ready to allocate a budget for citizens’ dialogue. The smaller organizations, such as Tambon Municipalities, which were only recently raised from the status of Tambon Administration Organization, and almost all small Tambon Administration Organizations, indicated that they are not ready to do so. The executives of this group of local administrations indicated that if there was any agency contributing half of the total cost, they are ready to contribute that amount as well.

The above statement suggests that the Tambon Administration Organizations that participated in this citizens’ dialogue were not ready to use it. However, all the executives and stakeholders who participated agreed that this method is useful, and is a tool to help mobilize knowledge and wisdom of all local stakeholders, so that they could come to share
and learn from each other. It modifies their way of thinking from thinking separately to thinking jointly, which leads to the creation of a shared vision in educational management, as well as to provide guidelines for action to achieve the desired vision together. This process not only helps to build mutual understanding, an important foundation of strategic development, but leads to a reduction in conflict within the organizations, or between organizations and external society.

**Conditions conducive to the local administrations using citizens’ dialogue**

There are six factors conducive to the success of citizens’ dialogue in Thailand:

1) leadership;

2) understanding and learning from each other;

3) understanding and accepting differences of organizational culture;

4) diversity of stakeholders;

5) the ability to think systematically, and 6) components of the meeting arrangement.

**Leadership:** the first key factor to success is the leadership of the executives of the local organization. Not only should they have knowledge and understanding of local administration, but, in addition, the people must be allowed to cooperate with the local administration in local development. This means that the executives must have the vision and ability to mobilize local or national knowledge from all sectors to formulate strategies for local development.

The executives of local government must be of change agents for the development of local stakeholders. They can do this through creating the changes for the stakeholders, especially in terms of changing the mode of thinking in educational management, to the effect that it is not only a matter of one person or one type of budget. Instead, it is a matter of all organizations working together, because education is a lifelong process that takes place everywhere, not just in the classroom. In order to put these changes into effect, the executives must establish a common understanding and anticipate the impact of such cooperation on the system. In addition to leadership, the executives of local governments should have vision and be able to foresee the future of the organization and its direction to suit the potential and capabilities of the people and organizations of the present day. They must provide policy support for
mobilizing citizens’ dialogue if they themselves lack leadership, which will affect the stakeholders. Having collective leadership will enable all the stakeholders to accept each other, and, as a consequence, lead to a common vision.

**Mutual understanding and learning from each other:** The goal of citizens’ dialogue is to understand and learn from each other. Persons who participate in the process should not seek to be winners or losers. To achieve this goal, those who participate in citizens’ dialogue must not think that their opinions are right, while those of others are wrong. The participants in the process must be open-minded, and have positive thinking, which can lead to a broadening of the individual’s worldview to learn to exchange knowledge with others. This will lead to an enhancement of administrative powers and help make the work successful. It must always be kept in mind that it is possible for people to have different opinions. When we have an opinion that is different from others, we are inclined to view their opinion as their shortcoming. Naturally, no one is perfect and everyone has weaknesses, which blocks people’s perceptions. We have to look at such differences as differences of opinion, but not as a shortcoming of the person or their personality. If we do not do this, it can lead to conflict rather than contribute to mutual understanding. Mutual understanding and learning from each other, therefore, are key steps to accepting the differences among individuals.

**Understanding and acceptance of differences of the organizational culture:** For the sake of effectiveness, all individuals or stakeholder groups must not only agree on the differences between them, but they need to understand and accept the differences of the culture of each organization. The organizational culture will affect a person's membership, because the organization is one of the major social institutions that play the role of socialization. If a person in the organization is not able to accept the differences in culture, he/she will inevitably attempt to dominate or influence the performance of organizations participating in citizens’ dialogue, and will try to influence the thinking of the other members of the group.

**The diversity of the group of stakeholders:** One of the main factors affecting the effectiveness of citizens’ dialogue is the qualifications of the stakeholders. They need to be diverse and cover the demographic, economic, and social characteristics of the local people. Individuals who decide to join the citizens’ dialogue process must act as representatives of others, in order to make it possible to look at relevant issues widely and inclusively. In this way they can proceed to determine the development strategies that create a fair and thorough
distribution to all local citizens equally, and not for the benefit of any single party, person, or organization.

**The ability to think systematically:** The stakeholder groups that participate in dialogue must not only represent a variety of roles and diverse demographic, economic and sociological viewpoints; they must also possess the ability to think systematically. That is, they must realize that the way each person from each organization works separately or independently, according to individual expertise and uniqueness, will not always lead to the best result for an organization. To achieve this, all involved parties must work as partners in a chain or network, promoting the work of other agencies. Changing the way one thinks will lead to working in a new way that facilitates the holistic resolution of problems. In order to work in a new way, however, one needs to make a paradigm shift in one’s thinking, and this requires the knowledge, understanding, and analysis of one’s role and how this can supplement and support the work of others. Most important of all is that the individual must have the nature of a learner, that is, one who develops himself or herself constantly. To possess the nature of a learner is considered an essential and important characteristic for the effectiveness of citizens’ dialogue.

**Components of the meeting:** Another set of conditions that will allow local governments to use the citizens’ dialogue process includes the following: 1) preparation of the seats; 2) time and location; and 3) the skills and abilities of the process experts and facilitators.

1) **Setting up the seats:** The first component of the meeting to be considered is selecting a site and layout that enable the group members to interact with each other. The seating arrangement is a direct reflection of the type of meeting held and the relationship between the participants. A room that is arranged like a lecture hall, with the chairs attached to the floor, is suitable for providing information to the public. However, it does not enhance interaction among the participants. Therefore, to increase the chance of interaction among the participants, according to the principles of citizens’ dialogue, in which everyone listens attentively and equally, the seats should be arranged in a circle, instead of in rows, or in a semicircle. This allows the participants to make eye contact with each other during the meeting, and equalizes their status.

2) **The time and venue:** In arranging a time and place for the meeting, the schedule should depend on the convenience of the public or the stakeholder groups, rather than on that of a particular organization, and it should not last for more than two days.
3) **The nature and capabilities of the process speakers:** The final issue is the ability of the process speakers. They should have the knowledge and skills to motivate and encourage the group members to participate in group discussions, brainstorming, and discussing various points constructively, as well as observing the rules of citizens’ dialogue and the time limits. Process speakers must act as mediators to help summarize the key points with a large group of attendees, and motivate and encourage them. They should remember that, in general, Thai people are not familiar with brainstorming or voicing their opinions freely in a group. The ability to summarize the ideas and to debate issues, including connecting various issues expressed by the members, is another key feature of the process experts. Thus, the selection of those who have the personal characteristics to function as process experts, including the training to enhance their knowledge and skills, is another condition leading to the success of citizens’ dialogue. This process indicates that the process is a method accepted from abroad and that it is useful. More importantly, it is a tool for enabling the community to become a community of learning. In order to put it into practice, the first priority is to train the local government president, so that he/she can mobilize resources from all sectors and participate in citizens’ dialogue.

The resources here imply not only a budget, personnel, equipment and materials, but also the essential administrative resources. In other words, the executives of local government must have the ability to create networks that include government, as well as private and public sectors.

In addition, the executives of local government need to have systematic thinking to understand and realize that education is not a matter of an individual or a single organization. Rather, it is a task for all sectors, because education is a matter of lifelong learning, and it is learning everywhere, not only in schools. Therefore every person and every organization must become involved in educational management. This means that when local governments have received the power of educational management, it does not mean that they must do it alone, but that they need to decentralize and disperse educational management to the public.

**References**


