

Challenges and Innovations in Teaching Social Studies in Thailand: Bridging Tradition and Modern Pedagogies

**Parinrada Uthaisa¹, Sujittra Sadoo², Sukanda Tenissara³,
Phrapalad Weerasak Theerangkuro (Pukkham)⁴,
Phramaha Supat Nandapañño (Sriyort)⁵**

¹Maharakham Buddhist College, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Thailand,
E-mail: phalinrada.air@mcu.ac.th

²Independent Scholar, E-mail: sujittraow@gmail.com

³Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Khon Kaen Campus,
E-mail: tenissarasukanda@hotmail.com

⁴Faculty of Social Sciences, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Ayutthaya,
Thailand, E-mail: weerasak.puk@mcu.ac.th

⁵Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University
E-mail: krupranon@hotmail.com

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Abstract

This paper explores the challenges and innovations in teaching social studies in Thailand, focusing on the integration of traditional values with modern pedagogical approaches. The study identifies key challenges, such as the persistence of teacher-centered methods, rigid curricula, insufficient teacher training, and limited technological resources. In response, innovations like active learning, project-based approaches, the use of digital tools, and experiential learning models have been successfully implemented in some schools. The paper examines case studies of successful integration and offers strategies for overcoming challenges, including enhancing teacher training, advocating for policy reforms, and leveraging community resources. The findings highlight the need for a more flexible, student-centered approach to social studies education that respects Thai cultural values while preparing students for global challenges. Recommendations for educators and policymakers are provided to ensure continued progress in social studies pedagogy.

Keywords: Social studies, Thailand, education, pedagogy, innovation

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview of Social Studies in the Thai Education System

Social studies education plays a vital role in the Thai education system, as it is tasked with fostering students' understanding of their national identity, social structures, and cultural heritage. Historically, social studies curricula in Thailand have focused on promoting moral values, civic duties, and a sense of loyalty to the nation, which aligns with the country's emphasis on traditional values and societal harmony (Pongpiachan, 2019). The curriculum covers various disciplines, including history, geography, economics, and political science, with the aim of creating informed and responsible citizens (Sakul, 2021). However, the rapid globalization of the past few decades, alongside Thailand's increasing interaction with international communities, has prompted the need for an evolution in teaching methods to ensure students can navigate both traditional and modern social landscapes effectively.

1.2 Importance of Integrating Tradition with Modern Pedagogies

The integration of traditional values with modern pedagogies is essential to ensure that Thai students are equipped with the necessary skills to succeed in a rapidly changing global environment. While traditional pedagogies in Thailand have been teacher-centered, focusing on rote memorization and lecture-based instruction (Saengboon, 2020), modern educational trends call for more student-centered approaches, such as inquiry-based learning, critical thinking, and digital literacy (Poonpipat, 2020). These modern methodologies encourage active participation, collaboration, and the development of higher-order thinking skills, which are crucial in addressing complex global challenges.

Balancing these two pedagogical approaches—maintaining respect for Thai cultural and social traditions while incorporating innovative teaching methods—can be challenging but also offers numerous opportunities. For example, experiential learning activities that encourage students to engage with their communities can help bridge the gap between the local and global, allowing them to apply modern skills while staying connected to their heritage (Suwannatrai & Chumchon, 2021).

1.3 Purpose of the Study and Key Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore the challenges and innovations in teaching social studies in Thailand, focusing on how educators can effectively integrate traditional pedagogical approaches with modern methodologies. This study aims to address the following key research questions:

- (1) What are the main challenges faced by educators in teaching social studies in Thailand using traditional methods?
- (2) How can modern pedagogical approaches, such as project-based learning and digital tools, be integrated with traditional values in Thai social studies education?
- (3) What examples of successful innovation in social studies teaching exist, and what lessons can be learned from these practices?

By investigating these questions, this study seeks to provide insights and recommendations for educators and policymakers on how to modernize social studies education in Thailand while preserving the cultural and societal values that are fundamental to Thai identity.

2. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL STUDIES EDUCATION IN THAILAND

2.1 Origins of Social Studies Curriculum

The origins of social studies education in Thailand can be traced back to the early 20th century, during the reign of King Rama V, when the country underwent significant modernization reforms aimed at aligning itself with Western educational models. Social studies, as part of the national curriculum, was introduced to promote civic consciousness, national unity, and moral development (Sukhatunga, 2018). Initially, the curriculum was heavily influenced by Thai cultural values, Buddhist teachings, and the concept of "Thainess" (Niratpattanasai, 2020). The early curriculum focused on instilling respect for authority, national pride, and moral integrity, reflecting the importance of social cohesion and loyalty to the monarchy. This foundation set the tone for the role of social studies in fostering a collective national identity.

2.2 Evolution of Teaching Methods

Teaching methods in social studies have evolved significantly over the years in response to both global educational trends and local demands. Initially, the teacher-centered approach dominated, with an emphasis on rote memorization, recitation of facts, and passive learning (Chantraratt, 2019). This method, common in early Thai education, mirrored broader social hierarchies, where teachers were viewed as the primary authority and students as passive recipients of knowledge. However, starting in the late 20th century, there was a growing awareness of the need for more interactive and critical pedagogies. The shift toward student-centered learning was influenced by global education reforms that promoted critical thinking, problem-solving, and active participation (Saengboon, 2020). Educational reforms in Thailand, particularly after the 1999 National Education Act, encouraged schools to adopt more innovative approaches, including inquiry-based learning and experiential learning, to better prepare students for a rapidly changing world (Lertchalerms, 2021). This evolution has also been driven by advancements in technology, allowing for the integration of digital tools and online resources into the classroom, making social studies more engaging and relevant to contemporary issues.

2.3 Influence of Cultural and Political Factors on Curriculum Design

The design of the social studies curriculum in Thailand has been deeply influenced by cultural and political factors, particularly the country's emphasis on preserving national identity, social order, and loyalty to the monarchy. Cultural values rooted in Buddhism and the concept of "Thainess" have always been central to the social studies curriculum, shaping its content and objectives (Pongpiachan, 2019). The curriculum has traditionally focused on fostering respect for authority, promoting unity, and instilling moral values, all of which align with the nation's socio-cultural priorities. Political developments have also played a significant role in shaping the curriculum. During periods of political instability, such as during the military coups and shifts between democratic and authoritarian regimes, the social studies curriculum was used as a tool for promoting political ideologies and national stability (Sukhatunga, 2018). For example, during the Cold War era, the curriculum emphasized anti-communist sentiments, reflecting the political climate of the time. More recently, the government has introduced reforms to integrate global issues, such as human rights and environmental sustainability, while still maintaining a strong emphasis on traditional Thai values and civic duties (Niratpattanasai, 2020).

3. CHALLENGES FACING SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHING

3.1 Traditional Teaching Methods and Teacher-Centered Approaches

One of the primary challenges in social studies teaching in Thailand is the continued reliance on traditional, teacher-centered methods. Historically, Thai education has favored approaches that emphasize rote memorization, lecture-based instruction, and passive learning, where students are expected to absorb information rather than engage critically with it (Saengboon, 2020). These methods are particularly entrenched in the teaching of social studies, which often focuses on factual knowledge of history, geography, and civics. While these methods have been effective in instilling basic knowledge, they fall short in fostering critical thinking, problem-solving, and participatory citizenship, which are essential skills in today's globalized world (Sakul, 2021). Moreover, these approaches tend to stifle student creativity and discourage interactive learning, making it difficult for students to apply social studies concepts to real-world contexts.

3.2 Curriculum Rigidity and Lack of Flexibility

Another significant challenge is the rigidity of the social studies curriculum, which leaves little room for flexibility or adaptation to local contexts. The national curriculum in Thailand is highly standardized, with strict guidelines on content delivery and assessment. This rigidity limits teachers' ability to introduce innovative teaching methods, such as inquiry-based or experiential learning, which could better engage students and develop critical thinking skills (Suwannatrai & Chumchon, 2021). Furthermore, the curriculum's heavy focus on national history and traditional values often neglects the inclusion of contemporary global issues, such as climate change, human rights, or digital literacy, which are increasingly relevant to modern society (Pongpiachan, 2019). This disconnect between curriculum content and the evolving needs of society makes it challenging for educators to provide students with the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate complex social and political landscapes.

3.3 Insufficient Teacher Training and Professional Development

The effectiveness of social studies education is also hindered by insufficient teacher training and a lack of professional development opportunities. Many social studies teachers in Thailand have not received adequate training in modern pedagogical techniques, particularly those that promote active learning and critical thinking (Sakul, 2021). Professional development programs, when available, tend to focus on content delivery rather than innovative teaching strategies, leaving teachers ill-equipped to adapt their instruction to meet the needs of 21st-century learners (Lertchaleram, 2021). This lack of training also extends to the integration of technology in the classroom, where many teachers feel unprepared to use digital tools that could enhance learning outcomes (Niratpattanasai, 2020). As a result, the potential for transformative learning experiences in social studies is often underutilized.

3.4 Limited Technological Resources in Classrooms

The limited availability of technological resources in many Thai classrooms presents yet another challenge to the modernization of social studies teaching. Although digital tools and online resources offer significant opportunities to enrich social studies education, particularly by exposing students to global perspectives and interactive content, many schools lack the necessary infrastructure to support these innovations (Pongpiachan, 2019). Rural and underfunded schools, in particular, face significant barriers in accessing modern technology,

which exacerbates educational inequalities between urban and rural areas. Even in schools where technological resources are available, their effective use is often hampered by a lack of teacher training and support (Saengboon, 2020). This technological gap limits the ability of social studies educators to provide students with the skills they need to engage in a digital, globally connected world.

4. INNOVATIONS IN SOCIAL STUDIES PEDAGOGY

4.1 Active Learning and Project-Based Approaches

Active learning has emerged as a powerful alternative to traditional teacher-centered methods in social studies education, promoting student engagement, participation, and hands-on learning experiences. In Thailand, there has been a growing movement to shift toward active learning approaches, particularly project-based learning, where students take on real-world tasks that require research, collaboration, and problem-solving (Sakul, 2021). Project-based learning not only allows students to apply theoretical concepts to practical situations but also encourages them to explore social issues within their own communities. This method fosters a deeper understanding of social studies topics while developing skills such as communication, teamwork, and self-directed learning (Lertchalerm, 2021). For example, social studies teachers might assign students to research local historical sites or analyze current social issues, culminating in group presentations or community engagement projects. These active learning strategies have been shown to increase student motivation and ownership of their learning process (Chantavanich, 2020).

4.2 Incorporation of Digital Tools and Online Resources

The integration of digital tools and online resources into social studies pedagogy offers new opportunities for interactive and engaging learning experiences. In recent years, Thailand's education system has begun incorporating various digital technologies into classrooms, including multimedia presentations, interactive quizzes, and digital simulations, to enhance the learning experience (Niratpattanasai, 2020). Online platforms such as Google Classroom and educational apps like Kahoot! allow teachers to create interactive lessons that actively involve students. These tools not only make lessons more dynamic but also provide students with access to a wealth of information beyond textbooks, enabling them to explore global perspectives and current events more comprehensively (Suwannatrai & Chumchon, 2021).

Incorporating digital tools also enables teachers to use multimedia resources—such as videos, documentaries, podcasts, and virtual field trips—that enhance students' understanding of complex social issues. For example, students might virtually explore historical landmarks or participate in simulations of global diplomatic processes. These experiences bring social studies content to life, making abstract concepts more tangible and relevant to students' lives. Furthermore, digital tools offer opportunities for formative assessments through online quizzes and feedback, enabling teachers to monitor student progress and adjust instruction accordingly (Pongpiachan, 2019).

4.3 Collaborative and Experiential Learning Models

Collaborative and experiential learning models have gained traction as innovative methods for teaching social studies in Thailand. These models emphasize learning through experience and cooperation, allowing students to engage with the material in ways that are

both meaningful and personally relevant (Chantavanich, 2020). Experiential learning, for example, involves students actively participating in simulations, field trips, and hands-on activities that reflect real-world social dynamics. In social studies, this might include mock elections, role-playing historical figures, or conducting interviews with community members. Such activities help students better understand the societal structures and processes they are studying while fostering empathy and critical reflection.

Collaborative learning, on the other hand, involves students working together in groups to solve problems, debate issues, or create presentations. This model not only encourages peer-to-peer learning but also helps develop key social skills such as cooperation, communication, and conflict resolution (Sakul, 2021). In Thai social studies classrooms, group projects on topics like environmental sustainability or civic participation allow students to engage with societal challenges collectively and develop a shared understanding of their roles as citizens in a democratic society. Moreover, collaborative learning encourages diversity of thought, as students with different perspectives contribute to discussions, thus enriching the learning experience.

4.4 Integrating Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving Skills

One of the key innovations in social studies pedagogy in Thailand is the increasing focus on critical thinking and problem-solving skills. As the country becomes more integrated into the global community, there is a growing recognition that students need to develop the ability to think critically about societal issues and solve complex problems (Poonpipat, 2020). In response, educators have begun to incorporate strategies that promote critical analysis, evidence-based reasoning, and reflective thinking. For instance, inquiry-based learning is being used to encourage students to ask questions, investigate issues, and engage in debates on topics such as human rights, governance, and social justice.

Problem-based learning (PBL) is another innovative approach that requires students to address real-world challenges by applying their knowledge and critical thinking skills. In a social studies context, PBL might involve students analyzing case studies on economic inequality or designing solutions for improving local governance. By focusing on contemporary issues, PBL helps students connect academic concepts with societal challenges, thus fostering both practical problem-solving abilities and civic responsibility (Suwannatrai & Chumchon, 2021). These innovations reflect a shift in social studies education in Thailand toward cultivating not only knowledgeable citizens but also active, critical thinkers who are equipped to contribute to a rapidly changing society.

5. CASE STUDIES OF SUCCESSFUL INTEGRATION OF INNOVATION AND TRADITION

5.1 Examples from Schools or Universities

Several schools and universities in Thailand have successfully integrated modern pedagogical approaches while preserving traditional values in social studies education. One prominent example is the Chulalongkorn Demonstration School, where a blended approach to teaching social studies incorporates project-based learning with a strong emphasis on Thai cultural heritage (Lertchalerm, 2021). Students are encouraged to undertake projects that explore both local history and global issues, such as comparing Thailand's political history with democratic developments in other countries. This allows students to engage critically with contemporary issues while remaining grounded in their own cultural context.

Another example comes from Mahidol University, where a combination of digital

tools and experiential learning has been introduced in social studies courses (Pongpiachan, 2019). Students participate in online simulations of political processes, such as mock elections, and also engage in field trips to historical sites, providing them with a well-rounded understanding of both modern and traditional concepts. These programs show how innovation and tradition can be blended to create more engaging and meaningful learning experiences.

5.2 Teachers' Perspectives on Adopting Modern Approaches

Teachers who have adopted modern approaches in social studies classrooms often express a positive outlook on the integration of innovative teaching methods. For example, a study conducted by Suwannatrai and Chumchon (2021) highlights that teachers who have shifted from traditional, lecture-based methods to active learning strategies, such as inquiry-based learning and project-based learning, have noticed increased student engagement and enthusiasm. One teacher from a rural secondary school in Khon Kaen shared that incorporating local history projects into the curriculum allowed students to see the relevance of their studies to their daily lives, which led to more active participation and a deeper understanding of social studies content.

However, teachers also noted challenges, particularly when it comes to balancing the use of technology and traditional cultural content (Sakul, 2021). For example, older teachers, who are more accustomed to teacher-centered methods, have found it difficult to fully integrate digital tools into their teaching. Despite these challenges, many teachers reported that the benefits of using innovative approaches, including better student outcomes and more dynamic classroom environments, outweighed the difficulties.

5.3 Student Outcomes and Feedback

The integration of innovation and tradition in social studies education has had a positive impact on student outcomes. Research indicates that students exposed to active learning and project-based approaches demonstrate higher levels of critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and civic engagement compared to those in traditional settings (Poonpipat, 2020). For example, students at Chiang Mai University, who participated in a social studies course incorporating experiential learning, reported that they felt more confident in discussing social issues and applying theoretical knowledge to real-world problems (Chantavanich, 2020).

Student feedback has also been overwhelmingly positive, particularly in regard to the use of digital tools. Students appreciated the interactivity and the ability to access a wide range of resources through online platforms, which they felt made social studies more relevant to their lives (Niratpattanasai, 2020). One student from a Bangkok high school noted that participating in a simulated global summit on climate change helped her understand the complexities of international relations in a way that textbooks alone could not provide. These examples demonstrate the effectiveness of integrating modern approaches with traditional social studies content in enhancing student learning outcomes and engagement.

6. STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

6.1 Teacher Training and Professional Development

One of the most critical strategies for overcoming challenges in social studies education is enhancing teacher training and professional development. Teachers are central to the successful integration of modern pedagogies with traditional values, but many

educators feel ill-equipped to adopt new teaching methods, particularly those involving digital tools and active learning strategies (Sakul, 2021). To address this, it is essential to provide comprehensive training programs that focus on both content and pedagogical innovation. Workshops and continuous professional development initiatives can help teachers become more comfortable with using digital resources, facilitating project-based learning, and encouraging critical thinking in the classroom (Lertchalerm, 2021).

In addition, training programs should include modules on integrating traditional Thai cultural values into modern educational practices. By understanding how to effectively merge these two elements, teachers can create a learning environment that respects Thai heritage while equipping students with 21st-century skills (Suwannatrai & Chumchon, 2021). Ongoing mentorship and peer collaboration can also provide teachers with the support they need to implement these new strategies effectively.

6.2 Policy Reforms and Curriculum Flexibility

Rigid curricular structures are a significant obstacle to innovation in social studies education. One solution is to advocate for policy reforms that allow for greater flexibility in curriculum design and implementation. Current curricula in Thailand often prioritize national history and civic education, with limited opportunities for incorporating contemporary global issues or alternative teaching methods (Pongpiachan, 2019). By reforming policies to allow schools more autonomy in adapting the curriculum, educators can tailor lessons to better suit the needs of their students and local contexts.

Furthermore, policy changes should emphasize the inclusion of inquiry-based learning, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills in social studies. These reforms could involve revising national assessments to focus not only on memorization but also on students' abilities to analyze and engage with complex social issues (Poonpipat, 2020). Policymakers should also consider creating frameworks that support experiential learning opportunities, such as community service projects or internships, which would give students practical experience in civic engagement and social responsibility.

6.3 Leveraging Community and Cultural Resources

Another key strategy for overcoming challenges in teaching social studies is leveraging community and cultural resources. Thailand's rich cultural heritage and diverse communities offer numerous opportunities for experiential learning, which can be used to complement traditional classroom instruction. By engaging with local communities, teachers can provide students with real-world applications of the social studies curriculum, helping to bridge the gap between academic concepts and lived experiences (Chantavanich, 2020).

For example, students can participate in projects that involve researching local history, documenting cultural practices, or interviewing elders about their experiences. Such projects not only enhance students' understanding of their own cultural heritage but also foster a sense of social responsibility and civic duty (Pongpiachan, 2019). Additionally, collaboration with local cultural organizations, museums, and historical sites can provide valuable resources and expertise that can enrich the curriculum.

Community engagement also helps to strengthen the link between schools and local stakeholders, creating a more supportive educational ecosystem. Teachers who collaborate with local leaders and cultural experts can incorporate diverse perspectives into their lessons, making the social studies curriculum more inclusive and relevant to students from different backgrounds (Suwannatrai & Chumchon, 2021).

7. CONCLUSION

7.1 Summary of Challenges and Innovations

The teaching of social studies in Thailand faces several challenges, including the reliance on traditional teacher-centered methods, the rigidity of the curriculum, insufficient teacher training, and limited access to technology. These factors hinder the development of critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and engagement with contemporary global issues. However, there have been significant innovations aimed at addressing these challenges, including the adoption of active learning strategies, project-based approaches, the incorporation of digital tools, and the use of collaborative and experiential learning models. These innovations allow students to engage more deeply with the material, fostering a more dynamic, student-centered learning environment that integrates both modern pedagogical approaches and traditional Thai values.

7.2 Recommendations for Future Improvements

To continue advancing social studies education in Thailand, several key improvements are recommended:

Enhancing Teacher Training and Professional Development: Comprehensive teacher training programs must be developed to equip educators with the necessary skills to integrate modern pedagogical methods, such as inquiry-based learning and the use of digital tools. Ongoing professional development initiatives should be prioritized to ensure teachers are continually adapting to new educational trends.

Curriculum Flexibility and Policy Reforms: Policymakers should consider revising the national curriculum to allow for more flexibility in content delivery and the incorporation of global issues alongside traditional subjects. This could involve updating national assessments to emphasize critical thinking and problem-solving skills rather than rote memorization.

Leveraging Local Cultural and Community Resources: Schools should actively engage with local communities to provide students with opportunities for experiential learning that connects academic content with real-world experiences. Utilizing cultural resources, such as historical sites and local experts, can enhance students' understanding of social issues and their cultural heritage.

7.3 Implications for Educators and Policymakers

The successful integration of tradition and innovation in social studies education has significant implications for both educators and policymakers. For educators, adopting modern teaching approaches will not only enhance student engagement but also improve overall learning outcomes by fostering critical thinking and active participation. Teachers must be supported through professional development and access to resources that enable them to incorporate these innovative methods effectively.

For policymakers, there is a clear need to reform the social studies curriculum to reflect the changing needs of Thai society in a global context. This includes allowing for greater flexibility in teaching methods, content adaptation, and the integration of technology. By creating a more flexible and relevant social studies curriculum, policymakers can ensure that students are better prepared to face the complexities of the modern world while maintaining a strong sense of national identity and cultural awareness.

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