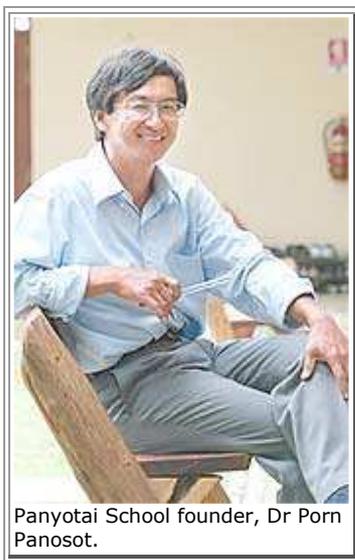


## Learning the Waldorf way

***Education doesn't have to be a grind. For children at one school in Bangkok, every day is an adventure***

**Story by PICHAYA SVASTI Photos by YINGYONG UN-ANONGRAK**



Panyotai School founder, Dr Porn Panosot.

In a playground are around 20 students playing with bamboo, coconut shells and pine cones. A group of Prathom 1 pupils are playing a freeze tag-like game called Kratai Kha-diew (rabbit with one leg), where a child will jump on one leg and try to touch the others, who are ready to escape. It helps improve muscular coordination and balance.

In a kindergarten classroom lie wooden baskets containing pine cones, woollen yarns, colourful cotton fabrics and hand-made toy bamboo bricks that can be assembled and connected in many ways. No trace of Thai or English alphabet posters. On each desk is a handmade textbook \_ white paper sheets on which each pupil has drawn or painted a fish on one page and written a very big Thai letter, Por Pla, in a childish style \_ crooked and inconsistent.

On one side of a Mathayom 3 class are stacks of similar textbooks. One of these textbooks has in its owner's handwriting, a poem by poet and philosopher Khalil Gibran on the front cover \_ but the contents concern algebra. Another pile contains textbooks on art history in which the students copied some Renaissance masterpieces and have written down their research findings.

The whole class of Prathom 4 students are playing angaloong, a kind of traditional Thai music using bamboo instruments, which must be played in harmony as each musician represents only one note.

In the rice farming season, students will work on a farm in addition to their regular studies. Kindergarten pupils will grind rice into flour and do some baking. Older students will work in the fields, preparing the land, ploughing the soil, planting rice, keeping an eye on the crop and harvesting it.

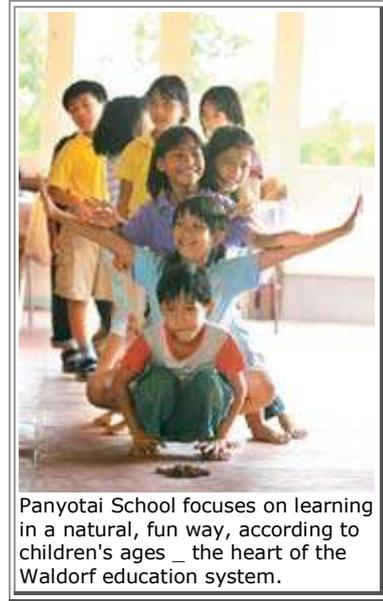
All this happens at Panyotai School, a Thai school that is run using the principles of the Waldorf philosophy. Here, students learn naturally from firsthand experience and experiments, designed to suite their ages.

The Waldorf philosophy, devised by Austrian scholar Dr Rudolf Steiner almost a century ago, is a way of looking at the world and life by seeking a balance between body, soul and spirit to promote creativity, self-learning and closeness to nature.

Growing from a small house with a handful of pre-school children, to an educational institute with around 200 students of kindergarten to Mathayom 4 levels, the school is now in its 12th year and will extend the student body to Mathayom 6 in one or two years.

Ten-year-old Kirin Techawongtham, or Sai, who is studying Prathom 5 here, said, "It's fun. Here we learn less than in mainstream schools. We try growing rice and working on farms. We trek. It's fun but tiring. And I want more. I like everything here. Friends help each other."

She loves reading Thai books and stories. Students will paint what they have learned from tales based on illustrations shown to them by their teachers. She is proud of a pavilion in the playground that she and her classmates recently built themselves.



Unlike other children, she and her younger sister, Kita, aged six, seldom watch television. However, their parents sometimes allow them to watch wildlife documentaries.

Pattharasai Thippayananukul, 15, a Mathayom 4 student at Panyotai School, recalled that he quit a mainstream school to join this school at the Prathom 3 level. Here, his two younger sisters are also studying Prathom 6 and kindergarten while his younger brother is in Prathom 4.

"Ordinary schools emphasize teaching without caring how much children can take. And children don't want to learn. But here, students play most of the time. We may not excel academically. But, we learn happily from different perspectives," he said.

According to him, he had to memorise English vocabulary every day at his old school, but would just as quickly forget the words. But here, knowledge has been naturally absorbed into each student for a more sustained knowledge base.

Subjects are taught in fun ways, such as history through story-telling.

Pattharasai also loves music, and plans to apply for a university place to study violin. As to his future, he wants to work for the benefit of others.

He does not watch television but listens to music on the radio, adhering to the Waldorf principle that believes that natural sounds like the chirping of birds are good for youngsters.

"Education is a way to pass on knowledge, but is also a process to nurture and make children complete human beings. Our education system must support physical, mental and spiritual growth because we consider people as spiritual beings," said Panyotai School founder, Dr Porn Panosot.



Students play in a toy house, made by themselves from bamboo and natural fabrics.

The school applies different approaches to different ages. Kindergarten pupils like to imitate what adults do. Thus, teachers will not "teach", but do good things for students to learn from. Students will imitate their teachers' words and actions.

Primary students are gushing with emotion and think the world is beautiful. So, teachers must inspire and encourage their curiosity for them to learn about life.

Secondary students are teens in pursuit of truth and are not inclined to easily believe without good reason or evidence. Thus, teachers must share knowledge and encourage students to find the truth through thought and analysis.

At Panyotai School, before reciting any mathematical or scientific formula, students will be guided by their teachers as to how each formula was devised and how it can be applied in other cases. Understanding is achieved through experiment and discussion.

In geography classes, students do not memorise geographical facts about Thailand and its provinces. Instead, they learn from legends or tales about each province designed to make them curious and eager to read more.

In history classes, teachers do not not teach primary students historical accounts, but give them samples of heroes in history so they can do further research.

"The Waldorf approach focuses on learning according to age. Teachers have to know what is suitable for students, and match their teaching methods and content to the development of children of different age groups," the doctor-turned-educator added.

The Thai cultural or historical context is also taken into consideration. Festivals are marked with story-telling and puppet shows; Visakha Bucha Day will feature the Lord Buddha's birth, for example.

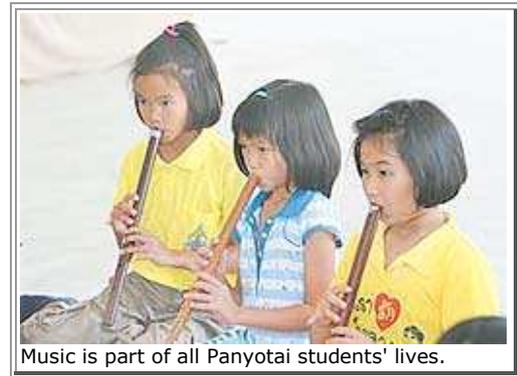
The school does not group its high school students into science or art classes as it does not want "mass produced" identical child "products". But Dr Porn is

confident that his students are well-rounded, aware of human values, and look at the world as a connected whole, not as fragments.

"Our students start reading more slowly than others. They might be unable to read when in Prathom 1 or 2, but will suddenly begin reading seriously at Prathom 3 because the basics are already in their heads. They like reading books, but they seldom read comics," the doctor said.

At Panyotai School, there are no tests. Older students enjoy grades based on their reports, school work and enthusiasm. The school's Prathom 3 and Prathom 6 students all passed national standard tests recently, though.

There is, naturally, the concern that Waldorf students are not academically qualified to gain admission to state universities. The school points out that university education is not the only choice in life for students. To guide their future careers, the school has arranged internships for them to find what they like.



In the summer, Mathayom 3 graduates must work on farms, including integrated farms, stud farms and sugar plantations, and learn how to live with villagers. Mathayom 4 students must take up internships in the handicraft industry, and the school is planning social service and internships at non-governmental organisations for Mathayom 5 students, while Mathayom 6 students must complete projects on their own choice of topic.

This system relies crucially on qualified and caring teachers, and the total cooperation of the parents. According to Dr Porn, all the teachers, both Thai and non-Thai, have been trained in the Waldorf principles, with many of its teachers being recruited from overseas.

The school, in its new location in Bangkok's Sai Mai district, is the fruit of cooperation between Dr Porn, teachers and parents. The parents helped in whatever way they could, depending on their inclination or profession: Raising funds and finding soft loan sources for building the new school, designing the building or helping with structural engineering work, or donating cash, construction materials and equipment.

"We live as family ... parents, children and teachers. Everything suits child development, so they can fully blossom," said Aroonrat Chalernpornphan, a Chinese language and handicraft teacher. "The children are close and kind to each other."

Jessica Parker, an English mother whose six-year-old son, Orion, and four-year-old daughter, Aria, are Panyotai School students, said, "They are excited to go to

school. We don't have to pull them from bed. They love to go to school." To her, every student here seems self-confident, calm and happy.

Another parent, Wipawee Otaganonta, the mother of the school's Prathom 5 student Kirin Techawongtham, 10, and Prathom 1 pupil Kita, six, said the Waldorf education system is a sophisticated and gentle way that allows children to learn in a natural environment, without pressure, often using art as a teaching medium. "Art is essential for human development," she said with conviction.

According to her, learning under the Waldorf philosophy focuses on virtues for children aged up to seven, artistic beauty for children aged from seven to 14, and truth and knowledge for children aged from 14 to 17.



Children here live with art with no need for artificial stimulation. At home, they can either paint or work on their own, while their peers are often addicted to watching television or computer games. They are mature for their ages, but have fun when playing. The students are encouraged to accept each other for what they are, and this is reinforced through the banning of cartoon-imprinted or brand-name outfits or belongings.

As Panyotai School is a non-profit school, it can strictly adhere to Waldorf principles, with no need to please parents. Since 2000, the school has been run under the Waldorf Panyotai Foundation.

"Learning here is natural, fun and integrated. It is suitable for their ages. Each thing will be learned through real-life experience," Wipawee said.

To learn more about Panyotai School, visit <http://se-ed.net/panyotai> or call 02-792-0670.