

The Deaf Around The World: Thailand Tried and True

By CARL A. ARGILA, De La Salle College, Manila, Philippines

Before I visited the Dusit School for the Deaf in Bangkok I had seen a number of "oral" schools in neighboring countries. I must admit that my spirits were kind of low—seeing all those little deaf kids with long faces, fear in their eyes and their struggle in the classroom to put on a good show for "our visitor from the Philippines." I knew that the situation would be different in Thailand—but I guess I just wasn't prepared for my first few moments at the school.

I had a lot of trouble finding the school in the first place. It is located at Number 137 Rama V Street. No problem finding Rama V Street; it's one of the main thoroughfares in Bangkok (running by the palace of Thailand's American-educated king). The problem was finding Number 137! Seems like the numbers don't quite run consecutively—137 and 138 are miles away! To make matters more interesting, I got rained on (it was monsoon season!) and in desperation I took shelter in a taxi whose driver insisted that the school for the deaf was located crosstown! (I threatened to jump out of the cab several times before he would even slow down and let me out!). I finally found the school in an area of town where there were no street numbers.

With some intrepidity I walked across a wooden bridge, spanning a canal (Bangkok is known as "the Venice of Asia") and leading into the school compound. It was then that it happened.

I found myself in the midst of a group of deaf children. You couldn't really tell that they were deaf—they were playing, looking over each other's homework, just being kids—only they were signing with each other.

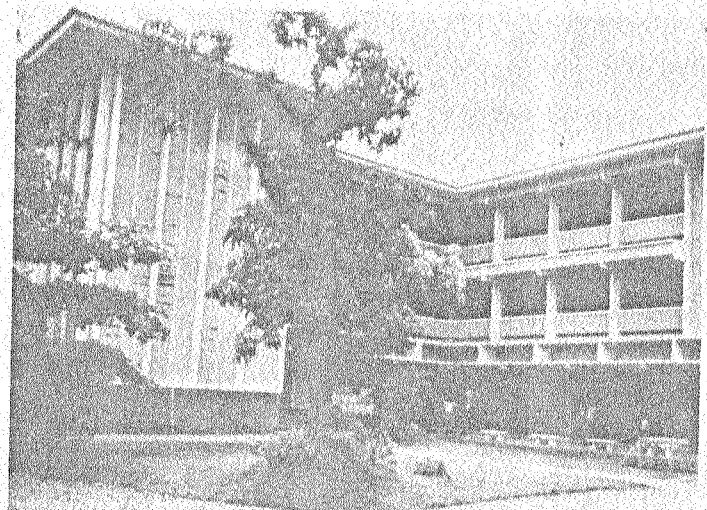
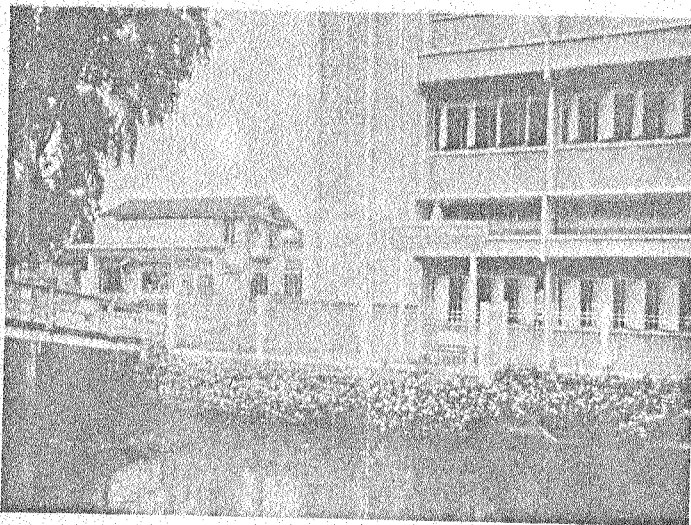
A couple of the older boys spotted me, ran over and started to talk to me in pretty good AMESLAN! I guess it was obvious that I was a visitor—but how they knew I could understand AMESLAN was a mystery (Perhaps they thought I was deaf—my friend Ed Bloom always tells me I "look" deaf.) We chatted for a while—the noonday Thai sun dried me out, they pointed me in the direction of the principal's office and we parted. Somehow seeing the principal would be anti-climatic, the students themselves, in unspoken ways, had told me so much more about the school than the principal ever could.

The contrast between these kids and those I'd seen in neighboring countries was just so stark. You don't see fancy electronic equipment at this school—in fact, you can't even call the Dusit school a "total communication" school since there is virtually no emphasis on oralism. But the faces of those children—they sparkle!

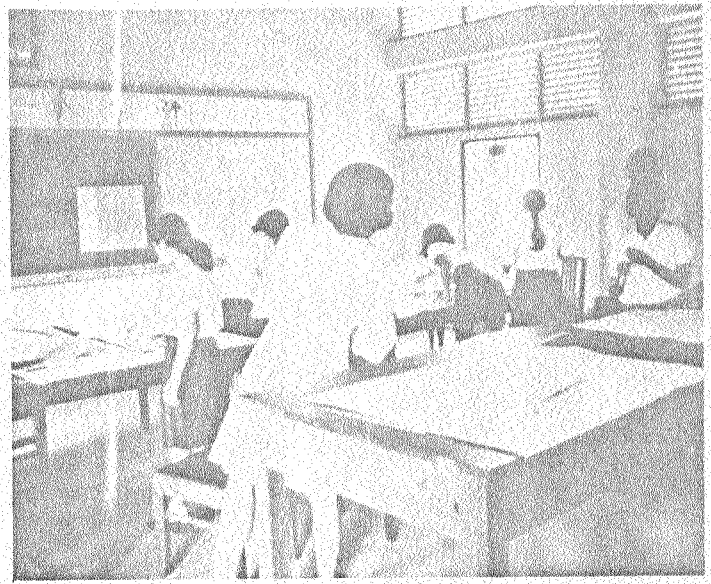
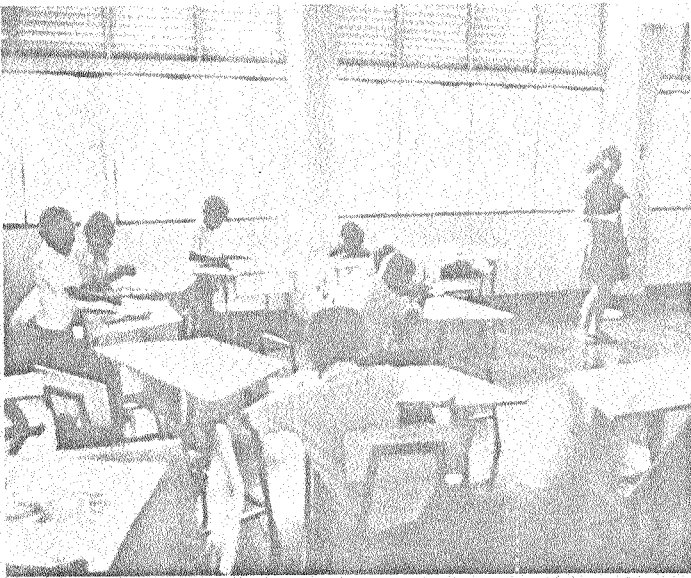
In last months "Deaf Around the World" article we said something about "colonialism" and western influence on our educational programs. Though Thailand has had a minimum of western influence, thanks to the "closed door" policy of previous monarchs, the "sparkling faces" of the Thai deaf children can be attributed in part to one westerner—Gallaudet's beloved former Dean of Women, Elizabeth Benson. A number of years ago the Supervisor of Schools for the Deaf, Mrs. Kamala Krairiksh, was studying under scholarship at Gallaudet College. With Dr. Benson's help they worked out a system of fingerspelling to represent the Thai alphabet's 44 consonants and 7 forms of vowels. Because Thai is a tonal language, one lip position might have many different meanings depending on the tone or pitch of the voice. This precludes a pure oral approach to education—a fact which, no doubt, has something to do with those "sparkling faces."

In the cluttered and cozy book-lined office shared by the Dusit School principal, Mrs. Sathaporn Suvannus, and her administrative staff, she told me something of the start of education for the deaf in Thailand. It was only in 1951 that the first education for the deaf in Thailand was started—a one-room school in the Wat Somanat (Somanat Temple). By 1953, the school was able to locate a donated piece of land and moved to its present site on Rama V street with 43 pupils and 7 teachers. Today the Dusit School for the Deaf has an enrollment of about 350 students and 30 teachers and even boards some students.

By 1961, the need was felt to open a second school in Bangkok. The Tung Maha Mek School for the Deaf (The Great Cloud School for the Deaf!) was



Left: Bangkok is known as the "Venice of Asia"—as can be seen in this photo. The Dusit School for the Deaf is located on the banks of Bangkok's canals. Students might take either a boat or a bus to school. Right: The main classroom building at the Dusit School for the Deaf houses classes from grade one to what we call high school.



Left: Spacious, modern and well equipped classrooms are probably one of the reasons why Thai deaf are the best educated in all of South-east Asia. Right: Vocational education is a part of the curriculum at the Dusit School for the Deaf.

opened in southeast Bangkok with nearly 300 children.

What was most significant to me was the awareness of the Thai Ministry of Education that there was a need for provincial schools for the deaf—not just in the population centers of the country. In 1968 the government opened its Khon Kaen School for the Deaf in the northern part of the country and in 1970 its Tak School for the Deaf in the southern part of the country. This awareness stems I think from the government's concept of and policy regarding "special education." Special education in Thailand encompasses not only what we normally think of as special education (education of the blind, deaf, crippled, etc.) but also education of the chronically ill, leprosy children and children of lepers, children of hill tribes and boatmen's children. In other words, special education in Thailand is just that—education which is out of the ordinary, i.e., special. I was particularly impressed with their programs for minority group education. Children who live in the hill tribes (20% of Thailand area) are not culturally, socially, or economically in the mainstream of the country. They are provided with special education. Children of the nomadic boatmen are also so provided. It is only now that western educators are expanding their "special education" in directions which the Thai have long ago followed!

As Mrs. Suvannus showed me around the school, I could see that special education in Thailand had "paid off"—it was an investment which had begun to bring in returns. Mrs. Suvannus explained to me that most of their school leavers were able to pass government examinations and to find employment.



These students learn typing both on the Thai keyboard and the Roman alphabet keyboard.

And that's the kind of "pay off" I think any government would want to see for its special education programs—school leavers who would become workers for economic development of the country, not drains on the economy of the country.

The Dusit School also has a number of deaf faculty members! In our part of the world it is rare, except in such cosmopolitan areas such as Hong Kong or Singapore, to find deaf teachers. This to me was the greatest testimony to the success of the Thai program.

Deaf teachers sparkling faces, deaf who work—instead of loafing! The Thai way of doing things has proved itself "tried and true."

Next month we travel to Thailand's western neighbor, Burma, a country

racked by political and social unrest—a Marxist country in the midst of fledgling democracies. What's it like for the deaf?

Next month "The Deaf Around The World: Burma—The Challenge of Adversity."

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