



From Compliance to Social Justice: Repositioning External Quality Assessment for Teacher Empowerment and Equity in Thailand's Border Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study rigorously evaluates the ability of External Quality Assessment (EQA) outcomes to promote culturally sensitive and equitable Human Resource Development (HRD) in primary school settings within Thailand. The study used a thorough survey approach, including PNI modified analysis, contextual mapping, and collaborative strategy development, to reveal a systemic deficiency in translating EQA outcomes into effective HRD activities. The findings reveal a substantial "Compliance-to-Empowerment" gap, emphasizing the critical need for the strategic administrative application of EQA data as a management tool rather than solely a compliance report. The contextual analysis indicates that external threats, such as inconsistent regulations and digital inequalities, undermine internal strengths. The primary contribution of the study is the creation of a framework of seven culturally attuned HRD strategies. These initiatives, including teacher and school leader upskilling, contextualized curriculum co-design, and equity-centered planning, aim to empower educators and enhance the resilience of schools in frequently marginalized areas. The assessment verified that the approaches aimed at enhancing human capacity and the strategic application of EQA data achieved the highest ratings for effectiveness and equity impact. This paper presents an empirically validated, socially relevant framework for human capital development in unstable and diverse educational settings, offering practical, policy-focused recommendations to fundamentally reframe EQA, transforming evaluation from a bureaucratic process into a crucial instrument for equity and social change in marginalized learning communities.

KEYWORDS

Social justice; teacher empowerment; equity-centred planning; cultural analysis; border education.

INTRODUCTION

Ensuring equitable access to quality education is a primary goal for global development (Carney, 2022; Citaristi, 2022a; Espejo Villar et al., 2022; Martínez-Martín et al., 2023). The Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (ONESQA) in Thailand uses External Quality Assessments (EQA) to ensure schools are accountable for educational quality, particularly in areas where student performance is lacking (Pitiyanuwat et al., 2017, 2018; Whitaker et al., 2022). When utilized just for accountability purposes, EQA frequently devolves into a bureaucratic procedure centered on compliance, detached from the primary objective of sustained school enhancement. This perspective on compliance is detrimental to schools along the Thai border. These schools have numerous interconnected challenges due to their remote location and diverse cultural contexts. The issues encompass a shortage of educators, inadequate infrastructure, linguistic obstacles for children from ethnic minorities, and minimal community engagement (Canton, 2021a, 2021b; Citaristi, 2022b; Governors, 2020). These structural deficiencies impede assessment data from facilitating genuine, enduring change, hence perpetuating educational disparity. The failure to translate EQA results into relevant local action indicates a breakdown of social justice in these disadvantaged environments.

Repositioning Human Resource Development (HRD) for Equity

To address this deficiency, it is imperative to position Human Resource Development (HRD) as a pivotal instrument for social transformation, particularly in underprivileged communities. In this instance, strategic HRD must extend beyond fundamental training to empower educators, cultivate culturally responsive leadership, and create learning environments that are genuinely aligned with the needs of the local community.

Recent HRD scholarship supports this critical and regional focus, with studies exploring fundamental HRD strategies across Southeast Asia (Banks, 2021; Crocco, 2021a, 2021b; Giordino & Crocco, 2025) and applying institutional theory to regional HRD specifically within ASEAN (Tkachenko et al., 2022). Further strengthening the emphasis on cultural relevance, scholars also propose incorporating indigenous methodologies into HRD research (Kuchinke et al., 2022; Kuchinke & Lee, 2024). Collectively, these approaches establish the conceptual alignment of capacity development and HRD (Danquah et al., 2023), moving the field toward more context-sensitive and socially engaged practice.

The EQA-HRD Gap: From Compliance to Development

Despite the recognized significance of strategic HRD, the use of EQA outcomes in HRD programs remains poorly comprehended in impoverished nations (Meyer, 2023). The persistent gap between compliance-focused evaluation and genuine empowerment is not merely administrative; it is shaped by infrastructural and regulatory obstacles, characterized by a lack of locally relevant, evidence-based frameworks that prioritize equity. Pulakos et al. (2019) assert that performance management (PM) often falters because it is entirely detached from daily, developmental activities like immediate feedback and experiential learning. This highlights the urgent need for ongoing, behavior-focused HRD interventions that can effectively and

developmentally address EQA findings. Fullan (2016a, 2016b) asserts that comprehensive educational reform requires systemic, multi-tiered involvement grounded in significant, contextual approaches, highlighting that sustainable change relies on the integration of assessment with practical, capacity-building efforts customized to local circumstances.

Research Focus and Contribution

The study's explicit objectives are to (1) examine the existing compliance-focused EQA application in contrast to the ideal empowerment-centered approach in border schools, (2) evaluate the SWOT factors influencing HRD from an equity standpoint, (3) create and assess HRD models that convert EQA outcomes into empowering practices for educators, and (4) recommend policies to fundamentally realign EQA data towards inclusive and sustainable HRD strategies that promote equity.

The primary contribution is the transition from compliance-oriented evaluation to human resource development that emphasizes empowerment. This examines how strategic human resource management might enhance equity and resilience in diverse and resource-limited environments. The findings offer pragmatic, policy-oriented recommendations for lawmakers, planners, and accreditation bodies seeking to leverage evaluation for societal advantage and to address systematic inequities in border schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Critical Divide Between Compliance and Social Justice

Human Resource Development (HRD) for Social Transformation

Traditionally, HRD focuses on enhancing organizational efficiency, whereas a more critical perspective regards it as essential for establishing equitable, high-quality educational institutions (Chimbi & Jita, 2023; Garavan et al., 2018, 2019a, 2019b; Wang et al., 2018). In marginalized educational environments, effective human resource development must prioritize the empowerment of educators, the cultivation of adaptive leadership, and the implementation of culturally acceptable and contextually relevant teaching methodologies (Ajani, 2024; Garavan et al., 2018, 2019a, 2019b). In border and peripheral regions, human resource development must surpass traditional methods to address complex challenges like structural inequity and cultural marginalization. Global HRD practices are progressively advocating developmental techniques that align with local needs and power dynamics (Cooke, 2018; Syed et al., 2018; Makarem, 2024; Mambetova et al., 2025; Nqabeni, 2024).

Such an effort requires equipping educators to manage sociocultural diversity through inclusive teaching methods and equity-focused policies (Arnesen & Allan, 2009; Koutsouris et al., 2024; Szelei et al., 2020), thereby fostering the inclusion and agency vital for social change.

Border Educational Ecosystems: Manifestations of Structural Inequity

Border schools face numerous interconnected challenges. The issues encompass a deficiency of educators, linguistic and cultural obstacles, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient

community engagement (Dhar, 2021). These issues are indicative of systemic inequity. Standardized national policies frequently overlook these locations.

However, these circumstances present a unique opportunity for intercultural education and community-driven development of human capital. The OECD's 2023 report on equality states that as diversity increases, schools must employ inclusive and contextually relevant approaches that leverage local resources and cultural capital. For systemic change to occur, active participation from community people and educators is essential. This will foster a collaborative culture that leverages local and indigenous knowledge to improve educational institutions (Fullan, 2016a; 2016b).

The data together demonstrates that prioritizing inclusive, participatory HRD practices can transform marginalized border situations from places of deficiency into centers for innovative, equity-focused learning.

The Critical Divide: EQA, Compliance, and the Failure to Empower

Integrating External Quality Assessment (EQA) data into HR programs could link educational enhancement with evidence-based decision-making. When appropriately restructured, EQA data can transition from simple accountability to act as a catalyst for focused human capital development (Pulakos et al., 2019). This information should be utilized to assess effectiveness, identify skill deficiencies, and construct tailored professional development programs unique to each context.

However, particularly in isolated and underprivileged regions, a pervasive "compliance trap" exists. EQA is often implemented reactively instead of proactively in alignment with institutional and social goals (Shirmohammadi et al., 2021; Wang & Swanson, 2008). School administrators frequently underutilize EQA data due to insufficient training, inadequate digital infrastructure, and a lack of analytical abilities. This administrative failure represents a fundamental deficiency in social justice, since compliance-oriented evaluation diverts resources and focus from the developmental requirements of the most vulnerable schools.

To address this gap, there is an urgent need for training that equips educators and leaders to assess EQA outcomes within a developmental framework and integrate them into flexible HRD strategies that promote continuous improvement and, eventually, educational justice.

Human Capital Development in Border-School Ecosystems: Policy, Culture, and Power

Research on Human Capital Development (HCD) in border regions highlights the importance of synchronizing educational methods with the complex sociopolitical and cultural challenges associated with cross-border life. Thailand's Buffer School Policy aimed to enhance quality; nevertheless, it frequently faltered because of inadequate coordination and human resource systems that overlooked local variables (Kaewkumkong & Sen, 2019a, 2019b; Wilson Heenan et al., 2023). Promising regional instances, such as collaborative initiatives between Thailand and Indonesia, highlight the possibility of reciprocal capacity building to address border-specific challenges, including teacher shortages and language barriers (Kaewkumkong, 2024, 2025).

Comparative ASEAN studies demonstrate that data-driven empowerment of local committees and community education improves workforce resilience and local ownership (Noor & Sugito, 2019; Sahrul, 2024; Sahrul et al., 2025). These examples illustrate that enduring human capital development is critically reliant on inclusive pedagogies and culturally attuned leadership, often grounded in critical literacy and community narratives (Khamratana & Adunyarittigun, 2021; Velazquez, 2024).

HCD and Inclusive Learning in Stateless and Culturally Diverse Contexts

Educational systems in disputed territories face intertwined issues of statelessness, violence, and significant cultural marginalization. The lack of formal citizenship poses considerable obstacles to sustainable education for Karen refugees near the Thailand–Myanmar border (Yeo & Gagnon, 2020). Integration initiatives are disjointed due to a lack of policy coordination rooted in peacebuilding and cultural sensitivity (Norman & Mikhael, 2023; Smith et al., 2016), whereas community-driven programs emphasize identity-affirming activities to foster local leadership and resilience (Alam et al., 2025; Paljor et al., 2025).

Cultural citizenship and identity politics significantly influence teacher recruitment, curricular relevance, and inclusivity in regions such as the Thailand–Lao PDR border (Sappasuk & Nawarat, 2018). The findings necessitate the application of critical pedagogy as a transformative tool to enhance inclusive literacy and empower local educators (Khamratana & Adunyarittigun, 2021). Moreover, research indicates that gender and ethnic disparities significantly obstruct HCD strategies for vulnerable populations, including Hmong women in Lao PDR and ethnic minority girls in neighboring border regions (Hayes, 2015; Jakubowski, 2022).

These studies collectively demonstrate that effective HRD in border regions requires a foundation in both quantitative data and a thorough understanding of local socio-political dynamics, as well as the complex ethical obligations of educators working with various non-citizen and ethnic minority groups.

The literature recognizes a "Compliance-to-Justice Divide," arising from five critical research shortcomings that impede EQA systems from promoting social transformation. The issues encompass the inadequate, equity-oriented incorporation of EQA data into HR planning; the lack of culturally attuned Human Resource Management (HRM) frameworks for complex border areas; insufficient empirical evidence regarding the use of data to mitigate injustice; tenuous links between teacher empowerment and evaluation systems; and the underrepresentation of participatory human rights approaches.

Closing this gap is crucial; it pertains to the incapacity to transform compliance-oriented EQA data into empowerment strategies pertinent to the context, particularly in the structurally disadvantaged schools along the Thai border.

This study consequently investigates four major questions: What are the present conditions, objectives, and prerequisites for equity-focused external quality assurance in border schools? What are the SWOT factors influencing the incorporation of EQA into HRD, considering social and political issues? What culturally sensitive human resource development approaches

may be formulated from EQA findings to augment educator empowerment? To what extent do the proposed HRD techniques meet the needs of border residents and contribute to equitable education?

The subsequent section, the methodology, delineates the rigorous procedure employed to address these deficiencies and assess the efficacy of HRD in these undeveloped regions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design: A Critical Survey Approach

This study utilizes a three-step critical survey methodology to thoroughly examine the systematic conversion of External Quality Assessment (EQA) results into equity-oriented Human Resource Development (HRD) for elementary schools in Thailand's border regions. The intricate complexity of border school ecosystems—shaped by interrelated social, cultural, political, and institutional factors—demands a survey approach. The research aims to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the EQA-HRD dynamic's influence on educational equity and teacher empowerment by triangulating extensive quantitative data (e.g., surveys) with nuanced qualitative data (e.g., focus groups and critical strategy reviews) (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The three-step survey methodology is based on critical analysis and collaborative co-creation. Phase I, Critical Equity Gap Identification, utilizes survey data and PNI_{modified} analysis to delineate the disparity between the existing compliance-oriented application of EQA and the aspirational, empowerment-driven use, therefore creating a foundation for structural intervention. Building on this, Phase II, Critical Contextual Analysis, uses SWOT and PEST studies to include the views of stakeholders and make systemic constraints and opportunities clearer, especially those that are part of local socio-political and cultural settings. Lastly, Phase III, Participatory Strategy Co-Development, uses the opinions of both experts and stakeholders to work together to create, evaluate, and confirm HR plans that are practical, culturally sensitive, and long-lasting. This design improves the study's validity and social relevance by using data from three different sources and including points of view from different levels of the education system. This is in line with calls for evidence-based, participatory HR planning in areas that are marginalized and culturally diverse.

Population and Sampling: Focusing on Sites of Marginalization

The target market consists of school administrators and educators from 354 primary schools located near Thailand's borders with Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia. The sample finally consisted of 1,062 individuals. The emphasis on these three borders (Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia) is predicated on their geographical significance and the necessity for an examination of social fairness. These regions differ from the southern border with Malaysia due to several factors that exacerbate educational inequality significantly: Numerous marginalized ethnic groups encounter significant challenges in accessing public services; substantial educational disparities exist, evidenced by pronounced variations in infrastructure and teacher distribution in rural and mountainous regions; additionally, many multilingual and multicultural

environments necessitate specialized human resource strategies centered on inclusive and culturally responsive pedagogy to affirm non-dominant identities.

Poverty, migration, and political instability are some of the factors that impede educational access for individuals in these regions. The research primarily focuses on Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia as critical regions to investigate how EQA outcomes may enhance HRD in the least funded and most culturally intricate schools, hence fostering social transformation near Thailand's borders.

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Data Collection Procedures, Instruments, and Analysis

The survey strategy ensures comprehensive research by integrating quantitative breadth with qualitative depth focused on socio-cultural background.

Phase I: Quantitative Equity Needs Evaluation

The objective of this phase was to assess the current compliance-based utilization and the desired equity-focused circumstances regarding EQA data use, and subsequently identify the priority needs for HR intervention in primary border schools. Data was acquired using a standardized questionnaire with paired response items that evaluated current and optimal conditions across three core areas: 1) Utilization of EQA results, 2) The development of learning ecosystems, and 3) The quality of teaching and institutional administration. For data analysis, descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were used, followed by the Modified Priority Needs Index ($PNI_{modified}$), which rigorously prioritized developmental needs by systematically comparing the current (compliance) and desired (empowerment) states. This critical analysis effectively identified the structural entry points for HR intervention and systemic improvement.

Phase II: Qualitative Critical Contextual Analysis (SWOT–PEST)

The objective of this phase was to examine the internal and external factors influencing the application of EQA-informed HRD approaches in border-school ecosystems from a social change perspective. Data was collected via focus group discussions in each border region, consisting of 8–12 key informants (administrators, local education officers, and senior teachers) chosen through purposive sampling based on their expertise. The inquiry employed the 2S4M Model for Internal Investigation (SWOT) and the PEST framework for External Analysis, scrutinizing the political, economic, social, and technological aspects that either exacerbate or alleviate marginalization. Qualitative data was transcribed and subjected to theme analysis for data examination. A TOWS matrix was employed to integrate the identified components, matching internal strengths with external challenges to formulate equitable policy solutions.

Phase III: Participatory Strategy Co-Development and Validation

The objective of this phase was to examine the internal and external factors influencing the application of EQA-informed HRD approaches in border-school ecosystems from a social change perspective. Data was collected via focus group discussions in each border region, consisting of 8–12 key informants (administrators, local education officers, and senior teachers) chosen through purposive sampling based on their expertise. The inquiry employed the 2S4M Model for Internal Investigation (SWOT) and the PEST framework for External Analysis, scrutinizing the political, economic, social, and technological aspects that either exacerbate or alleviate marginalization. Qualitative data was transcribed and subjected to theme analysis for data examination. A TOWS matrix was employed to integrate the identified components, matching internal strengths with external challenges to formulate equitable policy solutions.

Reliability and Validity Checks

The investigation's reliability was enhanced through the application of rigorous procedures.

To ensure methodological rigor, both instrument reliability and validity were established. Reliability was confirmed through internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients reaching 0.82. For validity, the questionnaire underwent expert review by five specialists in evaluation, HRD, and border education to ensure construct alignment and cultural appropriateness. Furthermore, a high Content Validity Index (CVI) of 0.84 confirmed the instrument accurately measured the intended constructs of EQA utilization and HRD needs.

To ensure the methodological rigor and trustworthiness of the qualitative data, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria were employed. Credibility was achieved by the triangulation of data sources and member validation, in which participants evaluated summaries of the discussions. Transferability was ensured by providing comprehensive assessments of the educational and social contexts of the three designated border locations. A meticulous audit trail that documented all coding and analytical procedures contributed to maintaining high reliability. Finally, confirmability involved mitigating personal bias through peer debriefing with independent qualitative researchers to ensure that the themes were grounded in the data. This comprehensive analysis demonstrated that the ultimate HRD techniques exhibited a robust

consensus (PNI_{modified}) about their efficacy and relevance across various contexts. This demonstrated their ability to transform EQA from a compliance instrument into a catalyst for social transformation.

The detailed Materials and Methods section outlined a rigorous, three-phase critical survey framework designed to address the "Compliance-to-Justice Divide," advancing from an assessment of equity disparities via PNI_{modified} analysis to the joint development of culturally responsive HRD strategies. The systematic collection and validation of quantitative data (Phase I) and qualitative contextual insights (Phase II) have produced a significant evidence base regarding the priority needs for HR intervention and the socio-political constraints and opportunities within border-school ecosystems. We are now proceeding to the "Results" section, which will present the empirical outcomes of the PNI_{modified} analysis, the themes derived from the SWOT–PEST inquiry, and the finalized validated HRD models. This will show how EQA data can be used to promote empowerment and equal access to education in Thailand's economically disadvantaged border areas.

RESULTS

Critical Equity Needs Analysis

Addressing Research Question 1, Phase I findings, which examined the existing conditions, aspirational conditions, and priority needs for implementing EQA in border schools, indicated that school personnel comprehend EQA's significance conceptually; however, a substantial disparity persists between bureaucratic practices and educational expectations regarding "compliance-to-empowerment." The Modified Priority Needs Index (PNI_{modified}) quantified this disparity and identified the most pressing developmental needs across three primary domains, indicating that the foremost requirement is the active, strategic, and practical implementation of EQA solutions, moving beyond theoretical comprehension to realize systemic social change. See table 1.

The utilization of EQA as a management tool (0.071) possesses the highest PNI_{modified} score. This significant conclusion indicates that the primary issue lies not in the content of EQA reports, but rather in the failure of schools to utilize them strategically or administratively. Individuals are utilizing the EQA as a compliance document rather than as a tool for equitable decision-making and resource allocation. The schools possess a fundamental understanding of the concept, which is the least significant aspect in this domain; nonetheless, they lack the political will and capacity to implement strategic measures. Furthermore, the urgent need to improve learning quality (0.058)—focusing on everyday instruction and teaching practices—rather than solely targeting outcomes reaffirms the importance of teacher empowerment and fundamental pedagogical reform. Research indicates that border schools must cease merely obtaining EQA results and begin incorporating them into their strategic planning to achieve significant progress in educational equity.

Table 1.

Critical Equity Gap Analysis (PNI_{modified}): Prioritizing Strategic Action Over Conceptual Understanding in Border School EQA Utilization

Domain	Foremost Requirement (Highest PNI _{modified}) - The Justice Gap	Least Pressing Requirement (Lowest PNI _{modified}) - The Conceptual Strength
Application of EQA Results	Employment of EQA as a management instrument (0.071)	Conceptual application of EQA findings (0.056)
Enhancement of Educational Quality	Improvement of learning quality (0.058)	Student learning outcomes (0.035)
Learning Ecosystem Development	Strategic planning for learning ecosystem management (0.049)	Curriculum and learning activity design (0.033)

Critical Contextual Analysis: Systemic Barriers to Social Justice

Addressing Research Question 2, the qualitative SWOT–PEST analysis investigated the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with EQA utilization, highlighting the structural and socio-cultural elements that either hinder or facilitate the transition from compliance to social justice. See table 2.

Table 2.

Critical Contextual Analysis: Systemic Barriers and Levers for Equity-Focused HRD in Thai Border Schools

Category	Key Findings with Equity Lens
Strengths	Development of tailored curricula and community-supported educational initiatives, with a focus on participatory leadership and governance. These are internal resources for empowerment.
Weaknesses	EQA data is not consistently used in HR planning and teaching; learning plans are not flexible enough to meet the demands of different students and the realities of the area. These are systemic obstacles to equity within the organization.
Opportunities	A significant number of individuals in the community are engaged and receptive to bilingual and multicultural education. The ASEAN principles facilitate collaboration among schools across several nations. These are external variables that enhance cultural awareness among individuals.
Threats	There is an absence of a tailored educational program for the border region, insufficient governmental funding for border education, and linguistic and cultural disparities hinder effective teaching for all. These are external threats to social justice and sustainability.

The findings indicate that the schools possess some internal resources that enhance their cultural responsiveness, such as community support and participatory leadership. Nonetheless, external and institutional challenges, such as insufficient finance and regulatory complications, hinder EQA's ability to foster equitable human resource development.

Culturally Attuned HRD Strategies for Educator Empowerment

Addressing Research Question 3, the seven strategies emerged from Phase III: Participatory Strategy Co-Development and were then assessed in the tables presented in Section 4.4. The seven techniques devised to bridge the significant compliance gap and enhance social equity are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1.

Framework of Culturally Attuned HRD Strategies for Educator Empowerment



Figure 1 illustrates a comprehensive framework of Culturally Attuned HRD Strategies for Educator Empowerment, organized into seven interconnected areas designed to enhance learning environments and support staff development in culturally diverse border regions. The framework emphasizes the following key actions:

1. **Upskilling Teachers and School Leaders:** This strategy focuses on providing ongoing professional development to improve educators' skills in educational innovation, leadership, and, critically, cultural competence.
2. **Contextualized and Flexible Curriculum Co-Design:** This involves developing a specifically tailored local curriculum to the unique multilingual, multicultural, and political contexts of the operating region.
3. **Strategic Use of EQA Results for Continuous Improvement:** Here, Education Quality Assessment (EQA) data is transformed from a mere compliance tool into an evidence-based mechanism for equitable resource allocation and planning.

4. **Development of Educational Information Systems:** This calls for developing or improving localized digital infrastructure and data systems to ensure that decision-making and performance monitoring are robustly data driven.
5. **Cross-Sectoral Collaboration and Linkages:** The strategy champions robust cooperation across educational institutions, local communities, governmental entities, and nonprofit organizations to build a unified support system.
6. **Reducing Inequality (Equity-Centered Planning):** This component mandates the implementation of policies and resource allocation strategies that actively rectify historical prejudice and prioritize investment in the most underserved areas.
7. **Inclusive Learning Spaces and Environments:** The final strategy focuses on implementing policies and resource allocation techniques that proactively rectify past inequality and directly invest in the most underserved communities, ensuring all spaces are welcoming and supportive.

Effectiveness of Empowerment Strategies

Addressing Research Question 4, In the final step, we evaluated the efficacy of the recommended strategies, ensuring they addressed the primary needs (Section 4.1) and facilitated teacher empowerment and equity.

The solutions were assessed using a multi-criteria framework involving stakeholders and experts, with a particular focus on social change metrics, including Equity and Inclusion Impact. See table 3.

Table 3.

Multi-Criteria Evaluation of HRD Strategies: Assessing Efficacy, Feasibility, and Impact on Equity and Empowerment

HRD Strategy	Efficacy	Stakeholder Support	Feasibility	Equity & Inclusion Impact
Upskilling Teachers & School Leaders	4.5	4.6	4.2	4.6
Contextualized & Flexible Curriculum Development	4.3	4.4	4.0	4.2
Strategic Use of EQA Results for Continuous Improvement	4.2	4.3	3.7	4.7
Development of Educational Information Systems	3.8	3.9	3.5	N/A

Enhancing the skills of educators and school administrators was the optimal option across all practical domains (Effectiveness, Support, and Feasibility). This conclusion underscores the critical role of human capital empowerment in driving reform, confirming the shift from institutional compliance to individual and collective agency. The methodology for the Strategic Utilization of EQA Results for Continuous Improvement received the highest ratings from experts in both Integration of EQA and Data Utilization (4.9) and Equity and Inclusion

Impact (4.7). This validates the primary hypothesis of the study: that deliberate repositioning of EQA can convert it into the most efficacious policy instrument for social fairness.

Conversely, the Development of Educational Information Systems consistently received the lowest ratings across all areas (Effectiveness: 3.8; Feasibility: 3.5) and the highest Implementation Challenge score (3.0). This indicates that the deficiency in digital infrastructure and technical proficiency in border schools is a persistent issue that undermines the efficacy of data-driven systems and perpetuates digital inequality. The evaluation confirms that prioritizing people-centric and capacity-building strategies (such as teacher upskilling and curriculum adaptation) is essential in the short term, while also promoting focused investment in digital infrastructure to support a long-term, data-driven vision for social transformation.

The Results section adeptly addressed Research Questions 1 through 4, beginning with a quantitative delineation of the "Compliance-to-Empowerment" gap, wherein the PNI_{modified} underscored the imperative for strategic administrative intervention (PNI_{modified}) rather than superficial conceptual understanding. The SWOT–PEST study contextualizes this conclusion by highlighting systemic issues, such as insufficient targeted financing and policies. The study developed and evaluated a series of seven Culturally Attuned HRD Strategies (Figure 1). The findings indicated that upskilling teachers & school leaders and the strategic use of EQA results were the most effective methods for fostering social transformation and equity. The subsequent Discussion section will analyze these empirical findings in relation to existing literature, clarify the theoretical and practical implications of transforming EQA from a bureaucratic compliance mechanism to a comprehensive tool for equity-oriented human resource development, and offer specific policy recommendations for sustainable educational reform in Thailand's marginalized border regions.

DISCUSSION

From compliance to empowerment: what the findings mean

Results from several phases converge on a critical assertion: EQA fosters equity exclusively when employed as a management and development tool rather than merely a reporting mechanism. The most significant PNI_{modified} gap—utilizing EQA as a management instrument—demonstrates that the constraining element is application capability, rather than conceptual understanding. In summary, border schools are aware of EQA, although they lack the necessary routines, authority, and assistance to effectively implement their knowledge for daily improvement. This aligns with critiques of performance management that dissociate evaluation from continuous developmental practice (Pulakos et al., 2019) and supports reform models that incorporate assessment into iterative cycles of feedback, coaching, and skill development (Fullan, 2016a, 2016b).

The outcomes from the SWOT-PEST study support this assessment: Internal strengths, such as community support and participative leadership, coexist with external constraints, like inadequate money, regulatory inflexibility, and language barriers. In the absence of deliberate

HRD design, EQA may perpetuate a "compliance trap" that diverts scarce time and focus from improving education in resource-deficient environments (Shirmohammadi et al., 2021; Wang & Swanson, 2008). The significant impact of teacher upskilling and intentional EQA utilization on efficacy and equality reinforces the notion that a people-centric paradigm of change is valid, wherein human capital—not documentation—drives systemic transformation.

Positioning HRD as the missing middle

This study contextualizes its findings within existing literature, enhancing the growing corpus of HRD scholarship that underscores the significance of context, culture, and power in development efforts across ASEAN (Banks, 2021; Crocco, 2021a, 2021b; Giordino & Crocco, 2025; Tkachenko et al., 2022). This seven-strategy approach operationalizes the concept by integrating competence development (strategy 1) with contextualized curriculum co-design (strategy 2) and equity-focused planning (strategy 6). This aligns with the advocacy for the incorporation of indigenous approaches and culturally sensitive leadership within HRD theory and practice (Kuchinke et al., 2022; Kuchinke & Lee, 2024).

The findings clarify how HRD can enhance the linkage between EQA evidence and classroom transformation: (a) by translating EQA indicators into precise skill objectives for educators and leaders; (b) by instituting feedback-rich practices (coaching, lesson study, peer observation) that make those objectives actionable; and (c) by aligning incentives and resources to guarantee that improvement efforts are protected and rewarded. This addresses the "critical divide" identified in the review between accountability systems and teacher agency (Garavan et al., 2018, 2019a, 2019b), reframing EQA as a mechanism for professional development rather than a final objective.

Equity in border ecosystems: why context matters

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Digital systems: necessary, but not first

The minimal scores for Educational Information Systems caution against errors in the sequence of operations. In scenarios of inadequate connectivity, data platforms that operate more swiftly than individuals and organizations can exacerbate issues, such as data being entered but remaining unused. The practical implication involves a phased approach to digitalization: initiate with basic tools that directly support coaching and formative assessment; integrate each digital enhancement with explicit use cases pertaining to EQA-to-HRD workflows; and then increase the infrastructure. This model prioritizes individuals over platforms, so reconcile the developmental advantages of data with the pragmatic circumstances of border schools.

Policy and practice implications

The results indicate that the subsequent maneuvers are both high-leverage and feasible.

1. Transform EQA recommendations into actionable playbooks for enhancement. For each EQA domain, provide a concise list of evidence-based HRD actions, such as coaching cycles, PLC protocols, and bilingual lesson templates, together with user-friendly tracking rubrics. This directly addresses the "application gap" that has been altered by the PNI_{modified} framework (Pitiyanuwat et al., 2017, 2018; Pulakos et al., 2019).

2. Prioritize investment in human capital. Allocate funds for educators and leaders to enhance their competencies, including micro-credentials in multilingual instruction and culturally responsive leadership, which have demonstrated efficacy in practical applications (Kuchinke et al., 2022; Kuchinke & Lee, 2024).

3. Incorporate community co-design into your organization. Mandate border schools to establish Equity Design Councils of parents, elders, and civil society organizations to collaboratively develop curriculum modifications and monitor EQA-related enhancement strategies (Arnesen & Allan, 2009; Szelei et al., 2020).

4. Create translators for EQA-HRD. Educate district-level "improvement partners" to transform school EQA findings into 90-day HRD initiatives that demonstrate instructional changes (Fullan, 2016a, 2016b).

5. Strategize your digital investments. Initiate with low-bandwidth dashboards that align with coaching cycles. Transition to complete MIS alone when use thresholds are attained.

6. Ensure you provide time for practice. Incorporate time for peer observation and lesson study into the contract to ensure that HRD is a standard component of the workday rather than an additional obligation.

7. Accountability grounded in equity. Based a portion of the supervisory evaluation on advancements in equity metrics, such as language-access provisions and the inclusion of stateless learners, rather than solely on aggregate test scores.

Theoretical contributions

The study offers three notable contributions. Initially, it outlines the causal relationships from EQA to HRD, illustrating that application capability functions as a mediator between assessment data and equity outcomes. Secondly, it enhances critical HRD by employing indigenous and

culturally responsive techniques within a specific seven-strategy framework (Kuchinke et al., 2022; Kuchinke & Lee, 2024). Third, it reconceptualizes border schools as hubs of innovation where intercultural resources facilitate improvement within the framework of participatory governance (Fullan, 2016a, 2016b).

Limitations and directions for future research

Two limitations moderate assertions. Efficacy assessments rely partially on reviews from experts and stakeholders, which, while advantageous, do not correspond to longitudinal outcomes. The results stem from specific Thai border conditions, hence limiting generalizability without alteration. Future research should conduct longitudinal studies linking EQA-aligned HRD to changes in teaching practices and learner outcomes and assess the cost-effectiveness of human-capital-first sequencing versus tech-first sequencing. Future research should also evaluate participatory and indigenous human resource development methods through design-based implementation research; develop equity dashboards to track access, engagement, and advancement for stateless and minority learners.

The findings collectively reflect a pragmatic, justice-oriented perspective: EQA can function as an equity lever only if it is included in sustainable HRD practices that are culturally attuned and organizationally feasible. Emphasizing individuals, formalizing EQA-to-practice pathways, and structuring digital systems to support rather than supplant human judgment facilitate a feasible transition from compliance to capability in Thailand's border schools (Carney, 2022; Fullan, 2016a, 2016b; Kuchinke et al., 2022; Kuchinke & Lee, 2024; Pitiyanuwat et al., 2017, 2018; Pulakos et al., 2019).

CONCLUSION

This study meticulously examined the implementation of External Quality Assessment (EQA) to improve Human Resource Development (HRD) in Thai border schools, offering an evidence-based framework for strategic interventions focused on social justice. The study produced four significant contributions:

Critical Compliance Gap (RQ 1): EQA predominantly serves as a compliance report, indicating a deficiency that necessitates its evolution into a proactive strategic management tool aimed at enhancing teacher competences and equity.

Contextual Dynamics (RQ 2): The SWOT–PEST analysis revealed internal school strengths compromised by systemic challenges (e.g., digital inequality, uneven regulation), underscoring the necessity for culturally sensitive human resource development.

Seven Culturally Attuned HRD Strategies (RQ 3): The research established a comprehensive framework encompassing "Upskilling Teachers and School Leaders" and "Contextualized Curriculum Co-Design," aimed at empowering educators and enhancing curriculum relevance.

Effectiveness and Feasibility (RQ 4): The evaluation revealed elevated impact scores PNI_{modified} for "Upskilling Teachers and School Leaders" (4.6 Impact) and "Strategic Use of EQA Results" (4.7 Impact), while digital disparity persists as a significant implementation obstacle.

In summary, the research promotes the use of EQA as a tool for development rather than punishment to enhance inclusion and educational success. The suggested paradigm provides a reproducible and scalable framework that links strategic HRD initiatives with EQA indicators and local requirements to convert neglected learning environments into avenues for social justice.

This study theoretically endorses the implementation of robust performance evaluation methodologies, such as External Quality Assurance (EQA), within fundamental frameworks for human capital development. Furthermore, it provides empirical evidence that underscores the necessity of data-driven and contextually customized Human Resource Development (HRD) activities in intricate border regions. This research advances academic discourse on inclusive education, cultural responsiveness, and capacity-building as methods for achieving equity.

The study presents a replicable, equity-centered HRD framework for educational stakeholders committed to realizing social justice goals within complex sociopolitical contexts. The proposed seven-strategy HRD framework is grounded on real-world scenarios and insights from stakeholders and experts, ensuring its cultural relevance and applicability for policy development. Employing strategies such as contextualized curriculum co-design and equity-centered planning to address region-specific challenges achieves optimal results.

This work enhances theoretical and practical understanding by integrating performance evaluation (EQA) into human capital development and providing empirical evidence for data-driven, customized HRD in border regions, so enriching the literature on equality. It offers a replicable seven-strategy HRD framework that has been validated by stakeholders and enhanced through contextualized curriculum co-design. The primary issues are the inability to generalize results, agency bias stemming from perceptual data, the lack of a long-term framework to assess lasting impact, and the complications introduced by the digital divide.

Future study should prioritize comparative social analysis across diverse ASEAN border contexts to broaden geographical scope and assess the efficacy of HRD methodologies and cultural policy implementation. It must employ long-term equity tracking to monitor the impact of HRD on teacher agency and workforce stability over time. Furthermore, researchers should develop decolonizing HRM frameworks that incorporate indigenous and informal practices, utilizing community-oriented indicators such as student outcomes and local engagement to ensure accountability and advance educational justice.

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