

The Characteristics of Lifelong Learners among Thai Youth

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Abstract

Due to rapid societal changes at the global level, Thai youth must acquire the characteristics of lifelong learners. Thus far, there have been no clear indicators of these characteristics; therefore, the present research aims to analyze and present the characteristics of lifelong learners among Thai youth. This study employed qualitative methodology to collect interview data from a sample of 5 Thai adult lifelong learners and 5 Thai youth leaders and use the results in focus group of 10 lifelong learning and youth experts to draw conclusions about the characteristics of lifelong learners. The results reveal that the characteristics of lifelong learners among Thai youth are 1) having the spirit of a searcher, 2) employing various learning styles to seek knowledge, 3) being open to learning and ready to engage in self-directed learning, 4) having the courage to face and solve problems appropriately, 5) finding value and potential within themselves, 6) learning through interaction and enjoying exchanging knowledge with others, 7) using analysis, synthesis and crystallization skills, 8) being learning leaders, and 9) living a sufficient life and being happy. All these characteristics can aid Thai youth in becoming lifelong learners with the potential to transform Thailand into a learning society.

Keywords: characteristics; lifelong learner; Thai youth; Lifelong learning

Introduction

Rapid changes in the world economy, society, politics and culture have forced Thai society to adopt a holistic development approach in which "humans" are positioned at the center of development (Phuthong & Srisan, 2002). Thai youth represent one of the key age groups for development efforts, and the United Nations defines "youth" as people who are 15-25 years old. The youth population will drive future development within the country because youth are physically able, independent thinkers, ready to develop new skills and able to rely on and learn by themselves (Chiengkul, 2009). According to the Education Ministry (2010), Thai education styles consist of formal, non-formal and informal education. All three education systems must encourage learners to learn the four pillars of education defined by UNESCO: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live and learning to be (UNESCO, 1996). The desired image of Thai youth in the 21st century is of people who exemplify the concept of lifelong learning: individuals who encourage and support learning in all circumstances, learn with flexibility and variety, engage in self-directed learning, learn through integration, are ready to face and solve problems and are motivated to learn continually even after graduation from the formal system (Areekul, 1998; Office of the Thai National Education Commission, 2000; Sangsri, 2001; National Council for Child and Youth Development, 2011). The results of a literature review of research by educators in Thailand and overseas reveal that "lifelong learners" are people who are ready to learn, open to learning, participate in the learning process and achieve their goals through ongoing learning throughout their lives.

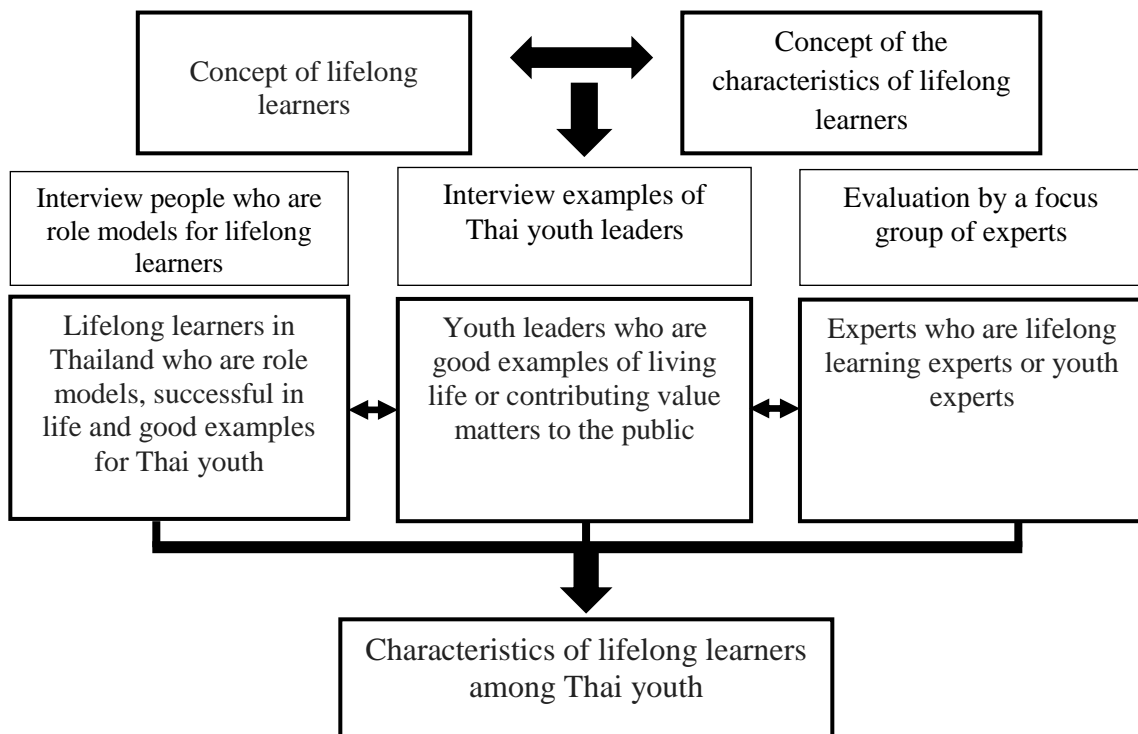
Lifelong learners exhibit essential characteristics such as a love of learning, the aptitude to engage in self-directed learning, an interest in questioning the unknown, the capacity to learn through practice, various life skills (i.e., thinking, problem solving, and communication skills), optimism about themselves and their circumstances, the ability to find value in themselves, the skill to convey the value and importance of learning to other people, the motivation to learn, and the ability to manage and integrate knowledge in a useful manner in diverse situations. Thus, lifelong learners enjoy living life as well as learning (Cropley, 1978; Tuijman, Kirsch & Wagner, 1997; Chanthalam, 2007). However, hopes to improve the process of shaping Thai youth to become lifelong learners remain dim because of the lack of a clear and concrete definition of the characteristics of lifelong learners. Even though many of the organizations working with Thai youth have proposed various characteristics, most of those definitions include only the basic characteristics Thai youth should possess. Thus, the present research aims to identify the specific characteristics of lifelong learners among Thai youth in order to develop a framework of characteristics that institutions, organizations and departments responsible for Thai youth can use to aid Thai youth in becoming the primary driver of efforts to convert Thai society into a learning society.

The purpose of the research

To analyze and present the characteristics of lifelong learners among Thai youth

Research framework

Figure 1: Research framework



Research methodology

To analyze the characteristics of lifelong learners among Thai youth, the researcher employed a qualitative research design as described below.

1. Populations and samples

(1.1) The populations included in this research include Thai lifelong learners, Thai youth leaders, and Thai youth experts.

(1.2) The samples for this research are as follows:

(1.2.1) Five Thai lifelong learners who were selected based on the following criteria: people who are successful in life, who are fully accepted in society and who are role models. These individuals were also required to be leaders who arrange beneficial and regular activities related to lifelong learning for people in the community

or society or teachers of Thai wisdom with more than 10 years of experience in transferring knowledge and expertise in any area of wisdom.

- (1.2.2) Five Thai youth leaders were chosen using the snowball sampling method. The researcher began with the president of the Children and Youth Council of Thailand.
- (1.2.3) Five lifelong education experts were chosen using the following selection criteria: individuals with a doctoral or master's degree in a non-formal education major or a major related to lifelong education, at least 5 years of experience as an instructor in non-formal education or lifelong education and who are experienced and have recognized expertise in non-formal education or lifelong education.
- (1.2.4) Five experts on youth were chosen using the following selection criteria: employees in departments related to youth development with at least 5 years of experience at the professional level or leaders with at least 10 years of work experience arranging activities to develop the potential of youth.

2. Research tools

(2.1) An interview guide was developed for the sample of lifelong learners that focused on the "characteristics of lifelong learners suitable for Thai youth". The guide included open questions that were tested for validity by 5 experts using the index of item-objective congruence (IOC). The test results revealed that all the question items had an average score higher than 0.50 indicating that the questions conformed to the purpose of the research and had suitable content validity.

(2.2) An interview guide was developed to facilitate the lifelong education experts and youth experts in evaluating the characteristics of lifelong learners that were summarized from the data obtained from interviews with the Thai lifelong learners and Thai youth. The guide included open questions that were approved and considered appropriate for evaluation by the main advisors of the present study.

3. Data collection

(3.1) The researcher collected data via face-to-face interviews with 5 Thai lifelong learners and 5 Thai youth. The researcher arranged the dates, times and locations of the interviews in advance and provided the interview guide to the interviewees 2 weeks prior to the scheduled interviews. Following the interviews, the researcher summarized (in an outline) the characteristics of lifelong learners among Thai youth and presented the preliminary results to the experts for evaluation.

(3.2) The researcher arranged a focus group that consisted of 5 lifelong education experts and 5 youth experts in meeting room 823 of the Phar Mingkhwan Karnsuksathai building, Chulalongkorn building on December 24, 2015, from 13.00-16.00 hrs., to evaluate and summarize the characteristics of lifelong learners among Thai youth.

4. Data analysis

The researcher used the content analysis method to summarize the collected data and then write a descriptive report that includes quotations from the interviews.

Results

The results of the interviews and the expert evaluation revealed that to be lifelong learners, Thai youth should possess the following 9 characteristics:

1. The spirit of a researcher, which involves being observant, questioning the unknown, participating in the learning process to answer questions about the unknown and putting knowledge into actual practice.

The second lifelong learner stated that "...most Thai youth are afraid of answering questions and do not like to ask questions even if they are curious. Knowing how to ask questions is very important because the more courageously youths ask questions, the more knowledge they gain...". This statement is consistent with the answer provided by the third Thai youth, who noted that "...questioning, curiosity may be common among foreign youth, but for Thai youth, questioning that leads to answers should not be overlooked. It should be a vital characteristic because asking questions might lead to answers for a probable new body of knowledge...".

According to the results of the expert evaluation, all the experts accepted this characteristic and offered the following supporting reason: curiosity is revealed through questioning; thus, curiosity should be encouraged in practice because practice enables one to test the accuracy of previous answers. The experts indicated that this process represents a learning method that is used by researchers and that Thai lifelong learners should employ it in their learning.

2. The ability to use various learning styles appropriately to seek answers.

The first lifelong learner proposed that "...*Su (Listener), Ji (Thinker), Pu (Asker), and Li (Writer) represent not only the heart of the wise in Buddhism but also a crucial skill of lifelong learners that Thai youth should focus on the most...*". This notion was also mentioned by the second Thai youth: "...*lifelong learners should not only learn well by listening, reading, and speaking but also through various methods such as listen, speak, ask, read, write...*".

The results of the expert focus group revealed that all the experts accepted this characteristic and advocated that lifelong learners should employ various learning styles, should not be strictly limited to any specific learning style and should not believe the results of only one learning style. For example, when a lifelong learner receives information from one person, he or she should not believe it immediately but instead verify the information by searching the internet or asking another knowledgeable person. This characteristic is not commonly observed among Thai youth, who primarily learn through their familiar learning style.

3. Open nestle earning and readiness to engage in self-directed learning.

People who can learn independently must know and understand themselves, be able to analyze their needs and interests and have the capacity to push themselves to achieve their goals. The fourth lifelong learner mentioned that "...*most Thai youth learn as a follower of teachers who instructor teach them. In reality, learning should happen all the time through self-directed learning. Therefore, self-directed learning should be an essential characteristic among Thai youth...*". The fifth lifelong learner noted that "...*youth who are self-directed learners will be able to tell what they want, like, and dislike and the life goals they want to achieve by themselves, which might require a facilitator to help from a distance...*". All the experts who participated in the evaluation accepted this characteristic and provided the following supporting reasons: youths who possess the characteristic of self-directed learning will be prepared to learn at all times and will be open to opportunities and new knowledge. Individuals with this characteristic have the capacity to learn without requiring follow up from someone else, which suggests that they are more responsible.

4. The ability to employ a thought process that involves analysis, synthesis and crystallization.

The first lifelong learner commented that "...*the ability to analyze and differentiate facts should be a characteristic of Thai youth who will be lifelong learners because the diversity of information in the online social era has caused many Thai youth to be victims of information with no differentiation and analysis, leading them to receive faulty facts...*". The third lifelong learner emphasized that "...*I see Thai youth who study a lot and know a lot but do not know how to apply them because of the failure of the education system. This is our weak point. Therefore, if we are to develop Thai youth to become lifelong learners, we should encourage them to bring what they have learned into analysis then evaluate the analyzed information and finally be able to apply all that they have learned appropriately to their own context...*". This statement was consistent with the statement by the fourth Thai youth leader: "...*Thai youth should have analytical thinking and synthesis skills, while family and school should have a direct role in supporting youth to learn these skills...*".

All the participants in the expert focus group accepted this characteristic based on the following reasons: Thai youth should develop their ability to analyze and synthesize information because Thai youth primarily prioritize memorization over thinking. The experts indicated that it is not surprising to observe that Thai youth are unable to apply knowledge or use information. However, analysis and synthesis must occur through an appropriate process, and the outcomes should be based on crystallization and could then be used in real-life situations.

5. The courage to face problems and a readiness to learn and participate in a process to solve problems in a creative manner.

The second lifelong learner expressed that "...*we must accept that most Thai youth are unable to solve their own problems. They lack confidence when they face unexpected problems; thus, there is a real need to develop the ability to solve problems as they occur...*". The fourth lifelong learner claimed that "...*Thai society needs youth who can solve problems without hesitation and who are able to face problems that occur in any situation...*". The first youth leader stated that "...*youth can be good lifelong learners by solving problems in life...*".

The expert focus group revealed that all the experts accepted this characteristic. The experts indicated that the ability to solve the problems that occur in daily life is a characteristic that Thai youth should have, with the following condition: Thai youth must engage only in constructive problem solving.

6. The capacity to identify their own potential and value and to use that potential and value for the benefit of learning.

The fifth lifelong learner mentioned that "...youth who can see their own value and potential will be people who are ready to learn everything in life without thinking that it would be too difficult or beyond their ability...". The second youth leader stated that "...I believe that everybody has his/her own potential but on different levels according to his/her experiences. This potential will encourage each person to continue pursue learning...". The fifth youth leader noted that "...Thai youth should be more confident about their own value and abilities and should believe in themselves because whenever we believe in ourselves, we feel empowered to achieve success...". All the participants in the expert focus group accepted this characteristic. They also noted that the capacity to identify one's own value should be a characteristic of people of all ages because perceiving value encourages people to develop self-esteem and self-confidence. Many youth lack the confidence to learn because they never see their own value; instead, they seek value from external sources to protect themselves while remaining in their comfort zone.

7. The capability to learn through interactions, exchange knowledge and experiences with other people with knowledge or expertise and to accept criticism from other people.

The second lifelong learner expressed that "...learning in the modern world should be done through formal and informal discussion. Discussion leads to the exchange of knowledge from one to another and helps youth learn from the experiences of other people, which might be useful for them in the future...". The third lifelong learners expressed that "...Thai youth who are going to be lifelong learners should have the courage to learn from different experiences and dare to accept criticism from others. These criticisms will be useful for developing themselves...". The results of the expert focus group indicated that all the experts accepted this characteristic based on the rationale that Thai youth should seek to learn more through interactions, which involves not only listening to people but also sharing their knowledge and experiences with others. Both positive and negative learning experiences have value, and, more importantly, youth learn more effectively when they are willing to accept and implement suggestions for improvement.

8. The aptitude to be learning leaders who serve as role models and inspiration for other people, have a long-term vision and the ability to manage themselves and other people, are flexible and are capable of driving their local community to become a learning community.

The fourth lifelong learner emphasized that "...lifelong learners in modern society should be role models to other people in the sense that they are good role models for work, role models for living life, and role models for serving society...". The fifth lifelong learner expressed that "...youth who are lifelong learning should have long-term vision, which involves not only giving priority to the present but also looking ahead to the future, and they must have the potential to manage themselves and surrounding matters...". The second Thai youth leader shared that "...youth who are lifelong learners should have the characteristics of leaders who are responsible for themselves and for the public...". All the participants in the expert focus group accepted this characteristic, reasoning that Thai youth should possess leadership skills that are entirely different than the skills required by general community leaders. Youth must exhibit leadership in learning through enthusiasm and responsibility and must be able to manage themselves and their circumstances with flexibility. More importantly, youth who are lifelong learners should be role models or inspiration for others and promote the success of future generations. Communities with many lifelong learners will undoubtedly have a better chance of becoming communities of learning.

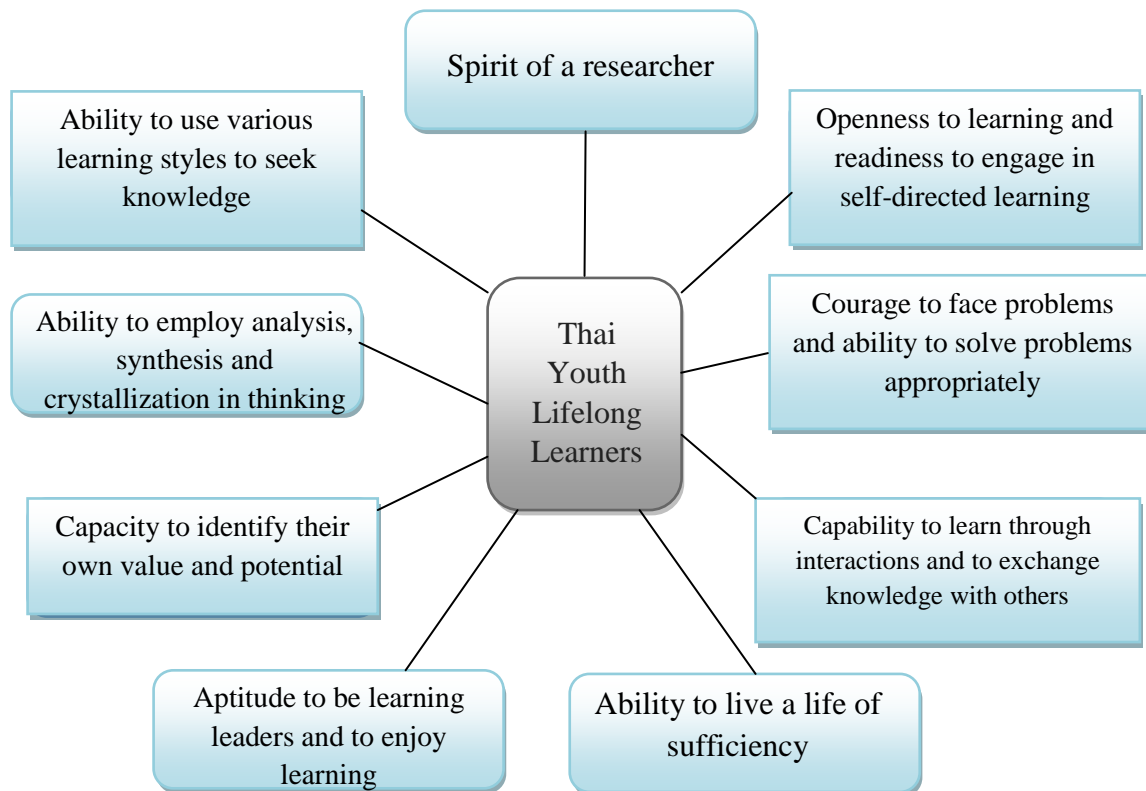
9. The ability to live life happily according to the philosophy of sufficiency economy advocated by King Rama IX, which consists of living life with reasonableness and moderation and building self-immunity.

The first lifelong learner mentioned that "...Thai youth should have their uniqueness, which is learning to live in sufficiency according to the philosophy of sufficiency economy encouraged by King Rama IX. Sufficiency does not mean living in poverty and hunger but learning to live in moderation, constantly have reasons to live life then this will make youths have more immunity to living life..." The second lifelong learner stated that "...nowadays, youth are impacted by media and trends or by the media around them, which causes them to want to live in luxury. Some are poor but must borrow money or get a loan just to buy expensive goods so they can have similar things to what other people have. Therefore, we should make youth live a sufficient life that is suitable for their own contexts...".

The results of the expert focus group revealed that all the experts accepted this characteristic. The experts provided supporting reasons for their agreement, including that youth who live according to the philosophy of sufficiency economy promoted by King Rama IX exhibit characteristics 1-8 described above. The philosophy of sufficiency economy teaches people to learn by using themselves as an instrument of study to seek knowledge, to learn by practicing a variety of learning methods, to use analytical thinking and logic, to learn through exchanges with others, to solve problems that arise, to believe in their full potential and to be successful in living life with sufficiency and serving as role models for the next generation.

The study findings described above are summarized in figure 2.

Figure 2: Characteristics of Lifelong Learners among Thai Youth



Discussion

The characteristics of lifelong learners include behaviors, skills, attitudes, and knowledge that people use continually throughout their entire lives, not only at certain times. These characteristics encourage people to learn all the time and to use what they learn to benefit themselves and the public. Based on the results of the present research, there are 9 main characteristics of lifelong learners among Thai youth.

1. Thai youth who are lifelong learners should possess the spirit of a researcher who questions the unknown and continually leads the search for answers through experimental or practical processes. This result is consistent with Chareonwongsak (2003), Longworth (2003), and Office of the Basic Education Commission of Thailand (2004), who stated that youth should be observant, have the courage to ask about things they do not understand and learn by putting knowledge into practice. Learning by seeking answers through a continuous process will help youth gain more knowledge and an eagerness to continue learning (Nordstrom, 2011).

2. Encouraging Thai youth to use a broader variety of learning styles is consistent with Suwanpitak (1999), who suggested that lifelong learners should learn using more than one method because a variety of learning styles enables them to examine all available information and determine its reliability. This notion is also supported by Wongboon (2007), who found that lifelong learners exhibit learning behaviors such as listening, speaking, reading and writing. Buddhism believes that people who listen, ask, think and write have more opportunities to be successful and to learn (Vajiramedhi, 2015).

3. An openness to learning and the ability to engage in self-directed learning should be a characteristic of Thai youth who are lifelong learners. This is consistent with the findings of studies by Skager (1978), Candy, Crebert, & O'Leary (1994), and Panich (2012), which noted that self-directed learning is very important for lifelong learning and is one of the essential characteristics of lifelong learners of all ages, not only youth. In the Thai context, many Thai youth still lack experience in self-directed learning due to the nature of Thai education management, which continues to focus on teacher-centered teaching and learning.

4. Advanced technology has provided many Thai youth with rapid access to information from around the world. Employing analysis, synthesis and crystallization would encourage Thai youth to differentiate between true or false information and determine the reliability of information. This aligns with Sinlarat et al (2007), who reported that the desired characteristics of Thai youth in an information-based economy should include being a smart consumer and using constructive analytical thinking. In addition, crystallization should be combined with idea creation to encourage the development of a constructive lifelong learning process (Ya-Hui Sy, 2009), which is consistent with Trier and Peschar (1995), who noted that people with the ability to crystallize their thinking have the capacity to learn.

5. Problems can arise in any situation and at any time, and Thai youth should have the courage to solve problems without fear and the capacity to draw from various experiences to engage in problem solving. Many scholars such as Trier and Peschar (1995), Tuijman, Kirsch & Wagner (1997), Sinlarat et al (2007) have proposed that the ability to solve problems is one of the characteristics of lifelong learners.

6. Thai youth who are lifelong learners should have a positive attitude toward themselves. They should be able to identify their own value and potential, which is consistent with Skager (1978), Knapper and Cropley (2000), Charoenwongsak (2003) and Hartas (2016), who claimed that lifelong learners are typically people who recognize their unlimited capacity for learning and are motivated and happy to learn throughout their life.

7. Learning through formal and informal interactions provides opportunities for youth to exchange knowledge and experiences. This exchange enables youth to receive different aspects of information or knowledge and may occasionally allow youth to identify their weaknesses and areas they need to improve (Office of the Basic Education Commission of Thailand, 2004).

8. The results of the present study reveal that Thai youth who are lifelong learners in the 21st century should be learning leaders, have a long-term vision, have the ability to manage themselves and other people and be responsible for given tasks, including serving as role models for the next generation. This is consistent with Ronnarong's (2007) model of lifelong learning in Thai society, which states that lifelong learners should be role models for society and leaders who have the ability to manage and plan and who focus on maximizing public benefits rather than benefits for themselves. The Thai Education Ministry aims to ensure that Thai youth have the potential to learn, and in addition to serving as leaders, they must be the main power driving the development of a learning society.

9. Living life in moderation according to the sufficiency economy philosophy advocated by King Rama IX is an essential characteristic of Thai youth, and it differs from other concepts and theories regarding the characteristics of lifelong learners. King Rama IX was a role model for lifelong learners who lived life in moderation based on his ability to live simply: he encouraged people to save some of their income to spend during hard times or emergencies, to choose an occupation in the context of the community and to not waver according to societal trends, to employ reasonableness in living life and to develop immunity to negative external influences.

Conclusion

Ongoing changes in society require Thai youth to develop skills as lifelong learners who possess knowledge and the ability to adjust and are prepared to be the main power driving the nation to remain level with other countries. Thai youth who strive to be lifelong learners should practice the characteristics described in this study in their daily lives: develop the spirit of a researcher; employ various learning styles; be open and ready to engage in self-directed learning; be courageous in facing and ready to solve problems; use analysis, synthesis and crystallization in their thinking; identify their own value; enjoy exchanging knowledge with others; be learning leaders; and live lives of sufficiency. However, these characteristics cannot be acquired in a short period of time; they require time and practice as well as training and refinement from others, including family, educational institutions, community and government.

Suggestion for future research

1. Use the findings of this study to develop tests to assess the level of lifelong learning among current Thai youth.
2. Conduct a comparative study between Thai youth and youth in other countries regarding the differences and similarities in the characteristics of lifelong learners.
3. Develop a process to support Thai youth in acquiring the characteristics of lifelong learners.

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