

Prepared for publication in
T. Townsend & Y.C. Cheng, *Educational Change and
Development in the Asia-Pacific Region: Challenges for the Future.*
Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Swets & Zeitsinger.

The Challenge of Educational Reform in Thailand:

Jing Jai, Jing Jung, Nae Norn

Philip Hallinger

Vanderbilt University

Panomporn Chantarapanya

Umporn Sriboonma

Chiang Mai University

Pornkasem Kantamara

Vanderbilt University

Southeast Asia has witnessed a decade of transformational change such that children entering primary school today, “cannot even imagine the world in which their grandparents lived and into which their own parents were born” (Drucker, 1995, p. 75). Since 1990, ASEAN nations have embraced greater political openness and integration into the global economy. A largely unforeseen consequence of this integration has been a whirlwind of change that threatens to overwhelm social and political institutions.

Yet, even with the massive political and economic changes observed in Southeast Asia, fundamental cultural norms have proven more resistant to global forces. As Ohmae has observed: “The contents of kitchens and closets may change, but the core mechanisms by which cultures maintain their identity and socialize their young remain untouched” (1995, p. 30). This frames the challenge of educational reform throughout the world where educational systems are struggling to keep pace with rapidly changing environmental demands (Fullan, 1993; Hallinger, 1998a, 1998b).

Nowhere is this observation more salient than Thailand. Until recently one of Asia’s tiger economies, Thailand’s economic growth has ground to a halt, due in part to inadequacies in its educational system (Bangkok Post, 1998a, 1998b; ONEC, 1998a). Thailand’s schools were never designed to produce the highly motivated, independent thinkers and learners demanded by an information-based economy (MOE, 1996; ONEC, 1997a, 1998a). Today, Thai parents, school practitioners and policymakers agree that the capacity of school graduates to meet the challenges of the information age is at best uncertain.

Indeed, over the past decade, numerous planning documents published by Thai government agencies have eloquently articulated the need for a new and visionary set of educational priorities (MOE, 1996, ONEC, 1997a, 1998a). Policymakers and educators alike have identified the urgent need for educational reforms that will foster economic competitiveness while preserving the national culture. For example, Professor Kriengsak Charoenwongsak of Thailand’s Institute of Future Studies for Development has noted:

If the trends [in enrolment and retention of primary and secondary

school graduates] continued the number of secondary school graduates would double by 2002. . . . However, increasing the quality of Thai products also involves improving the quality of education. The current emphasis on rote learning does not help students assume positions in the workplace which stresses problem-solving and other analytical skills. (Bangkok Post, 1998b, p. 2)

Unfortunately, reform in educational practice has lagged well behind political rhetoric. As Thai newspapers report daily, lack of educational progress threatens Thailand's continued development. For example, at a recent seminar on social and educational reform:

Mr. Amaret Sila-on and NEC [National Education Commission] secretary-general Rung Kaewdaeng were in complete agreement that Thailand's decline in global competitiveness was mainly due to poor quality of education and graft. The IMD's (International Institute for Management Development) study said Thailand's education system did not live up to global economic challenges compared to that of Singapore. . . . Several [seminar] participants also blamed the drop [in competitiveness] on inefficient public management and a lack of support from the decision-making level, saying despite high potential Thailand will regress further. (Bangkok Post, 1998a, p. 3)

During the 1990's, politicians and bureaucrats, flush with the spoils of the economic boom, demonstrated little sense of urgency to press forcefully for the implementation of the nation's new educational priorities. The current economic recession has highlighted fundamental weaknesses in Thailand's institutional infrastructure. It is possible that crisis will provide the catalyst for change.

This chapter begins by discussing the context of educational reform in Thailand during the 1990's. We describe specific reforms as well as general educational trends in the society. We then discuss how the cultural and institutional context in Thailand influences the implementation

of educational reform. We close with reflections salient to the continuing reform of education in Thailand.

The Landscape of Educational Reform in Thailand: 1990 to the Present

The scope and purposes of schooling in Thailand and throughout the world have shifted within the space of a decade (Caldwell, 1998; Fullan, 1993; Hallinger, 1998a; Murphy, 1998). Even as recently as 1990, the purpose of Thai schools was to prepare a subset of the youth population with basic skills. Only students with promise and those from the societal elite received opportunities for education beyond six years. However, as the middle class grew over the past decade, so did educational opportunities for Thai youth. Thus, in 1993 Thailand expanded the scope of basic education to nine years and in 1996 to 12 years.

Basic education in Thailand is, however, just that: basic. Educational performance in most subjects lags behind that of students in other similar Asian countries (e.g., Singapore, Hong Kong, Philippines, Malaysia, Korea). In 1995 Thailand had 119 scientists and engineers per million of population. South Korea and Singapore had more than 2,500, while China had 350 per million people (Bangkok Post, 1998b). In the last five Science and Mathematic Olympic Competitions, Thailand has placed at the bottom among the competing Asian nations.

In the latest competition in 1997, Thai students fared poorly in all subjects, particularly in the practical fields. In practical learning of chemistry, Thai students scored only 4 out of 40, and in physics they got a score of 2.5 out of 20. . . With such records. . . the time is right to. . . overhaul the teaching/learning system which fails to provoke thinking.
(Santimetaneedol & Bunnag, 1998, p. 3)

Indeed, global economic competition has raised the stakes for developing students' cognitive knowledge, capacity for problem-solving, and their ability to perform a new range of skills in the workplace. Creativity, critical thinking, technological skills, communication, teamwork, practical use of English, social responsibility and life-long learning have assumed higher priority as

national educational goals (MOE, 1996; ONEC, 1998a). *None of these educational goals* received emphasis in the traditional curriculum of Thailand prior to 1995.

Educational policy in Thailand is formulated primarily via the Ministry of Education, the Office of the National Education Commission, and the National Economic and Social Development Board. Thai policymakers have proposed an ambitious reform agenda over the past decade. However, reform implementation in Thailand has neither kept pace with its own timeframe nor with changes in the world outside. Observers attribute the lack of change to the primary agency responsible for implementing reform: the Ministry of Education (MOE).

Thailand's educational system is highly centralized and the MOE holds all of the cards with respect to policy implementation. Decision-makers in Bangkok make virtually all decisions from curriculum content to the size and weight of student backpacks. Although the MOE operates regional and provincial offices, these ministerial outposts function primarily as conduits for policy decisions made by headquarters in Bangkok.

The MOE operates under the political authority of an elected government. However, as in many countries it takes a back seat to "A Class" ministries such as defense, finance, commerce, industry, agriculture, and communications. In 1994, Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai became the first Thai politician to raise the profile of educational reform as a national priority. He took a courageous, if politically dangerous, stand by stating that education and human development should be higher priorities than the purchase of submarines. His Minister of Finance, Tarrin Nimanhaeminda, also caused a stir by floating the idea of providing greater access to government funds for private education. This was interpreted -- probably accurately -- as a means of circumventing the logjam of change at the MOE. Regardless, Prime Minister Chuan was unable to follow through on his intentions as his administration was short-lived.

During the succeeding administrations of Banharn Silpa-archa and General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh (1995-1997), educational reform received mixed treatment. On the one hand, reform dropped from public sight as a visible priority and implementation lacked the moral urgency previously generated by Prime Minister Chuan. On the other hand, bureaucratic leaders

did begin to initiate educational reforms during this period and educational expenditures increased year by year (see Table 1).

[Insert Table One about here]

By way of exploring the landscape of educational reform in Thailand, we will examine two major programs undertaken in the past decade: The *Basic and Occupational Education and Training* (BOET) project and the Ministry of Education's 1996 educational reform program. These represent but two of many initiatives promulgated over the past decade. However, other efforts either targeted a particular subject or represented a blanket policy change (e.g., expansion of basic education from six to nine years). Here we are primarily interested in multi-faceted reforms designed to foster systemic change.

The Basic and Occupational Education and Training (BOET) Project

The *Basic and Occupational Education and Training* project was borne out of the recognition that other recent efforts at educational change in Thailand had been piecemeal. This project, jointly sponsored by the Thai government and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), was designed to engage several MOE departments in systemic change. The project began in May 1993 and was completed in December 1998. BOET was conceived as an experimental project and its implementation was limited to selected schools in several regions.

BOET's stated objective was to develop and implement a reform design that would expand educational access and improve the quality of basic and occupational education in Thailand. Its operating principles reflected lessons learned from other international efforts at educational reform (MOE, 1993, 1998). They revolved around the decentralization of decision-making and building local capacities for problem-solving and change implementation. Specifically, BOET sought to:

1. Enable local education authorities and practitioners to work collaboratively among themselves and with officials from other government agencies, the

private sector, and community representatives in order to plan, implement, and monitor/evaluate activities designed to increase access to and improve the quality of basic and occupational education, especially in the rural areas; and

2. Enable the regional education offices and relevant Ministry-based units to provide technical assistance and program monitoring and evaluation in support of provincial program planning, development, and implementation efforts. (MOE, 1993)

Policymakers, practitioners and parents participating in BOET received the opportunity to participate in workshops and study tours to the United States, Australia, or New Zealand. The experiences were an eye-opener for Thai officials. The visits and workshops helped create a better understanding of educational decentralization and site-based management, central components of BOET. In addition, the participants were exposed to other educational movements and innovations prevalent abroad (MOE, 1998).

Another BOET goal was to expand the roles and responsibilities of the local community in school governance (MOE, 1993). In a centralized system, schools do not need long-term school improvement plans. Plans are developed and budget allocations are decided by the MOE. Schools only have to implement the plan, regardless of whether it addresses local needs. With efforts to push for a decentralized educational management system, BOET realized the importance for schools to develop long range development plans.

Every school participating in BOET was required to establish a school council. A primary responsibility of the school council was to develop a school improvement plan. Staff learned how to use actual databases from the Ministry's management information systems in planning. A major success of the program was increased collaboration between pilot schools, communities, and the provincial education office in all participating regions (MOE, 1998).

With regards to reform of teaching and learning, several new approaches were introduced to administrators and teachers: curriculum integration, active learning, student-centered learning, authentic assessment. The issues of local needs, accountability and quality assurance also

received attention. Participatory Action Research was embedded in all activities of BOET.

The BOET project faced a great number of obstacles during its operation. Foremost among these was that BOET was a *project* of limited duration and scope of authority. Despite the effort to prepare MOE officials for educational decentralization, BOET still operated within the existing centralized system of rules and regulations (MOE, 1998). Government regulations typically allow little room for creativity or innovation and project schools often found themselves bumping up against regulations and traditions that ran counter to the intent and direction of BOET activities. This limited the potential impact of the project on participating schools and may account for the rather disappointing substantive project outcomes (MOE, 1998).

Even so, BOET was never intended to be a wide-scale reform effort. The fact that it was unable to broker systemic change in practice reconfirmed the belief that real reform will not occur until the agent of reform -- the MOE -- changes. Policymakers incorporated lessons learned from the BOET project into a large-scale reform initiated by the Ministry 1996 (MOE, 1996, 1998).

MOE Educational Reform for Thailand, 1996

In 1996, Minister of Education Sukhavit Rangsitpol introduced a Ministry-wide program that has since provided a framework for education reform in Thailand. The intention was to revise operational approaches to eliminate persisting problems and enhance the quality of education (MOE, 1996). In contrast to BOET which worked with under one hundred schools, about 20,000 schools are operating under the MOE's comprehensive Education Reform Program.

The reform agenda focuses on four priority areas: 1) physical infrastructure, 2) teachers, 3) curriculum and instruction, 4) school management (MOE, 1996). Infrastructure reform has focused on school mapping. This concerns determining and applying criteria for the ideal size of schools, creating school attendance zones, and setting minimum standards for the school environment. In addition, computer labs and other facilities have been upgraded in many schools.

Teacher reforms aimed to build greater professional awareness among teachers, enhance their performance, and revise welfare and social security benefits for the profession. The respect and

position of teachers has eroded in the past decade. Steps were taken to shore up their financial and social position in society.

Curriculum reform has focused on improving the quality of the teaching/learning process, as well as the evaluation system. As noted earlier, Thai classrooms remain, for the most part, in a highly traditional mode of teacher-centered instruction. Under this reform program, new training has begun to broaden the repertoire of instructional methods used by teachers. The teaching of English as a foreign language, previously begun at grade five in public schools, was shifted to grade one as a part of the curriculum reform.

Management reform has built explicitly on experience gained in the BOET project. The reform statutes sought to increase local involvement, enhance collaboration, and involve more stakeholders in decisionmaking. In particular, greater emphasis is being given to promoting the role of family, community and the private sector in educational management.

While these represent the central thrusts of this reform effort, it is also notable that reform was accompanied by increased fiscal commitment to education. Although Thailand still trails some of its regional competitors (see Table Two), it has increased its educational expenditures in conjunction with this reform (see Table One).

[Insert Table Two about here]

While we reserve our discussion of reform implementation for the next section of the chapter, we note several trends resulting from this effort since 1996:

1. The educational budget increased from 133 billion baht in 1996 to 163 billion baht, a 22% increase.
2. English has become a subject taught in the first grade since 1996.
3. The cabinet approved the professional advancement from Teacher Level 6 to Teacher Level 7 without having to submit academic work for consideration.
4. Educational standards from pre-primary to tertiary education have been drawn up and disseminated.

5. A clear policy has been instituted on providing 12 years free education for all children. This will be phased in gradually. (ONEC, 1997a, 1997b; 1998).

Summary of Reform Efforts

During the 1990's educational reform in Thailand has faced three major challenges:

1. Provision of adequate resources to fund development of the physical infrastructure of formal education;
2. Keeping pace with developments that affect the content and process of education emerging from global forces;
3. Developing the capacity of its human resources in order to effect change in school and classroom practice.

There is evidence to suggest significant progress on the first challenge and limited gains on the second (ONEC, 1997a). Fiscal allocations to education have increased progressively during the 1990's (ONEC, 1997b) and we expect this continue though perhaps at a lower rate because of the economic recession (see Table 1). A higher percentage of students are attending school than in 1990 and for a longer period of time. There has also been a gradual but noticeable improvement in the physical infrastructure of Thai schools.

Results with respect to the second issue are mixed. Policies consistent with educational reform in other countries in the region have been adopted (MOE, 1996; ONEC, 1998a, 1998b; also see Caldwell, 1998 on Australia; Dimmock & Walker, 1998 on Hong Kong; Hallinger, 1998a on Southeast Asia; Murphy & Adams, 1998 on the U.S.; Rahimah, 1998 on Malaysia). However, in virtually all instances, the connection between the *adoption* of reform and their *implementation* in practice remains tenuous.

At the local level institutional norms continue to shape the perception of reform implementation. Local school practitioners and community members generally interpret reform as change in the *physical, observable conditions of schooling*. Are students attending from the correct zone? How many computers are in the lab? Are minimum standards are being met? Principals complete checklists of changes and pass these on to their supervisors. We are

reminded of the Gary Larson cartoon in which the manager responds to his supervisor: “So you don’t care how bad our internal processes are as long as they are well-documented.” This checklist approach to reform is not, however, limited to local administrators; their behavior mirrors norms that permeate the ministry bureaucracy.

This observation applies even more directly to the third challenge. Implementation results that carry through to the school and classroom continue to disappoint. Reality has not matched the rhetoric of reform when it comes to the *software of education* -- teaching, learning, and the management of schools. Moreover, until the system makes progress on this score, Thailand cannot expect to reap benefits from its increased investment in the physical infrastructure of education.

As international experience bears out, any significant reform of education takes a period of three to seven years (Caldwell, 1998; Fullan, 1993). Moreover, Thailand’s proposed reforms represent a greater qualitative and quantitative leap for the educational system than those being implemented in more developed countries. Thus, the limited results obtained over the past several years are not surprising when viewed in context. At the same time, the decade’s disappointing experiences with educational change suggest the need for a closer look at reform implementation in the Kingdom. This represents the focus of the following section of this chapter.

Moving from Adoption to Implementation of Change in Thai Education¹

Interviews with local school leaders in Northern Thailand begin to fill in the outline of the reform story suggested above. These school administrators and teachers note many of the same obstacles to successful educational reform described in the international literature (e.g., Fullan, 1991):

- Shifting goals and unclear direction,
- Inadequate or inappropriate resourcing,
- Lack of skills or knowledge among staff,

- Rigid and sometimes conflicting policies,
- Traditions,
- Poor communication,
- Structural inefficiencies and lack of cooperation across levels,
- Lack of *meaningful* monitoring, support and follow-through from supervisory levels,
- Changing political agendas resulting in inconsistent direction and priorities,
- Political infighting and unwillingness to let go of vested interests.

These obstacles take on a uniquely Thai flavor as they play out in the context of Thailand's highly centralized institutional system and traditional culture.

Educational bureaucracies remain among the largest government institutions in Asian nations such as Thailand. Yet, as governments are concluding throughout the world, large centralized bureaucracies cannot keep up with the rapid pace of change emanating from the environment. Competing interest groups and the bureaucratic emphasis on procedures hamper Thailand's educational system from responding effectively to new priorities.

Centralized decisionmaking by a small group of highly educated and informed individuals made sense in the past when the workforce was less well-educated. Today, however, rising educational levels within ASEAN nations means that people in and around schools (i.e., principals, teachers and parents) are better prepared and more interested in contributing to decisions. This is *beginning* to have an impact on how leaders work with staff and their communities to bring about change. As a principal in Hong Kong recently noted, "Here in Hong Kong, we are starting to ask the question, 'Why?'"

Change is Easy: *Just do it!*

The Thai approach to educational reform fits comfortably within the rubric of school restructuring. Indeed, the reforms described above are just that, *structural* changes. Yet, structural characteristics of the Thai educational system and norms of the Thai culture both wield influence over implementation of reform.

In Thai culture, seniority and status are paramount in considering relations within the social

system (Mulder, 1996). Therefore, when an elder (or a school administrator) tells his/her juniors (or school faculty) to do something, there is little choice. Institutional and cultural norms shape the only acceptable response: “Yes.” This tendency to *geng jai* or show consideration for one’s elders (or boss) is a central norm in Thai culture (Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1996; Mulder, 1996). It is part of the glue that creates social cohesion and is also apparent in other Asian cultures (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1997). This norm is salient to our discussion of change. As Rohwer (1996) has noted, change in Asia is a community-based affair.

Few people can cope on their own with unbridled change. But most of Asia has thrown the shock-absorbing that an individual is bound to need onto the family, and the community and neighborhood networks associated with families, rather than onto public institutions. This is a policy that makes it extremely risky in Asian societies to function as a maverick; nobody, certainly not the government, will catch you if you fall. (Rohwer, 1996, p. 344)

This observation holds special salience when viewing management in the government sector. There is widespread, unspoken, pressure to conform with socially sanctioned expectations, at least on a surface level. This reduces the degree to which individuals -- principal or teachers -- are willing to experiment or depart from traditional social norms.

It also shapes the manager’s perception of how to bring about change. As one Thai secondary school principal noted:

I understand that leading change is very complex in the United States where everyone wants to have a say and participate in everything. So it’s important to talk to everyone and get them interested and so forth. But here in Thailand, that’s not necessary. If we want teachers in the school to change the way they are doing something, we just tell them, ‘Do it!’

Unlike their Western counterparts, teachers in Thailand will *geng jai* their administrators.

Face-to-face, they will politely accept their orders and try to “do it”-- *within the scope of their capabilities*. Such polite acquiescence does not, however, begin to suggest that change has been implemented.

When the innovation is simple, such as a new method of keeping attendance, instructions to “do it” may be highly efficient. However, this change approach is insufficient when the innovation involves learning to teach with technology, use cooperative learning, or teach English. These all require a more extended process of learning and support than is typically found in Thai schools.

This approach to managing change may not describe the strategy of every school administrator in Thailand. Yet principals and other managers in Thailand, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore voice similar inclinations about the inefficiency of working to gain the interest and support of staff at the front-end of change implementation (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1997).

Some have further noted the impact of other normative tendencies of followers.

You know, sometimes even if we want to involve staff more actively in determining the direction and procedures for change they misunderstand us. If we really spend a lot of time asking their opinions, they think we don't know how to do our job! It's as if they say, “You're the principal. If you have to ask me, it must mean that you don't know what you're doing.”

This is an institutional system in which staff are unaccustomed to participating in decision-making and a social system where juniors are culturally bound to *greng jai* their bosses. The strategy of telling staff to “do it” meets traditional institutional and cultural expectations of the system in which the principal works. Moreover, this change strategy has survived because it was successful in the past when the pace of change was slow, the source of change was internal, innovations were less complex, staff were less well-educated, and the consequences for *not* changing were less severe.

This tendency extends up through the system where the provincial or departmental supervisor may query the principal. “Are your teachers using the _____ yet?” The response is, “Of course.” The principal told them to do it and they had been to the workshop. The supervisor duly reports up to his or her supervisor that schools in the _____ Region are all using the new program.

As noted above, the monitoring of reform implementation seldom goes beyond the use of checklists. Supervisors perform what principals refer to as “hit and run” missions to check on implementation at the site level. In combination, the *system* is satisfied that change has taken place since all monitoring points have reported it as such.

What we describe here is a shared mythology of change. Participants at each level of the system are doing *what is expected of them* and all agree that everyone has done what was asked. Yet, change fails to occur.

Fostering Change in a Centralized System: *Jing Jai, Jing Jung, Nae Norn*

In general, social and political institutions that are shielded from changes in the world at-large adapt more slowly (Rohwer, 1996). Schools fall into this category, as they seldom feel the pressure of market forces. Schools have always been among society’s most conservative institutions since they are responsible for transmitting the culture to youth (Tyack & Hansot, 1982).

Educational decision-makers in Bangkok cannot understand why principals and teachers do not respond more readily to the need for change. Yet, in practice, the MOE has shielded local schools from the global change forces that underlie reform. By keeping schools highly dependent upon central directives, the MOE has unwittingly reduced the imperative for change at the local level. One school director from Northern Thailand attributed the lack of substantive educational change to three cultural norms of Thailand’s educational system: *jing jai, jing jung, nae norn*.

Jing jai . He asserted that the rhetoric of the Ministry of Education lacks a fundamental Thai trait, *kwarm jing jai* (i.e., sincerity). Few local administrators or teachers find the rhetoric of local

empowerment supported by the substantive behavior of MOE decision-makers. When those at the local level fail to see their bosses conform to the same changes they have mandated for others, it indicates a lack of sincerity. Culturally, this reduces the need for staff to venture beyond surface compliance.

Lacking *kwarm jing jai*, Bangkok decision-makers are unable to fulfill another necessary condition for bringing about change in a Thai organization: *gumlung jai*. *Gumlung jai* is the encouragement or moral support that Thai people receive from their social group, especially when engaged in a difficult task (Mulder, 1996). In the current context, the perception that MOE decision-makers lack *kwarm jing jai* or sincerity renders them unable to offer *gumlung jai* to the schools in any meaningful way.

While *support* is also needed to foster change in Western cultures, there are some essential differences. First, in Thailand's community-based culture, change is fundamentally a group not an individual phenomenon (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1997). Even the very term *gumlung jai* often refers to a *group* giving *public* support or encouragement to an individual in need. In contrast to the West, the individual in Thailand almost never exists except in relation to his/her reference group (Holmes & Tangtongtay, 1996; Mulder, 1996).

Also salient to this contrast, Thailand's heroes and heroines are not mavericks who defy convention to find the new path. In Thailand, American heroes like Chuck Yeager, the Lone Ranger, Daniel Boone, the Marlboro man, and Steve Jobs would not be people with the *right stuff* to make a lasting cultural impression. Thai people are more likely to move (or change) with their peer group, and the group is most likely to move in response to a strong morally persuasive message from above.

Finally, in Thai culture, feelings take precedence over reason (Holmes & Tangtongtay, 1996; Mulder, 1996). In Thailand it is common to describe the resolution of a conflict in terms of two parties developing mutual understanding or *kwarm khow jai gun*. The source of the mutual understanding, however, is the heart, not the head. That is the Thai word for understanding -- *khow jai* -- means to "enter the heart" not the head! This has powerful implications for change

implementation. The best laid plans of policymakers will never see the light of successful implementation unless the feelings of staff are sincerely acknowledged and supported. Paradoxically, this is the case even though surface compliance is easily obtained because of the cultural tendency to *greng jai* or defer to the feelings of one's superordinates.

Jing jung . As suggested earlier, the seriousness of purpose for educational reform is often unclear to local staff. As one principal noted, "There is little relation between the idea of reform as conceived in Bangkok and implementation in the provinces." In Thai this translates into a lack of seriousness of purpose or *kwarm jing jung*. Communication remains one-way, from the top down and local school leaders remain highly cynical about the intent of Ministry decision-makers.

A recent survey of almost 800 staff generated relevant data on communication in East Asian corporations (Council of Management Communication, 1996 in World Executive's Digest, 1998). Sixty-four percent of staff did not believe what management told them. Sixty-one percent did not feel well-informed of plans. And 54 percent did not feel that decisions were well explained. While we do not have comparable data on the perceptions of Thai teachers and principals, we suspect a similar pattern would prevail. Cultural norms and institutional structure each play a role in this problem of communication.

Recent large investments in computers represent an example of this how a lack of seriousness plays out in reform implementation. Since 1996, the MOE invested millions of baht into computer hardware and software in response to the acknowledged imperative for technological development in schools. The MOE implemented the policy in a traditional "one size fits all" manner without preparing schools first. Consequently, computers were even sent to schools that still lacked electricity. Development of software for use in the schools got bogged down in corruption among the vendor and MOE officials. Training for teachers was unevenly distributed and of highly variable quality. This type of implementation breeds cynicism among local staff concerning the seriousness and motives of Bangkok decision-makers.

The hard work of articulating the moral and practical basis for reform and the meaning

behind new methods has simply not been done in Thailand. This problem is by no means limited to Thailand or Asia. For example, as an American journalist recently noted:

[In the USA] Republican voters have not yet been persuaded that “economic change and the free operation of the market, can be exciting rather than frightening.” The key words there are “can be”. But change often *is* frightening, and the world over, governments and commentators have done too little to explain why such change is necessary and how its wounds can be healed.

(Newsweek, March 4, 1996, p. 9)

The communication gap suggested here relates directly back to the systemic tendency to believe that telling others to *do it* is an efficient means of fostering change. We noted earlier the absence of a nationally recognized moral voice for educational reform in Thailand. Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai started to tell this story to the people, but was not in office long enough to finish. Until the nation’s leadership does use its moral authority to articulate the why and how of educational reform, systemic change will not take place.

Nae norm . The third condition noted by our colleague, *nae norm*, refers to the need for certainty. Of course a degree of stability is essential for effective policy implementation in any context. However, certainty takes on special significance within the Thai institutional system because of its highly political nature.

In Thailand, educational policy priorities change as frequently as the government. During the past decade no coalition government served out its full term of office. Not one Minister of Education was in office for even a full year. Since the Minister is appointed by his coalition party, each entering Minister must stamp his (and his party’s) name on education policy quickly. This generally means first canceling out the favored reforms of his immediate predecessor.

For example, when the most recent Minister of Education assumed office, his first major policy decision was to cancel the ambitious investment in computers initiated by the prior Minister. With great fanfare and concern over the “efficiency” of expenditures, he shifted the

funds towards teacher welfare. Notably, the former Minister's political supporters were to be found among private sector contractors. The new Minister's party counted the teacher's federation among its supporters.

This source of systemic uncertainty is further compounded by rapid turnover of senior bureaucrats in the Ministry of Education. The Permanent Secretary of Education, his Deputies, and the various Department Directors are seldom in position for more than one or at most two years. As they reshuffle annually, implementation priorities shift with repercussions down through the institutional system.

Political uncertainty is hardly unique to Thailand. Yet the speed with which Thailand's policy goals and implementation priorities turn over is extraordinary when compared with regional countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, or the Philippines. This translates into a high degree of uncertainty among staff at the local level.

Implementation of educational reform in Thailand is severely handicapped by norms of the institutional system as well as by certain norms of Thai culture. The goal of local empowerment in schooling runs counter to the existing structure of the educational system. As other nations have found, it is difficult for a bureaucracy to change its very purpose and traditional operating procedures. Moreover, norms of Thai culture lead staff (and parents) who are the targets for empowerment to engage in a cultural dance with their superiors. The result is an absence of change beyond the surface indicators compiled onto a checklist. Educational reform has evolved into shared mythology of change consistent with the cultural and institutional norms of Thai society.

Leading Thailand into a New Era of Education

In this chapter we have presented an overview of educational reform in Thailand as it has evolved since 1990. In recent years, Thai policymakers have done an excellent job of crafting a reform agenda suited to 21st century schooling. They have initiated the adoption of important reforms including a gradual move towards basic education to 12 years, expansion of English

instruction to first grade, decentralization of decision-making, introduction of new teaching methods, and development of the physical infrastructure of schools.

We have been more critical of how Thailand's educational decisionmakers have *implemented* these reforms. Their ability to foster change in school management and classroom teaching in particular has been undermined by structural and cultural features of the educational system. We identified three conditions necessary to the successful *implementation* of educational reform in Thailand: sincerity, seriousness of purpose, and stability. Observations and interviews with local level school leaders suggest that these conditions were not in great abundance during the 1990's.

Directives issued from the MOE for principals and teachers to change have not succeeded beyond altering the outward appearances of schooling. For reasons we have discussed, in the Thai context, it is unlikely that a groundswell of staff and parent initiative will overcome the structural constraints of the current system. Thus, reform has to a large degree halted at the door of the schoolhouse.

Even so, the conditions noted earlier -- *jing jai, jing jung, nae norn* -- offer possible clues for breaking the logjam of change. We believe that the MOE has provided a viable policy structure for reform, and that people throughout the country are ready for change. What Thailand's educational reform lacks is a catalyst that will jump-start and support the process of systemic change.

Trite as it may seem, we believe that strong political and cultural leadership is the needed catalyst at this particular stage in the reform process. National leaders must articulate the moral basis for reform. Just as important, they must apply pressure and offer encouragement for implementation of the MOE's school reform plans *throughout the MOE*. In fact, national leadership has been the catalyst for societal reform of education in several other nations (e.g., Bill Clinton in the U.S., Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore, Dr. Mahathir Mohammed in Malaysia).

In Thai culture, strong leaders are viewed as possessing *baramee* (personal power) that can influence the direction of the group. This is not the same as bureaucratic power. A leader earns *baramee* over time through interaction and experience in the public or corporate arena. Leaders

with *baramee* are viewed as sincere (*jing jai*) and have the moral authority to lead.

Earlier, we noted how Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai made education a moral issue in 1994. This type of morally-based political leadership applied more broadly and with greater persistence is necessary to bring about educational reform in Thailand. Unfortunately, since returning to office in 1997, Prime Minister Chuan's attention has been fixed on reviving the economy. Perhaps this will change as the economy stabilizes.

Cultural leadership is also needed to inspire and motivate. Leaders can stimulate change by reframing reform in light of the culture's tradition. For example, going back many generations, Thailand's Kings have been proponents of learning. They have modeled learning personally as well as encouraging the development of the nation's educational system. Given the Thai citizens' respect of the monarchy, it would be reasonable to frame current changes in education in light of the traditional importance placed upon learning by Thai Kings.

The Thai people are also fortunate to have an educational leader in the person of King Bhumipol Adulyavej. The King possesses the necessary *baramee* to transform educational change into a cultural issue essential to the future well-being of the nation. The King's life itself is a model of lifelong learning, technological innovation, artistic creation, creative problem-solving, preservation of traditional values, and engagement with the global culture. The King could, better than anyone else, inspire Thai's to join together in moving towards the type of educational system needed in the Thailand of today and tomorrow. This cultural leadership must, however, work in tandem with political-bureaucratic leadership of the Prime Minister or another political leader.

Education reform may determine the future of the Thai nation. Given the Thai institutional system, the catalyst for reform must come from the top. Key national leaders must awaken the Thai people to the urgency of the tasks before them. Only a clear and persistent articulation of education's importance (*jing jung*), change in the behavior of senior MOE staff (*jing jai*), and a conviction that reform is here to stay (*nae norn*) will give educators the courage to change.

Education in Thailand has always been the responsibility of a few government officers at the

MOE. In the 21st century this must change and education must become a more integral part of Thai society at-large. To do so educational reform must become part of the national agenda. The Thai people are ready for this challenge. They await the political and cultural leadership to join this process in earnest.

Table 1

Education Spending in Thailand as % of Government Expenditure

Year	Edu. Exp.	Nat'l Exp.	% of Nat'l	GDP	% of GDP
1988	43,860.70	243,500	18.01	1,559,804	2.81
1989	47,358.10	285,500	16.59	1,856,992	2.55
1990	59,962.10	335,000	17.90	2,191,094	2.74
1991	74,923.60	387,500	19.34	2,519,618	2.97
1992	85,664.40	460,400	18.61	2,833,277	3.02
1993	108,069.70	560,000	19.30	3,164,000	3.42
1994	121,973.10	625,000	19.52	3,635,000	3.36
1995	135,309.00	715,000	18.92	4,203,000	3.22
1996	167,560.40	843,200	19.87	4,728,000	3.54
1997	205,462.90	944,000	21.77	4,804,000	4.28
1998	201,707.59	800,000	25.21	5,076,000	3.97

(in Million Baht)

Source: UNESCO, 1998 p. 1.

Table 2
Educational Expenditure as % of All Public Expenditure
in Selected East Asian Nations

Country	1975	1980	1985	1988	1990	1992	1993	1994	1995
China	...	9.3	12.2	12.1	12.4	12.2	12.2	...	...
Indonesia	13.1	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
LPDR	...	...	...	6.6	...	...	...	...	...
Malaysia	19.3	14.7	16.3	16.9	18.8	16.9	15.7	15.5	15.5
Myanmar	15.3	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	14.4
Philippines	11.4	9.1	7.4	1.1	10.1	10.5	...	...	...
Singapore	8.6	7.3	...	11.5	...	21.2	23	24.2	23.4
Thailand	21	20.6	18.5	16.6	20	19.6	20.6	18.9	20.1
Vietnam	7.4

Source: UNESCO, 1998 p. 5

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Bio Notes

Philip Hallinger is Professor in the Department of Leadership and Organizations, Vanderbilt University where he directs the *Vanderbilt International Institute for Principals*. He is also Senior Researcher in the *Center for Leadership Research and Development* at Chiang Mai University (Chiang Mai, Thailand), as well as Chulalongkorn University (Bangkok, Thailand) and Melbourne University (Australia). He can be reached at philip.hallinger@vanderbilt.edu

Panomporn Chantarapanya is Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Administration in Chiang Mai University. Umporn Sriboonma is Assistant Professor and Chair of the Department of Educational Administration at Chiang Mai University. Pornkasem Kantamara is a doctoral student in the Department of Leadership and Organizations at Vanderbilt University

Correspondence should be sent to:

Dr. Philip Hallinger

133/10 Jed Yod

Muang Chang Puek

Chiang Mai, 50300

Thailand

Ph: 661 881 1667, 6653 210 150

Fax: 1-415-840-0642 (USA)

email: philip.hallinger@vanderbilt.edu

web: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lead>

¹ This section is drawn from two sources. First, it comes from the authors' collective experience with school reform in Thailand. Second, excerpts are drawn from a survey that focused on educational change conducted with local school leaders in Northern Thailand.