Meeting the Challenges of Cultural Leadership: The changing role of principals in Thailand

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This paper examines the changing role of principals in Thailand using a cultural lens. Global educational trends and new expectations for school improvement have placed Thai principals firmly at the crossroads between tradition and change. The paper proposes several avenues that Thai principals may explore in order to manage the conflicting pressures for stability and change.

The massive political and economic changes that have taken place in Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand over the past decade are observable and undeniable. Yet, paradoxically, despite these economic and political changes, fundamental *cultural* norms have proven more resistant to global change forces. As Kenichi 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 largely untouched" (1995, p. 30). Schools are among the foremost social institutions struggling to keep pace with rapidly changing environmental demands (Dimmock, 2000; Drucker, 1995; Fullan, 2000; 2001; Hallinger, 1998a; 1998b).

Even in the face of persisting political pressure, however, schools have been slow to make significant changes in the practices used to socialize youth in the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Caldwell, 1998; Fullan, 2001; Hallinger, 1998a; Murphy & Adams, 1998). Indeed, the slow pace and limited scope of changes inside schools when compared with those in broader society are striking. The reasons can be traced to the role that schools play as institutions of cultural transmission.

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Tyack and Hansot (1982) referred to schools as the "community's museums of virtue". Just as museums preserve a nation's ancient artifacts, schools keep safe and pass on society's cherished values and traditions. It is a demonstrable though often ignored feature of social change that a society's *virtues* never change as rapidly as the fads that float upon the surface of the business, political, and economic landscape (Fullan, 1999; O'Neil, 2000; O'Toole, 1995; Tyack & Hansot, 1982).

This analysis, which places educational reform in the context of *cultural* change, may shed light on causes of the slow pace of educational change. This article asserts that a key challenge facing principals throughout the world is *cultural leadership*. Cultural leadership requires principals to assess the demands for change originating in the school and its environment in light of the school's capacities for change. Principals must always be sensitive to the competing pressures for stability and change (Cuban, 1988; Lam, 2003; Tyack & Cuban, 1995)

Nowhere is this cultural tension more salient than in Thailand. Until 1997 one of Asia's tiger economies, Thailand's economic growth ground to a halt, due in part to inadequacies in its educational system (*Bangkok Post*, 1998a; 1998b; ONEC, 1998). Only in recent years has Thai society begun to question whether its school graduates have the capacity to meet the challenges of the information age. Thailand's schools were not designed to produce the highly motivated, independent thinkers and learners demanded by today's information economy (MOE, 1996; ONEC, 1997; 1998). A sweeping national educational reform law passed in 1999 would make familiar reading for educators throughout the world: student-centered teaching and learning, school-based management, parental involvement, system decentralization, and more.

Thailand's system-level leaders look to school principals for leadership in implementing these large-scale educational reforms at the local level. As in other nations throughout the world, Thai policy makers accept the dictum that principals hold the keys to educational change at the school level. Yet, there are serious doubts as to whether the current (and future) corps of Thai principals has the will and the skill to implement education reform.

This article explores the cultural challenges faced by school leaders in Thailand during this era of global transformation. The paper focuses on the changing role of principals and features of the local cultural context that may foster and impede successful implementation of educational reforms.

The Context of Educational Change in Thailand

As suggested above, the global focus on educational reform has begun to reshape the context of education in Thailand. This section of the article will describe the changing scope and purposes of education in the region, trace these changes in the process of cultural transmission, and finally assess the impact on educational practices in schools.

Globalization of the Educational Ideal

The scope of schooling in Thailand has shifted dramatically within the span of little more than a decade (Caldwell, 2003; Fullan, 1999; Hallinger, 1998a; 1998b; Murphy & Adams, 1998; Smith, 2002). Even as recently as 1990, the charge given to educators in Southeast Asia was to prepare a limited subset of the youth population with basic skills. In many Southeast Asian nations only students with special promise and those from the societal elite received opportunities for education beyond six or nine years of study. However, as the middle class has grown in size and influence over the past decade, so have educational opportunities for youth. Today, educational systems in the region have increasingly embraced the policy of providing 12 years of free, basic education to all children.

Just as significantly, the purposes of schooling in the region have also shifted during this period of time. Global economic competition has raised the stakes for educational attainment, individually and collectively. Consumers now define the meaning of quality education globally, rather than locally or nationally. Concerns for national competitiveness shape education policy decisions from Ottawa to Hong Kong. Parents throughout the world are coming to view quality education in similar terms (Drucker, 1995; Ohmae, 1995).

For example, Moses Cheng, a member of the Hong Kong Education Commission, observed, "Young people must have a global perspective … They need to have high personal integrity, strong language ability, be computer literate, able to think independently, and be creative" (Hong Kong Education Department, 1998, p. 24). This statement of Hong Kong's educational aims is notable in several respects. First, essentially the same statement of educational aims could be found in Sydney, London, New York, or Bangkok. Second, few of these educational goals received particular emphasis in Southeast Asia's educational systems prior to 1990. Third, this is an ambitious agenda for educational systems that have been under criticism globally for their inability to accomplish more modest aims. Fourth, it is an agenda that will require substantial development in the capacities of the people who comprise the educational system.

Moreover, these purposes of schooling are not static. The pace of innovation in many fields (e.g. computer science, biology, medicine, biochemistry, library science, physics, law, nursing, education) has accelerated greatly in recent years. Consequently, knowledge is being viewed much more dynamically than in the past. This has profound implications for the practice of schooling. What is learned in schools today may well be obsolete in just a few short years. As Engel noted,

> Those who embark on higher education now will still be active in professional practice well towards the middle of the next century. They will practice during a period of accelerating and massive change. Change, as it relates to their profession, will make self-directed learning throughout their life a sine qua non … How then are institutions of higher education to meet their challenge of creating capable citizens for the next century? (1991, pp. 45–46)

In fact, this challenge extends through all levels of schooling. Roland Barth (1997) has defined the "at-risk student" as "any student who leaves school before or after graduation with little possibility of continuing learning". This represents a major challenge, especially in Southeast Asia's educational systems, which have traditionally been organized to teach a stable curriculum. Schools, while still in the business of conveying content, will need to revamp their methods in order to teach students to become independent, self-directed, lifelong learners.

Globalization, Education, and Cultural Transmission

The global era is challenging traditional ways of living and working throughout the world (Naisbitt, 1997; Ohmae, 1995; Rohwer, 1996). As O'Toole (1995) observed, these changes arrive (often uninvited) from beyond national borders and from outside discrete disciplines. Drucker has observed that this trend has special implications for education:

> [I]t is a safe prediction that in the next 50 years, schools and universities will change more and more drastically than they have since they assumed their present form more than 300 years ago, when they reorganized around the printed book. What will force these changes is in part new technology, such as computers, videos, and telecasts via satellite; in part the demands of a knowledge-based society in which organized learning must become a lifelong process for knowledge workers; and in part new theory about how beings learn. (Drucker, 1995, p. 79)

A key change force in this era of globalization has been the development of global information, communication, and transportation networks. Nations throughout the region have ready access to global images and trends via cable television, and the *Wall Street Journal*. In fact, the same news reports, movies, advertisements, sporting events, and soap operas beam into homes in homes throughout the world. In Thailand, Charoenwongsak has observed,

> The television has become a distribution centre for a universal culture. Instead of learning from others with whom they have a close relationship, Thai children now imitate the same set of movie stars, sing songs from the same set of Thai or foreign pop stars, and imitate behavior from the same movies—all compliments of television. (*Bangkok Post*, 1998b, p. 2)

These developments in information and communications technology have combined with more fluid national boundaries to create a new social-cultural context for all organizations (Ohmae, 1995). This emerging social-cultural context brings new challenges for the socialization of youth. American educational writer Neil Postman (1990, interviewed in *New Perspectives Quarterly* [NPQ]) reframed this role of education as an institution of cultural transmission.

> Postman | In this mass-media culture dominated by television, everything is geared to pleasing the consumer. Yet, over the ages, the essential function of culture has not been to please, but to negotiate between what people want and what they need. Culture is about what the society and the individual need to survive into the future with their dignity intact. Culture is not about amusement, but about sustaining the acquisitions of civilization.

> NPQ | In other words, the essential purpose of *culture* is to convey conserving values, not provide gratification of desire through endless consumption.
>
> Postman | Yes. Traditional institutions of *culture*, such as religion, impose limits and rules on behavior, asking people to sacrifice certain things that they might enjoy or do to destructive excess in order to maintain the community or serve a higher moral purpose. Religion inculcates a sense of responsibility and discipline. *Education* does occasionally try to provide people with what they want, but its primary purpose is to transmit a set of mental habits and a democratic outlook, which we need to live in an open society. (Postman, 1990, p. 52)

This cultural analysis of educational change highlights the *conserving* role played by schools as social-cultural institutions. Sometimes schools seem like islands of stability in a sea of change. This cultural analysis begins to illuminate why schools are *designed* to change more slowly than the society surrounding them.

Indeed, schools in Thailand and other Southeast Asian nations are even reasserting their role as vehicles for social preservation as well as change. For example, Malaysia has identified cultural integration and preservation as formal goals of the educational system:

> Bergotong-royong or "community-effort" is a custom of Malaysians … It is important to instill the spirit of community effort in the consciousness of all Malaysians, particularly the young. The spirit of goyong-royong sows seeds of neighborliness and strengthens unity. (Tun Uda, 1990, p. 16)

The recent economic downturn in ASEAN (Association of South-East Asian Nations) nations has forced policy makers to re-examine many assumptions concerning the adequacy of education in regard to national economic and social development (*Bangkok Post*, 1998b). Rapid—perhaps overly rapid—integration into the global economy has led many Asians to turn their backs on their local culture. This meant paying less and less attention to traditional norms, values, and traditions. In Thailand, to judge by advertisements for MBA programs in the newspapers, one might conclude that every Thai university graduate was intent on becoming a businessperson. The consequences are sobering. Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore has observed,

> We are all groping towards a destination which we hope will be identifiable with our past … We have left the past behind and there is an underlying unease that there will be nothing left of us which is part of the old. (*The Economist*, 1994)

The Evolution of Educational Policies and Practices in Southeast Asia

These evolving educational goals have already begun to redirect the methods of education. As with the goals themselves, virtually all of the educational policy reforms of the past decade originated outside of Thailand and the region (e.g. school-based management, student-centered learning, information and learning technology, quality education, earental involvement).

Teaching is a core process of schooling and one that remains highly resistant to rapid change throughout the world (Fullan, 1999). Countries that wish to reform teaching and learning processes face a special challenge. Globally disseminated educational reforms such as student-centered learning originated

in cultures that operate with different normative assumptions than those of the local culture. In fact, the very meaning of learning and teaching encompassed in the constructivist tenets of the new teaching and curriculum reforms is often diametrically opposed to the traditional model in Asian schools. As Sin-ming Shaw has observed,

> Blaming Asian schools for focusing on memorization—as opposed to "thinking"—is too pat an excuse, as schools reflect the basic values of a society. It is ingrained in the Asian psyche that "correct" answers always exist and are to be found in books or from authorities. Teachers dispense truth, parents are always right and political leaders know better. In executive-led societies such as China and Hong Kong, leaders act like philosopher-kings, often uttering unchallenged banalities. Senior officials sometimes resemble the powerful palace eunuchs of the past dynasties: imperial, unaccountable, incompetent. Questioning authority, especially in public life, is disrespectful, un-Asian, un-Confucian. (Shaw, 1999, p. 23)

Viewing educational reform in Thailand from this perspective, we begin to conclude that educational reform is part and parcel of broader cultural change in the society (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1997). Proposed changes in classroom curriculum and teaching mirror proposed changes in decision making at the school and system levels, and also patterns of citizen participation in society as a whole. The same holds true for changes in methods of educational management. Dimmock highlights this cultural discontinuity in his analysis of Hong Kong's implementation of school-based management:

> In the global push for school-based management and decentralization, a reconfiguration in the pattern of decision-making, responsibility and power in favor of principals, teachers and parents is foreshadowed. Predictably, societal cultures in which power is distributed more equally, e.g. Anglo-American societies, would adjust rather more successfully to school-based management than societal cultures in which power is concentrated, such as Chinese communities like Hong Kong and Singapore. This may partly explain the different forms in which school-based management manifests itself—in some societies, simply reinforcing the power of the principal, while in others leading to more genuine participation of teachers and parents. (Dimmock, 2000, p. 301)

Taken together, recent educational reforms in the Southeast Asian region suggest a movement away from educational practices that are consistent with traditional Asian cultural values and norms. These changes run squarely into resistance generated by a need to maintain a sense of stability (O'Toole, 1995). Achieving the types of complex changes envisioned by system policy-makers will require skillful leadership at all levels of the educational system (Caldwell, 2003; Fullan, 2001; Hallinger, 1998a; 1998b). It will require leaders who are able to manage the tension between cultural stability and cultural change.

Managing through Power, Leading through Understanding

The previous analysis sets the context for identifying cultural challenges facing school principals as they attempt to convert society's intentions for educational reform into practice. Principals throughout the world have become the favored

targets of policy makers intent on system-wide reform. A preponderance of research conducted on education innovation and school improvement finds that school principals hold the keys to successful policy change (Fullan, 2001; Hallinger & Heck, 2003). Without active, skillful support from principals, the implementation of change in schools seldom succeeds. This realization has resulted in a global trend in which governments have prioritised increasing the leadership capacities of school principals (e.g. see Caldwell, 2003; Hallinger, 2003; Huber, 2003; Lam, 2003; Leithwood, 2003).

Yet, this cultural analysis suggests that even though school principals occupy a key role in the educational system, their ability to fulfill society's expectations for change will not come easily. Traditionally, principals in educational systems throughout the world have acted as agents of stability, rather than as agents of change (Cuban, 1988; Fullan, 2001; Lam, 2003). For the past 100 years, the role of principals has been framed as that of *order takers* within the educational bureaucracy. Initiative has seldom been valued or expected (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Instead, principals have been rewarded for maintaining cultural continuity, both within society and inside the system bureaucracy (Cuban, 1988; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991).

Consequently, principals face the difficult challenge of meeting conflicting expectations in this era of global educational reform. Indeed, principals who have risen through the bureaucracy on the basis of meeting expectations for continuity and stability are now being asked to "lead change" to this same system. This section of the article elaborates on the challenge of cultural leadership facing school leaders in Thailand.

The Managerial Role of Principals

The traditional role of the school principal has been that of administrator or manager[1]. Cuban (1988) argued that a *managerial* or conservative orientation is embedded in the "DNA of the principalship" in the United States. Efforts by principals to act in ways that depart from this conservative or managerial orientation are likely to face overt and covert resistance from above and below, as well as inside and outside the school. In the light of this tendency, what could be more disconcerting to a school administrator than sudden pressure to assume the role of a leader of innovation?

If it is true that a managerial orientation characterizes the historical role of American principals, scholars have argued that this tendency is even stronger in Thailand and other Asian nations (Dimmock, 2000; Dimmock & Walker, 1998; 2000; Hallinger, 1998a; Hallinger & Kantamara, 2000). Asian principals are members of *high power distance* cultures (Dimmock, 2000; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1997; Hofstede, 1980; 1991). This means that in their cultural contexts large differences in power between staff levels tend to be accepted as natural. For example, the normative expectation of Americans that "all men are created equal" is simply not a part of their cultural fabric. Instead, differences in social status are set at birth and reinforced throughout the period of socialization.

In practical terms, this means that principals tend to accept the orders of their superiors, just as teachers accept the orders of their principals. People find it uncomfortable, inappropriate, and impolite to question authority in ways that would be considered quite mild in low power distance cultures such as the US or Australia. This has been the natural order within Asian educational bureaucracies for past generations, and more broadly within Southeast Asian societies at large (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1997; Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1996).

One consequence is that Thai principals emphasize their managerial role and rely strongly on the use of position power. In the Thai school, for example, the principal is traditionally viewed as the *sole* decision maker. Principals naturally expect their orders to be followed with relatively little discussion, few questions from staff, and no overt dissent. This would be the same in terms of relationships between principals and their superordinates, as well as between teachers and their students.

Changing Roles and Changing Strategies

This managerial approach served both Thai principals and the school system well during periods of stability. It allowed the educational system to develop its internal capacity while gradually adapting to incremental changes in its environment. However, in this era of global educational reform, a managerial emphasis may be less effective. Leithwood (1996) cogently notes some of the reasons for this changing requirement:

> From this [recent] redistribution of power and responsibility [in school systems] has emerged a decidedly different image of the ideal educational organization … This is an organization less in need of control and more in need of both support and capacity development. Organizational needs such as these seem more likely to be served by practices commonly associated with the concept of leadership … than administration. (1996, p. vi)

Research on educational change conducted internationally finds that change in complex teaching, learning, and management practices occurs slowly and only under specific conditions (Fullan, 2000). Successful large-scale reform is difficult at best, and not subject to change by dictum or orders (Caldwell, 1998; 2003; Fullan, 1999; 2000; Hallinger & Kantamara, 2000; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). The traditional position power of Southeast Asian principals remains a useful tool during the change process. It can be used, for example, to gain staff attention during the initial stages of change, to obtain and coordinate resources for training and support, to reinforce the change as a school priority, to exert pressure on staff members who resist the change over a longer period of time, and to gain passage of policy adjustments that would support institutionalization of the change.

However, as suggested by Leithwood (1996), successful implementation of the current era's educational reforms will require Southeast Asian principals to develop a broader repertoire of behaviors commonly associated with *leadership*.

This leadership role will require principals to use several new capacities (Fullan, 2001; Hallinger, 1998a; 1998b):

- *Vision.* Understanding educational trends as they are evolving globally and interpreting them in ways that help local practitioners make sense of them.
- *Motivating.* Shaping a school culture that motivates and supports students and staff for lifelong learning and change.
- *Organizing.* Organizing the school's fiscal, educational, and human resources to achieve its vision of new educational practices.

Research on educational change in Thailand (Hallinger & Kantamara, 2000) has found that principals tend to emphasize the use of position power during the change process. The cultural expectation that staff will "follow orders" to adopt officially pronounced changes has led Thai principals to underemphasize their role in creating a shared vision of the change process and motivating staff to change. Thus a typical change strategy observed among Thai principals would consist of the following steps:

- Announce the change to be implemented by the school at a meeting of teachers.
- Send selected staff to workshops for training.
- Leave staff to implement the new practices in their classrooms largely on their own.

This strategy reflects the high power distance culture that characterizes Thailand. There is a culturally ingrained expectation among Thai principals that their position power should be sufficient to bring about change in their schools. This expectation receives unwitting reinforcement from another system-wide norm whereby surface changes such as staff workshop attendance are treated as evidence that change has occurred. This reflects a *checklist mentality* regarding the implementation of change (Hallinger & Kantamara, 2000).

Paradoxically, although Thailand's educational administrators seem to implicitly believe that change implementation results from the simple delivery of orders to staff, they are also among the first to complain that nothing ever changes in the educational system. School principals in Thailand understand well the ineffectiveness of this top-down change strategy as used by their superiors with them. Yet they tend to quickly replicate the same type of strategy when implementing changes with teachers in their schools. The strength of this normative behavior in the educational system reflects its origins in the broader social culture of Thailand.

Missing from this change strategy are the three key leadership capacities necessary to support educational change: (1) creating a shared vision of the change, (2) motivating students, parents and staff, and (3) organizing staff and resources. Each of these requires a much more intimate and time-consuming engagement of the principal with staff during the change process. Moreover, in the absence of this type of *leadership*, staff are less likely to embrace complex changes in educational practices as their own, to *actively* learn how to use the new practices, and to follow through with their use in classrooms.

Cultural Leadership that Creates Mutual Understanding

It is interesting to note that within Thai culture feelings clearly take precedence over reason (Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1996; Mulder, 1996). Over 100 different words in the Thai language are compound words formed by combining a verb with the noun "heart". For example, Thai's don't "change their minds" they "change their hearts".

Why is this relevant to an understanding of the change process? The prior analysis suggested that the predominant change strategy in use by school administrators is a very linear, rational approach. Tell the staff; then train the staff and they will proceed with implementation. As noted, however, this approach skips the important process by which staff members become interested in and make sense of the change. Particularly in the early stages, change is more an emotional than a rational process (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991; Fullan, 1999; 2000).

In the Thai language, the word "to understand" is *khow jai*. A literal translation of *khow jai* is "to enter the heart"… For Thai people "understanding" is predominantly emotional rather than cognitive. The process of developing mutual understanding of another person requires one to enter his or her heart (*kwarm khow jai gun*). By implication, a teacher must understand the student (i.e. enter his or her heart) before the student will understand the subject matter. A principal must understand the teachers (i.e. enter their hearts) before the teachers will accept the need to change longstanding educational practices.

Conclusion

This article has analyzed the context of educational change in Thailand from a cultural perspective. A cultural perspective locates the school as an institution of cultural transmission in an open social system. Schools reflect the predominant values and norms of the larger culture. However, for reasons elaborated above, the practices of schools will tend to change more slowly than those of the broader society. I have asserted that this time lag experienced by schools in their implementation of complex changes is a built-in design feature of schools. Simply stated, societies have not traditionally wished for their schools to change quickly. They are indeed the society's "museums of virtue" (Tyack & Hansot, 1982).

Extending this analysis further, the paper concluded that the principal's role is therefore inherently conservative and emphasizes managerial rather than leadership behavior. Principals have always been agents of stability rather than agents of change. Even the most effective principals must lead with "one foot on the brake" (O'Toole, 1995).

Yet, the current era poses new challenges for school principals. The global tidal wave of change is creating a new cultural context for education and schools. The salient features of this new cultural context are both global and local. By virtue of their positions, principals are key agents linking schools with their environments (globally and locally). Research and practice reinforce the

belief that the capacity of educational systems to implement large-scale reforms is moderated by the will and skill of school principals. This has resulted in a new interest among governments in changing school principals from agents of stability into leaders of change.

This cultural analysis contends that such a change, although difficult for principals throughout the world, represents a special challenge for principals in Thailand. Cultural norms in Thailand have shaped the managerial behavior of school principals in special ways. The argument presented in this article emphasizes the need for Thai principals to work harder at articulating the moral basis of reform and at creating interest among teachers in engaging in educational reform.

Note

1. The terms "administrator", "manager", and "leader" are used differently in various cultural contexts. In this paper "administrator" and "manager" are used interchangeably to suggest the maintenance, coordination, and control functions of principals. "Leadership" is used to suggest the role principals play in creating a shared vision of the future and motivating members of the school community to move in that direction.

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