



Educational Change in Thailand: opening a window onto leadership as a cultural process

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ABSTRACT *This article uses a case study of change leadership in a Thai school to illustrate the salience of multi-cultural perspectives on school leadership. The case study explores the role of leadership in implementing 'modern' systemic reforms in a traditional Thai school. The study employs a cultural analysis of the change process that contrasts the nature of the 'empowering' reforms with the underlying cultural norms of Thai society. The results suggest differences in the nature of educational change that are rooted in the social culture of the country. Implications for leading educational change in the East and West are discussed.*

Introduction

Over the past decade policy-makers have increasingly focused on the need to develop system capacities for educational reform and change. This focus on *change* represents a global response to the widening gap between the traditional capabilities of educational systems and emerging demands of the information age (e.g. Cheng & Wong 1996; Hallinger & Leithwood 1996; Caldwell 1998; Dimmock & Walker 1998; Murphy & Adams 1998). Throughout the world, reform policies are reshaping the context for school management and highlighting the role of school-level leaders as change agents (see Cheng & Wong 1996; Caldwell 1998; Dimmock & Walker 1998; Hallinger *et al.* 1999). Consequently, in London, New York, Bangkok, Hong Kong, Melbourne, Singapore and Beijing, developing the leadership capacities of school administrators has taken centre stage as an educational priority (e.g. Hallinger & Bridges 1997; Reeves *et al.* 1999; Davis 1999; Feng 1999; Hallinger 1999; Li 1999; Low 1999; Tomlinson 1999).

While a global consensus has formed around the need for more adept change leadership in schools, the knowledge resources on which to build these capacities remain uncertain and unevenly distributed.

Over the past few decades the knowledge base about ... change has grown appreciably. Some scholars feel that we know more about innovation than we ever have ... But although we have surely learned much, there remain

two large gaps in our knowledge: training and implementation. (Evans 1996: 4)

Evans' observation is especially salient in nations outside Europe and North America where the indigenous literature on school leadership and change is often less mature (e.g. see Cheng 1995; Bajunid 1995, 1996; Walker *et al.* 1996; Walker & Quong 1998; Hallinger 1999). Thus, when formal training is provided, school practitioners in non-Western nations often learn Western frameworks that lack cultural validity. This has led to calls for development of an 'indigenous knowledge base' on school leadership, particularly among Asian scholars (for commentaries on the need for such studies see Cheng 1995; Bajunid 1995, 1996; Hallinger 1995; Heck 1996; Walker *et al.* 1996; Wong 1996; Hallinger & Leithwood 1996, 1998; Dimmock & Walker 1998; Walker & Quong 1998).

These calls for culturally-grounded research set the context for our own research and development effort aimed at understanding change leadership in Asian cultures (see Hallinger & Kantamara in press; Hallinger 1999). In an earlier paper we took the position that leading organisational change is fundamentally a *cultural* process (Hallinger & Kantamara in press). While this is not an original proposition, most scholars to date have employed *organisational culture* as the conceptual framework for understanding change (Bolman & Deal 1992; Sarason 1982; Fullan 1993; Evans 1996; Kotter 1996; Schein 1996). We instead employed *national culture* as the conceptual lens (Hallinger & Kantamara in press, see also Hofstede 1991; Brislin 1993). In that article, using Thailand as a case for our theoretical examination of the change process, we drew the following conclusion.

[W]e have barely touched perhaps the most intriguing aspect of this topic: the interaction between these traditional cultural norms that shape behavior in Thai educational organizations and global change forces. That is, earlier we asserted that the effective change leader in Thai schools would need to be *both* adept at negotiating the traditional culture *and* knowledgeable in the ways of 'modern' educational reforms.

Experience suggests that the scarcity of this dual set of skills among Thai school leaders is only exceeded by the paucity of theoretical or practical knowledge in supply by academics. While this compounds the already difficult tasks of educational reform in Thailand, we believe that it holds fascinating challenges for those practitioners and scholars willing to accept the charge. (Hallinger & Kantamara in press)

In this article, we build on this theoretical analysis by reference to an exploratory case study of change leadership in Thailand. The earlier analysis focused solely upon speculating on how traditional cultural norms might shape the process of change in Thai schools. Here we examine the change process as experienced in Thai schools that successfully undertook complex systemic reforms that reflect the direction of what we refer to as 'modern Thai education'. By this we mean Thai schools that are seeking to meet global educational goals (e.g. computer literacy, English proficiency, problem-solving capacity, social responsibility, mastery of disciplinary knowledge)

and that are using some subset of globally-disseminated educational practices (e.g. school-based management, parental involvement, IT, co-operative learning).

The purpose of the article is twofold. First, we explore how Thai school leaders successfully respond to the demands of traditional cultural norms even as they transform schools into 'modern' Thai organisations. Second, we reflect on these findings from Thailand in the light of a cross-cultural perspective on educational change. The findings demonstrate the significance of cross-cultural research by expanding traditional (i.e. Western) perspectives on organisational leadership and change.

Leading Educational Change in Thailand

Like other areas of public administration in Thailand, the educational system is highly centralised (Meesing 1979; Ketudat 1984; Hallinger *et al.* 1999; Hallinger & Kantamara in press). In Thailand's educational system, participants assume that orders from above are orders for all concerned. This has resulted in what even senior Ministry of Education officials have acknowledged, with mixed feelings, is a 'compliance culture' (see also Sykes *et al.* 1997; Wheeler *et al.* 1997). Over the past decade the constraints imposed by this institutional culture on educational reform have become increasingly apparent. Consequently, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has recently adopted policies that seek to implant 'empowering' educational reforms into Thai schools (Ministry of Education 1997a, 1997b; Sykes *et al.* 1997). These include school-based management, parental involvement, social-constructivist teaching practices, and the use of new learning technologies.

In their countries of origin, implementation of these 'global' school reforms has been difficult, long, and uncertain (e.g. Evans 1996; Caldwell 1998; Hargeaves & Fullan 1998; Murphy & Adams 1998). Not surprisingly, these reforms have found an even more tentative welcome in the strongly hierarchical social and institutional culture of Thailand's schools. More so than in the West, the values and assumptions underlying these 'modern' educational practices run counter to traditional cultural norms of Thai society (Sykes *et al.* 1997; Wheeler *et al.* 1997; Hallinger *et al.* 1999; Hallinger & Kantamara in press).

This is not to say that Thai educators have not been asking for change. Indeed, there is widespread recognition that the current system is inefficient and ineffective at meeting the demands of the emerging era. Even so, when faced with implementing these challenging new approaches to management, learning and teaching, Thai educators remain subject to traditional Thai cultural values, assumptions, and norms.

We therefore assert that implementation of these 'modern' educational reforms will fail unless Thai leaders demonstrate a deep understanding of how traditional cultural norms influence the implementation of change in Thailand's social systems. We further contend that *being Thai* no more guarantees understanding how to foster real change in Thai schools than *being American* does in the USA or *being Chinese* in Hong Kong. Thus, we begin this inquiry into leading change with a summary of key

facets of Thai culture (see Hallinger & Kantamara in press for a more complete explication).

A Cultural Perspective on Change in Thai Schools

Geert Hofstede, an engineer and industrial psychologist, conducted a 6-year social study in the late 1960s to explore cultural differences among people from 40 countries, including Thailand. Hofstede defined culture as the 'collective mental programming of the people in a social environment in which one grew up and collected one's life experiences' (Hofstede, 1980, 1983, 1991). He identified four dimensions on which national cultures differ: Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism-Collectivism, and Masculinity-Femininity. According to Hofstede's cultural map, Thailand ranks high on Power Distance, high as a Collectivist culture, high on Uncertainty Avoidance, and high on Femininity.

In an earlier paper, we concluded the following:

- The *high power distance* characterising Thai culture shapes the behaviour of administrators, teachers, student and parents to show unusually high deference (*greng jai*) towards those of senior status in all social relationships. This results in a pervasive, socially-legitimated expectation that decisions should be made by those in positions of authority (i.e. Ministry administrators for principals, principals for teachers and parents, teachers for students). High power distance also creates a tendency for administrators to lead by *fiat*. There is a cultural assumption that leading change entails establishing orders—which will be followed—and applying pressure in special cases where it is needed.
- The *collectivist* facet of Thai culture shapes the context for change by locating it in the group more than in individuals. While it is still individuals who must change their attitudes and behaviours, Thai's exhibit a stronger 'We' than 'I' mentality. They look primarily to their referent social groups in order to 'make sense' of their role in change (Holmes & Tangtongtavy 1995). Moreover, staff are more likely to 'move in the direction of change' as a group than as individuals.
- The high level of *uncertainty avoidance* means that Thai's are strongly socialised to conform to group norms, traditions, rules and regulations. They evince a stronger tendency to seek stability and to find change disruptive and disturbing than in 'lower uncertainty avoidance' cultures.
- The *feminine* dimension leads Thai's to place a high value on social relationships, to seek harmony and to avoid conflict. Since conflict is a natural by-product of change, this exerts a further drag on the already slow process of change. Thai's also place great emphasis on living and working in a pleasurable atmosphere and on fostering a strong spirit of community through social relations. Anything that threatens the harmonious balance of the social group (e.g. change) will create resistance.

In this current research effort, we assumed the challenge of exploring empirically the salience of these propositions in Thai schools.

Methodology

Several potentially conflicting characteristics complicate research into school leadership in Thailand and other rapidly developing countries in this era.

- Thailand's MOE is promulgating reform policies that seek to change the normative practices of Thai schools in terms of management, the role of parents and community, teaching, and learning (MOE 1997a, 1997b).
- The social-economic context surrounding Thai schools is in a period of rapid transition. This emerging context is characterised by rising expectations and dissatisfaction with the educational system among a growing middle class and a concerned business community (Bangkok Post 1998; Hallinger 1998; Hallinger & Kantamara in press).
- To date, new reform policies have reached relatively few schools and Thailand's leaders are under pressure to consider how they will 'import' these innovative practices into more schools (MOE 1997a, 1999b; Sykes *et al.* 1997).
- Given these trends, understanding 'what worked' in terms of leading Thai schools in 1980 or 1990 will provide an incomplete picture of what it takes to lead change in the year 2000 (Drucker 1995).

This rapidly evolving context created a problematic situation given our goal of illuminating the process of change in Thai 'schools of the future'. We settled on a research strategy that would study schools that had demonstrated success in implementing the type of 'modern' educational reforms envisioned by Thai policy-makers for all schools.

Our case study focused on a subset of 139 schools that participated in a systemic school reform project undertaken by the MOE between 1993 and 1997: the *Basic and Occupational Education and Training* (BOET) (MOE 1997a, 1997b). The BOET project's goal was, 'To expand access to and improve the quality of basic and occupational education programs so that traditionally disadvantaged groups will be better served' (MOE 1997b). This was accomplished largely through local collaboration and technical assistance designed to assist these project schools in implementing the types of innovations in management, teaching and learning noted above. The BOET programme was funded by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and implemented in 13 provincial sites in the four regions of Thailand.

We selected three schools from among the 139 schools two years after completion of the project (i.e. spring 1999). The three schools were nominated by the project Director as having successfully implemented and maintained the desired reforms over a 7-year period. Moreover, the principals who led these schools during the project were still working at them in the spring of 1999.

The three schools were located in different regions of Thailand (North, South, Central). They were co-educational schools of moderate size (200–350 students)

serving students from preschool to 9th grade. Teaching staffs ranged from 15 to 17 teachers per school. Staff qualifications were similar across the schools with all teachers having at least a special diploma and a few teachers at each school possessing a bachelor's degree. The Directors (two male and one female) each held a BA.

Participation in the BOET project meant that these schools received more resources than 'typical' Thai schools. Despite this difference from the challenge facing Thai schools in general, they still met our most important criteria.

- They had started at a typical baseline of performance compared with other schools in their regions. Initially, the schools had been selected for participation in the BOET project because their norms of practice reflected a range typical of other Thai schools.
- They were implementing the same educational reforms envisioned for all Thai schools by the MOE (i.e. parental involvement, school improvement planning, IT, schoolbased management).
- Over a 7-year period, the schools had overcome a typical set of change obstacles faced in Thai schools and still managed to sustain the implementation of these complex reforms.

While this sample of three schools would not provide a definitive perspective on the salience of our conceptual analysis, it seemed well suited to the requirements of an exploratory empirical effort.

Data Collection and Analysis

We contacted principals from the three schools to obtain their participation in 'a study of educational reform'. Two days were spent at each of the schools. A researcher observed and conducted focus group interviews with teachers. More extensive individual interviews were held with each of the principals. The interviews were semi-structured and designed to elicit staff perceptions of the change process that the school had undertaken. Each interview typically lasted from one to two hours.

We employed thematic analysis of the data focusing specifically on two areas: obstacles and change strategies. Initially we looked for patterns within the three schools and compared the perceptions of the teachers with those of the principal. Then we compared data across the schools in order to generate common categories. Finally, we referred back to our conceptual framework on cultural change to generate additional perspectives on the data. Due to space limitations, we limit our report of findings to a summary and discussion related to the change strategies employed in the schools.

Results

When comparing the findings across the three schools, several common categories

emerged from the data: leadership style, group orientation and teamwork, pressure and support for change, spirit and celebration, accountability.

Leadership Style

As suggested above, the predominant tendency of Thai school administrators is to rely heavily on position power when implementing new policies or programmes. In light of this, we were surprised to find that all three Directors used decidedly participatory management styles. Although it manifested in different ways, each of the Directors took specific steps:

- to build widespread support for the vision of change;
- to reduce the 'status gap' between themselves and their stakeholders;
- to gather information that reflected a broad range of perspectives from stakeholders prior to and during the adoption of school changes.

This was demonstrated in their approaches to building visions for change in the schools. Contrary to the top-down vision approach favoured by many Thai leaders, these principals involved all stakeholders—students, teachers, parents, community members—in setting the direction for change.

One of the Directors, Mr Lek, went to unusual lengths for a Thai leader, to ensure that everyone had an opportunity to voice their thoughts on school matters. Annually, he asked all students to fill out an evaluation form on their teachers. Lek summarises the results and the staff use the data to identify the needs of the school. In addition, he holds individual teacher conferences during which he shares the classroom-based information. He noted, 'In the first couple years there were only compliments for the teachers, because the students tended to *greng jai* them. But more recently they have begun to offer critical comments as well'.

The teachers also evaluate the Director in writing once a year. Lek claimed to find this method helpful because most teachers were too *greng jai* to give him direct verbal feedback. The teachers noted that allowing them to evaluate him represented a powerful form of modelling. It indicated that Lek supported continuous improvement for all staff, not just teachers.

A second Director, Ms Jintana gives each parent a form on which to write their opinions of the school. The forms are anonymous and divided into different sections: teachers, students, school administrator, care provided for students. She distributes the results to all teachers so that they can become aware of how the community views the school.

The third Director, Mr Suchin, noted the importance but also the difficulty in obtaining broad participation in developing a school improvement plan. Consistent with Thai tradition, staff, students and parents were initially afraid to express their opinions even when he encouraged them to do so. Few people, teachers and villagers alike, felt comfortable speaking up in group forums. A Thai who speaks up in the company of a mixed social group runs the risk of appearing to think he/she is better than others. They felt much more comfortable letting the senior person present, the school Director, decide for them.

With students, the problem was even more pronounced. They refused to speak up at all because they were bound to *greng jai* everyone; all other members of the committees were senior. Suchin reduced this problem by inviting their seniors (or *roon pii*) who recently graduated to attend the meetings and to work with them as coaches. This began to bridge the gap between ages. Suchin noted that the most important thing is for the school leader to find ways to help people see that it is okay for them to voice their thoughts and ask questions.

Through involvement in a variety of projects, these norms began to change in all three schools. Representatives of students, graduates, staff and community members felt more comfortable participating in the process of developing school improvement plans that were based on locally-identified needs. However, this change only occurred slowly and over a period of several years.

Teachers at all three schools gave much credit for their success to the school Directors. They elaborated that the Directors would often participate in tasks with their staffs, an unusual step for Thai principals. All three Directors were more involved in activities with their staff than is typical. All led by example, a key facet identified among change leaders (e.g. Evans, 1996).

Group Orientation and Teamwork

The three Directors worked hard to create a sense of family in their schools. One Director, noted, 'I want my staff to work as brothers and sisters with a sense of mutual responsibility and a high level of trust, even in the face of the conflict that comes with change'. This also reflected the high value that the principals placed on teamwork as a focus for change.

In one school, staff identified how peer coaching, in formal and informal ways, provided support in the midst of change. Teamwork had both technical and emotional dimensions. Given the feeling of living as brothers and sisters, senior teachers (or *pii*) helped their junior teachers (or *nong*) in learning to use curricular and instructional innovations. The family atmosphere promoted trust among colleagues and somewhat reduced the sense of uncertainty that comes naturally with change.

Access to special budget allocations afforded the staff the opportunity to participate in numerous group planning and development activities: planning meetings, workshops, seminars, site visits to other schools, and study tours. These seemed to have a positive impact on change in two ways. First, they afforded the staff, as a group or subgroups, with opportunities to 'make meaning' out of the new (Fullan, 1990, 1993; Evans, 1996). These also enabled staff to gain access to moral and technical support from a broader array of sources: programme staff, colleagues, teachers from other schools, and consultants.

Pressure and Support for Change

When the BOET project was initiated, all three Directors explicitly avoided forcing teachers to join. Instead, they sought initial participation on a voluntary basis and

then expanded the programme concurrent with increased staff interest. They all used a similar strategy of encouraging the more active and knowledgeable teachers to participate in the change effort first. This allowed sceptical colleagues to observe their colleagues as well as the reactions of students. This reduced the stress associated with change and defused the fear that they were 'guinea pigs for another topdown MOE project'. Over time, many of the initially sceptical teachers decided to join the project activities as well.

There were of course some teachers who paid little attention to the new initiatives. Moreover, while they were indifferent to the new programmes, they were not averse to criticising other staff's efforts. The Directors relied on a combination of support and peer pressure to foster change with these staff members (Evans 1996; Kotter 1996).

As suggested above, this project provided a high degree of technical support. Teachers were able to attend numerous workshops in areas targeted by the innovations. In the BOET programme human resource development was provided for teachers, students, community members, school administrators all at the same time. Moreover, they had multiple opportunities to visit other schools and see the new management, instructional, and curricular processes at work prior to and during implementation. Professional development and implementation activities went well beyond the typical one-shot workshop.

The Directors employed a variety of strategies with staff who simply would not work towards implementation of the project goals over a long period of time. Suchin, for example, noted that he relied more on persuasion than orders to foster change. He used both group meetings and individual conversations to explain the rationale of the initiatives and to encourage staff participation. Sometimes he assigned sceptical staff members with particular responsibilities to make them feel special and also to encourage a sense of responsibility.

Jintana would meet with a particularly resistant teacher personally outside of the school to have a *jap-kao-kui-gun* or 'touch-the-knee' talk. This is an informal 'open-heart' talk to discuss an issue, problem or concern about the new. Or the Director might ask an informal leader among the staff member's colleagues to talk with a resistant colleague or even to act as a mentor.

With the most resistant teachers, the Directors also used administrative pressure, especially from outside the school. For example, Lek used high status 'resource people'—the district/provincial teacher supervisor, BOET task force consultants, UNDP representatives—to legitimate the project as a larger priority of the educational system.

Over time, public recognition of the schools' success also became a source of positive pressure for change. For example, over a period of several years, one school became a model for the use of student portfolios. Teachers came from other schools around Thailand to observe how its teachers used portfolios. Even teachers who had continued to resist the use of student portfolios gradually began to take a closer look. Positive recognition of the school's successful innovation among 'outsiders' validated the school's efforts and created positive pressure for sustaining the change effort.

While parents and community members typically play a limited role in Thai schools, a goal of this project was to increase collaboration between schools and their communities. The principals were key players in navigating the potentially treacherous waters as teachers, parents and community members came together. Jintana noted: 'We need to open our door, go to the people, and accept them first. Some things we do not know as well as the community ... teachers do not know everything'. This attitude and the practices associated with it represent a major departure from traditional Thai schools and norms (e.g. high power distance). It is also interesting to note that as collaboration between schools and their communities increased, these external groups became a new source of positive pressure for change.

Spirit and Celebration

Thai culture's feminine dimension places a strong emphasis on social relationships in the workplace. A key outgrowth of this norm lies in the importance of paying attention to spirit in the workplace. To be productive Thai people must find some degree of fun in their work. Harmonious group relationships are a necessary condition for effectiveness in Thai organisations (Holmes & Tangtongtavy 1995). This takes forms that differ in both subtle and obvious ways from Western schools. In these schools it was apparent in the degree to which group-oriented socialising occurred in the context of the school's change implementation activities.

For example, the schools used several different kinds of celebrations to publicise, reinforce, and share the fruits of change. Student Fairs, Teacher Fairs, and BOET-sponsored study visits in Thailand and abroad all became vehicles for celebrating the collective effort. Many people prepared for these events which became occasions for fun or *sanook*. But it was also the shared effort putting the fair together successfully that energised the staff.

At Suchin's school, when parents were invited to a school fair displaying their children's products they felt very proud. Moreover, parents began to hear stories about how 'their teachers' were training teachers in other schools. This made them curious about what the school was doing and further stimulated their interest. It also reinforced the public impression that the school was providing a high quality education. Increased pride and spirit, *gumlung jai*, among the public became a source of new energy to sustain the teachers during the difficult effort to change.

Accountability

The BOET programme provided regular monitoring and evaluation of the school's progress. The teachers noted that the follow-up visits by BOET staff were different from traditional infrequent monitoring conducting by MOE officials. When a teacher supervisor visits a school, he tends to only check whether the school is following the annual plan, and if the teachers write their lesson plans. MOE monitoring of schools follows a checklist mentality and has been characterised as 'hit and run visits' (Hallinger *et al.* 1999). Few teachers feel the visits are helpful. Worse

still, they feel threatened rather than supported, as the purpose often seems to be to find fault in their teaching.

The BOET programme visits focused on formative evaluation and made staff feel that people cared what the school was doing with their money. Was it worth it or not? How were school projects progressing? Was any help needed? The result was a more positive attitude of staffs towards accountability.

One strategy that fostered staff learning while also promoting implementation and accountability was action research. This approach gave practical support to long-term implementation and seemed to increase teachers' sense of responsibility. In sum, this actively formative approach towards programme accountability made staff feel that policy-makers were *jing jung*, serious, about the project. This is seldom the case in the traditional system (e.g. see Hallinger *et al.* 1999).

Discussion and Conclusions

Our earlier analysis of educational change in Thailand's cultural context led to several propositions about leading change in Thai schools (Hallinger & Kantamara, in press). Here we seek to extend these propositions using the findings of this exploratory study. Note that results from this single case study cannot 'confirm' the propositions; they merely elaborate on their face validity.

Leading School Change in the Thai Cultural Context

- (1) *Target formal leaders and obtain their support early in the change process.* If administrative support is an important condition for educational change in Western countries (Fullan 1990, 1993; Evans 1996; Kotter 1996), our theoretical and empirical analyses suggest that it is a *sine qua non* in Thailand. The 'high power distance' that characterises Thai culture invests the principal with significantly more position power as well as culturally legitimised, informal influence.

Both carried over to the principal's role in leading change. The teachers at all three schools made it clear that their principals played a critical role by creating an initial stimulus for change and actively supporting implementation. The leader's role as a catalyst for change seems even more necessary given that these schools were undertaking reforms that ran counter to deeply-rooted Thai cultural norms. Thus, early, firm support from the principal seems necessary for catalysing and sustaining the transformation of Thai schools into 'modern organisations'.

- (2) *Formal leaders must use strategies that counter traditional norms of deference and bring staff concerns to the surface so they may understand and address staff resistance.* The high power distance prevalent in Thai culture creates an intriguing problem for change leaders. It would appear that Thai leaders may need to 'disarm' themselves of the most powerful tool at their disposal, power, in order to promote lasting change. This is consistent with a

Buddhist principle familiar to Thai people: 'In order to get something that you really want, you need to want it less'.

In the face of the principal's power and status, the Thai tendency to *greng jai* or show deference forestalls the initial impulse of staff to ask important questions about the innovation. Consequently, Thai leaders often fail to surface the concerns and questions of staff at the outset. They may come to believe they have achieved consensus where none exists. These principals demonstrated an implicit understanding of this fact as they employed a variety of 'disarmament' strategies designed to reduce the power distance between themselves and their constituencies.

The tendency of staff to *greng jai* by responding with surface politeness also drives resistance underground. The result is a polite, surface compliance seasoned with varying degrees of passive resistance. This also means that managers fail to tap the most important resource they possess in the change implementation process, the knowledge of their own staff. As Maurer has observed:

Often those who resist have something important to tell us. We can be influenced by them. People resist for what they view as good reasons. They may see alternatives we never dreamed of. They may understand problems about the minutiae of implementation that we never see from our lofty perch. (Maurer 1996: 49)

Resistance is a natural by-product of the change process (Senge 1990; Bolman & Deal 1992; O'Toole 1995; Evans 1996; Maurer 1996). It is something leaders must learn to work with; not something to sweep under the rug, to bludgeon into submission, or even to 'overcome' through argument. To successfully foster change in organisations, leaders must learn to look for and use resistance. Yet, as suggested above, the high power distance in Thai culture creates a dynamic in which resistance is unconsciously smothered.

To our surprise, these principals evinced a more participatory mode of leadership than we typically see in Thai schools. This extended to personal perspectives (e.g. vision), behaviours (e.g. modelling), leadership tools (e.g. surveys, annual written evaluation-feedback forms, open meetings), and to the strategies used to foster staff interest and involvement in the change projects. While these Directors emphasised the importance of breaking down cultural norms of deference, they also continued to maintain traditional values of mutual respect and sincerity. More in-depth case studies that describe the manner in which leaders walk this fine line of cultural transformation would add greatly to our understanding of change leadership more broadly.

- (1) *Obtain and cultivate the support of informal leaders and leverage the resources of the social network to create pressure and support for change.* As noted above, Thailand is a highly collectivist culture. Thai people learn to use their social groups as the primary sources of reference for understanding their place in society. Not surprisingly, these principals made extensive and varied use of the social networks in and around their schools to foster change.

The principals targeted informal leaders in the initial implementation of the reform project and maintained close contact with them throughout. Their colleagues often looked to these leaders for direction and reassurance. Accessing the resources of the social network of the school, and in this case the community, created support for change. For example, staff outings gave the staff a chance to gain a group perspective on the innovations under consideration.

Surprisingly, parental and community pressure emerged as a factor that exerted considerable influence on teachers over time. This project mandated a level of community participation hitherto unknown in Thai schools. A range of activities that increased contact among staff and community members (e.g. planning meetings, fairs, celebrations, study visits) also created pressure (e.g. higher expectations) as well as support (e.g. pride) for change. Thus, we would suggest that the informal network of the school and its community is as important—if not more important—in Thailand as in Western schools.

- (2) *Use formal authority selectively to reinforce expectations and standards consistent with implementation of the innovation.* As suggested above, these principals walked a fine line in the use of their authority. They understood the need to downplay their authority if there was any hope of stimulating meaningful participation among staff, students, and community members. Thus, they began the change project by seeking the participation of volunteers and encouraging the use of ‘democratic’ group processes.

Even so, over time they did use a variety of strategies that increased the pressure for implementation. Some were quite direct, while others were indirect. Thus, they were not afraid to use the authority of external educational constituencies (e.g. project staff, provincial administrators, experts), the expectations of the community, and peer pressure to foster change.

- (3) *Find ways to inject fun, encourage the spirit, and celebrate shared accomplishments in the workplace while maintaining accountability.* All three directors identified the importance of fostering a family spirit of mutual responsibility and assistance when speaking of visions for their schools. The skill of their leadership and that of their colleagues lie in finding an acceptable balance between the pressures for change (e.g. accountability) and group harmony. Organisational rituals such as study visits, fairs, and celebrations became important opportunities for creating meaning and sustaining the momentum of change. The staff in all three schools would claim that in an effective school, *sanook* (fun) and *gumlung jai* (moral support/spirit) go hand in hand with productivity.

Implications for Cross-cultural Studies of Leadership

We emphasise that this report represents an early step in a long-range programme

of research and development on leadership across cultures. Moreover, this study's abundant limitations point the way for future research. For example, the addition of comparison schools from another culture would add greatly to the richness and power of this analysis.

As a preliminary effort, however, this study confirms the complexity of understanding leadership processes across cultures. Two decades ago Bridges (1977) claimed that leadership entails getting results through other people. If this is the case, then we can only understand the nature of leadership by exposing the hidden assumptions of the cultural context. This will open new windows through which to view educational leadership.

The culture of Thailand creates a unique context in which to lead educational change. According to Hofstede's cultural map (1991), however, Thai culture also shares similarities with other Southeast Asian nations. In particular, other Southeast Asian nations tend to rank high on both collectivism and power distance. Thus, for example, that high power distance also shapes the context for leading educational change in Singapore and in Hong Kong (Hallinger 1999). To the extent that this is the case, school principals in these nations might find a need for similar 'disarmament strategies' in efforts to foster change.

This analysis further suggests that a culture's strengths are also its limitations. In the case of leading change, high power distance enables leaders to achieve initial compliance more easily. However, it can become a limitation when the goal is deeper implementation of complex innovations that require staff to learn new skills. This is an intriguing problem which only cross-cultural comparison can illuminate.

This perspective on leadership seems especially salient during an era in which global change forces are changing the face of education throughout the world. An ever-expanding array of Western management innovations are traversing the globe and finding their way into traditional cultures. Not unlike the response of a living organism to a virus, the instinctive response of many organisations to these innovations is to attack with self-protective mechanisms. Thus, even as policy-makers embrace *foreign* educational policy reforms, change engenders more suspicion than enthusiasm at the point of implementation. Successful implementation will require sophisticated leadership, especially where the underlying assumptions are *foreign* to prevailing norms of the local culture.

A special caveat is in order before we close. We emphatically restate the cautions of other scholars against the tendency to believe that change in cultural processes can be achieved quickly, even in the presence of the most skilled leadership (Sarason 1982; Fullan 1990, 1993; Senge 1990; Ohmae 1995; O'Toole 1995; Evans 1996; Kotter 1996; Schein 1996). As futurist 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 untouched' (1995: 30). Schools were never designed with the goal of rapid change, and the transformation of traditional schools into 'modern' organisations will require a long-term perspective and persistence (Tyack & Hansot 1982).

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