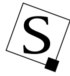

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Exploring the Cultural Context of School Improvement in Thailand

Philip Hallinger and Pornkasem Kantamara
Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, USA

ABSTRACT

As education becomes a global enterprise, policies and practices derived from a particular cultural context are finding their way into educational systems that differ significantly from their land of origin. The article explores the cultural context of school improvement in Thailand, a developing Asian nation. Although Thailand is rapidly integrating into the global culture, it retains a strongly traditional set of cultural values and norms. Drawing upon literature review and case study data, we examine the changing nature of successful school improvement in Thailand during this period of rapid cultural transition. We also discuss implications for school improvement more generally.

INTRODUCTION

> The contents of kitchens and closets may change, but the core mechanisms by which cultures maintain their identity and socialize their young remain untouched. (Ohmae, 1995, p. 30)

Nowhere is the paradox of stability within a context of change more apparent than in Southeast Asia. Observers assert that the pace of economic and social development in this region over the past decade is comparable to two to three generations of change in Europe and North America (Ohmae, 1995; Rohwer, 1996). The region's governments have responded by articulating ambitious new educational policies consistent with their evolving social, political and economic goals. Yet experience shows that the same governments are finding it easier to formulate than to implement these new policies.

Address correspondence to: Dr. Philip Hallinger, 133/10 Jed Yod, A. Muang, T. Chang Puek, Chiang Mai, 50300, Thailand. Tel.: +1-661-881-1667. Fax: +1-813-354-3543. E-mail: philip@leadingware.com; web: http://www.leadingware.com

The unfulfilled potential of educational reform is not, of course, limited to Asia. Throughout the world, educational systems are struggling to keep pace with rapidly changing environmental demands. Scholars have characterized the results of school reform efforts initiated during the 1990s in the industrialized world as discernable but modest (Caldwell, 1998; Murphy & Adams, 1998).

One increasingly popular approach to increasing the potency of school-level change has been through leadership development. In both industrialized (e.g., England, Australia, USA) and developing countries (e.g., Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore), governments are undertaking significant new investments in the training and development of principals and other school-level leaders. This reflects the view that school leaders play a key role in successful school improvement.

Despite this policy trend, our ability to increase capacities for leading school improvement through training and development remains unproven. Indeed, such efforts are predicated on an optimistic reading of the literatures on leadership and organizational change. As Evans (1996) has noted:

> 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. (p. 4)

Evan's observation is especially salient for school systems in Asia where the need for school reform is acute, but local conditions create a very different context for change.

As globalization proceeds apace, proposals for the local adaptation of school reform initiatives are demanding greater attention. Cultural and institutional differences in the context of schooling as well as in the nature of *successful school leadership* make "global dissemination" of school improvement programs and training designs a questionable proposition. Further complicating this process of knowledge adaptation is the fact that the Asian literature on school improvement is even less mature than in the West.

Consequently, scholars in the Asia Pacific region have increasingly called for the development of an "indigenous knowledge base" on school leadership (Bajunid, 1996; Cheng, 1995; Hallinger & Kantamara, 2000a). These calls for culturally grounded research set the context for this article aimed at under-

standing successful school improvement in Thailand. Elsewhere we have reviewed the literatures salient to school improvement in Thailand (Hallinger & Kantamara, 2000b) and presented findings from our own empirical study of successful change in Thai schools (Hallinger & Kantamara, 2000a). In this paper, we summarize these findings and reflect upon their implications for school improvement.

METHODOLOGY

This project on school improvement in Thailand began with a review of literature on organizational and educational change in Western societies, Thailand, and other Southeast Asian nations. Unfortunately, the Asian literature was relatively sparse, particularly with respect to empirical studies. Thus, examination of another domain proved essential: literature on Thai culture. We synthesized findings drawn from these literatures in order to generate propositions about the nature of the change process in Thai schools.

This was followed by a set of case studies of ''successful change schools'' designed to explore themes identified in the literature review (Hallinger & Kantamara, 2000a). The case studies focused on a subset of schools that had participated in a systemic school reform project undertaken by Thailand's Ministry of Education (MOE) between 1993 and 1997: the *Basic and Occupational Education and Training* (BOET; MOE, 1997a, b). 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 project schools in implementing innovations in management, teaching and learning (e.g., school-based management, parental participation in schooling, student-centered learning, authentic assessment).

We selected three schools from among the 139 project schools for inclusion in a case study 1 year after completion of the project (i.e., spring 1999). Project staff nominated these schools on the basis of having implemented and sustained important innovations during the 7-year school reform project. In-depth interviews were conducted with groups of teachers as well as with the principal at each of the schools. These focused on the process of change experienced in the schools, obstacles staff encountered, and strategies that enabled them to achieve their goals. The interview data, supplemented by

school documents, were analyzed in order to identify patterns of similarity and difference across the sites.

A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE ON ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE IN THAI SCHOOLS

Scholars increasingly contend that the culture of a nation exerts a hidden but demonstrable influence on its organizations and their capacity to change. For example, Herbig and Dunphy (1998) assert a direct linkage between the innovation and national culture.

> Culture has a profound impact on the innovative capacity of a society. A society's values provide social direction to the process of technological development. The social organization of a culture may either foster or inhibit technological development. It tends to operate as a source of authority, responsibility, and aspiration, thus influencing the course of technological advance and the creation of material culture. (p. 15)

While Herbig and Dunphy focus specifically upon technological development, we believe a similar case can be made for change and innovation in general. This premise sets the context for our cultural exploration of change in Thai schools.

Educational change in Thailand: Past and present

Like other areas of public administration in Thailand, the educational system is highly centralized. Participants at all levels assume that orders from above are orders for all concerned and should be followed accordingly. This has resulted in what senior Ministry of Education officials have acknowledged as a "compliance culture." The Thai approach to leading change by fiat (i.e., orders or mandate) has long been culturally viable. People accept it as a normal part of life in Thai society and schools. Several recent developments have, however, begun to undermine the functional utility of this approach to educational reform.

First, as Thailand integrates into the global culture, Thai parents are becoming more aware of educational practices and standards in other countries. Not surprisingly, they are beginning to seek the same quality of education for their children. There has been a slow but discernable erosion in the willingness of Thai citizens to accept without question decisions made by

bureaucrats. If anything, this trend towards greater expression of public voice has accelerated in the wake of the recent Asian financial crisis.

Second, globalization has led the Thai government to adopt global educational reform policies – school-based management, parental involvement, student-centered learning – in a desire to increase national competitiveness. However, despite their global seal of approval, these "empowering" educational reforms conflict with the normative practices associated with traditional Thai culture. To the extent that these reforms are truly desired by policymakers, significant change will need to occur in the assumptions that guide the Thai system of schooling, from teaching and learning to management.

Third, as experience around the world confirms, this type of normative change is much more difficult than change at the policy level. In the world of schools, the change process is complex, protracted and only partially amenable to implementation by mandate. While this has been recognized as a major factor in implementing policies in Western societies, centralized mandates have remained the preferred approach to change in Thai schools.

Sykes, Floden, and Wheeler (1997) have observed:

> The training model currently employed in Thailand tends to leave out . . . follow up in the classroom to assist the teacher in actually using new approaches or methods. What can be centrally accomplished is the presentation of the new approach, but then teachers are left largely isolated and unsupported in actually implementing new practices . . . Such consequences mirror research findings in the U.S. and other countries which show that under such conditions most teachers do not implement the new practices or only partially implement them, with little resulting change in teaching. (pp. 4–5)

Finally, evidence from research conducted for the Thai Ministry of Education suggests that despite its cultural viability, this traditional approach to change does not achieve the desired results – change in practice at the school level (MOE, 1997b; Sykes et al., 1997). In the past, however, *results* were neither highly valued nor closely monitored. Performance and results were less highly valued than social harmony. It is only with the relatively recent integration of Thailand into the global society that *results* matter in areas such as educational reform.

As noted, the inclination to assume that change *adoption* and *implementation* are synonymous is hardly limited to Thailand. Yet we assert that there is an even stronger tendency towards this approach to change in Thailand.

Moreover, we believe these differences in the strength of these tendencies are rooted in cultural norms of the society.

Thus, while we assert that the leading change by *fiat* holds little promise of success in Thailand's 21st century schools, wholesale adoption of globally sanctioned approaches to improvement is no more likely to achieve desired results. Given this confluence of global change forces and traditional Thai culture, it is unclear just how Thailand's school leaders might approach the challenge of leading school improvement. This is where we began our cultural analysis of school improvement in Thailand.

Change in Thai schools: A cultural analysis

As noted earlier, the empirical literature on educational change in Thailand is sparse. Therefore, we bolstered the review with theoretical and empirical studies of Thai culture. Although our own cultural analysis was broader, we chose Hofstede's (1980) framework for analyzing cultures as the conceptual framework for the study.

Geert Hofstede, an industrial psychologist, conducted a 6-year study 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, 1991). Hofstede identified several dimensions on which national cultures differ: *Power Distance*, *Uncertainty Avoidance*, *Individualism-Collectivism*, *Masculinity-Femininity.*

We took Hofstede's cultural dimensions as the starting-point for our exploration of school improvement in Thai culture. We synthesized the results of our literature review and empirical data analysis in terms of:

- key cultural norms that reflect the particular dimension;
- the effects of cultural norms on change and school improvement; and
- leadership strategies that may foster successful change in the confluence of cultural traditions and educational policies emerging in this era of globalization.

The results of the synthesis are displayed in Tables 1–4. We include definitions of specific cultural norms listed in the Tables at the end of the article. Given limitations of space, we only summarize the results here. We refer the reader to other articles that provide in-depth discussions of the framework and empirical findings (Hallinger & Kantamara, 2000a, b). Here our goal is to

extend those findings into a discussion of how Thailand's culture influences school improvement.

Power distance

Power distance refers to "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organization within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (Hofstede, 1991, p. 28). Thailand is a high power distance culture. This is reflected in its strongly hierarchical and bureaucratic society.

The impact of high power distance on leadership and school improvement processes in Thailand is enormous and is shared, to a large degree, by other Asian cultures. This dimension, perhaps more than any other, creates the most difficult and unique challenge for Thai school leaders today: fostering participation and gaining the whole-hearted commitment of their followers. Table 1 displays ways in which this cultural dimension plays out in school improvement.

Numerous well-established cultural norms of Thailand – *greng jai, greng glua, bunkhun, hai kiad* – that fall within this dimension shape the attitude and behavior of Thai students, parents, teachers, and principals towards change. In Thai society, differences in power and status are accepted as the natural order of life. People expect to be told what to do and how to do it. A paternalistic style of leadership prevails in which administrators at each level receive and pass on orders. There is an implicit expectation that the orders will be heeded without complaint or resistance, although in reality this is not the case.

This carries over to school improvement in both overt and covert ways. At every level of the educational system, people are reluctant to question authority. Principals must *greng jai* or show deference to their supervisors; teachers and parents must do the same to the principal; students act accordingly with their parents and teachers. Upon adoption of a new program or practice, the principal will typically "tell" the staff what is to be done. Teachers receive this information quietly. If they respond at all, they may even express polite interest. They will ask few if any questions. Even asking the question –"Why are we doing this?"– is considered impolite. Such a question would suggest unacceptable public disagreement with someone of higher rank, age or status.

This results in a "compliance culture" that permeates the institutional system. As Fullan (1993) and others have noted, asking questions represents a key early step whereby people make sense of change. Thai school leaders often misinterpret the absence of questions or the polite acceptance of staff as

Table 1. Impact of Large *Power Distance* on Leading School Improvement in Thailand.

Findings from Literature & Research		Strategies
Thai cultural characteristic	Effect on change	Implications for leading change
Large power distance (PD)		
• Highly hierarchical and bureaucratic society	• People expect and accept their position in society from birth	• Articulate moral purpose behind change more than the institutional (*jing jai*)
• Implicit belief that power differences are "natural"	• Reluctant to question – why? – at all levels	• Use non-public strategies to uncover the varying perspectives of people
• Deference to authority and to seniors in age and rank	• Reluctant to make a decisionon their own at all levels	• Listen to people more; sell them on the change less
• People "expect" to be told what to do; participation is not viewed as a right or as something to be sought	• Greater authority vested in people holding administrative positions such as principals	• Take a long-term approach to reducing power distance
• "Just do it" mentality prevails throughout society	• Staff tend to follow orders from higher-ranking position at least at a surface level	• Foster individual and group initiative; ensure leaders' actions are consistent with words (*jing jung*)
• Managers have more power but also greater obligations to their subordinates	• Compliance culture; people at implementation level often lack commitment to change	• Use power selectively
• Real leadership is earned	• Assume adoption represents change; insufficient focus on supporting implementation	• Support the practical tasks of implementation
• (Norms: *Greng jai, Greng Glua, Baramee, Bunkhun, Hai Kiad*)	• Informal relationships heavily shape expectations	• Gain support of informal leaders; share responsibility for implementing change

commitment to the new program. In fact staff are simply fulfilling their socially expected roles. Indeed, this social norm of *greng jai* drives resistance underground accounting for what one leader termed "the high level of passive aggressive behavior" found in Thai organizations generally.

Thus, while leaders in Thai schools can achieve surface compliance more readily than their counterparts in the West, they often fail to go beyond the appearance of change. This tendency to *greng jai* one's superiors is evident throughout the system. It results in a comfortable web of mutual agreement that change has taken place, even when it has not.

As noted, however, globalization has raised the bar against which school success is measured. Change at the surface level is no longer sufficient. Yet, even as Thai leaders attempt to implement global school reforms practices, they continue to operate in a culture where traditional norms hold sway. To achieve successful change in this evolving context, Thai school leaders must develop strategies that honor the local culture while meeting the underlying requirements of the global initiatives.

As displayed in Table 1, we found that successful leaders took steps to articulate the moral purpose behind innovations. For example, when implementing SBM they sought to demonstrate how this approach would raise the dignity of all people concerned. Obtaining the active participation of staff, parents and students in giving voice to beliefs and concerns was perhaps the most difficult obstacle these leaders faced. They employed a mix of public and private (e.g., anonymous surveys) strategies to gain greater levels of participation. We also observed a strategy that we termed "selective disarmament" in which the principals selectively refused to exercise power that fell within their prerogative. They also paid special attention to ensure that their public statements about the need for staff and parental participation were matched by their actions.

We would emphasize that change in the perceptions and behaviors of people within a cultural system are excruciatingly slow. These change strategies aimed at reducing the power distance between leaders and followers and the attendant outcomes occurred over a 7-year period of time. Moreover, the principals in the study schools all articulated an unusual predisposition – for Thai people – towards participatory leadership.

Collectivism

The second dimension in Hofstede's framework contrasts *collectivism* with *individualism*. *Collectivism* pertains to "societies in which people from birth

onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty'' (Hofstede, 1991, p. 51). In contrast, nations such as the United States, England, and Australia are highly *individualistic*. In these societies, ''the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family'' (Hofstede, 1991, p. 51). Thailand, like other Asian nations, is a highly collectivist culture.

As suggested in Table 2, *collectivism* also shapes the change process in important ways. Fullan (1993), Evans (1996) and others have noted that the process of change is essentially one by which people ''make sense'' of something new. An extensive literature has accumulated that describes how *individuals* respond to change and how to assist them in adapting more effectively (e.g., Hall & Hord, 1987; Rogers, 1971).

In collectivist cultures change, however, is fundamentally a group process. While change must still take place at the individual level, in a collectivist culture individuals filter all changes through the lenses of their key reference groups. Thai people seldom think in terms of ''I''; rather their primary point of reference in any social or work-related venture is ''we.'' As depicted in Table 2, this characteristic manifests itself in Thai's responses to change and in the strategies employed by Thai leaders in successful school improvement.

Change is moderated through the ''eyes'' of the group. Fear of not meeting the expectations of one's peers takes precedence over fear of personal failure. Moreover, the group's spirit must be engaged and social harmony maintained if real change is to take place. Thus, overt conflict is avoided at all costs, even at the expense of the innovation.

While change must still take place at the individual level, people will tend to move through the stages of change along with other members of their social reference group. Innovators are rare and people go to enormous lengths to avoid standing out or looking different from others. This renders a change strategy that depends on ''seeding innovation'' through receptive individuals less potent than in Western cultures.

Even though change must still take place at the individual level, in Thailand the individual's perspective towards the change is first filtered through the eyes of the group. The *group* must come to terms with the ''why's'' and ''how's'' of the innovation first. Only then is there any hope that individuals will take serious steps towards implementation.

Table 2. Impact of *High Collectivism* on Leading School Improvement in Thailand.

Findings from Literature & Research		Strategies
Thai cultural characteristic	Effect on change	Implication for leading change
High collectivism		
• "We" consciousness prevails rather than 'I'	• The majority of people move through change with the group	• Focus change activities on the group
• Change is moderated through the "eyes" of the group	• Group decisions more than individual decisions moderate efforts to change	• Leaders must gain the acceptance of the group
• Group spirit is a fundamental prerequisite to individuals gaining confidence	• People look for social acceptance and sanctions to direct their behavior during the change	• Focus especially on obtaining the support of the group's informal leaders and administrators
• Fear of not meeting the group's expectations tends to be greater than fear of individual failure	• Actions which make one stand out from the group are avoided	• Allow the group to make sense of the change both inside and outside of the formal school setting
• (Norms: *Gumlung Jai, Sia Naa, Sanook*)	• Conflict is avoided and disagreement with the direction of change is hidden • Harmony is sought wherever possible	• Use team building, synergistic activities that build the group's spirit even as they address technical aspects of the innovation

Uncertainty avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance reflects the "extent to which a society feels threatened by uncertain and ambiguous situations and tries to avoid these situations by providing greater career stability, establishing more formal rules, not tolerating deviant ideas and behaviors, and believing in absolute truths and the attainment of expertise" (Hofstede, 1980, p. 45). Thailand ranks high on uncertainty avoidance. As shown in Table 3, this dimension has far-reaching implications for predominant Thai responses to change.

Table 3. Impact of High *Uncertainty Avoidance* on Leading School Improvement in Thailand.

Findings from Literature & Research		Strategies
Thai cultural characteristic	Effect on change	Implication for leading change
High uncertainty avoidance		
• Cultural norms foster stability and continuity more so than in low UA cultures	• Change is often slower in high UA cultures	• Demonstrate clarity and seriousness of purpose (*jing jung*) in words and actions
• Culture tends neither to seek innovation nor to reward innovators	• High level of discomfort with uncertainty, ambiguity, and complexity	• Gain support of the group
• Innovation and "being different" are regarded as undesirable and disruptive	• "Innovators" are marginalized	• Connect the purposes of the change is past traditions
• Traditions and rules exert a stronger reign on individual and group behavior	• Accept rules and traditions as "natural" even when they cease to make sense • Once a change is made, it is very difficult to change • Reluctance to make decisions that depart from status quo • Focus on guidelines rather than purposes of change • Strong bureaucratic emphasis creates "order-taking" or "wait and see" mentality at all levels	• Expect change to be slow and persist in the face of opposition (*nae norn*)

In general, Thai people would rather maintain things the way they are than to take initiative, be different, or shake the ground. Throughout Thai society, innovation is neither encouraged, nor highly valued, and may even be regarded as disruptive. Even if a new practice holds high potential for the organization, individuals will feel uncomfortable departing from accepted practice.

Of course, as school improvement scholars (Evans, 1996; Fullan, 1993) have noted, people in general find change disruptive. Almost all individuals and organizations tend to seek stability, and to feel most comfortable with standard practices, routines and traditions. The differences that exist on the dimension of *uncertainty avoidance* across cultures are, therefore, a matter of degree.

This dimension creates a cultural tendency whereby people experience change as more disruptive, anxiety-producing and difficult than in some other societies. Rules and traditions are accepted with fewer of the questions posed in the US, Canada, Australia, or England. Rules and traditions represent the "natural order" of things and provide a sense of stability in the face of a rapidly changing environment.

High *uncertainty avoidance* also creates a tendency to focus on procedures rather than on goals or outcomes of school improvement efforts. This institutional tendency is reflected in the "hit and run" missions conducted by Ministry officials when visiting schools. Supervisors typically complete a checklist focusing on the outward manifestations of implementation – number of computers in classrooms – rather than on the actual implementation behavior of staff (see Table 3).

Masculinity/femininity

This dimension contrasts *masculinity* with *femininity. Masculinity* pertains to "societies in which social gender roles are clearly distinct, whereas *femininity* pertains to societies in which social gender roles overlap" (Hofstede, 1991, pp. 82–83). This dimension highlights the value people place on social relations versus productivity. Within *masculine* cultures, performance outcomes and productivity represent the top priorities. As a more *feminine* culture, Thai's place great value on maintaining harmonious social relations, even at the expense of accountability and productivity in the workplace.

The impact of this dimension on school change may be discerned in Table 4. There is distinctly greater emphasis given to the process of change over the outcomes of change. As Redmond has observed, in Thailand:

Table 4. Impact of *Femininity* on Leading School Improvement in Thailand.

Findings from Literature & Research		Strategies
Thai cultural characteristic	Effect on change	Implication for leading change
Feminine culture		
• Caring for other people and preservation of relationships is emphasized in the workplace	• People seek to maintain social harmony, even if it means foregoing potential benefits of change	• Demonstrate moral leadership; connect change to the needs of people
• Social relations are valued more than productivity or performance at both the individual and group levels	• Open disagreement is avoided	• Show sincerity (*jing jai*) in words and actions
• Harmony between individuals and among groups is sought and conflicts are avoided as much as possible	• Resistance to change remains passive, covert and 'underground'	• Demonstrate seriousness of purpose (*jing jung*)
• People act on feelings more than on logic; in Thai to "understand" each other is to "enter each other's hearts"	• Tendency to view lack of dissent as support. Leaders proceed without real support resulting in partial implementation	• Try to resolve conflicts by compromise and negotiation
• All relationships entail reciprocity; those with largest power distance carry the greatest obligation on the part of the senior member	• "Group processes" popular in Western cultures fail to obtain the desired results	• Work with individuals; demonstrate caring as people struggle to change
• (Norms: Kwarm kow jai gun, *Sanook, Bunkhun, Greng jai, Sia naa*)	• Logical arguments for change carry less weight	• Persist (*nae norn*) and avoid the tendency to sacrifice long-term goals for short-term harmony
	• People mix work and play; work without fun achieves fewer results	• Create opportunities for staff to have fun and develop team spirit during the change
		• Celebrate success and provide moral support

> Responsibility is a proud and cold word, capable of causing abysmal rents in the social fabric and frayed edges of tender feelings. An ethic of compassion, the inculcation of deference to superiors (*kreng jai*) and an ingrained desire for harmony and familiarity have created a communal security blanket. (1993, b2).

The result of culturally based variations is a fundamentally different approach to human relationships in Asian societies. The quite different importance attached to reason and logic has manifest implications for how leaders relate to followers. For example, current educational reforms in Thailand imported from abroad have begun to emphasize accountability. Yet, in Thai culture, the very notion of taking responsibility or being accountable is quite different from Western cultures.

> [Responsibility] signifies "being the source or cause of something." It means that one is "capable of making moral or rational decisions on one's own . . ." These, in fact, are what it means to be a person in Western terms.
>
> Westerners are more committed to taking responsibility because it automatically brings with it the recognition and respect, regardless of consequent profit or loss, accorded to "real persons". . . But in Thailand, it is rank and its rewards that give a faint reading of responsibility into the bargain. The honour is not in the responsibility itself (let alone its fulfillment) but in the position that allows it to be borne. (Redmond, 1993, b2)

This tendency is readily apparent in the roles of Thai principals. Compared with counterparts in Western nations, they spend a significant portion of the day outside the school building in community-building activities. Principals often find themselves drawn into a wide variety of external social rituals and functions simply as a function of their position (e.g., attending the weddings and funerals of family of staff members). Thai administrators report that such symbolic activities are critical to maintain both vertical and lateral relationships within the institutional system and the community at large.

The emphasis on social harmony over productivity is linked to another important social norm, *sanook*. *Sanook* is "the feeling of enjoyment, excitement or pleasure that one has taking part in work, play or any other activities" (Dakins, 1988, p. 51). In the absence of *sanook*, it is difficult to engage the ongoing motivation of Thai staff in any organization.

Indeed, the increased focus on results and accountability associated with school improvement increases the stress on staff. This creates resistance to change. Thus, increasing opportunities for staff to have fun – *sanook* – is essential to obtain the commitment of the group. Of course, on the other end, danger lies in the tendency for staff to become complacent, an all too common occurrence in Thai organizations.

The impact of the *femininity* dimension on leadership strategies is manifested throughout the change process. The sincerity (*kwarm jing jai*) of leaders is under constant assessment among followers. Without a sense that their leader is sincere, followers will *only* comply at the surface level. Individual acts of support and kindness by the leaders are conveyed throughout the informal culture of the school.

Persistence is also critical. The lack of a strong goal-orientation among staff means that the leader's own sense of vision for the desired change and persistence towards its accomplishment is especially important. As suggested earlier, this will be most likely to evolve when it occurs in the context of activities that foster a strong spirit of group participation, enjoyment and commitment.

These results bear out the assertion that societal culture influences school change in both overt and covert ways. On each dimension, key cultural norms associated with the broader dimension are evident (see Definition of Terms: Thai cultural norms). These commonly accepted cultural norms come into play as Thai leaders implement school improvement.

LEADING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT IN A NON-WESTERN CULTURE

This article is drawn from a research and development project on school improvement in Thailand. The purpose of the project has been to design a culturally valid knowledge based on school improvement for Thai school leaders. The previous section was intended to provide the reader with a feel for the very different cultural context in which Thai school leaders work. In this concluding section we will discuss implications for school improvement in Thailand.

We are under no illusion that our literature review or our research has provided a solid foundation for conclusions about school improvement in Thailand, never mind other Asian nations. Yet, we present these results in the hope that they will provoke others to think about school improvement in a non-

Western context. Therefore, in this section we will sketch how our findings might cohere into a Thai school leader's thinking about school improvement.

We will put ourselves into the shoes of a Thai school leader undertaking one of a number of new school reforms, *student-centered learning*. In the current era, the impetus for this reform has come from outside the school in the form of a Ministry-led policy mandate. How might a Thai principal draw on these findings in developing an improvement strategy for his/her school?

In the early stages of change implementation, we recognized that the Thai staff are looking to their local leader(s) (e.g., principal) for direction and guidance; this reflects the *high power distance* dimension of the culture. As noted, the greater power accorded to leaders within Thai culture would allow greater leeway in initiating the change. This is especially true since this change is already confirmed as national policy. Yet, these facts should not lead us to think that implementation will be rapid or easy. Indeed, these very facts typically lull Thai school leaders into taking a passive role in leading change.

It is at the information and interest stages of change that Thai school leaders often short-cut the process. Therefore, we would need to guard against going ahead with implementation before staff, students and parents understood what this change was, what it looked like, and what it would require. Moreover, we would also need to ensure that we build sufficient support and interest among key individuals and groups within the school and its community before moving ahead with implementation.

Our first goals would be to inform staff about the change and then to determine what *student-centered learning* might look like in our school. The cultural challenge here is to elicit staff concerns and questions about *student-centered learning*. Earlier we noted the reluctance of Thai staff to speak up or even ask questions. We would use multiple strategies to ensure that people are well-informed about the *purposes* and intended benefits of the change. We would begin by talking to staff individually, in small groups and then to the staff as a whole. We would create school-community forums to give out information as well as to show demonstrations of *student-centered learning*. At this stage we are trying to make the abstract concept of student-centered learning concrete and real to our local stakeholders.

The reader should note that during the first year of implementing *student-centered learning* as national policy in Thailand (in 1999), the Ministry of Education actually had to change the official translation of *student-centered learning* in Thai. Initially, the English term was translated into Thai as the equivalent of *learning where the student is the center-middle*. This translation

caused much confusion about what *student-centered learning* was and what it should be in Thai culture. This translation clashed with Thai cultural notions of teaching and learning. It seemed to suggest that valuable learning only occurred when the student was the initiator. After much controversy and discussion nationally, the official terminology was changed to the equivalent of *learning where the student is important*.

This suggests that the importation of global education reforms does not occur easily, even when the change has been confirmed as national policy. At the adoption stage, local school leaders must create understanding and stimulate interest. This, however, assumes that they themselves understand the policy, something that often is not the case.

We suggest that the culture clash implicit in the *foreign* nature of these changes can act as a further *drag* on the pace of change implementation. While this may appear as commonsense, note the discrepancy with the local norms. The norms implicit in a *high power distance* culture typically lead policy-makers to assume that implementation will be straightforward and easy. For example, at the outset of implementing student-centered learning in Thailand, the Secretary General of the National Education Commission of Thailand stated:

> Learning by rote will next year be eliminated from all primary and secondary schools and replaced with student-centered learning . . . Any teachers found failing to change their teaching style would be listed and provided with video-tapes showing new teaching techniques. If they still failed to improve, they would be sent for intensive training. (Bunnag, 2000, p. 5)

Local school leaders will criticize such statements as unrealistic. Yet, they themselves tend to make similar assumptions when addressing these changes with their own staffs; that is, the fact of living and working within one's culture. From the outset we would look at this as a 5–7-year implementation process rather than as a 1-year process.

While the initial direction would come from us, we would quickly recruit respected teachers, parents, and if appropriate, students to help lead the change. This aspect of our strategy would not differ very much from that in the West. It is only that social groups and informal leadership within the school are even more important in a *collectivist* society. There may be a reluctance among staff to assume formal leadership roles because they wish to avoid standing out from among their peers. However, it is essential to build

internal staff leadership for the change by giving them responsibilities for leading implementation.

We would create opportunities for staff to discuss the change both inside and outside the school. The *feminine* dimension of the culture would lead us to create opportunities to combine work and play. Thai staff need to discuss the change in a relaxed – *sanook* – atmosphere. In Thai culture to be called *serious* is actually considered to be a criticism. Therefore, it becomes important to find ways to engage people in a working style that is pleasurable.

Initially, we would not focus particularly on the technical aspects of implementing *student-centered learning*. Rather we would spend time articulating the moral purposes behind involving students in their learning and clarifying its meaning for all constituencies. We would engage in activities designed to create a vision of what student-centered learning is. We would seek to build staff belief that this is something that we should do while building their confidence that it is something that they could do.

We would recruit a group of staff that had evinced interest (as assessed by the informal leaders) to visit two or three other schools that were using student-centered learning with success. We would intentionally organize an overnight trip so that staff could spend time together outside of our school. It would be essential for the formal leader to accompany staff to demonstrate interest and support. We would provide an opportunity for staff to talk with teachers and students at the other schools and let them share their experience and answer questions. This is also a strategy for overcoming the reluctance of staff to ask questions of their formal leader (*power distance*). In the evening, we would discuss what we were learning over dinner and social activities (thereby building on the Thai's *feminine* and *collectivist* dimensions).

All the while we would recognize that our own leadership of the change would be under constant scrutiny. Staff would be looking for signals that our own support of the change was sincere and remained constant. The leadership challenge is to provide consistent emotional support while building the leadership resources of the group and its key members. The moral dimension would be encompassed in directing talk about the innovation towards its potential benefits for the growth of students as well as teachers and the society.

Only after information about student-centered learning was well-disseminated to all staff and a core group of staff felt confident to move ahead, we would begin workshops and other training activities. As noted earlier, in Thai schools, there is a tendency to provide training only after implementation has failed. We would seek to build training and support into the process from the start.

Our goal at this stage would be to develop the expertise and confidence of staff leaders and their teams. The *collectivist* dimension of Thai culture bodes well for building a supportive environment for change, but only if interest has been created first. Thus, Thai's often feel good about working on teams. However, effective teamwork requires knowledgeable coordination, something often lacking when principals distance themselves from implementation.

It has been noted by scholars that pressure and support are key factors in stimulating people to adapt successfully to change. In Thai culture, *high power distance* reinforces the force of the administrator's expectations and the school's goals. Thai's feel an implicit desire and responsibility to contribute to their organizations and leaders. This can be a positive force for change, but only when staff believe they are being treated fairly and sincerely.

In the centralized institutional culture of Thai schools, actual change implementation must catch up to national policies. The *high power distance* characteristic of Thai culture tends to foster an assumption that change has taken place on the basis of policy adoption. Research in Thailand and abroad discounts the validity of this assumption.

The challenge, therefore, at the institutionalization stage is to maintain a sense of priority, urgency, and momentum among concerned parties. Again this is a key leadership function for change leaders at the local level. While there is no menu for how to do this, the collectivist dimension of the culture represents an important resource. The tendency among Thai's to be influenced by key reference groups suggests that school-wide activities and even activities across schools could provide valuable momentum for change.

CONCLUSION

We would remind the reader that the rationale for this effort remains grounded in global trends.

1. School improvement programs and policies are spreading internationally into cultures and institutional systems far different from their origins.
2. There remains a significant gap between the capacity of system leaders to articulate new policies and to implement them with desired effects.
3. A renewed focus on the role of school leaders is manifesting in the establishment of leadership training centers from the US to Britain and from Australia to Hong Kong and Singapore.

4. Concurrent with this is a trend towards the sharing of training curricula, resources, and approaches.

This movement towards a global school improvement community is a positive development. At the same time, however, cultural and institutional differences among schools in different countries are broad and deep. Indeed the extent of these differences raise serious questions about the degree of thought being given to the adoption and transfer of reform programs from country to country.

This brings to mind an issue raised by scholars in the early days of the school effectiveness movement. Critics noted the contextual limitations of a literature that had grown largely out of research conducted on poor, urban elementary schools. They questioned the salience for secondary schools as well as for schools in other socioeconomic communities. We assert that cultural differences represent at least as significant a contextual factor with respect to the salience and implementation of findings on school effectiveness and improvement.

We have come to believe that there are culturally grounded differences in people's responses to change. These suggest potential differences in the types of strategies that foster change. These derive from cultural values and norms that shape human behavior. The role of the individual versus the group, the type and strength of the social hierarchy, the degree to which people are comfortable with uncertainty, and the emphasis on product versus process all appear highly relevant to understanding personal and organizational responses to change (Herbig & Dunphy, 1998; Hofstede, 1980).

Even as we make this plea for attention to the cultural dimensions of school improvement, however, we must guard against an overreaction. Indeed, during our examination of school improvement in Thailand, we encountered numerous similarities to school improvement in other cultures. Some of the propositions that appear applicable in Thailand included:

1. The belief that there are predictable stages in the change process appears applicable in Thailand.
2. The notion of concerns-based adoption of change (Hall & Hord, 1987) finds initial support in our investigation.
3. The importance of school-level leadership to successful change was even stronger in Thai schools.
4. The view of school improvement as an ongoing process that requires a vision of change as well as time and persistence was apparent here.

5. The notion of change as a process that entails both technical and socioemotional dimensions was visible here, with even greater focus on the emotional dimension.

Earlier we cited research that suggested that Thailand's combination of cultural characteristics might represent a less conducive environment for innovation and change. Yet, from our point of view, even this conclusion is premature. It may be possible to craft change strategies that build upon characteristics of Thai culture to bring about more rapid and lasting change in practice.

For example, greater power in the role of the principal need not necessarily undercut attempts to foster responsibility, commitment and shared vision among staff. While strong uncertainty avoidance may impede initial attempts at reform, it may also shape change that is more sustainable. While the group-oriented nature of the society may create a culture that is less conducive to fast innovation, it may also result in firmer implementation.

When viewed from this perspective, cultural characteristics that appear initially as limitations may actually address chronic weaknesses identified in school reform in Western nations (partial implementation and faddism). Of course, it requires skillful leadership to understand how to take advantage of the cultural strengths within any society. Therefore, we view cultural characteristics as a two-sided sword.

When one adopts this perspective, a richer field of vision emerges on the domain of leadership and school improvement. It should stimulate scholars in the West to look more deeply at their own conceptual models. If so, they will see – perhaps for the first time – the cultural background on which their theories exist. This will open up the possibility of richer and more broadly applicable theoretical development.

In closing we are cognizant of the fact that we have only begun to scratch the surface of the most intriguing aspect of this topic: the interaction between the traditional cultural norms that shape behavior in Thai schools and external change forces. We assert that future leaders in all nations will need to be adept at negotiating the norms of the traditional culture *and* the global culture. The extent to which the norms of the local culture differ from the global norms will determine the types of adaptation. Our experience in Thailand suggests that this dual set of skills is in short supply. This suggests an important challenge for the future for those engaged in school improvement research and practice.

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APPENDIX

Definition of Thai norms

Baramee: Personal power or strength derived from respect and loyalty; baramee is earned through deeds done in the past and forms a foundation for interpersonal relationships necessary to the exercise of leadership.

Bunkhun: Indebted goodness, is a psychological bond between someone who, out of sheer kindness and sincerity, renders another person the needed help and favor, and the latter's remembering of the goodness done and his ever-readiness to reciprocate the kindness (Komin, 1990, cited in Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1995, p. 30).

Greng glua: The feeling of respect or fear often held by subordinate persons towards those in positions of authority and power (Dakins, 1988, p. 15).

Greng jai: To be self-effacing, respectful, humble, and extremely considerate, as well as the wish to avoid embarassing other people, intruding, or imposing upon them.

Hai kiad: To give respect or show honor to another, often to one senior in age or position.

Jing jai: To have sincere interest and intent underlying one's actions.

Jing jung: To stand firmly behind your words.

Mai pen rai: A carefree attitude of whatever will be will be; reflects the desire to not be too serious about everyday matters.

Nae norn: To be certain and unwavering.

Sanook: The feeling of enjoyment, excitement or pleasure that one has taking part in work, play or any other activities (Dakins, 1988, p. 51).

Sia naa: To make someone lose face or to embarrass someone.