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Publisher: Routledge

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International Journal of Leadership in Education: Theory and Practice

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tedl20>

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Published online: 15 Feb 2013.

To cite this article: Philip Hallinger & Darren A. Bryant (2013) Synthesis of findings from 15 years of educational reform in Thailand: lessons on leading educational change in East Asia, *International Journal of Leadership in Education: Theory and Practice*, 16:4, 399-418, DOI: [10.1080/13603124.2013.770076](https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2013.770076)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2013.770076>

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Synthesis of findings from 15 years of educational reform in Thailand: lessons on leading educational change in East Asia

PHILIP HALLINGER and DARREN A. BRYANT

The past two decades have been a period of active education reform throughout much of the world, and East Asia is no exception. This paper synthesizes findings from a series of empirical studies of educational reform in Thailand where an ambitious educational reform law was adopted in 1999. The purpose is to identify lessons learned about educational leadership and change that may be applicable both in Thailand and other parts of East Asia. The studies reveal successful reorientation of the nation's educational system around a new vision and education goals. However, the vision of change has been much slower to penetrate the daily practice of Thailand's 35,000 principals and 400,000 teachers. The paper identifies factors that are impacting successful reform in Thailand and draws implications for leading educational reform and change in the East Asia region.

The past two decades have been a period of active education reform throughout much of the world (Carnoy, 2003; Lockheed & Levin, 1993). This was also the case in East Asia where national governments were intent on increasing economic competitiveness by enhancing the quality of education (Carnoy, 2003; Hallinger, 2010; Mok, 2006; Pan & Chen, 2011; Psacharaopoulos & Patrinos, 2002). East Asian observers have witnessed a continuous stream of education reforms aimed at changing methods of school management as well as approaches to teaching and learning (Cheng & Walker, 2008; Hallinger, 2010). Recently even the region's policy-makers are beginning to acknowledge system fatigue and policy indigestion. For example, Hong Kong's incoming education secretary stated: 'The education system should be spared any further overhaul after more than a decade of reform' (Chong, 2012).

Thus, it seems a suitable time to pause and reflect on what has been learned about education reform in East Asia during this period of policy-driven change. As a case in point, this paper examines findings

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from a series of recent empirical studies of educational reform and change in Thailand. The purpose is to synthesize findings from these studies of Thailand's education reform, and identify lessons that may be more broadly applicable to educational leadership and change in Thailand, the region and beyond.

We chose Thailand for two reasons. First, although each nation represents a unique context for the implementation of education reforms, Thailand's challenges typify those faced by other developing countries in Asia as well as in other parts of the world. Its education system has been attempting to reorient its focus from quantity to quality, adapt to rapid change in social and economic conditions, meet the demands of a changing workforce and maintain cultural coherence in the face of globalization (Fry, in press; Hallinger, 2004; Jungck & Kajornsinsin, 2003; Natthapoj, 2011; Ohmae, 1995). These features make Thailand's experience in educational reform relevant to policy-makers and school leaders elsewhere in the developing world.

Second, in selecting Thailand, we were able to draw upon a set of empirical studies for our assessment of educational reform. Empirical data on education reform and change are not always easily accessible in developing countries. Therefore, we viewed this as a salient opportunity to conduct an empirically informed, policy synthesis of research on reform and change. Together these features suggested the potential for useful implications concerning leadership, educational reform and change.

Background on educational reform in Thailand

During the 1990s, Thailand, like other rapidly developing nations in Southeast Asia, had focused upon expanding access to education for its youth. Over the course of the decade, Thailand raised the level of compulsory schooling from six to nine years and then finally to 12 years of free schooling (Office of the National Education Commission [ONEC], 1999). This rising investment in education reflected beliefs that sustainable economic development would require a more knowledgeable and skilled labour force (Carnoy, 2003; Fry, 2002; Wasi, 1998). Moreover, new capabilities and attitudes would be needed for the nation to cope with the cultural exigencies of globalization (Fry, 2002; Jungck & Kajornsinsin, 2003; Kaewdang, 1998; Mounier & Tangchuang, 2009).

Indeed, there was a developing consensus that expanded educational access had simply increased the number of students being exposed to the 'pedagogy of the worksheet' (Pennington, 1999, p. 2). A chorus of influential voices contended that continued reliance on traditional educational methods had become an impediment to the nation's social and economic development (Kaewdang, 2001; ONEC, 1999; Pennington, 1999; Thongthew, 1999; Wasi, 1998). For example, a respected academic and member of numerous education commissions, Dr Prawase Wasi (1998) claimed that continuing the traditions of Thai education would lead to 'national disaster'. Dr Sippanondha Ketudat, a widely respected, former Minister of Education, asserted:

[S]tudents should not be blamed for poor academic performance. The fault lay instead with the learning process ... [S]chools and parents should. ... create a learning atmosphere to encourage students to think analytically. Schools spend too much time teaching by rote and doing multiple choice tests. (Bunnag, 1997, p. 2)

It was in this context that Thailand passed an ambitious National Education Act (NEA) in 1999 (ONEC, 1999). This law set new educational goals and sought both to legitimate and stimulate the reform of teaching and learning methods, school management systems and the legal framework of education in Thailand (Kaewdang, 2001). The substantive thrusts of the NEA were to decentralize authority, engage local initiative in the management and delivery of educational services, support the integration of 'local wisdom' into the curriculum, empower teachers, create a more active learning environment for pupils, identify curriculum standards and new means of assessment and refocus the system from *quantity of graduates* to *quality of learning* (Fry, 2002, in press; ONEC, 1999; Thongthew, 1999).

Responsibility for leading education reform in Thailand was shared by the ONEC and the Ministry of Education's Office of Basic Education (OBEC). The following quotation conveys the ambitious and urgent vision for change as stated by the Secretary General of ONEC, in 2000.

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

Although this quotation no doubt oversimplifies the complex education reform strategy formulated by ONEC (Fry, 2002; Kaewdang, 2001), we assert that this vision accurately conveys cultural assumptions about organizational change that predominate in the Thai context. Implicit in this quotation is a cultural disposition to believe that people (including teachers) will do as they are told by those who are more senior in rank. Referred to by Hofstede (1997) as 'high power distance', evidence of this social disposition towards status, rank and seniority is well documented not only in Thailand's education system (e.g. Hallinger, 2004; Hallinger & Kantamara, 2001), but also in the business sector (Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1996), and Thai society more generally (Mulder, 1997; Redmond, 1998).

Of course, resistance to change has also been described extensively in Western cultures (e.g. Cuban, 1990; Evans, 1996; Kotter, 1996; Maurer, 1996; O'Toole, 1995). Yet, scholars have documented predictable ways in which cultural values and norms shape modal responses to change in the Thai context (e.g. Hallinger, 2004; Hallinger & Kantamara, 2001; Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1996). Consequently, we suggest that Thai policy-makers have tended to view the main obstacles to education reform and change as structural (e.g. create a new organizational framework) and political (pass a law authorizing new goals and legal frameworks) rather than sociocultural. This has, in turn, shaped the implementation strategies employed at the national and local levels.

More than a decade after the passage of the NEA, we reflect upon Thailand's progress towards education reform. This is by no means just an 'academic' issue. Observers have explicitly linked social unrest in Thailand during 2010 to a perception among some segments of Thai society of unequal access to quality education (Natthapoj, 2011; *The Nation*, 2010). More generally, a broad array of critics has suggested that education reform has stalled, and public dissatisfaction with the lack of observable results is on the rise. For example:

The Thai government ... has spent a huge amount of money to reform schools here. The intention to raise the standard of schools is admirable. But the means of upgrading school quality might need a more meaningful push. Simply throwing money at schools to build new buildings or increase teaching personnel without evaluating the level of education itself may not be money well spent. (Editorial excerpt from *The Nation*, 2010)

Moreover, we observe that dissatisfaction with progress in education reform is not unique to Thailand. Empirical studies conducted in Malaysia, Hong Kong, Singapore, China and Taiwan find a similar gap between ambitious visions for educational change and reality on the ground (Cheng & Walker, 2008; Hallinger, 2010; Pan & Chen, 2011; Pennington, 1999). Thus, we suggest that findings from this 'case study' of education reform in Thailand may hold lessons for educational leaders in neighbouring nations as well.

Method

This paper employs research synthesis of findings drawn from empirical studies of education reform in Thailand. We focus particularly on several studies recently conducted by the author. These examined education reform in Thailand from several perspectives.

Study of reform implementation progress: 1999–2008

The first study examined principals' perceptions of progress in education reform over a 10-year period from 1999–2008 (Hallinger & Lee, 2011). This study was framed within theory and research on educational reform and change conducted globally (Carnoy, 2003; Cuban, 1990; Evans, 1996; Fullan, 2007; Hall & Hord, 2002; Kotter, 1996; O'Toole, 1995) as well as within Asia (e.g. Cheng & Walker, 2008; Cravens & Hallinger, 2012; Fry, 2002; Hallinger, 2010; Mok, 2006). The study was both an assessment of reform progress and an exploration of how the implementation of 'global reforms' was shaped by the processes of change in the Thai cultural context.

This study used an action science methodology (Action science, n.d.; Argyris, 1993) that engaged a large representative sample of Thai school principals in developing in-depth case studies of changes being implemented in their schools. Action science is a practice-oriented approach used in organizational studies (Argyris, 1993).

Combining features of both research and redevelopment, it is a learning strategy designed to develop the skills and confidence of individuals or groups to create change in organizations and to foster long-term individual and group effectiveness. The method entails a sequenced description and analysis of contexts, constraints, behaviours and assumptions about actions (Action science, n.d.). It seeks to engage participants in understanding their own actions and those that describe their organizational unit from a systems perspective (Argyris, 1993; Checkland, 1981).

The case studies were gathered during a series of 17 full-day workshops conducted with 1819 principals from throughout Thailand (Hallinger & Lee, 2011). Although not randomly selected, the sample was representative of Thailand's school principals in terms of region, school level and experience (See Hallinger & Lee, 2011 for details). Although each of the 1819 principals developed case studies of change at their schools during the workshop, in-depth analysis focused on 167 of the case studies. The 167 case studies represented 'focal cases' selected by groups of principals at each of the workshops for group discussion and analysis. These case studies offered insights into the nature of changes in which the principals and schools were engaged as well as factors that impacted success, and the rate of progress in their schools. The process employed in constructing the case studies was informed specifically by change models proposed by Hall and Hord (2002), Kotter (1996) and Fullan (2007).

The authors analysed these case studies in order to understand the types of reforms being implemented in Thai schools, success factors, impediments to change and patterns of implementation progress across schools (Hallinger & Lee, 2011). Findings from this study are used in this paper to provide a broad view of the education reform process and outcomes in Thailand a decade after adoption of the NEA. This study provides insights into patterns of change in teacher practice.

Scaling up for reform: a study of successful curriculum implementation

Moving on from this broad assessment of reform implementation across the landscape of Thailand's schools, we next examine a case study of successful curriculum innovation in Thailand (Kantamara, Hallinger, & Jatiket, 2006). This case study was conducted six years after the launch of Thailand's reform act. The innovation involved a specific curriculum programme, integrated pest management (IPM). This student-centred curriculum modelled many of the features highlighted in Thailand's educational reform, including student-centred learning, curriculum integration and involvement of the local community. Our investigation sought to understand the process of local innovation within a highly bureaucratic system, as well as features that could enable 'scaling up' of a local reform.

For the purpose of this study, a single case of successful local curriculum design and implementation was identified in collaboration with the Thailand Education Foundation (TEF) and the Ministry of Education.

The methodology of this paper involves the review of secondary data from technical, progress and summary reports produced by TEF for the fund providers of the programme. The reports provided both general information on the conception of the IPM as well as the specifics of the programme, such as success factors and obstacles and the impact of the programme upon the students, teachers and other parties involved within the participating schools and communities.

The primary data were collected through individual interviews with various people (i.e. teachers who used IPM curriculum, TEF trainers and staff of the Ministry of Education who were closely involved with the programme activities). These people provided useful information from different perspectives to explain factors that appeared to contribute to the success of the IPM programme. In addition, the primary author made several additional visits to the IPM sites to observe the activities and obtain the reactions of the learners in order to gain insights on the impact of the programme (Kantamara et al., 2006).

Today, the IPM programme is recognized as one of the clearest examples of successful reform of the learning process that has emerged to date in Thailand. It stands out as a model of an integrated, student-centred curriculum and as a method of developing local curriculum that is responsive to community problems. Notably, this change effort originated outside of the institutional structure of the Ministry of Education. Thus, it represents an example of how bottom-up change initiatives can complement and build upon top-down initiatives launched from the centre of the education system.

Instructional leadership and change in the Thai context

The third study (Hallinger & Lee, in press-a, in press-b) shifts our focus from teachers to principals. This research had two goals. The first was to describe the current profile of principal instructional leadership in Thailand. The second was to assess the extent to which the profile of principal instructional leadership had changed in response to adoption of the nation's education reform law in 1999.

In addressing the first goal, the researchers analysed data collected from a nationally representative sample of 1195 principals from all levels and regions of Thailand in 2008. The data-set had been collected using an instrument with demonstrated reliability, the Thai form of the *Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale* (Hallinger, 2011; Hallinger, Wang, & Chen, in press). These data were analysed on three dimensions of instructional leadership: *defining a school mission, managing the instructional programme, developing a positive school learning climate*. The result was a national profile of principal instructional leadership.

In order to address the second goal, the study compared secondary data on principal instructional leadership gathered from three doctoral dissertations conducted during the mid-1990s (Poovatanikul, 1993; Ratchaneeladdajit, 1997; Taraseina, 1993) with the data collected in

2008. The comparison studies had also used the Thai form of the *Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale* (Hallinger, 1993) as the instrument for data collection. This facilitated direct comparison of change in perceptions of principal practice over time. This study can be conceived both as an assessment of the *impact* of the reforms on principal practice (Hallinger & Lee, in press-a), as well as an assessment of the *capacity* of Thailand's principals to provide the type of leadership needed to enact the reforms (Hallinger & Lee, in press-b).

Although, the author relies primarily on findings from these studies, other empirical research on leadership and change in the context of Thailand's education reforms is also discussed and referenced. With respect to the implementation of curriculum and instructional reforms, we take note of a diverse set of research and evaluation studies in addition to the two studies described above. With respect to our analysis of principal practice before and during the reform era, we complement the studies noted above with other empirical efforts to understand the nature and challenges of principal practice leadership during the reform era in Thailand. Thus, the method employed in this study seeks to synthesize findings from a broad set of quantitative and qualitative studies centring on education reform implementation in Thailand.

Findings on education reform in Thailand

The presentation of findings is organized into three main sections. The first focuses on describing broad patterns of reform implementation with a particular focus on change in teacher practice. This section draws primarily from the nation-wide study of principals' perceptions of reform implementation (Hallinger & Lee, 2011). This is followed by a section that focuses on the successful implementation of a single reform, the IPM curriculum (Kantamara et al., 2006). This elaborates on the 'big picture' of national education reform by analysing features that facilitated the successful implementation of one specific curriculum reform. Finally, we shift the focus from the implementation of curricular and instructional reforms to leadership capacity and change. Here, we examine the leadership response of Thailand's principals to the challenges of implementing national education reform.

Education reform implementation: the big picture

The reforms selected by the principals for their case studies of change mirrored the key foci of Thailand's NEA of 1999. Reforms in curriculum, teaching and learning, information and communication technology (ICT) and management systems were identified by principals from all four regions of Thailand as the most important changes underway in their schools. This was consistent with the intention of the reform law.

This finding suggests that national education policy has been impacting the *direction of change* in Thai schools over the past decade. Given the

possibility that 'reform fatigue' could have relegated any or all of these key reforms to the historical dust bin, we suggest that this is an encouraging finding (Cuban, 1990; Fullan, 2007). Shifting the focal direction of a national educational system comprised of more than 500,000 teaching and administrative staff is no easy task, and the reform effort seems to have succeeded in this respect.

At the same time, however, our data indicated that progress in implementing these reforms to a degree that impacts teacher practice and students across Thailand continues to be slow. The study employed Hall and Hord's (2002) *levels of use* construct as a framework for this analysis of reform implementation. Using this construct, principals identified the percentage of teachers who were located in five different levels of use with respect to the change they were implementing: information, interest, preparation, early use and routine use. The goal of change process is to assist teachers in moving from the first three 'non-use' levels into the 'user' levels (i.e. early use and routine use).

Based on the principals' perceptions, a decade after adoption of the NEA, only about one-third of their teachers had actively engaged these reforms in their teaching practice (i.e. reached the Early and Routine Use levels). This pattern was consistent across the 167 case studies of change, as well as in a survey of the 1800 principals. Thus, we conclude that the directive issued by the OBEC Secretary General in 2000 for all teachers to 'change to student-centered learning' had yet to be fulfilled even a decade later.

These results reinforce the public's perception that education reform in Thailand has yet to fulfil the promise of the NEA. Yet, we wish to suggest that this sense of disappointment was a consequence of 'over-promising' rather than a faulty reform strategy. The complexity and scale of Thailand's reforms would strain the capacity of any organizational system (Fullan, 2007). Indeed, the challenge of implementing such an ambitious set of reforms with over 400,000 teachers in a very traditional context would take more than a decade in any country. Moreover, Thailand's efforts to reform the education system during this period were further tested by a variety of 'local factors' including budget constraints, cultural mismatch with the reform foci and political instability (Hallinger & Lee, 2011, in press-a).

We also wish to highlight the fact that while effective users of these reforms had yet to reach a critical mass, there has been progress in developing staff capacity. Skillful leaders can draw on the expertise of the 30% of their staff who are users to build momentum for further change. Thus, while the rate of progress does not appear to have met the originally stated expectation of full implementation of student-centred learning in a short span of time, modest progress in implementing these complex reforms is certainly evident.

The study also explored a variety of factors that were impacting the schools' efforts to change. Key factors supporting change that were identified by the principals included school-level leadership, policy support and communication. The most prominent factors impeding change were complexity of the reforms, financial support, staff skill and the prior experi-

ence with Change. Somewhat surprisingly the principals did not identify staff attitudes as strong impediment to change as staff skills. This may suggest that some progress in stimulating staff interest in the reforms has been made. Consistent with international research findings (Fullan, 2007; Hallinger, 2010; Hall & Hord, 2002; Kotter, 1996; O'Toole, 1995), complexity was viewed by the principals as a particularly significant factor impeding changes in teaching and learning.

While the reformers behind the NEA of 1999 conceptualized a combination of political, structural and human resource-based change strategies (Fry, 2002; Kaewdang, 2001; ONEC, 1999; Thongthew, 1999; Wiratchai, Wongwanich, & Ruengtrakul, 2004), this may not have unfolded as intended during execution. In particular, we note inadequacies in training and development needed to support the acquisition of new skills and attitudes related to reforms in teaching and learning. This interpretation of the results is supported by findings from a study of curriculum reform implementation conducted in rural Thailand by Barron-Gutty and Chupradit (2009).

These researchers examined implementation of one specific reform embedded in the NEA, the integration of 'local wisdom' into the taught curriculum. While they found some evidence of curriculum change, it was described as fragmented, lacking in deep integration and well below the content level (i.e. 30%) envisioned in the education reform framework. In reflecting on the nature of progress, they characterized obstacles to successful implementation as follows: 'The hurdles towards the implementation [of local wisdom into the taught curriculum] can be defined as structural, with the issue of insufficient budget, inappropriate training, lack of time and motivation/incitation' (Barron-Gutty & Chupradit, 2009, p. 35). We would characterize the last two of these hurdles, inappropriate training and lack of motivation, as human resource obstacles that have been endemic in Thailand's reform effort.

Interpretation of these findings is also informed by reference to another empirical study of reform implementation. Wongwanich and Wiratchai (2004) employed a multi-site case study approach to study reform implementation in 80 schools in five provinces. The researchers inferred change in teacher behaviour based on finding greater variation in teaching strategies used by teachers in the schools. At the same time, however, they also reported a 'lack of knowledge and understanding about learning reform' among teachers ... and 'no clear evidence of satisfactory results on student achievement' (Wongwanich & Wiratchai, 2004, no page number). They also observed that 'implementation of School Based Management (SBM) in most schools was found, but the model or concept of SBM being used was unclear except the participation of relevant staff members' (Wongwanich & Wiratchai, 2004, no page number). Finally, even at that relatively early stage of reform implementation, they identified lack of budget devoted to staff development and training as important barriers to success.

Taken together the trend of these empirical studies suggests a lack of deep penetration of the reforms in a large percentage of schools. Thus, all three studies describe the pattern of change implementation as variable

across teachers, and partial or surface in the nature of impact. In sum, we conclude that the picture of reform progress is one of slow progress with a mixed record of success.

A case of successful curriculum implementation

As suggested by the previous section, the Ministry of Education's attempts to translate its goals and intentions into meaningful actions by principals and teachers in the provinces have been characterized by slippage, misinterpretation and variable success. Although passage of the national educational reform act provided the nation with a new vision of twenty-first century education, the problem of how to transform the vision into reality remains one of the country's most widely recognized, if unmet, challenges (Priyakorn, 2012). This stimulated a search for successful cases of reform. One such case was represented in the IPM curriculum (Kantamara et al., 2006).

Despite trends towards urbanization and increased manufacturing, Thailand is still largely a rural nation with more than 60% of the population located in rural provinces. Farming remains the largest contributor to the national economy, and local schools continue to play an important role in knowledge dissemination for the development this sector. Moreover, as suggested in the Barron-Gutty and Chupradit (2009) study described above, integration of curricular content with relevant local wisdom was a signature feature of Thailand's education reform act.

The IPM curriculum is a case example of this philosophy (Kantamara et al., 2006). This new curriculum was implemented using a 'Think Big, Start Small' philosophy. It was started from the inspiration of a single teacher working with a small non-governmental organization, the TEF. The impact of this small programme now can be seen at numerous schools in many parts of Thailand. Implementation of the IPM programme in Thailand demonstrates that 'global' education reforms such as student-centred, integrated curriculum and community-based education can work in developing countries.

The IPM curriculum was, however, a radical change from the norm in Thai schools. It is no exaggeration to refer to IPM as a paradigm shift from the modal teaching and learning method. The IPM programme requires a significant change in the individual mindset of teachers, principals, community members and system leaders. It also requires the development of new knowledge and skills among school personnel who undertake this programme. Nonetheless, schools in which the IPM curriculum is being used provide observable models of success (Kantamara et al., 2006).

No less important, however, are the lessons drawn about the process of systemic educational reform. The IPM programme was initiated from the bottom-up by a single teacher rather than by administrators in the Ministry of Education. The sense of ownership, commitment and motivation to carry out the programme demonstrated by a single teacher 'infected' other teachers who implemented the IPM programme. This

type of commitment, creativity and persistence is often lacking in programmes sponsored from the centre of the educational system.

Despite the bottom-up initiation of this programme, it must be emphasized that 'outside-in' supported was needed to nurture the programmes development from its earliest stages. Outside-in support from the TEF provided technical assistance during the process of identifying and adapting the curriculum. Both moral support in the form of encouragement and technical support in the form of training and follow-up support have continued during the subsequent stages as the programme began to spread to other schools.

It should also be emphasized that this bottom-up effort was enhanced through top-down support. Top-down support could be seen in a variety of ways. First, the vision of reform embedded in the NEA of 1999 offered legitimacy as well as moral support to those engaged in this innovative curriculum project. 'Radical' features of the IPM curriculum such as its student-centred learning approach, community involvement, curriculum integration and respect for indigenous knowledge were supported by the reform act.

Second, regional networks that emerged from restructuring of the education system enabled expansion of the IPM programme beyond just a few schools. This highlights the critical nature of top-down structural support in order to disseminate broader success of locally generated innovations. Scaling up reforms cannot be accomplished in highly hierarchical systems without this type of system support.

Third, the law also encouraged supportive features without which the programme could neither thrive nor spread. These included expectations for teachers and principals to engage actively in professional development, to participate in management of their schools and to collaborate in development of the school's learning programmes. Similarly, this research noted a variety of structural changes at the provincial and school levels in scheduling, planning and funding associated with the education reform act that supported programme implementation. There is little question that these features would have been more difficult to put into place prior to passage of the education reform legislation in 1999, and would never have reached even an intermediate scale of implementation. This case study of educational change in Thailand provides insight into how systemic change structures and systems can interact with local initiatives to produce positive change.

Capacity and change in principal instructional leadership

The third focus concerned the capacity of Thailand's principals to support change, and the extent to which they themselves had changed in response to adoption of the NEA in 1999. In Thailand, like other South-east Asian countries (e.g. Malaysia, Vietnam, Laos and Myanmar), the traditional identity of principals as government officers represents a 'genetic strand' in the *DNA* of their role (Cuban, 1988). This *DNA* creates an identity as government official (*karachagaan*) first and foremost in

the minds of Thai principals, and shapes their professional practice towards managerial and political domains (Cuban, 1988). Thai principals have traditionally been situated in local communities as key representatives and guardians of the national culture and system policies (Bunyamani, 2003; Hallinger, 2004). Indeed, prior to adoption of the NEA in 1999, terms such as 'instructional leadership' and 'leadership for learning' did not even have translated equivalents in the Thai language.

The NEA conveyed a new set of institutional expectations in 1999. These were not only different but conflicted with the existing normative role expectations of Thai school principals (Boontim, 1999; Bunyamani, 2003; Chuwattanukul, 2001; Gamage & Sooksomchitra, 2004; Leksansern, 2006; Oumthanom, 2001). In Thailand's 'post-reform era' principals were expected to actively lead teaching and learning development to an extent that simply did not exist in the past (e.g. see Bunyamani, 2003; Leksansern, 2006; Maxcy, Sungtong, & Nguyen, 2010). For the first time in the Thai context, leadership among Thai principals took on an explicitly instrumental aspect.

Moreover, the concurrent implementation of 'school-based management' over the ensuing decade resulted in new expectations for principals to involve a broader variety of stakeholders in formal decision-making in their schools (Boontim, 1999; Gamage & Sooksomchitra, 2004; Leksansern, 2006). This was a major change as well, since the Thai principal traditionally acted as a unitary leader (Boontim, 1999). This meant that not only did Thai principals need to lead actively, but for the first time their leadership would be open to broader scrutiny. Empirical evidence suggests that although Thailand's principals have evinced acceptance of these changes, many remain uncertain *how to enact these new roles effectively* (e.g. Bunyamani, 2003; Gamage & Sooksomchitra, 2004; Leksansern, 2006; Oumthanom, 2001; Wongwanich & Wiratchai, 2004).

With these changes in role definition in mind, the authors mapped the current profile of principal instructional leadership in Thailand (i.e. in 2008) in order to gain a perspective on the current capacity of Thai principals to support education reforms in teaching and learning.¹ The national profile of instructional leadership suggested that overall Thai principals engage their instructional leadership role to a moderate extent. In enacting this role, they appear to give significantly greater emphasis to activities that *define a school mission* and *promote a positive school learning climate* than those involved in *managing the instructional programme*. Indeed, the data indicated that the Thai principals did not engage actively in developing instruction, monitoring student progress and coordinating curriculum. This finding applied to all school levels and regions of the country (Hallinger & Lee, in press-a).

The second study examined change in the profile of principal practice following adoption of the NEA in 1999. This analysis sought to understand whether the reform policies that emerged from the NEA had reshaped the role orientation Thailand's principals. More specifically, the study sought to determine if there were changes in the profile of principal instructional leadership in Thailand between the 1990s and 2008.

The comparative analyses of PIMRS data focused on the profiles of secondary school principals. The results indicated that there was *no increase in the level of engagement* in instructional leadership among Thailand's secondary school principals during the years following passage of the NEA in 1999. This applied across the three dimensions of instructional leadership noted above. Indeed, the data profiles conveyed a picture of considerable stability in the *patterns of principal instructional leadership practice*. This, even in the face of a major change in the institutional context, there was no evidence that the principals were engaging this role more actively than in the past.

Together these findings raise two questions. First, do principals have the capacity and confidence to lead reforms. That is, during the same period when principals have been asked to support teachers in their adoption of radically new educational practices, the principals themselves have had to make similarly significant changes in their own practice. Relatively few—if any—Thai principals would have received in-depth, skill-oriented training on instructional leadership in Ministry-sponsored administrative preparation programmes.

Without firm action on this front, it is unlikely that Thailand's schools will possess the leadership capacity required for continuing development of the education system (see also Fry, 2002, in press; Gamage & Sooksomchitra, 2004). More specifically, this research suggests that steps need to be taken to redesign selection criteria as well as the training curriculum for school leaders if Thailand's policy-makers wish to embed a stronger emphasis on instructional leadership in the nation's schools. Training in change management, data-driven decision-making, coaching for improvement, high impact methods of teaching and learning and uses of technology to support both instructional leadership and teaching should receive attention. We note that these areas are largely ignored in the current training programmes required of Thailand's principals. In the absence of knowledge and skills in these domains, it is difficult to imagine how the principals can provide useful support to teachers in the implementation of reforms that focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning.

Second, and just as important, the new educational orientation fostered by the NEA represented a policy-driven effort to re-engineer the genetic makeup of Thai principals. This not only involves providing the principals with new knowledge and skills. It also entails a deeper change in values and norms about the identity of the principal and the focus and modes of interaction with others in the school and its community. We suggest that relatively little has been done to address either of these two dimensions required to enable Thailand's principals to fulfil the new role expectations.

Discussion

This paper has sought to gain a medium-term perspective on the process of education reform in Thailand through reference to a diverse set of empirical studies of change capacity and implementation. At the outset, we suggested that reflecting on the Thai experience of system-wide reform

could potentially offer useful lessons, not only for future system development in Thailand, but in other developing societies as well. In this section, we seek to place these findings in perspective.

First, we wish to note the similarity in the patterns of education reform as described in Thailand with those from school systems in the West (e.g. Fullan, 2007; Hall & Hord, 2002). While there is no doubt that cultural and structural features of the Thai context lend a unique flavour to reform implementation, many general patterns remain highly consistent with the Western literatures on leadership and change. For example, we note the following similarities:

- The complexity of system-wide reforms that require change in embedded behaviours of professionals represents a significant obstacle to change (Fullan, 2007).
- There is a common tendency to treat change as an ‘event’ rather than a process, and therefore, to underestimate the time frame for system-wide change (Hall & Hord, 2002).
- Even in highly hierarchical societies, users ‘on the ground’ possess the capacity to resist centrally mandated changes (Evans, 1996; Fullan, 2007; Maurer, 1996).
- The process of change is characterized by gradual adoption of changes as potential users move through different stages and levels of use (Hall & Hord, 2002; Kotter, 1996).
- There is evidence of mutual adaptation during the implementation process as reforms are reinterpreted by local users (Fullan, 2007; McLaughlin, 1990).
- Change is facilitated by alignment of policies and processes engaged by actors at multiple levels of the system (Fullan, 2007).
- Top-down change appears to be effective at defining priorities and directions, but insufficient by itself to motivate people to change embedded behaviours (Fullan, 2007; McLaughlin, 1990).
- Meaningful change in the behaviour of educators results when bottom-up initiatives are reinforced by top-down vision and structural arrangements, and outside-in support (Fullan, 2007; Hall & Hord, 2002; Kotter, 1996).
- Thai principals have evinced a role orientation that emphasizes managerial and political behaviour (Cuban, 1988), with the added distinction of being government officials who were never expected to fulfil the role of instructional leader (Bunyamani, 2003; Gamage & Sooksomchitra, 2004; Hallinger, 2004).

McLaughlin’s conclusion about implementing strategic change in US schools offers apt commentary on this case of educational reform in Thailand. McLaughlin wrote, ‘You can’t mandate what matters to people, but what you mandate matters’ (1990, p. 14). The data presented in this report suggest that Thailand’s principals believe that the new policy framework for education reform has been useful (i.e. what was mandated *matters* to the principals).

At the same time, revision of legal structures and Ministry pronouncements to 'do it' do not comprise a comprehensive strategy for change. Finding ways to engage the interest of teachers (i.e. making these reforms matter to them), and then developing their capacity to implement the changes represent continuing challenges (Fry, in press). The data indicated that skill development actually lagged behind teacher interest in putting these reforms into practice a full decade after passage of the NEA.

Areas in which the reform experience of Thailand suggests a different flavour in the approach to leadership and change include the following. High power distance (Hofstede, 1997) in the Thai context accentuates the tendency of policy-makers globally to overestimate the readiness of users to adopt centrally initiated policies. Leaders at the school level evidence similar cultural norms when they interpret lack of overt resistance as acceptance of change initiatives. This allows them to maintain a reasonable level of comfort in the face of resistance. A similar tendency leads leaders at all levels to measure and interpret success based on limited evidence (Jackson, 2004).

For example, passage of the NEA in 1999 led to the establishment of a new *Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment*. Consistent with global trends, this office has sought to identify curriculum standards, encourage the use of new forms of assessment and implement new systems of monitoring school quality. To date, however, evidence suggests that despite the substantial investment in implementing new site-based school assessments, the new systems have yielded only limited substantive improvements (Amornwich, 2008; Fry, in press; Mounier & Tangchuang, 2009; Priyakorn, 2012; Wiratchai et al., 2004). As Priyakorn (2012) has observed, national standards are largely unknown and have failed to impact subsequent policy and practice. This represents one more example of how Thai culture enables surface and incremental adaptation in order to maintain 'legitimacy' (see Meyer & Rowan, 1975), but without changing fundamental relationships or processes. This trend was observed in Thailand 40 years ago and referred to by Jacobs (1971) as 'modernization without development'.

From the outset, Thailand's policy-makers looked to the nation's school principals to lead reforms in teaching in and learning. For example, in 2008, the Secretary General of the OBEC Commission of Thailand noted the following:

The reforms we have undertaken at the national level cannot be accomplished without active involvement and leadership from our school principals. Without skillful leadership and active support from the principal, how can teachers hope to make these changes in curriculum and teaching? But our principals need motivation as well as more skills to lead these changes in their schools. (K. Varavarn, personal communication, December 12, 2008)

Yet, our data suggest that principals have been slow to don the garb of instructional leaders. Indeed, the 'genetic code' of Thai principals as 'government officials' emerged as a significant factor in understanding change, or lack of change, in the principals' role behaviour during the reform era. This has shaped their role orientation to an extent that has

maintained the centrality of managerial and political even in the face of centrally directed reforms that call for more active instructional leadership (Bunyamani, 2003). We note that Thailand has no historical orientation towards leadership as an *instrumental* activity. Instead, Thai conceptions of leadership emphasize the leader as a 'figurehead'. Redmond (1998) observed this tendency in his cultural analysis of leadership within the Thai context.

Whereas Western power is held by 'heads' (e.g. of state, or of corporations), Thai leaders are *hua/na*—'heads in front', front being rendered by the word *na* which means 'face.' The contrast is instructive. Not only is the corporeal image of leadership emphasized by two metonyms rather than one as in the West, the facial aspect of being in front indicates that leaders are meant to conform to the central values of Thai culture, namely, 'facial' values. Leaders are neither born nor made in Thailand; they are made up. (Redmond, 1998, p. 65)

This highlights the cultural gap faced in Thailand, and other Asian societies when they borrow policies and practices from Western societies (Dimmock & Walker, 2005; Walker & Dimmock, 2002). Incorporating instructional leadership into the practice of Thai principals involves not only the development of capacity (e.g. knowledge and skills), but also a more fundamental change in normative expectations and role identity. Although we assert that the latter represents the more significant challenge, neither has been addressed adequately to date.

This finding related to change in the role of principals is quite consistent with the findings from the studies that examined change in teacher behaviour following adoption of the NEA in 1999. During the mid-1990s when 'student centered learning' first arrived on the shores of Thailand, the Ministry of Education's translation of this concept into Thai was 'method of learning where the student is at the center'. Several years later, the translation was changed to 'method of learning where the student is important'. This reflected a changing cultural interpretation of the meaning of the teaching and learning practice, and highlights the longer time frame for change when the values underlying innovations conflict with those of the society in which they are being implemented.

Implementation of student-centred learning has faced other forms of cultural misunderstanding and misinterpretation. Phunghol describes a perceived trend among many teachers that still persisted into the mid-2000s with respect to their interpretation of student-centred learning.

What is often heard in education circles today is the word 'khai-centered,' meaning 'buffalo-centered,' in Thai, a slick metaphor for 'learner-centered.' 'Buffalo,' the beast of burden, is used here as a metaphor for learners. A person thought to be very dumb is often dubbed 'buffaloes' by many Thais. Likewise, inexperienced learners, particularly very young children in elementary grades or kindergarten school, are also being dubbed 'buffaloes' because these learners are considered to be as dumb as the buffaloes by disillusioned teachers. (Phunghol, 2005, p. 11)

These observations highlight the fact that educational change is synonymous both with knowledge transmission as well as with cultural transformation. In the words of, Ohmae: 'The contents of kitchens and closets

may change, but the core mechanisms by which cultures maintain their identity and socialize their young remain largely untouched' (1995, p. 30). Thus, we suggest that where educational changes conflict with fundamental cultural values, the process is likely to encounter even greater resistance and require a longer time frame for implementation. This was, for example, consistent with the finding from the study of teacher change described earlier where changes related to implementation of ICT in schools were proceeding more quickly than changes in teaching and learning methods. We believe that this type of cultural mismatch characterizes many of the changes that are being implemented in East Asian schools today (Dimmock & Walker, 2005; Hallinger, 2010; Pan & Chen, 2011). Thus, we believe that these lessons concerning leadership and change are relevant to the region beyond Thailand.

What does this synthesis suggest with respect to the way going forward? Hall and Hord's (2002) reprise that change is a process, not an event offers a relevant perspective on the future. These studies highlight the fact that the rate of system change in education seldom meets the vision espoused by reformers in Western (Cuban, 1990) or Asian societies (Hallinger, 2010). The tendency of policy-makers to treat change as an event leads to incomplete strategies, distorted time frames for assessing success and a lack of commitment to persist over the long term. These studies also offer insight into the capacity of Thai schools to assimilate and adapt slowly to changes coming from the outside-in (Dimmock & Walker, 2005; Hallinger, 2004; O'Toole, 1995).

Nonetheless, the fact that changes in Thailand's are incremental and often difficult to discern in the short term, should not hide the fact that changes are taking place. The IPM study provided an example of how a curriculum trend that was largely anathema to the traditional direction of Thai education (i.e. locally generated curriculum) could succeed. Without the impetus of 'outside-in' change, advocates of integrating 'local wisdom' into the Thai curriculum would never have been given the space to launch such an effort. Thus, we suggest that despite the slow progress towards reform suggested by these studies, scholars, policy-makers and practitioners need to develop both a longer term perspective on education reform as well as the commitment to persist.

Acknowledgement

The authors wish to acknowledge the funding support of the Research Grant Council (RGC) of Hong Kong for its support through the General Research Fund (grant # GRF-841512).

Note

1. We note that although the PIMRS had also been used in studies in Taiwan, Malaysia and China, differences in the school level and sources of the samples (i.e. teachers, principals) limited the utility of direct comparison with data drawn from these studies.

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