Synthesis of Findings from 15 Years of Educational Reform in Thailand:

Lessons on Leading Educational Change in East Asia

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Abstract

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; Hanushek, & Woessmann, 2007; 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 (Cheng, 1999; Hallinger, 1998, 2010; Mok, 2006; Psacharaopoulos & Patrinos, 2002). Thus, East Asian observers have witnessed a continuous stream of education reforms aimed at changing methods of school management as well as teaching and learning (Cheng & Walker, 2008; Hallinger, 2010). Recently even the region's policymakers 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 is 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 from a series of empirical studies of educational reform and change in Thailand. The purpose is to synthesize findings from studies of Thailand's education reform, and identify lessons that may be more broadly applicable to educational leadership and change in the region, and beyond.

We choose Thailand for two reasons. First, although each nation represents a unique context for the implementation of education reforms, Thailand's challenges typify many of those faced by other developing countries in the region. Its education system was trying to reorient its focus from quantity (e.g., of graduates) to quality (e.g., of learning), 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 (Fullan, 2003; Hallinger, 1998, 2001; Ohmae, 1995). These common features make the case of Thailand relevant to policymakers and school leaders elsewhere.

Second, we were fortunate to have access to empirical findings from a diverse set of studies on which to assess progress and draw lessons. Empirical data on education reform and change is not always easily accessible in developing countries. Therefore, we view this as a salient opportunity to conduct an empirically-informed policy study. Together these features suggest potential for the analysis to yield useful implications for leading 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 (ONEC, 1999). This rising investment in education reflected beliefs that continued economic development would require a more knowledgeable and skilled labor force (Carnoy, 2003; Wasi, 1998). Moreover, new capabilities and attitudes would be needed for the nation to cope with the cultural exigencies of globalization (Fry, 2002; Jungck & Kajornsin, 2003; Kaewdang, 1998; Mounier & Tangchuang, 2009).

In the view of some Thai policymakers, however, expanded educational access had simply increased the number of students being exposed to the "pedagogy of the worksheet" (Pennington, 1999, p. 2). Indeed, 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, and refocus the system from *quantity of graduates* to *quality of learning* (Fry, 2002; Hallinger, 2001; Kantamara, Hallinger & Jatiket, 2006; Pennington, 1999; ONEC, 1999; Thongthew, 1999; Wase, 1998; Wongwanich & Wiratchai, 2004).

Responsibility for leading education reform in Thailand was shared by the Office of the National Education Commission (ONEC) and the Ministry of Education's Office of Basic Education (OBEC). The following quotation conveys the highly 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 video-tapes 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), we wish to suggest that this vision of strategic reform of education also reflects assumptions about organizational change in the Thai cultural 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. Evidence of this social disposition towards status, rank and seniority is well documented not only in Thailand's education system (e.g., Hallinger & Kantamara, 2000, 2001), but also in the business sector (Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1996), and Thai society more generally (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 & Kantamara, 2000, 2001; Holmes & Tangtongtavy,

1996). Consequently, we suggest that Thai policymakers 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 socio-cultural. 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 (*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 both 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 neighboring nations.

Method

This paper employs research synthesis of findings drawn from empirical studies of education reform in Thailand. We focus particularly on three studies. The first study examined principals' perceptions of progress in education reform over the 10 year period from 1999-2008 (Author, 2011). This study used an action science methodology (Action Science, n.d.; Argyris, 1997) that engaged a large representative sample of Thai school principals in developing in-depth case studies of changes in their schools.

The case studies of reform implementation were gathered during a series of 17 full-day workshops conducted with 1,800+ principals from all school levels and regions of Thailand (Author, 2011). Although all principals wrote case studies of change for their schools, in-depth analysis focused on 167 of the case studies. 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 among teachers in their schools. The process employed in constructing the case studies was informed by change models proposed by Hall and Hord (2002), Kotter, 1996, and Fullan (2007).

The author analyzed 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 (Author, 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.

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 (Author, 2006). This case study was conducted six years after launch of Thailand's reform act. The innovation involved a specific curriculum program, Integrated Pest Management (IPM). This student-centered curriculum modeled many of the features highlighted in Thailand's educational reform, including student-centered learning, curriculum integration, and involvement of the local community. The study employed a qualitative case study methodology in order to describe and examine the efficacy of the IPM curriculum implementation.

Today, the IPM program 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-centered 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 center of the education system.

The focus of the third study (Author, in press-a, in press-b) shifts our perspective from teachers to principals. The 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 order to accomplish the first goal, the researchers analyzed data collected from a nationally representative sample of 1,195 principals from all levels and regions of Thailand. The dataset had been collected in 2008 using the Thai form of the *Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale* (Hallinger, 1982, 1993). These data were analyzed on three dimensions of instructional leadership: *Defining a School Mission, Managing the Instructional Program, 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, 1982, 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 (Author in press-a), as well as an assessment of the *capacity* of the principals to provide the type of leadership needed to enact the reforms (Author 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 (e.g., Barron-Gutty & Chupradit, 2009; Hallinger & Kantamara, 2001; Jungck & Kajornsin, 2003; Mounier & Tangchuang, 2009; Tan, 2007; Wiratchai, Wongwanich, &

Ruengtrakul, 2004; Wongwanich & Wiratchai, 2004). With respect to our analysis of principal practice before and during the reform era, we complement the study noted earlier with other empirical efforts to understand the nature and challenges of principal practice leadership practice during the era in Thailand (e.g., Boontim, 1999; Bunyamani, 2003; Chuwattanukul, 2001; Gamage & Sooksomchitra, 2004; Hallinger & Kantamara, 2000; Leksansern, 2006; Maxcy, Sungtong & Nguyen, 2010; Oumthanom, 2001; Tan, 2007). Thus, the method employed in this study seeks to synthesize findings from a broad set of quantitative and qualitative studies centering 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 (Author, 2011). This is followed by a section that focuses on the successful implementation of a single reform, the IPM curriculum (Author, 2006). This elaborates on the 'big picture' of national education reform by analyzing 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.

Reform Implementation: The Big Picture

The reforms selected by the principals for their case studies of change mirrored the key foci of Thailand's National Education Act of 1999. Reforms in curriculum, teaching and learning, 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; Tyack & Cuban, 1999). 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, 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 1,800 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 fulfill the promise of the National Education Act. 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 (Author, 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 percent 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-centered 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 Experience with Change. Somewhat surprisingly the principals did not identify staff attitudes as strong an 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, 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; Tan, 2007; Thongthew, 1999), 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 a 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 behavior 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 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 Education Reform
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 21st century education, the problem of how to transform the vision into reality remains one of the country's most widely recognized, if unmet, challenges. This stimulated a search for successful cases of reform. One such case was represented in the Integrated Pest Management (IPM) curriculum(Author, 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 new knowledge with local wisdom was a signature feature of Thailand's education reform act.

The IPM curriculum is a case example of this philosophy (Author, 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 Thailand Education Foundation (TEF). The impact of this small program now can be seen at numerous schools in many parts of Thailand. Implementation of the IPM program in Thailand demonstrates that "global" education reforms such as student-centered, 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 program 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 program. Nonetheless, schools in which the IPM curriculum is being used provide observable models of success (Author, 2006).

No less important, however, are the lessons drawn about the process of systemic educational reform. The IPM program 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 program demonstrated by a single teacher "infected" other teachers who implemented the IPM program. This type of commitment, creativity and persistence is often lacking in programs sponsored from the center of the educational system.

Despite the bottom-up initiation of this program, it must be emphasized that "outside-in" supported was needed to nurture the programs 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 program 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-centered 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 program 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 program 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 programs. 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 program 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 for our analysis 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 Southeast Asian countries (e.g., Malaysia, Vietnam, Laos, Indonesia, Myanmar), the traditional identity of principals as government officers represents a 'genetic strand' in the *DNA* of their role (Cuban, 1988; Hallinger, 2001). More specifically, this genetic identity shapes principal practice towards the managerial and political orientation in their role as school leaders. Prior to adoption of the NEA in 1999, Thai school principals were situated as local guardians of the national culture and system policies. Terms such as

instructional leadership and leadership for learning had not even attained the status of having translated equivalents in the Thai language.

However, in 1999 the NEA conveyed a new set of institutional expectations that were not only different, but also potentially in conflict with the traditional role 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; Hallinger, 2001; Kantamara et al., 2006; Leksansern, 2006; Maxcy et al., 2010;). Moreover, the gradual implementation of 'school-based management' over the past decade resulted in new system expectations for principals to involve a broader variety of stakeholders in formal educational decision-making in their schools (Boontim, 1999; Buranajant, 2007; Gamage & Sooksomchitra, 2004; Leksansern, 2006).This was a major change as well, since the principal has traditionally acted as a unitary leader in Thai schools (Boontim, 1999; Hallinger, 2001). Empirical evidence suggests that although Thailand's principals have generally 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 author conducted a study that compared principal instructional leadership during the pre- and post- reform eras (Author in press-, in press-b). Data collected with the PIMRS (Hallinger, 1982, 1993) were compared across samples obtained from secondary school principals from the two eras. The analyses yielded the following findings:

- The national profile of instructional leadership suggests that Thai principals give significantly greater emphasis to their role in *Defining a School Mission* and *Promoting a Positive School Learning Climate* than to *Managing the Instructional Program.*
- When compared with peers in primary and K-12 schools, secondary school principals were perceived to engage their instructional leadership role more actively on two dimensions: *Defining a School Mission* and *Promoting a Positive School Learning Climate*. No differences were found with respect to engagement on the dimension of *Managing Instructional Program*.
- 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.
- The comparative analyses conveyed a picture of considerable stability in the *patterns of principal instructional leadership practice,* even in the face of a major change in the institutional context.

This results raise a question concerning the adequacy of the principals' knowledge base for enacting this dimension of their role as instructional leader. Relatively few -- if any -- Thai principals would have received in-depth, skill-oriented training on instructional leadership in Ministry-sponsored administrative preparation programs. Moreover, this was a highly experienced sample of principals; 70% had more than 10 years of experience as principals. Thus most had received their preparation for teaching and the principalship prior to the passage of the *National Education Act* in 1999. While some principals might have accessed knowledge about this leadership domain in graduate degree programs, Thailand's higher education programs have

not traditionally emphasized instructional leadership. Thus, we hypothesize that lack of principal knowledge as well as skill in this domain could be impacting their capacity to effectively support the implementation of education reforms in teaching and learning.

In sum, this study yields two broad conclusions that complement those that emerged from the first study. First, the finding of stability in the pattern of principal instructional leadership suggests that the NEA has yet to result in substantial change in principal leadership behavior. This is significant in that the NEA had an explicit goal of reorienting the system-wide role orientation and behavior of school leaders. Second, although instructional leadership is considered an important contributor to school improvement (Hall & Hord, 2002; Hallinger, 2011), the capacity of Thailand's principals to provide this form of leadership remains open to question. Thus, findings from this study offer insight into the broader long-term pattern of education reform progress.

Discussion

This paper has sought to gain perspective on a decade of education reform in Thailand through reference to a diverse set of empirical studies of change capacity and implementation. We suggested that reflecting on lessons learned from the Thai experience of system-wide reform could offer useful lessons, not only for future strategies in Thailand, but in other regional societies as well. In this section, we synthesize findings from this body of empirical research in order to draw out possible lessons for leading change in the region.

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 flavor 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 behaviors 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).
- There is evidence of mutual adaptation during the implementation process as reforms are reinterpreted by local users (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 behaviors (Fullan, 2007; McLaughlin, 1990).

- Meaningful change in the behavior of educators results when bottom-up initiatives are reinforced by top-down vision and structural arrangements, and outside-in support (Fullan, 2007).
- Like principals in the West, Thai principals have evinced a role orientation that emphasizes managerial and political behavior.

McLaughlin's conclusion about implementing strategic change in American 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 the principals believe that the policy framework for education reform in Thailand 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. The data indicated that skill development actually lagged behind teacher interest in putting these reforms into practice a decade after passage of the NEA.

Areas in which the reform experience of Thailand suggests a different flavor in the approach to leadership and change include the following. High power distance (Hallinger, 2001; Hofstede, 1997) in the Thai context accentuates the tendency of policymakers globally to overestimate the readiness of users to adopt centrally-initiated policies. Leaders at the school level evidence a 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.

Thailand's policymakers looked to the school principals to lead reforms in teaching in and learning. For example, in 2008, the Secretary General of the Office of Basic Education 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. (Varavarn, 2008)

Yet, our data suggest that principals have been slow to don the garb of instructional leaders. Indeed, the 'genetic' identity of Thai principals as 'government officials' emerged as a significant factor in understanding change, or lack of change, in the principals' role behavior 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. We note that Thailand has no historical orientation towards leadership as a *functional* or *instrumental* activity. Instead, Thai conceptions of leadership emphasize the leader solely as a 'figurehead'. Redmond (1993) 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, p. 65, 1993)

This highlights the cultural gap faced in Thailand, and other East 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. We assert that the latter represents the more significant challenge.

This finding related to change in the role of principals is quite consistent with the findings from the studies that examined change in teacher behavior 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-centered learning has faced other forms of cultural misunderstanding and misinterpretation. Phungphol describes a perceived trend among many teachers that still persisted into the mid-2000s with respect to their interpretation of student-centered learning.

> What is often heard in education circles today is the word "khoi-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. (Phungphol, 2005, p. 11)

These observations highlight the fact that educational change is synonymous both with cultural transmission (Tyack & Hansot, 1982) as well as with cultural transformation. In the words of, Kenichi 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.

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