

Finding the Middle Way towards Educational Reform in Thailand: *Jing Jai, Jing Jung, Nae Norn*

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Southeast Asia has witnessed a decade of transformational change such that children entering primary school today, “cannot even imagine the world in which their grandparents lived and into which their own parents were born” (Drucker, 1995, p. 75). Since 1990, ASEAN nations have embraced greater political openness and integration into the global economy. A largely unforeseen consequence of this integration has been a whirlwind of change that threatens to overwhelm social and political institutions.

Yet, even with the massive political and economic changes observed in Southeast Asia, fundamental cultural norms have proven more resistant to global forces. As Ohmae has observed: “The contents of kitchens and closets may change, but the core mechanisms by which cultures maintain their identity and socialize their young remain untouched” (1995, p. 30). This frames the challenge of educational reform throughout the world where educational systems are struggling to keep pace with rapidly changing environmental demands (Fullan, 1993; Hallinger, 1998a, 1998b).

Nowhere is this observation more salient than Thailand. Until recently one of Asia’s tiger economies, Thailand’s economic growth has ground to a halt, due in part to inadequacies in its educational system (Bangkok Post, 1998a, 1998b; ONEC, 1998a). Thailand’s schools were never designed to produce the highly motivated, independent thinkers and learners demanded by an information-based economy (MOE, 1996; ONEC, 1997a, 1998a). Today, Thai parents, school practitioners and policymakers agree that the capacity of school graduates to meet the challenges of the information age is at best uncertain.

Indeed, over the past decade, numerous planning documents published by Thai government agencies have eloquently articulated the need for a new and visionary set of educational priorities (MOE, 1996, ONEC, 1997a, 1998a). Policymakers and educators alike have identified the urgent need for educational reforms that will foster economic competitiveness while preserving the national culture. For example, Professor Kriengsak Charoenwongsak of Thailand’s Institute of Future Studies for Development has noted:

If the trends [in enrolment and retention of primary and secondary school graduates] continued the number of secondary school graduates would double by 2002. . . . However, increasing the quality of Thai products also involves improving the quality of education. The current emphasis on rote learning does not help students assume positions in the workplace which stresses problem-solving and other analytical skills. (Bangkok Post, 1998b, p. 2)

Unfortunately, reform in educational practice has lagged well behind political rhetoric. As Thai newspapers report daily, lack of educational progress threatens Thailand's continued development. For example, at a recent seminar on social and educational reform:

Mr. Amaret Sila-on and NEC [National Education Commission] secretary-general Rung Kaewdaeng were in complete agreement that Thailand's decline in global competitiveness was mainly due to poor quality of education and graft. The IMD's (International Institute for Management Development) study said Thailand's education system did not live up to global economic challenges compared to that of Singapore. . . . Several [seminar] participants also blamed the drop [in competitiveness] on inefficient public management and a lack of support from the decision-making level, saying despite high potential Thailand will regress further. (Bangkok Post, 1998a, p. 3)

During the 1990's, politicians and bureaucrats, flush with the spoils of the economic boom, demonstrated little sense of urgency to press forcefully for the implementation of the nation's new educational priorities. The economic crisis of 1997 highlighted fundamental weaknesses in Thailand's institutional infrastructure. New laws were passed promoting nation-wide educational restructuring and reform.

Not only in Thailand, but throughout Asia, educational leaders face the challenge of fostering change in practices consonant with the needs of their rapidly developing societies. Yet, leading change has never traditionally formed a central role of Asian school leaders. This paper discusses how the cultural and institutional context in Thailand influences the implementation of educational reform.

The Problem of Change in Thai Education

Educational bureaucracies remain among the largest government institutions in Asian nations such as Thailand. Yet, as governments are concluding throughout the world, large centralized bureaucracies cannot keep up with the rapid pace of change emanating from the environment. Competing interest groups and the bureaucratic emphasis on procedures hamper Thailand's educational system from responding effectively to new priorities.

Centralized decisionmaking by a small group of highly educated and informed individuals made sense in the past when the workforce was less well-educated. Today, however, rising educational levels within ASEAN nations means that people in and around schools (i.e., principals, teachers and parents) are better prepared and more interested in contributing to decisions. This is *beginning* to have an impact on how leaders work with staff and their communities to bring about change. As a principal in Hong Kong recently noted, "Here in Hong Kong, I am starting to ask the question, 'Why?'"

Change is Easy: *Just do it!*

The Thai approach to educational reform fits comfortably within the rubric of school restructuring. Indeed, the reforms described above are just that, *structural* changes. Yet, structural characteristics of the Thai educational system and norms of the Thai culture both wield influence over implementation of reform.

In Thai culture, seniority and status are paramount in considering relations within the social system (Mulder, 1996). Therefore, when an elder (or a school administrator) tells his/her juniors (or school faculty) to do something, there is little choice. Institutional and cultural norms shape the only acceptable response: "Yes." This tendency to *greng jai* or show consideration for one's elders (or boss) is a central norm in Thai culture (Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1996; Mulder, 1996). It is part of the glue that creates social cohesion and is also apparent in other Asian cultures (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1997). This norm is salient to our discussion of change.

There is widespread, unspoken, pressure to conform with socially sanctioned expectations, at least on a surface level. This reduces the degree to which individuals -- principal or teachers -- are willing to experiment or depart from traditional social norms. It also shapes the principal's perception of how to bring about change. As one Thai secondary school principal noted:

I understand that leading change is very complex in the United States where everyone wants to have a say and participate in everything. So it's important to talk to everyone and get them interested and so forth. But here in Thailand, that's not necessary. If I want teachers in the school to change the way they are doing something, I just tell them, 'Do it!'

Unlike their Western counterparts, teachers in Thailand will *greng jai* their administrators. Face-to-face, they will politely accept their orders and try to "do it"-- *within the scope of their capabilities*. Such polite acquiescence does not, however, begin to suggest that change has been implemented.

When the innovation is simple, such as a new method of keeping attendance, instructions to "do it" may be highly efficient. However, this change approach is insufficient when the innovation involves learning to teach with technology, use cooperative learning, or teach English. These all require a more extended process of learning and support than is typically found in Thai schools.

This approach to managing change may not describe the strategy of every school administrator in Thailand. Yet principals and other managers in Thailand, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore voice similar inclinations about the inefficiency of working to gain the interest and support of staff at the front-end of change implementation (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1997).

Some have further noted the impact of other normative tendencies of followers.

You know, sometimes even if I want to involve staff more actively in determining the direction and procedures for change they misunderstand us. If I really spend a lot of time asking their opinions, they think I don't know how to do our job! It's as if they say, "You're the principal. If you have to ask me, it must mean that you don't know what you're doing."

This is an institutional system in which staff are unaccustomed to participating in decision-making and a social system where juniors are culturally bound to *greng jai* their bosses. The strategy of telling staff to “do it” meets traditional institutional and cultural expectations of the system in which the principal works. Moreover, this change strategy has survived because it was successful in the past when the pace of change was slow, the source of change was internal, innovations were less complex, staff were less well-educated, and the consequences for *not* changing were less severe.

This tendency extends up through the system where the provincial or departmental supervisor may query the principal. “Are your teachers using the _____ yet?” The response is, “Of course.” The principal told them to do it and they had been to the workshop. The supervisor duly reports up to his or her supervisor that schools in the - _____

Region are all using the new program.

As noted above, the monitoring of reform implementation seldom goes beyond the use of checklists. Supervisors perform what principals refer to as “hit and run” missions to check on implementation at the site level. In combination, the *system* is satisfied that change has taken place since all monitoring points have reported it as such.

What I describe here is a shared mythology of change. Participants at each level of the system are doing *what is expected of them* and all agree that everyone has done what was asked. Yet, change fails to occur.

Fostering Change in a Centralized System: *Jing Jai, Jing Jung, Nae Norn*

In general, social and political institutions that are shielded from changes in the world at-large adapt more slowly (Rohwer, 1996). Schools fall into this category, as they seldom feel the pressure of market forces. Schools have always been among society’s most conservative institutions since they are responsible for transmitting the culture to youth (Tyack & Hansot, 1982).

Educational decision-makers in Bangkok cannot understand why principals and teachers do not respond more readily to the need for change. Yet, in practice, the MOE has shielded local schools from the global change forces that underlie reform. By keeping schools highly dependent upon central directives, the MOE has unwittingly reduced the imperative for change at the local level. One school director from Northern Thailand attributed the lack of substantive educational change to three cultural norms of Thailand’s educational system: *jing jai, jing jung, nae norn*.

Jing jai

He asserted that the rhetoric of the Ministry of Education lacks a fundamental Thai trait, *kwarm jing jai* (i.e., sincerity). Few local administrators or teachers find the rhetoric of local empowerment supported by the substantive behavior of MOE decision-makers. When those at the local level fail to see their bosses conform to the same changes they have mandated for others, it indicates a lack of sincerity. Culturally, this reduces the need for staff to venture beyond surface compliance.

Lacking *kwarm jing jai*, Bangkok decision-makers are unable to fulfill another necessary condition for bringing about change in a Thai organization: *gumlung jai*. *Gumlung jai* is the encouragement or moral support that Thai people receive from their

social group, especially when engaged in a difficult task (Mulder, 1996). In the current context, the perception that MOE decision-makers lack *kwarm jing jai* or sincerity renders them unable to offer *gumlung jai* to the schools in any meaningful way.

While *support* is also needed to foster change in Western cultures, there are some essential differences. First, in Thailand's community-based culture, change is fundamentally a group not an individual phenomenon (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1997). Even the very term *gumlung jai* often refers to a *group* giving *public* support or encouragement to an individual in need. In contrast to the West, the individual in Thailand almost never exists except in relation to his/her reference group (Holmes & Tangtongtay, 1996; Mulder, 1996).

Also salient to this contrast, Thailand's heroes and heroines are not mavericks who defy convention to find the new path. In Thailand, American heroes like Chuck Yeager, the Lone Ranger, Daniel Boone, the Marlboro man, and Steve Jobs would not be people with the *right stuff* to make a lasting cultural impression. Thai people are more likely to move (or change) with their peer group, and the group is most likely to move in response to a strong morally persuasive message from above.

Finally, in Thai culture, feelings take precedence over reason (Holmes & Tangtongtay, 1996; Mulder, 1996). In Thailand it is common to describe the resolution of a conflict in terms of two parties developing mutual understanding or *kwarm khow jai gun*. The source of the mutual understanding, however, is the heart, not the head. That is the Thai word for understanding -- *khow jai* -- means to "enter the heart" not the head! This has powerful implications for change implementation. The best laid plans of policymakers will never see the light of successful implementation unless the feelings of staff are sincerely acknowledged and supported. Paradoxically, this is the case even though surface compliance is easily obtained because of the cultural tendency to *greng jai* or defer to the feelings of one's superordinates.

Jing Jung

As suggested earlier, the seriousness of purpose for educational reform is often unclear to local staff. As one principal noted, "There is little relation between the idea of reform as conceived in Bangkok and implementation in the provinces." In Thai this translates into a lack of seriousness of purpose or *kwarm jing jung*. Communication remains one-way, from the top down and local school leaders remain highly cynical about the intent of Ministry decision-makers.

A recent survey of almost 800 staff generated relevant data on communication in East Asian corporations (Council of Management Communication, 1996 in World Executive's Digest, 1998). Sixty-four percent of staff did not believe what management told them. Sixty-one percent did not feel well-informed of plans. And 54 percent did not feel that decisions were well explained. While I do not have comparable data on the perceptions of Thai teachers and principals, I suspect a similar pattern would prevail. Cultural norms and institutional structure each play a role in this problem of communication.

Recent large investments in computers represent an example of this how a lack of seriousness plays out in reform implementation. Since 1996, the MOE invested millions of baht into computer hardware and software in response to the acknowledged imperative

for technological development in schools. The MOE implemented the policy in a traditional “one size fits all” manner without preparing schools first. Consequently, computers were even sent to schools that still lacked electricity. Development of software for use in the schools got bogged down in corruption among the vendor and MOE officials. Training for teachers was unevenly distributed and of highly variable quality. This type of implementation breeds cynicism among local staff concerning the seriousness and motives of Bangkok decision-makers.

The hard work of articulating the moral and practical basis for reform and the meaning behind new methods has simply not been done in Thailand. This problem is by no means limited to Thailand or Asia. For example, as an American journalist recently noted:

[In the USA] Republican voters have not yet been persuaded that “economic change and the free operation of the market, can be exciting rather than frightening.” The key words there are “can be”. But change often *is* frightening, and the world over, governments and commentators have done too little to explain why such change is necessary and how its wounds can be healed. (Newsweek, March 4, 1996, p. 9)

The communication gap suggested here relates directly back to the systemic tendency to believe that telling others to *do it* is an efficient means of fostering change. Until the nation’s leadership does use its moral authority to articulate the why and how of educational reform, systemic change will not take place.

Nae norn

The third condition noted by our colleague, *nae norn*, refers to the need for certainty. Of course a degree of stability is essential for effective policy implementation in any context. However, certainty takes on special significance within the Thai institutional system because of its highly political nature.

In Thailand, educational policy priorities change as frequently as the government. During the past decade no coalition government served out its full term of office. Not one Minister of Education was in office for even a full year. Since the Minister is appointed by his coalition party, each entering Minister must stamp his (and his party’s) name on education policy quickly. This generally means first canceling out the favored reforms of his immediate predecessor.

For example, when a recent Minister of Education assumed office, his first major policy decision was to cancel the ambitious investment in computers initiated by the prior Minister. With great fanfare and concern over the “efficiency” of expenditures, he shifted the funds towards teacher welfare. Notably, the former Minister’s political supporters were to be found among private sector contractors. The new Minister’s party counted the teacher’s federation among its supporters.

This source of systemic uncertainty is further compounded by rapid turnover of senior bureaucrats in the Ministry of Education. The Permanent Secretary of Education, his Deputies, and the various Department Directors are seldom in position for more than one or at most two years. As they reshuffle annually, implementation priorities shift with

repercussions down through the institutional system.

Political uncertainty is hardly unique to Thailand. Yet the speed with which Thailand's policy goals and implementation priorities turn over is extraordinary when compared with regional countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, or the Philippines. This translates into a high degree of uncertainty among staff at the local level.

Implementation of educational reform in Thailand is severely handicapped by norms of the institutional system as well as by certain norms of Thai culture. The goal of local empowerment in schooling runs counter to the existing structure of the educational system. As other nations have found, it is difficult for a bureaucracy to change its very purpose and traditional operating procedures. Moreover, norms of Thai culture lead staff (and parents) who are the targets for empowerment to engage in a cultural dance with their superiors. The result is an absence of change beyond the surface indicators compiled onto a checklist. Educational reform has evolved into shared mythology of change consistent with the cultural and institutional norms of Thai society.

Leading Thailand into a New Era of Education

In this paper I have presented an overview of educational reform in Thailand as it has evolved since 1990. In recent years, Thai policymakers have done an excellent job of crafting a reform agenda suited to 21st century schooling. They have initiated the adoption of important reforms including a gradual move towards basic education to 12 years, expansion of English instruction to first grade, decentralization of decision-making, introduction of new teaching methods, and development of the physical infrastructure of schools.

I have been more critical of how Thailand's educational decisionmakers have *implemented* these reforms. Their ability to foster change in school management and classroom teaching in particular has been undermined by structural and cultural features of the educational system. I identified three conditions necessary to the successful *implementation* of educational reform in Thailand: sincerity, seriousness of purpose, and stability.

Directives issued from the MOE for principals and teachers to change have not succeeded beyond altering the outward appearances of schooling. For reasons I have discussed, in the Thai context, it is unlikely that a groundswell of staff and parent initiative will overcome the structural constraints of the current system. Thus, reform has to a large degree halted at the door of the schoolhouse.

Even so, the conditions noted earlier -- *jing jai, jing jung, nae norn* -- offer possible clues for breaking the logjam of change. I believe that the MOE has provided a viable policy structure for reform, and that people throughout the country are ready for change. What Thailand's educational reform lacks is a catalyst that will jump-start and support the process of systemic change.

Trite as it may seem, I believe that strong political and cultural leadership is the needed catalyst at this particular stage in the reform process. National leaders must articulate the moral basis for reform. Just as important, they must apply pressure and offer encouragement for implementation of the MOE's school reform plans *throughout the MOE*. In fact, national leadership has been the catalyst for societal reform of

education in several other nations (e.g., Bill Clinton in the U.S., Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore, Dr. Mahathir Mohammed in Malaysia).

In Thai culture, strong leaders are viewed as possessing *baramee* (personal power) that can influence the direction of the group. This is not the same as bureaucratic power. A leader earns *baramee* over time through interaction and experience in the public or corporate arena. Leaders with *baramee* are viewed as sincere (*jing jai*) and have the moral authority to lead.

Cultural leadership is also needed to inspire and motivate. Leaders can stimulate change by reframing reform in light of the culture's tradition. For example, going back many generations, Thailand's Kings have been proponents of learning. They have modeled learning personally as well as encouraging the development of the nation's educational system. Given the Thai citizens' respect of the monarchy, it would be reasonable to frame current changes in education in light of the traditional importance placed upon learning by Thai Kings.

The Thai people are also fortunate to have an educational leader in the person of King Bhumipol Adulyavej. The King possesses the necessary *baramee* to transform educational change into a cultural issue essential to the future well-being of the nation. The King's life itself is a model of lifelong learning, technological innovation, artistic creation, creative problem-solving, preservation of traditional values, and engagement with the global culture. The King could, better than anyone else, inspire Thai's to join together in moving towards the type of educational system needed in the Thailand of today and tomorrow. This cultural leadership must, however, work in tandem with political-bureaucratic leadership of the Prime Minister or another political leader.

Education reform may determine the future of the Thai nation. Given the Thai institutional system, the catalyst for reform must come from the top. Key national leaders must awaken the Thai people to the urgency of the tasks before them. Only a clear and persistent articulation of education's importance (*jing jung*), change in the behavior of senior MOE staff (*jing jai*), and a conviction that reform is here to stay (*nae norn*) will give educators the courage to change.

Education in Thailand has always been the responsibility of a few government officers at the MOE. In the 21st century this must change and education must become a more integral part of Thai society at-large. To do so educational reform must become part of the national agenda. The Thai people are ready for this challenge. They await the political and cultural leadership to join this process in earnest.

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