

**A Reflection on Whole School Reform
Through Decentralized School-Based Management
By
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Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a great honour and pleasure for me to be here today among so many distinguished scholars participating in the 3rd International Forum of Education Reform: Education Decentralization Revisited: School-based Management.

Dr. Siriporn Boonyanant, Acting Deputy Secretary General of the Education Council of Thailand, asked me to reflect on the three presentations on whole school reform by three distinguished speakers in the first panel session. I have been a strong supporter of whole school reform. My Thai colleagues and I launched a pilot project on whole school reform in 1994, starting with three schools, and it was very successful. The whole school reform idea has been implemented in Thailand for over 20 years. Recently it has been expanded, elaborated and improved to include several hundreds of schools of Thailand. Yet we still have a long way to go to cover over 38,000 schools in Thailand.

Today the three speakers from three countries have shared with us their experiences and opinions about whole school reform, which can be summarized as follows:

Prof. Dr. Lee Sing Kong presented a very innovative conceptual framework of the whole school leadership training program in Singapore for school leaders at all levels. He has lead us to the dreamland of education, which becomes reality in Singapore. The importance of the expected outcomes as in most mainstream management is not the focus of this model. The main objective is to transform traditional schools into schools of the future that focuses on development “beyond best practice”, through the so-called “extraordinary leadership”. Words like “innovation”, “challenge”, “breakthrough”, “forward looking”, etc. are the keys, which serve as both means and ends. The uncertainty and uncontrollability of the expected outcomes, which are usually stressed in the mainstream management, are challenged. Priorities are given to opportunities to innovate and to learn through new experiences.

Prof. Dr. Philip Hallinger from U.S.A. dramatically portrait education reform as a necessity, but the process would naturally face resistance, due to institutional and cultural norms. In his paper, Prof. Hallinger gave an example of education reform in Thailand that has faced cultural norm of “kreng jai”, or showing consideration for one’s elders and bosses. He suggested the middle way of approaches leading to change, stressing “kwam kow jai”, understaning or literally “enter the heart”. Three things are required in the reform process: “jing jai” (moral purpose, sincerity of leaders), “jing jung” (transparency, fairness, clarity and consistency) and “nae non” (certainty of action, stability of goals).

Ms. Glenda Holdsworth informed us about a wonderful model of self-managing school system implemented in Victoria, Australia, a shift from the centralized system to the decentralized school-based management system. Again, a new kind of leadership is described, the kind that takes a proactive role as a change agent to transform schools into innovative, learning-centered and accountable schools. The shift from the “I” culture to the “We” culture is the key factor.

After reading the papers and listening to the presentations of the three distinguished professors, I would like to share with you some comments and remarks:

1. The three presentations may discuss or elaborate some different experiences, but they share one common central theme, that is, they all call for a new kind of leadership to transform schools into a new kind of schools. The keywords that reflect the transformational objectives are innovations, empowerment, capacity building, parent involvement, community participation, forward looking, future-oriented attitude, experience-based learning, etc., in order to prepare children for knowledge age of their generation. Decentralization through school-based management is a central dogma of this conference. More rapid change, less central control and more school autonomy also mean more risk, but *no risk no change*. School management is moving closer to corporate management, and school principals take a role resembling corporate managers. Nevertheless, let us be careful not to carry this so far as to turn schools to business enterprises, education to commodity and students to our customers.

2. Such transformation certainly requires a shift of paradigm, a very difficult one, because it involves institutional and cultural change. It is difficult to change one’s mindset, and so this is not an easy task. It is especially difficult because we do not know for sure where we are shifting to, how exactly we should do it and how much. Some say that education reform is like a pendulum that swings back and forth. Perhaps what we think is new is actually long-forgotten wisdom of loving and caring of community’s children as if they were our own children. A school is for community’s children, and so is the center of the community.

3. If anyone would like to try to predict the future, the chance is that he would fail. In many cases we have failed to predict the future of less rapidly changing society. So, in this rapidly changing situation, predicting a far future would be quite impossible. Near future is often too near for education to show its outcomes. Education takes at least one generation to reveal its overall effect. So all we can do and must do is to frequently review and revise our reform process as we go along. There should be no fixed course in an education reform journey.

4. In all change, one expects resistance of some sort. Everyone thinks that he or she knows something about education, even though his or her opinion is based on personal experience and common sense. So an education issue always invites public opinion and argument. Each has his or her own and usually fixed idea about good education.

5. How to learn may be an intellectual and educational challenge, but how to unlearn is mostly social, cultural and psychological. So, for educators to unlearn people, they should remember that they are not dealing with education *per se*, but they

must also think about social, cultural, political and psychological strategies. Education reform is usually more complicated and takes longer than other reforms. Even though everyone thinks that education is important, it is rarely taken as an urgent issue. So, when it comes to making decisions, priorities are usually given to other hot or emergency issues.

6. School-based management becomes a worldwide key strategy of education reform of the century. It is a dynamic process and must be continuously revised and adjusted to adapt to rapidly changing conditions. One model may work in one society, but may not in others. There is no such thing as a reform blueprint that works in all cases.

7. In this change process, school leaders and teachers are expected to play a new role, in which they are expected to be more proactive, integrative, participatory and adaptive. They are change managers. One big task that is the key to the success of this model is training and retraining of preservice teachers, inservice teachers and administrators. Teaching professionalism has changed. This is the biggest task of all, because we all know that it is not easy to change professors, principals and teachers, but once we change we can influence a lot of other people.

After all, the purpose of all these is for the development of our children. We must prepare them for their highly competitive and complex future. Let us get our kids ready for their world of high speed and so high risk.

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