



Research paper

Assessing the effects of Learning-Centered Leadership on Teacher Professional Learning in Thailand

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H I G H L I G H T S

- Examined effects of learning-centered leadership on teacher professional learning in Thailand.
- Effects of leadership were partially mediated by teacher trust and agency.
- Independent variables exerted strong effects on teacher learning.
- Identifies leadership behaviors that motivate and support teacher learning.
- Suggests a new path forward for education reform in Thailand.

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The teacher communities described here exhibit the best we know so far about effective professional development. They focus on instruction; are sustained and continuous, rather than short term and episodic; provide opportunities for teachers to learn from one another both inside and outside the school; make it possible for teachers to influence how and what they learn; and engage teachers in thinking about what they need to know. (Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2008, p. 233)

In this quotation, Lieberman and Pointer Mace not only summarize the core of what scholars and practitioners have learned about 'effective teacher learning and development' but also identify the 'heart of successful education reform'. Education reforms implemented throughout the world over the past several decades have challenged educators to adapt to a rapidly changing world. Yet, fundamentally, education systems cannot meet these challenges of change unless the educators in our schools are capable of

adapting to new perspectives, knowledge and skills (Borko, 2004; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). Thus, Lieberman and Pointer Mace (2008) concluded that teacher learning 'on-the-job' is the key to unlocking the untapped potential of educational reform.

Although Lieberman and Pointer Mace (2008) were referring to the challenge of education reform in the USA, this is equally relevant throughout the world. Indeed, we argue that teacher learning on-the-job is even more critical in developing societies where educators often have fewer resources and opportunities to learn both in pre-service and in-service settings. This is also the case in Thailand where efforts at education reform have stagnated after almost two decades of continuous effort (Fry & Bi, 2013).

In 1999, Thailand passed an ambitious education reform law that established new national education goals. These goals envisioned graduates with the capability to apply knowledge to solve problems, and who would have a sound moral foundation and the capacity to live fulfilling lives. These goals represented a radical shift from the prior rote-learning *cum* knowledge orientation of Thailand's education system (Fry & Bi, 2013). Achievement of these new goals would, however, require educators in Thailand to employ very different approaches to learning and teaching (Fry & Bi, 2013; Patrinos, Arcia, & Macdonald, 2015; Varavarn, 2011; Wiratchai, Wongwanich, & Ruenrakul, 2004). Fast-forward more than a decade hence and, like many other nations, the yield from Thailand's investments in education reform has generally failed to lived up to the expectations of policymakers and the public (Fry & Bi, 2013; Patrinos et al., 2015; Pimpa & Rojanapanich, 2013). A recent report on education in Thailand issued by the OECD/UNESCO (2016) concluded as follows.

Schools and teachers, however, have not always been given the support and skills they need to implement this new approach

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[to teaching and learning]. The country has a comprehensive system of standardised national assessments but lacks the capacity to ensure that its national tests reinforce the aims of the curriculum and support reform efforts rather than undermine them. It has raised the qualification levels of its teachers and school leaders, yet questions on the quality of their training and ongoing development remain. (OECD/UNESCO, 2016, p. 3)

A top-down system of training and development is renowned for mandated attendance at episodic workshops whose content often fails to match educators' needs. For example, one of the authors, while teaching in a week-long workshop for principals, found that 10% of the participants mandated to attend were retiring the following month, and would never return to their schools. In the end, too few educators in Thailand's public education system receive tangible, meaningful support to learn what they need at the time that they need it (Fry & Bi, 2013; OECD/UNESCO, 2016; Pillay, 2002).

This research examined school-level processes associated with teacher professional learning and development in Thailand. More specifically, we examined the role of learning-centered leadership, teacher trust, and teacher agency in fostering teacher professional learning in primary schools in Thailand. The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What is the pattern of learning-centered leadership evidenced by primary school principals in Thailand?
2. What is the effect of learning-centered leadership on teacher trust, teacher agency and teacher professional learning?
3. How do learning-centered leadership practices shape teacher agency, trust, and teacher professional learning?

This mixed methods study (Creswell, 2005) analyzed data gathered from 60 principals and more than 1000 teachers in 60 primary schools in Thailand. Confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling were employed to examine the effects of principal leadership on teacher learning. The quantitative analysis was followed by a small-scale qualitative study in which we interviewed principals, middle leaders, and teachers in two of the schools that demonstrated the 'strongest' results on our quantitative measures. The study adds to a growing body of research on school leadership and teacher learning and development both globally (e.g., Frost, 2006; Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2008; Saphier, King, & D'Auria, 2006; Schwille, Dembélé, & Schubert, 2007; Vescio et al., 2008) and in East Asia (e.g., Liu, Hallinger, & Feng, 2016; Ngang, Kanokorn, & Prachak, 2014; Qian

& Walker, 2013; Somprach, Tang, & Popoonsak, 2017; Wang, 2016).

1. Theoretical perspective

In this section of the paper we present the conceptual framework that guided the study and define the conceptual variables included in the investigation. Finally, we discuss the context of education in Thailand.

1.1. Conceptual framework

The conceptual model that guided the study accounts for the possibility that principal leadership effects could be either partially or fully mediated by teacher trust and teacher agency (see Fig. 1). The relationships proposed in this model are based on findings from earlier studies conducted in Hong Kong and Mainland China (e.g., Hallinger, Lee, & Ko, 2014; Li, Hallinger, & Walker, 2016; Liu et al., 2016).

1.1.1. Learning-Centered Leadership

Robinson and colleagues (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008) identified principal support for and participation in the professional learning of teachers as the most significant means by which school leadership impacts student learning (see also Barth, 1990; Frost, 2006; Knapp, Copland, Honig, Plecki, & Portin, 2010; Saphier et al., 2006). This widely disseminated finding gave rise to a new wave of empirical studies of 'leadership and teacher learning'. These studies, while acknowledging that student learning remains the key distal target for school leaders, proposed the strategic value of developing a more refined understanding of how school leaders influence the professional or workplace learning of teachers.

This emerging body of research has yielded the proposition that 'principal leadership effects on teacher learning' are largely mediated by teacher attitudes (e.g., trust, agency, commitment, efficacy) that shape their motivation to engage in professional learning (e.g., Hallinger et al., 2014; Lai et al., 2016; Li et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2016; Somprach et al., 2017). This research has also called attention to ways in which school structures and relational processes foster or inhibit teacher participation in productive learning (e.g., Cravens, 2014; Qian & Walker, 2013; Wang, 2016). This wave of research represents both an extension and refinement of research into leadership effects on student learning (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010; Robinson et al., 2008).

In this study, we defined learning-centered leadership as 'intentional efforts to inspire, guide, direct, support and participate

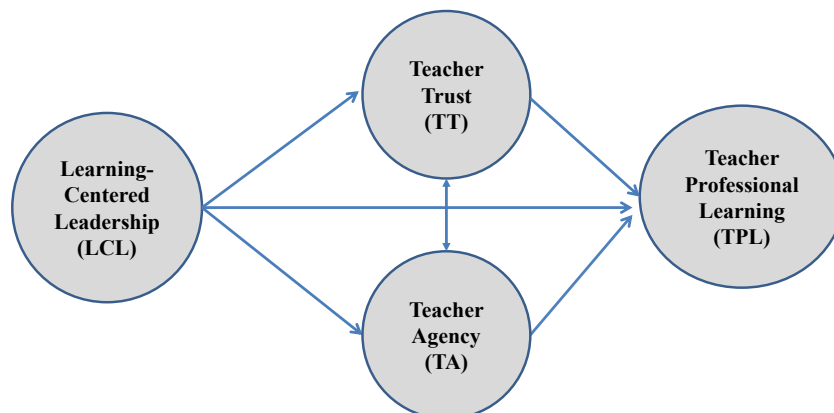


Fig. 1. Hypothesized model of learning-centered leadership and teacher professional learning.

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