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Effects of educational reforms in the 2nd decade (2009–2018) on teacher motivation and student achievement among schools in Southern Thailand

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ABSTRACT

This paper studied the effectiveness of four school reforms (instruction reform, teacher reform, learning sources reform, and administration reform) on improving school outcomes. Based on systems theory, this paper explored relationships among the four school reforms and their effects on teacher motivation and student achievement. The quantitative study was a secondary analysis using year 2014 datasets from a sample of 431 public basic schools in 3 southern provinces, Thailand. The researcher used structural equation modeling to explore the models and to verify cause–effect relationships among the variables. The research findings fairly confirmed the theoretical frameworks, and reflected some effectiveness of the 2nd decade school reforms in terms of whole organizational improvement and teacher motivation, although not student achievement. The key findings were discussed with a critical theory lens to depict Thailand as a case study of developing countries borrowing and struggling with global school reforms, and then proposed policy implications to improve the current education reforms as global issues, particularly for Thailand.

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Introduction

Fry and Bi (2013) noted that the educational crises in Thailand included: 1) low quality of education; 2) inequality in educational opportunities; 3) an existing education system that did not correspond to the social, religious, and cultural contexts of local communities; and 4) inefficiency of the education system with centralized administration and bureaucratic management. These crises brought about the demand for current education reforms, according to the 1999 National Education Act (NEA), which aimed to develop every Thai to become a whole human being with a balance of all competencies. To achieve this

goal, the reform focused on: 1) an education system based on the concept of life-long learning; 2) instruction based on the concept of student-centered learning; 3) administration towards decentralization; 4) professional development for teachers; and 5) a quality assurance system in education (Ministry of Education, 1999).

However, the consequences of the educational reform in the past decade (1999–2008) (Hallinger & Bryant, 2013) showed the educational problems remained unresolved. Thus, the Office of Education Council (OEC) has implemented education reform in the second decade (2009–2018), as a revised version based upon the NEA and its amendments. According to OEC (2009), the reform framework focuses on systematic education and learning reforms. In this reform framework, four policy approaches were proposed together: 1) instruction, 2) teachers, 3) learning sources, and 4) administration reforms.

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Instruction reform. Based on the framework for 21st century learning, particularly constructivist learning theory (Khemmani, 2006; Porcaro, 2011), OEC (2009) specified four instruction-reform strategies: 1) teaching students basic subject areas to raise their achievement; 2) improving student-centered learning and high-order thinking processes, particularly providing a variety of learning activities (problem-based learning); 3) integrating ethics and desirable Thai characteristics into the curriculum and instruction; and 4) developing students' life skills (learning enthusiasm, life-long learning.)

Teacher reform. OEC (2009) specified three teacher-reform strategies (see also Darling-Hammond, 2010): 1) maintaining teacher standards and quality assurance systems; 2) improving the ongoing professional development for teachers; and 3) improving teachers' work, particularly letting them focus mainly on academic work.

Learning sources reform. To promote quality life-long learning (Sahlberg, 2007; Thijssen, Maes, & Vernooij, 2002) for Thai students, OEC (2009) specified four reform strategies: 1) developing the school itself as a quality learning source; 2) providing ICT systems in school; 3) supporting learning communities and collaborative networks among educational institutions, local communities, the private sector, and social institutions; and 4) providing and developing quality learning sources within the local community.

Administration reform. OEC (2009) specified four strategies (see also Sahlberg, 2007): 1) school-based management; 2) good governance in school administration; 3) active participation of all sectors/groups in school development; and 4) providing more opportunities to access quality education for all groups of students.

As these education reform policies have been implemented in all schools nationwide, some national and local research projects reported mixed effects on school outcomes and student achievement. Moreover, many Thai scholars were concerned about the ineffectiveness (or even failure) of the reforms (Fry & Bi, 2013), and this led to proposals for reforming the education system yet again. The ambiguous research findings and chronic reform issues inspired the current study into the effects of school policies in the second decade education reform on teacher performance and student achievement as school outcomes.

As teacher performance is presumably affected by teacher motivation (Hoy & Miskel, 2008; Robbins, 2005), teacher motivation was used as a proxy for teacher performance; the concept of teacher motivation was based on Herzberg's two-factor theory and McClelland's theory of need (as cited in Robbins, 2005). Conceptual frameworks for this study were based on Hoy and Miskel's (2008) social systems model for school; that is, in general, a school process such as school reform affects school outcomes. In the school process, administration reform affects teacher, learning sources, and instruction reforms. Then, these school reforms affect teacher motivation and finally all the variables affect student achievement. The researcher expected to prove with empirical data the reform policies' effectiveness to school,

administrator, teacher, and student qualities, and to explore a sound model of their relationships.

Remarkably, Thailand's unique contexts may cause some anomalies in the theoretical frameworks. With a critical theory lens, these anomalous findings were discussed regarding the main issue—the sharp conflicts between Thai and Western cultures (Fry & Bi, 2013); that is, when the national reform policies borrowing Western innovations have been coercively implemented by traditional Thai schools, the latter's perceptions and practices may not willingly conform to the Western reform concepts and policies, and they may end up being the poor victims of cultural hegemony. The research findings and discussion were intended to raise the awareness of Thailand's educational issues, as well as global ones, leading to proposed policy implications for improving the current reforms.

Research Objectives and Hypotheses

1. To study the levels of implementing the four school reforms, as well as the levels of teacher motivation and student achievement, among schools in southern Thailand, and
2. To study the relationships among the four school reforms, Teacher Motivation, and Student Achievement, with the hypotheses that 1) if Administration Reform has a positive effect on Teacher Reform and Learning Sources Reform, then the latter variables have positive effects on Instruction Reform, and finally Student Achievement; 2) Administration Reform has a positive effect on Teacher Motivation, but the other reforms have positive reciprocal effects on the latter; 3) all four school reforms, as well as Teacher Motivation, have positive effects on Student Achievement. A conceptual framework for this study is depicted in Figure 1.

Research Method and Data

This quantitative research, using secondary data, was a cross-sectional, explanatory study examining the theoretical model and explaining relationships among the variables. The secondary data were a merger of two common datasets in 2014, each of which was designed and collected by a group of graduate students for their individual mini-research projects. These projects were studying the relationships between some variables within the same theme, that is, the whole model of this research.

Of the datasets, the population was public basic schools in southern Thailand and the sample was a group of the schools from Surat Thani, Yala, and Narathiwat provinces. As a limitation, the three provinces were selected based on the survey areas of the former researchers (local graduate students). To prevent sampling biases from oversampling and clustering of observations, the sampling method applied stratified multistage random sampling—in each province, schools were sampled proportionally according to school district and school size, and then the administrator and two teachers were sampled from each selected school. The data were drawn from a set of three questionnaires for each school, consisting of 1) Likert-scale

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