# New School Principals in Thailand: Influences on Their Leadership and Professional Development

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**Abstract**
This study addressed the following: 1) What factors influence new school principals in Thailand? 2) How do they plan for their professional development? 3) What do they learn from being a new school principal? A questionnaire was mailed to 355 new school principals. Two-hundred-seventy subjects returned the questionnaire, for a response rate of 76 percent. It was found that 1) factors affecting work included the community, parents, and supervisors; 2) principals promoted their professional development by self-learning, training, studying for higher degrees; and 3) most principals thought that they could not achieve their goals as expected because there were many on-the-job problems, the job was not easy, they lacked necessary facilities, and they felt they needed additional knowledge and skills.
**Key words:** New school principals, influence.

## Background

If one compares school executives and executives in other organizations, one might conclude that school executives are more important because they work in organizations that focus on teaching and learning. The ultimate goal of schools is student learning (Guskey, 2000; Hoy and Miskel, 2001); therefore, society pays close attention to and has high expectations of school executives. This importance is evident in metaphors for school executives, such as educator, manager, leader, self-believer, and inner person (Speck, 1999); cultural leader, learning and teaching leader, managerial leader (Seyfarth, 1999); and artist, architect, or examiner (Hughes, 1999). At the same time, schools are compared to learning organizations or learning communities (Speck, 1999), or moral organizations (Sergiovanni, 2001).

As mentioned above, school executives are important persons in every society. However, among different types of school executives, new school principals are critically important to educational management. Clearly, more research should be performed on new school principals to provide knowledge for their continuing professional development.

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With the exception of the first author's research conducted in 2003, a review of research literature in Thailand revealed no additional studies of new principals, in spite of their important impact on educational management at the national level. New principals are at a critical point in their career development. Beginning principals can become frustrated and/or confused as a result of their transition from being a follower to being a leader. In addition, their professional lives have changed, since they now have more interaction with more stakeholders in the school, community, and larger society.

During the critical first year of becoming a principal, it is important to have a "positive" beginning, since such a beginning will have a long-term effect on the quality of the educational programs they lead. On the other hand, a "negative" beginning will have a long-term negative impact, especially if the beginning principal is young and has many years until retirement.

**Research Questions**

Within the context of the critical first year for new principals in Thailand, this study addressed the following research questions: 1) What external factors influence the work of new school principals in Thailand, and how do they respond to these influences? 2) How do new school principals plan for their development during their careers? And, 3) What do they learn from being a new school principal?

**Research Methodology**

This survey research study was based on data gathered from new principals in schools under the control of Thailand's Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC). The ***target population*** was 4,652 school principals who were appointed to the post in Thailand between 2012-2013. A ***sample size*** of 355 new school principals was calculated using Krejcie and Mogan's formula at 95% confidence interval. The ***research tool*** used in this study was a questionnaire with open-ended questions developed by the researchers. The questionnaire was tested for its objectivity, and it was found that all questions were clear, concise, and addressed the study's research questions. ***Data collection*** was conducted by mailing the questionnaire to 355 new school principals. Two-hundred-seventy (270) subjects returned the questionnaire, for a response rate of 76 percent. ***The data*** were then qualitatively analyzed by manifest content analysis and classified according to themes and patterns that emerged.

**Results**

With respect to the research questions that guided this study, the following sections present the results of the data analysis.

***External factors that influence the work of new school principals -*** Four external factors were found to have an important influence on the work of new school principals: the community, the local administration office, parents, and the educational institute board. Principals responded to these factors by doing public relations work, arranging joint meetings, participating in community activities, talking with stakeholders, arranging school activities, and attending to the professional development of themselves and their schools. In addition, it was noted that the new principals implemented educational management practices that differed from those implemented by subjects in the first author's previous research.

***Official and unofficial responses to factors that influence the work of new principals -*** This could be because the national policy stating that school executives

must create mutual relationships with the community. However, reactions upon those external factors can be explained according to the roles of executives in interpersonal, informational, and decisional aspects of Minzberg (cited in Hoy and Miskel, 2001), as described above. Alternatively, it could be explained by social theories which were developed by Follett, Barnard, Mayo, Maslow, and McGregor (cited in Bartol, et. al., 1998).

*Career development -* New school principals focused on the following areas: (1) academic; (2) human resource; (3) students; (4) school buildings and environment; (5) public relation; and (6) students' activities.

Experiences that helped them to get promoted to be an executive included 1) self study and training, 2) working with executives, 3) working commitment, 4) being a committee in various boards, 5) being an assistant manager, 6) acting as executives in their absence, 7) being a speakers, host, or school auditor, 8) school transfer, and 9) being a head of some duties.

New school principals need to develop themselves on 1) principles of management, 2) personal management, 3) experience, and 4) work development. From this result, it is evident that new school principals need to improve themselves in technical skills, human skills, and conceptual skills, respectively.

New school principals used many methods to gain skills and knowledge they wanted. Those methods included 1) self study, 2) visiting other workplaces, 3) training, 4) asking for advice, 5) higher degree study, 6) learning from other school principals, 7) practicing or using experience, 8) training in public talking. It can be seen that new school principals tried to gain skills and/or knowledge they wanted mainly by "personal development." This considers the right way and in accordance with new concept of management that focuses on being active learners rather than passive (Ubben, et. al., 2001).

New school principals asked for consultation from various sources, such as 1) their bosses or officers in the office of educational service area, 2) people in the community, 3) colleagues, and 4) friends, relatives, and other people they met. New school principals thought that those people were valuable resources because of their experience, skills, expertise, ability to support their schools, and credibility.

*Learning experiences from being a school executive -* New school principals' perspectives on the word "executive" had influence on their acceptance to the post. They considered "executives" as follows: 1) executives are leaders of organizations who can make decision to do or not to do things to make changes or development; 2) executives are the ones who get honored, have privilege, and have more power than other staff in the organizations; 3) executives are the ones who are challenged to use their knowledge to improve the organizations; 4) executives are the ones who have skills in working with various types of people to reach personal and organizational goals; 5) executives are the ones who have high responsibility and get acceptance from the society; 6) executives are the ones who take care of the national education and can create justice in the organizations; 7) executives have more opportunities for career development than teachers. By comparing this result with persuasion theory, it can be seen that new school principals decided to accept the post because of their desire to fulfill high level needs, such as being accepted and achievement, according to Maslow's theory.

There were also factors that caused hesitation in accepting the post. Those factors were 1) worries about financial status and bigger expenses, 2) family, 3) distance from work and inconvenience of transportation, 4) lack of confidence in knowledge, personality, and experience to bear higher responsibility; and 5)

uncertainty about getting cooperation from colleagues and community. From the results, hesitations were largely in response to low-level needs, such as physical needs, survival, and security according to Maslow's theory

New school principals thought that they met the criteria to get promoted. Those criteria included 1) academic expertise, 2) experience in many work tasks, 3) continual self development, 4) examination system, 5) previous achievement, 6) personality, 7) commitment and motivation, and 8) family support.

New school principals also thought they did not yet work up to their expected standards. The reasons included they just started and there were many things to be done, the task was not as easy as expected, schools lacked facilities, they needed to create cooperation, gain more experience, and use their leadership.

They also learned a lot about school cultures, which they initially saw as a strength of the schools. Important points included understanding the importance of unity, teamwork, hospitality, community cooperation, and teachers' responsibility. However, some cultures needed to be changed, such as inactiveness, no enthusiasm, unchanged teaching methods, no punctuality, and passive working style.

Last year, new school principals thought they had achieved many goals, such as 1) creating relationship and cooperation, 2) developing school buildings and environment, 3) developing academic work, 4) changing teaching behavior of staff, and 5) developing school sports, respectively. Issues they thought they had not yet achieved included 1) changing teaching behaviors of staff, 2) developing school buildings and environment, 3) developing academic work, 4) solving problem of insufficient numbers of teachers, 5) developing students, 6) asking for support from offices controlling the schools, 7) raising funds, 8) developing agricultural projects, and 9) developing all areas because budget short.

**Recommendations**

Drawing from the results of this study, the researchers make the following recommendations regarding new principals for Thailand's schools.

1) Authorized bodies should make small schools located in rural areas that have substandard financial status to be 'special areas' and eligible for extra support on resources. At the same time, those schools should be taken care under any 'special projects' to promote students' well beings, such as having extra funds or other support from external bodies or having effective donation management system so that people in need can get better support from donators.

2) 'Project on promoting knowledge and skills for personal development' should be arranged for new school principals. Such project could help them to work with communities, communities' leaders, parents, local administration offices, and educational institute board, who were external factors that have impact on new school principals. This is because it showed in the results that new school principals need knowledge and skills in public speaking, community psychology, working psychology, interpersonal relations, and moral creation.

3) New school principals should be developed on technical and interpersonal skills rather than conceptual skill. However, because of changes in management concept and in decentralization, management should be school-based. Therefore, conceptual skill is important and necessary for career development of new school managers.

4) New school principals should be continuously promoted and encouraged. They should realize new educational expectation and change their behavior towards that expectation. They should consider renewal strategies rather than trainings. Not

only renewal strategies are cheaper than trainings, but also are sustainable, because they active rather than passive learning. Furthermore, with communication systems and technologies nowadays make self-development possible and effective.

     5)   There should be mentors or meeting centers for new school principals to exchange their viewpoints. This would make them less lonely since they just started their job to a higher position with more work and bigger responsibility.

     6)   There should be incentives for new school principals so they satisfy with the work and make their organizations successful. Those incentives should response to high level desire such as honor, acceptability, freedom to work, creativity and challenges. At the same time, low level desire should be fulfilled as well, such as personal life, well beings, work environment, financial status, and welfares.

     7)   Extra care should be given to problems on resource short and insufficient numbers of staff especially to small-size schools. Those problems should be tackled and solved as soon as possible. There should be no denials, such as 'money and human resources' are not important factors to managerial success in any organizations. Inadequate facilities in small schools in rural areas are major problems and can not be measured by any standards. Those problems should be solved as soon as possible.

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