

Exploring the effects of authentic leadership on academic optimism and teacher engagement in Thailand

Authentic leadership

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Abstract

Purpose – In the context of Thailand's progress towards education reform, scholars have identified a lack of effective school-level leadership as an impeding factor. The purpose of this paper is to develop and validate a theoretical model of authentic leadership effects on teacher academic optimism and work engagement. Authentic leadership was considered a suitable model of school leadership in light of Thailand's explicit recognition of the importance of developing the moral capacity of students and emphasis on ethical leadership.

Design/methodology/approach – The study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design. Survey data were obtained from 605 teachers in a nationally representative sample of 182 primary schools. The data were analyzed using confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling.

Findings – The results indicated that the model of authentic leadership effects on teachers' academic optimism and work engagement was validated. A moderate relationship was observed between authentic leadership and the dependent measures of teacher attitudes.

Practical implications – The study identified a potentially important lack of alignment between the espoused values and actions/decisions of school principals in Thailand. When combined with prior research conducted on leadership for educational reform in Thailand, our findings highlight the systemic nature of the problem faced in changing traditional patterns of behavior in Thai schools. More specifically, despite change in the nation's educational goals, human resource management of the nation's school leaders continues to produce administrators and managers rather than leaders, either instructional or moral.

Originality/value – The study extends prior studies of school leadership in the context of Thailand's education reform that focused more specifically on principal instructional leadership in Thailand. In addition, this study of authentic school leadership is one of only a few conducted outside of Western societies.

Keywords Thailand, Asia, Authentic leadership, Principal, Academic optimism, Teacher work engagement

Paper type Research paper

Among alterable school variables, teacher quality has been identified as the most significant predictor of student academic outcomes (Hattie, 2008; Sanders *et al.*, 1997). Indeed, international research conducted across developed and developing nations finds that teacher knowledge, attitudes and classroom practices explain up to 30 percent of the variance in student achievement (Hattie, 2008). This finding has encouraged policymakers across the world to refocus attention on strategies designed to improve the quality of the



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teaching force (e.g. Akiba *et al.*, 2007; Hanushek, 1995; Hanushek and Rivkin, 2006; Sanders *et al.*, 1997). Unfortunately, accountability policies explicitly designed to increase student achievement (e.g. focus on achievement test results, intensification of school inspection, emphasis on value-added teacher evaluation) can also have the unintended effect of reducing teacher motivation and engagement (Calabrese and Roberts, 2001; Chang, 2009; Finnigan, 2010; Leithwood *et al.*, 2002; Walker and Ko, 2011). Consequently, in societies throughout the world, researchers report that low teacher motivation and commitment threaten the sustainability of education reforms (Glewwe and Kremer, 2006; Leithwood *et al.*, 2002; Slegers *et al.*, 2014; Walker and Ko, 2011).

These findings from global research on education reform are mirrored in the experience of Thailand where an ambitious platform of education reforms was adopted in 1999 (Fry and Bi, 2013). Thailand's education reforms explicitly recognized the need to overcome historical inequalities in access to quality education among students of different social classes and communities (Brooks, 2014; Fry and Bi, 2013; Kaewdang, 1998; Sungtong and Nitjarunkul, 2012). Moreover, in contrast with many other nations where education reform had become synonymous with the unitary goal of student test achievement, Thailand's reformers set out three national education goals. These were to develop learners capable of: applying knowledge to solve personal and social challenges, living with a morally sound code of conduct, and living satisfying lives (Kaewdang, 1998). The inclusion of the "moral behavior and happiness" of students as national educational goals highlighted the belief that "education for knowledge and skills" should be grounded in broader values derived from Thailand's largely Buddhist culture (Fry and Bi, 2013; Pongsriwat, 2008; Puntarigvivat, 1998).

This tripartite platform of education reforms, however, posed significant challenges to the traditional the role of Thailand's school leaders (Hallinger, 2004). More specifically, these policy reforms required that Thai school leaders embrace new roles as "instructional leaders" (Hallinger and Lee, 2011, 2013) and "moral leaders" (Brooks, 2014; Kanokorn *et al.*, 2013; Pongjarern, 2002; Pongsriwat, 2008). Within a hierarchical education system where the needs of learners traditionally came last, moral leadership meant "standing up for students" – especially for under-served minorities (Frick, 2011; Hallinger, 2004). Kanokorn and colleagues (2013) elaborated on the connection between moral leadership and student development in the context of Thailand's education reforms:

The National Education Act's intention was to promote ethical administration and pedagogy. Consequently, there was acceptance that the concept of "ethical" leadership began with ethical leaders [...] In the Thai context, it was argued that ethical administration and pedagogy meant that *every student* [emphasis added] would receive the best possible education which could be provided in any particular context. In turn, this suggested that there would be constant attention on the quality of administration and pedagogy [...] (pp. 2085-2086).

Eighteen years later, members of the public, policymakers, and researchers have evinced disappointment at the slow pace of change in the modal practices of Thailand's leaders, teachers and learners (*Bangkok Post*, 2016; Fry and Bi, 2013; Hallinger and Lee, 2011, 2013; *The Nation*, 2013; Varavarn, 2011). For example, research has found a relatively low level of penetration of teaching and learning reforms at the classroom level (Fry and Bi, 2013; Hallinger and Lee, 2011; Pimpa and Rojanapanich, 2013; Sungtong and Nitjarunkul, 2012; Wongwanich and Wiratchai, 2004). Similarly, research finds that Thailand's principals, as a group, continue to lack both skills and perspectives needed to lead the changes embedded in the nation's education reform policies (Gamage and Sooksomchitra, 2006; Hallinger, 2004, In press; Hallinger and Lee, 2011, 2013; Pongjarern, 2002).

This context of stagnating education reform set the stage for this study of "authentic school leadership" in Thailand. "Authentic leadership" has been defined as a "pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate" (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2008). Scholars have asserted that "authentic

school leadership” has the capability to motivate teachers and enhance their commitment to change (Begley, 2001, 2003, 2006; Duignan, 2014; Duignan and Bhindi, 1997; Stefkovich and Begley, 2007). These characteristics of authentic leadership were deemed well-suited to the current challenges facing school leaders, not only in Thailand, but also in other developing societies (e.g. Demitras, 2010; Karaköse, 2007; Oduol, 2014; Owusu-Bempah *et al.*, 2014).

This research sought first to validate measures of authentic leadership in the Thai context. Then, we wished to understand the nature of authentic leadership exercised by Thai school principals. Finally, we examined whether authentic school leadership was associated with teachers’ academic optimism and work engagement. In order to address these research goals, we employed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM) to analyze survey data collected from 605 teachers in a nationally representative sample of 182 primary schools in Thailand.

This study contributes to a growing body of empirical scholarship on “Authentic School Leadership” (Begley, 2001; Bird *et al.*, 2012; Branson, 2007; Duignan, 2014; Wang and Bird, 2011). Moreover, it extends our understanding of leadership processes in the cultural context of Thailand. This takes on particular importance as leadership scholars have asserted the importance of linking the dynamics of effective school leadership to different national contexts (Clarke and O’Donoghue, 2016; Hallinger, 2016; Walker and Hallinger, 2015).

Theoretical perspective

Leadership and education reform in Thailand

Over the past 20 years, policymakers redoubled their efforts to reform education management so as to support changes in teaching and learning in Thailand (Fry and Bi, 2013; Gamage and Sooksomchitra, 2006; Hallinger, In press; Hallinger and Lee, 2011; Patrinos *et al.*, 2015). As in many other societies, Thailand’s school principals have been viewed as key players in education reform (Gamage and Sooksomchitra, 2006; Hallinger, 2004; Hallinger and Lee, 2011; Varavarn, 2011). Indeed, enhancing the capacity of Thailand’s school administrators has been viewed as an essential element of the nation’s education reform strategy (Gamage and Sooksomchitra, 2006; Hallinger and Lee, 2011, 2013, 2014; Kanokorn *et al.*, 2013; Varavarn, 2011).

In Thailand, institutional and socio-cultural features of the education system have traditionally concentrated school-level authority and influence in the hands of principals (Hallinger, 2004; Hallinger *et al.*, 1994). Although the education reforms adopted in 1999 sought to distribute school leadership and authority across a wider set of stakeholders (Fry and Bi, 2013; Gamage and Sooksomchitra, 2006; Samriangjit *et al.*, 2016), principals have continued to wield considerable authority (Maxcy *et al.*, 2010; Patrinos *et al.*, 2015; Varavarn, 2011). The question, however, remains “towards what ends” (Pimpa and Rojanapanich, 2013)?

Traditionally, the principalship in Thailand neither emphasized instructional leadership nor school improvement (Hallinger, 2004; Hallinger *et al.*, 1994; Poovatanikul, 1993). Thai principals were trained and socialized first and foremost as “government officers” and “administrators” with a strong sense of political responsibility to the Ministry of Education (Hallinger, 2004, In press). Thus, passage of the education reforms of 1999 represented a watershed moment for Thailand’s principals. For the first time, national policy articulated a role for principals as “leaders of learning and moral development” (Hallinger, 2004; Hallinger and Lee, 2011). The critical nature of this shift from administration and management towards leadership was highlighted by Thailand’s former Secretary of Education, Dr Khunying Kasama Varavarn Na Ayudhdhaya in 2011:

The reforms we have undertaken at the national level cannot be accomplished without active involvement and leadership from our school principals. Without skillful leadership and

active support from the principal, how can teachers hope to make these changes in curriculum and teaching? But our principals need motivation as well as more skills to lead these changes in their schools (Varavarn, 2011).

Despite this recognition, empirical studies conducted since 1999 have found that Thailand's principals, on the whole, continue to lack the capacities needed to fulfill their role as leaders of learning and moral development (Gamage and Sooksomchitra, 2006; Hallinger, In press; Hallinger and Lee, 2011, 2013, 2014; Samriangjit *et al.*, 2016). For example, Hallinger and Lee (2013, 2014) found little evidence that Thai principals had "grown into the role" of instructional leader. Other studies have found relatively weak profiles of Thai principals on other leadership assessments (Gamage and Sooksomchitra, 2006; Hallinger, In press; Hallinger and Lee, 2011; Pongjarern, 2002). These findings suggest a "gap" in the leadership capacities required for successful implementation of the nation's education reform goals.

These findings concerning Thailand's corps of school principals have been complemented by analyses of the human resource (HR) systems within their work. A recent study found that HR processes associated with the qualification, selection, training and evaluation of school principals have gone largely unchanged since 1999. Indeed, human resource management appears decoupled from the reformers' vision of school leaders with the capability to exercise instructional and moral leadership (Hallinger, In press). For example, the exam used for principal selection in Thailand continues to focus almost entirely on administrative and management processes (e.g. budget, facility, staffing), with little attention to either instructional or moral leadership.

For many years, the ethical behavior of Thailand's school leaders has been the subject of scrutiny by the media and public. News reports of misconduct by principals feature regularly on the front pages of national newspapers. Research conducted by Thongpan and colleagues (Thongpan *et al.*, 2013) affirmed these anecdotal reports, concluding that it was not uncommon for Thai school leaders to mismanage financial and human resources. Moreover, when compared with perceptions gathered in Malaysia and India, Thai teachers tended to view the ethical behavior of their principals more negatively (Sharma, 2010). Notably, these negative perceptions of the ethical behavior of Thai principals persist despite campaigns by the Ministry of Education of Thailand to highlight ethics and good governance as core capacities for educators. Runcharoen (2003) concluded that lack of a strong ethical code of conduct among many Thai principals reduced teachers' motivation and negatively impacted learning quality in schools. These facets of the context for leadership and education reform set the stage for our interest in examining "Authentic School Leadership" in Thailand.

Conceptual model

Over the past two decades, it has become widely accepted that school leadership effects on learning are "indirect" in nature (Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Heck and Hallinger, 2014; Leithwood *et al.*, 2010). More specifically, principal leadership appears to contribute to student learning by shaping organizational structures and processes as well as the attitudes and practices of teachers (Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Heck and Hallinger, 2014; Robinson, 2006; Slegers *et al.*, 2014). Recent research in this domain is increasingly focused on exploring how leadership shapes school- and classroom-level factors that are associated with or have the potential to impact student learning (e.g. Leithwood *et al.*, 2010). Our conceptual model proposes that authentic school leadership exercised by principals influences two key teacher attitudes, academic optimism and work engagement.

Authentic leadership. Authentic leadership has been proposed as a suitable approach for school improvement due to its emphasis on ethical action and motivating teacher engagement and commitment (Begley, 2006; Duignan, 2014). While authentic leadership shares similarities

with transformational leadership, it relies less on charisma and gives greater emphasis to the articulation and modeling of moral values (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Begley, 2003; Leithwood *et al.*, 2002). Walumbwa and colleagues (2008) conceptualized authentic leadership in terms of four dimensions: Self-awareness, Relational Transparency, Balanced Processing, Internalized Moral Perspective. Self-awareness refers to an understanding of one's own strengths and weaknesses and influence on others. Relational Transparency refers to the leader demonstrating personal values in interactions with stakeholders. Balanced Processing suggests the need to analyze both objective and relational information when making decisions. Lastly, Internalized Moral Perspective refers to leader behavior that adheres to articulated values even in the face of institutional and/or peer pressures.

The effects of authentic leadership have been studied at the individual, group, and organizational levels outside the education sector (Gardner *et al.*, 2011). This body of research finds that authentic leadership can have a significant impact on followers' trust (Clapp-Smith *et al.*, 2009) and work engagement (Giallonardo *et al.*, 2010; Walumbwa *et al.*, 2008). It has also been positively associated with psychological capital (Clapp-Smith *et al.*, 2009; Woolley *et al.*, 2011), organizational citizenship behavior (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2008), and work performance (Clapp-Smith *et al.*, 2009).

References to authentic leadership can be found in the educational leadership literature as early as the 1980s (Hoy and Henderson, 1983). A number of studies support the assertion that authentic principal leadership is associated with teachers' levels of trust and work engagement (Bird *et al.*, 2012; Bird *et al.*, 2010; Fox *et al.*, 2015; Wang and Bird, 2011). Srivastava *et al.* (2016) also identified a positive link between authentic leadership and academic optimism. In summarizing this literature, Duignan (2014) asserted that "authentic educational leaders tap into the collective positive energy of key educational stakeholders to shape the development of rich, engaging and productive learning environments, thereby, achieving high-quality outcomes for students" (p. 167). Like other ethically grounded approaches to leadership, authentic leadership is proposed to contribute to school environments that are more conducive to positive change (Frick, 2011; Fullan, 2003; Starrat, 2004).

A recent cross-cultural study conducted in Ghana and New Zealand (Owusu-Bempah *et al.*, 2014) found that, "some attributes of authentic leadership were common to the organizations, and some were common to the countries" (p. 1). The features of authentic leadership that appeared "common to the countries" were described as follows:

Results reported in this study showed that [...] AL is achieved when leaders are able to set clear goals for themselves and their followers and provide guidelines and direct help for goals to be achieved. This, the respondents believed demands openness on the part of the leaders to receive follower ideas and also appreciating follower strengths in addition to being firm, and treating followers equally without any bias whatsoever. It also includes leaders being transparent, exhibiting flexibility and being inspirational teachers (Owusu-Bempah *et al.*, 2014, p. 15).

Based on their findings, these authors urged that both the nature and effects of authentic leadership be validated across a more diverse set of societies. Successful implementation of Thailand's education reforms requires school leaders capable of demonstrating these same qualities. Thus, we saw a fit between the goals of authentic leadership and the needs of education reform in Thailand.

Academic optimism. Academic optimism has been proposed as a conceptualization for how teachers influence student outcomes (Hoy, 2012). McGuigan and Hoy (2006) defined academic optimism as follows:

Academic optimism is a shared belief among faculty that academic achievement is important, that the faculty has the capacity to help students achieve, and that students and parents can be trusted to cooperate with them in this endeavor—in brief, a school-wide confidence that students will succeed academically (p. 204).

Academic optimism has been further refined as a construct comprised of three teacher-level factors: academic emphasis, sense of efficacy, trust in parents and students (Beard *et al.*, 2010; Hoy *et al.*, 2006; Tschannen-Moran *et al.*, 2013; Woolfolk Hoy *et al.*, 2008). Teacher academic emphasis is the degree to which teachers stress the importance of learning achievement, and plan and execute learning activities to achieve this goal. Sense of efficacy reflects the teacher's belief in his/her ability to engage students and support successful learning. Lastly, trust refers to ability of teachers to form positive bonds with parents and students.

Academic optimism has been studied in relation to school leadership (e.g. Chang, 2011), teacher burnout, organizational citizenship, and commitment (Wagner and Dipaola, 2011), school organization (Wu *et al.*, 2013), and student learning (Bevel and Mitchell, 2012; Chang, 2011; Kirby and DiPaola, 2009; McGuigan and Hoy, 2006; Wagner and Dipaola, 2011). This body of research suggests first, that academic optimism can be influenced by school leadership (e.g. Chang, 2011) and second, that it is associated with teacher commitment and student learning (e.g. McGuigan and Hoy, 2006; Wagner and Dipaola, 2011). Given the intent of Thailand's education reform to motivate and engage teachers in fundamental changes in teaching and learning, academic optimism emerged as a relevant construct for this research.

Teacher work engagement. Work engagement has been defined as "a positive, fulfilling, affective-motivational state of work-related well-being that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption" (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008, p. 209). Teacher work engagement has been defined in terms of three factors: vigor, dedication, absorption. Vigor refers to the state of high energy, emotional resilience, and persistence in the face of obstacles demonstrated in the workplace. Dedication refers involvement, motivation, inspiration and challenge in one's work. Absorption reflects to feelings of determination and concentration in one's work (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2006).

Empirical research finds that measures of teacher work engagement are related to levels of staff motivation, creativity, openness to new information, and productivity (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008). Research further suggests that teachers with higher work engagement also evidence greater trust in the principal (Bird *et al.*, 2010, 2012), higher job satisfaction (Høigaard *et al.*, 2012), and are less likely to suffer burnout and leave the job (Bakker *et al.*, 2008; Bird *et al.*, 2012; Chang, 2009; Hakanen *et al.*, 2006; Høigaard *et al.*, 2012). Moreover, teacher work engagement has also been related to positive change in school cultures that support education reform and change (e.g. Leithwood *et al.*, 2002; Louis and Smith, 1991).

Method

This study employed a cross-sectional research design to study the relationships indicated in Figure 1. In this section, we present the procedures for scale development, data collection, and data analysis. The methods described in this section were assessed and approved by the Research Ethics Review Board of the university under whose auspices the research was conducted.

Measures

The survey employed in this study was comprised of two main sections. The first section consisted of demographic questions designed to obtain descriptive information from the teachers and principals. The second section was consisted of the three scales measuring authentic leadership, academic optimism and work engagement.

This study was conducted in the Thai language. We developed a Thai language measure for authentic leadership that was aligned with the standardized self-report instrument authentic leadership questionnaire (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2008). The survey instrument included

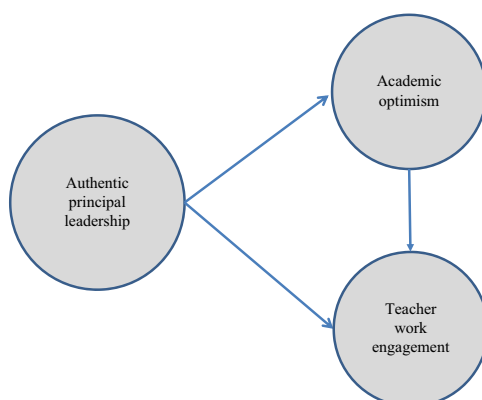


Figure 1. Proposed model of authentic school leadership, academic optimism and teacher work engagement

four subscales: self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and internalized moral perspective. The measure consisted of 22 Likert items scale scored on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always).

The academic optimism scale utilized the theoretical framework and dimensions conceptualized by Beard *et al.* (2010): academic emphasis, self-efficacy, and trust in parents and students. The 18 Likert items were scored on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The work engagement scale followed the theoretical framework authored by Schaufeli *et al.* (2006) and consisted of three components: vigor, dedication, absorption. The 18 Likert-item scale was scored on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always).

Where existing items were retained from the English language version of these instruments, the back translation method was employed (Brislin, 1970). In this procedure, the lead researcher translated the English language items into Thai language with the aim of maintaining the same meaning rather than literal word for word accuracy. A second English proficient educator unfamiliar with the original scale translated the Thai version of English items back into English. Then the two researchers examined and resolved differences.

After translation, the items were analyzed for content validity using the item-objective congruence (IOC) method developed by Rovinelli and Hambleton (1977). The IOC method enables the researcher to ensure that the items will be understandable to the respondents. IOC is frequently used when a scale has been translated or is being outside of its original research context.

A committee consisting of five university lecturers and school teachers was formed to conduct the item assessment. Assessments of the items were made using the following rating scale: +1 = item clearly taps objective of the question (agree to use the question), 0 = uncertain/unclear to use the question, -1 = item clearly does not tap objective of the question (disagree to use the question).

Using the following formula we obtained a result for each item on an index ranging from -1 to +1:

$$IOC = \frac{\sum r}{N}$$

where IOC = index of item-objective congruence ranging from -1 to +1, $\sum r$ = total of rating points from the academic members, N = numbers of the academic members.

Only items rated from 0.50 to 1.00 were selected for discussion by the committee. Suggestions for revision were obtained and these items were revised to ensure greater clarity.

Sample

To gain a nationally representative of schools in Thailand, we identified a pool of all public primary schools in Thailand. Starting with simple random sampling, we identified four schools from each of Thailand's 77 provinces (two medium-sized and two large schools) for a total of 304 schools. Next, we selected three to five teachers from each school to obtain a total sample of 1,514 teachers for the study.

Schools were contacted by mail to obtain participation. After agreeing to participate, each school received a package by mail containing a letter of information, questionnaire, and self-addressed stamped envelope. Four weeks later, a postcard was sent as a reminder to all non-respondents.

The final sample consisted of 605 (40 percent) teachers from 182 schools. The average age of the teacher sample was 45 years. The majority of participants were female (86 percent), had worked in the current school less than 10 years (54 percent), and held a bachelor's degree as the highest level of education (69 percent). The average age of the principals was 54 years, most were male (91 percent), and tenure as principal at the current school averaged seven years.

Data analysis

Data analyses reported in this paper focus on authentic leadership and its relationship to the selected teacher attitudes. Statistical tests examined patterns of authentic leadership and its component dimensions. However, due to the need for parsimony, we limit our reporting on results for academic optimism and work engagement to the main variables.

SPSS was utilized to determine reliability and generate descriptive statistics. The measures were then administered to a pilot sample to check for reliability (internal consistency) using Cronbach's α test. CFA was used to confirm the construct validity of the three main variables. Model fit was assessed using several goodness of fit statistics: χ^2/df , goodness of fit index (GFI), adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI), root mean square residual (RMR). The model fit criteria were: $\chi^2/df < 2$; GFI and AGFI value > 0.90 ; RMR < 0.07 (Hair *et al.*, 2010). SEM was employed to assess direct and indirect effects and relevant path coefficients for the three-factor conceptual model.

Results

First, we present the results of the model validation. Then we address the research questions related to the practice of authentic leadership by primary school principals and its relationship to teacher academic optimism and work engagement.

Measurement properties of the scales

Analysis of scale reliability revealed that the measures of all four dimensions of authentic leadership were high, ranging from 0.855 to 0.938 (see Table I). Similarly, the α coefficient for the dimensions of teacher academic optimism and work engagement indicated acceptable reliability. In sum, all scales and dimensions exceeded the minimum standard for reliability of 0.70 established by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) for basic research.

CFA results supported the construct validity of the three main variables. The measurement models also demonstrated a very good fit with the empirical data:

- Authentic leadership: $\chi^2 = 195.282$; $df = 168$; $P = 0.0735$; $\chi^2/df = 1.162$; GFI = 0.971; AGFI = 0.957; RMR = 0.01468,

Table I.
Reliability analysis
for instrument scales
and subscales

Instrument	Number of items	α coefficient
Authentic leadership	22	0.973
<i>Subscales</i>		
Self-awareness	6	0.914
Relational transparency	6	0.920
Balanced processing	5	0.935
Internalized moral perspective	5	0.885
Academic optimism	18	0.843
<i>Subscales</i>		
Academic emphasis	6	0.822
Self-efficacy	6	0.772
Trust in parents and students	6	0.712
Work engagement	18	0.869
<i>Subscales</i>		
Vigor	6	0.720
Dedication	6	0.813
Absorption	6	0.729

Note: $n = 605$

- Academic optimism: $\chi^2 = 123.504$; $df = 102$; $P = 0.0726$; $\chi^2/df = 1.211$; $GFI = 0.978$; $AGFI = 0.963$; and $RMR = 0.0187$,
- Work engagement: $\chi^2 = 120.054$; $df = 100$; $P = 0.0839$; $\chi^2/df = 1.201$; $GFI = 0.978$; $AGFI = 0.963$; and $RMR = 0.0182$.

The correlation matrix, mean and standard deviation of the study's main variables are displayed in Table II. The main components of each major variable were significantly correlated with one another, but showed lower correlation with constructs comprising the other variables. This was a desirable result consistent with our expectation.

Patterns of authentic leadership

Next we sought to understand the nature of authentic leadership practiced by the sample of 182 Thai primary school principals. How did teachers perceive their principals' enactment of practices associated with this approach to leadership? Were their patterns of practice consistent across the dimensions of authentic leadership?

The first pattern that stood out was the relatively low overall mean score (2.02) of the principals on the five-point Likert scale (see Table II and Figure 3). Second, we note that the relatively low rating of the principals was also consistent across all four dimensions of authentic leadership with mean scores ranging from 1.473 to 2.708. Third, the standard

Variable	SA	RT	BP	IMP	AO	WE
1. Self-awareness (SA)	1					
2. Relational transparency (RT)	0.859**	1				
3. Balanced processing (BP)	0.873**	0.882**	1			
4. Internalized moral perspective (IMP)	0.816**	0.854**	0.852**	1		
5. Academic optimism (AO)	0.281**	0.319**	0.297**	0.301**	1	
6. Work engagement (WE)	0.369**	0.363**	0.343**	0.363**	0.628**	1
Mean	2.708	1.543	2.373	1.473	3.024	2.588
SD	0.629	0.341	0.560	0.318	0.284	0.291

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed)

Table II.
Correlation matrix,
mean and standard
deviation of the
main variables

deviations for the dimension-level mean scores are quite small, suggesting a high degree of consistency in perceptions among the sample of teachers. In sum, these descriptive data indicate that in the view of their teachers, the principals were not generally exercising practices associated with authentic leadership.

Among the four dimensions of authentic leadership, self-awareness was ranked highest, followed by balanced processing, relational transparency and internalized moral perspective. Although scores for self-awareness and balanced processing were somewhat higher than the other two dimensions, the box plots for these dimensions were also longer (see Figure 2). It is notable that the dimensions on which the principals were rated as “weakest” – relational transparency (mean = 1.543) and internalized moral perspective (mean = 1.473) – both pertain to the extent to which the leader maintains congruence between articulated values and actions observed by teachers during workplace interactions.

Notably, this latter result contrasts with descriptions of “effective leadership” which often emphasize the need to maintain congruence between values/goals/intentions and actions (e.g. Begley, 2001; Dwyer, 1986; Law *et al.*, 2003; Leithwood and Jantzi, 2008; Robinson, 2006; Li and Hallinger, 2016). Dwyer (1986), for example, emphasized that effective instructional leaders operate with an “overarching value-driven perspective on schooling” that can be observed in their day-to-day behavior (p. 5). Finally, the low rating on the fourth dimension, Internalized Moral Perspective, reinforces the impression that the actions and decisions of the principals were quite malleable in the face of social pressure.

Although the ratings attained by the Thai principals appear low in an “absolute” sense, it is difficult to offer a more refined interpretation of these scores without a benchmark. To aid in our interpretation, we referred to studies of authentic leadership conducted in the USA by Bird and colleagues (2010, 2012). Because the items comprising our measure of

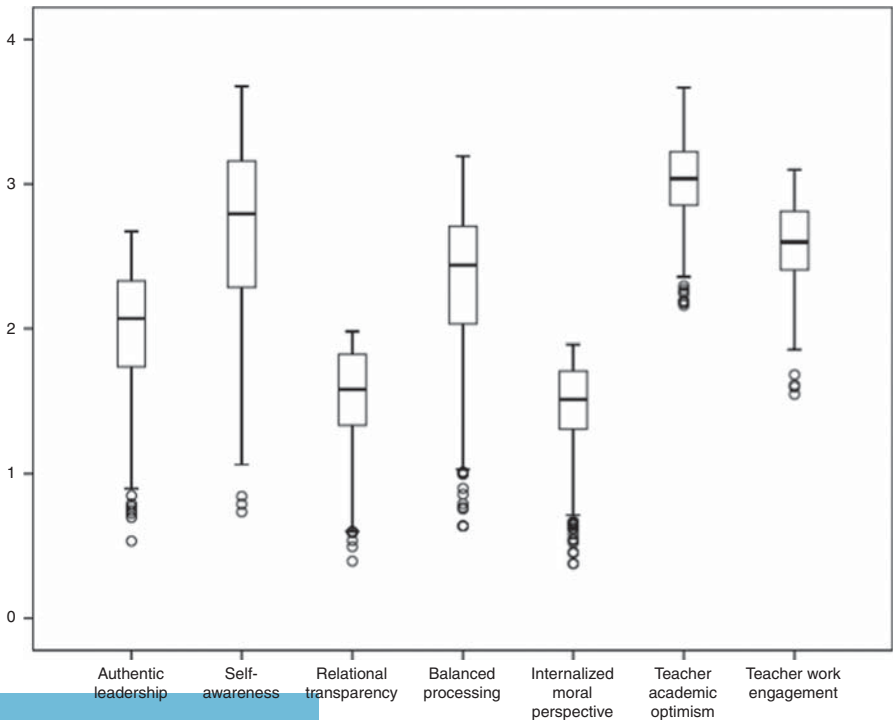


Figure 2. Box plot displaying distribution of authentic leadership and its four dimensions, teacher academic optimism and teacher work engagement

authentic leadership differed slightly from the measure used in Bird's studies, we cannot make direct statistical comparisons (e.g. *t*-tests). Nonetheless, similarities in the content of the scale measures allow for rough comparisons.

First, we noted that even after accounting for the small differences in scales, teacher ratings of the Thai principals were consistently lower than those of the American principals across all four dimensions of authentic leadership (see Table III). Second, ratings of the American principals were much more consistent across the four dimensions of authentic leadership. That is, unlike the Thai principals, they were not accorded significantly lower scores on relational transparency and internalized moral perspective. Although these comparisons must be interpreted with caution, they support our earlier characterization of the ratings of the Thai principals on the authentic leadership dimensions as surprisingly low.

Authentic leadership effects on teachers' academic optimism and work engagement

The next analyses explored the relationship between authentic leadership and the teacher attitudes of academic optimism and work engagement. SEM was used to establish the fit of the full model (see Figure 2). The coefficients reported in the model are standardized regression weights. These results suggest that our theoretical model fit very well with the empirical data, with a χ^2 of 5.947 (df = 8; $P = 0.653$). The GFI and the adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI) at 0.997 and 0.991, respectively, were very close to 1. The RMR and the root mean square error of approximation at 0.0074 and 0.00, respectively, were well below the threshold of 0.05 standard for a good fit. These results suggest that the data fit well to the proposed model.

The SEM results indicate that principal authentic leadership had a significant and moderate association (0.338**) with academic optimism (see Figure 3 and Table IV). We note that this effect ($\beta = 0.33$) was somewhat weaker than the finding ($\beta = 0.47$) reported by Srivastava *et al.* (2016) in India. Authentic leadership demonstrated a similar pattern of significant moderate association (0.396**) with teacher work engagement. Interestingly, the effect of authentic leadership on work engagement found in this study ($\beta = 0.40$) was significantly lower than the finding ($\beta = 0.76$) reported by Wang and Bird (2011) in the USA. The four dimensions of authentic leadership were all weakly to moderately correlated with academic optimism and work engagement (see Table II).

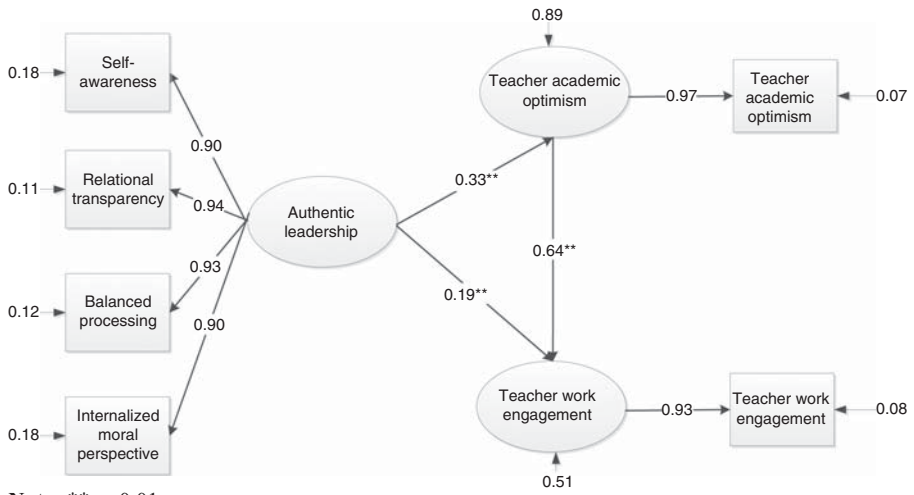
Our final analyses determined that teachers' academic optimism had a significant and strong association (0.617**) with work engagement. This result was consistent with findings from previous research (e.g. A. Agarwal, 2014; Bakker *et al.*, 2008). For example, Bakker *et al.* (2008) and Federici and Skaalvik (2011) both proposed self-efficacy as an antecedent of work engagement. A. Agarwal (2014) found that trust was a significant predictor of work engagement. Since the model fit with empirical data, we assume that teachers with high self-efficacy believed that they could meet the daily challenges in their schools and therefore tended to become more engaged in their schools.

Authentic leadership scales	Current Study		Bird <i>et al.</i> (2010) ¹		Bird <i>et al.</i> (2012) ²	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Authentic leadership	2.02	0.43	3.27	0.38	4.09	0.77
2. Self-awareness	2.71	0.63	3.17	0.48	3.92	0.98
3. Relational transparency	1.54	0.34	3.24	0.41	4.12	0.75
4. Balanced processing	2.37	0.56	3.23	0.50	3.91	0.92
5. Internalized moral perspective	1.47	0.32	3.41	0.56	4.35	0.75

Notes: $n = 156$ teachers from 22 *K-12* public schools; $N = 714$ teachers from 39 *K-12* public schools. Both were from southeastern USA

Table III.
Comparison of authentic leadership and its dimensions among three studies

Figure 3. Results of the structural equation model of authentic leadership, teacher academic optimism, and teacher work engagement



Note: ** $p < 0.01$

Independent variable	Dependent variable	Total effect	Indirect effect	Direct effect
Authentic leadership	Academic optimism	0.333** (0.040)	–	0.333** (0.040)
	Teacher work engagement	0.405** (0.041)	0.213** (0.029)	0.191** (0.036)
Academic optimism	Teacher work engagement	0.639** (0.037)	–	0.639** (0.037)
	Statistics	$\chi^2 = 5.947$; $df = 8$; $P = 0.653$ GFI = 0.997; AGFI = 0.991; RMR = 0.0074; RMSEA = 0.00		

Table IV. Results of the structural equation model

Notes: Text in italics denotes standardized effect; number in parenthesis displays standard error. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Discussion

Duignan (2014), proposed that researchers focus on understanding how Authentic School Leadership shapes teacher attitudes and behaviors that contribute to positive school cultures and student learning. Owusu-Bempah and colleagues (2014) highlighted the need for examining Authentic School Leadership outside of the predominantly Western societies in which it has been studied to date. The current study sought to address these challenges in the context of education reforms adopted and implemented in Thailand over the past 20 years. More specifically, our research examined the relationship between authentic school leadership and two important variables that have been associated with positive school learning cultures: teachers' academic optimism and work engagement. In this section of the paper, we review key limitations of the study, place the findings in context, and outline several implications for research and practice.

Limitations

Notable limitations of this study lie in the characteristics of the sample and the research design. First, the study focused solely on public primary schools, so we cannot determine

the extent to which these findings characterize principals in secondary schools and private schools in Thailand. Second, the surprisingly low level of authentic leadership practices perceived by the teacher sample in this study should be replicated not only by additional quantitative research but also by qualitative studies. Finally, although we selected dependent variables that represent potentially important mediators of leadership effects on student learning, this research cannot establish causality in these relationships.

Interpretation of the findings

The model of authentic leadership employed in this study was conceptualized and largely popularized in Western societies such as the USA, Australia and New Zealand. As elaborated earlier, research finds that authentic school leadership is associated with teacher attitudes and behaviors that contribute to positive change in schools. This study sought to understand the relevance of authentic school leadership in the Thai context.

The key features of authentic leadership are not entirely “foreign” to the way of thinking about effective leadership in Thailand. For example, Hallinger and colleagues identified three characteristics of “effective change leaders” from the perspective of Thai teachers. These were *jing jai* (i.e. conveying moral purpose and making change meaningful to teachers), *jing jung* (i.e. making sure actions are aligned with words), and *nae norm* (i.e. persisting towards a shared goal in the face of possible obstacles and conflict). Although these characteristics of effective leadership in Thailand are also hallmarks of authentic leadership, observers have asserted that they are too often conspicuous by their absence among leaders in Thai schools.

This assertion finds support in the weak ratings given to principals by their teachers on the dimensions of authentic leadership in this study. We earlier noted that the ratings of principals were relatively low when compared to findings reported in the USA. These findings suggest that the practices and perspectives encompassed in the authentic leadership model are not well-embedded in the leadership routines of Thai principals.

Moreover, we observed that the teachers gave the lowest ratings (~1.5 on a five-point scale) to the principals on the dimensions, relational transparency and internalized moral perspective. These dimensions focus on the extent to which the principal acts in a manner that is consistent with his/her espoused values. This recalls a Thai proverb used to describe poor or untrustworthy leaders: “Baak gub jai mai trong kun” (the mouth and the heart are not aligned).

This finding further suggests that the Thai principals in our sample are strongly influenced by social pressures when making decisions. These trends were evident in data reported that showed strikingly low variability in teacher perceptions of their principals on these two dimensions (see Table II and Figure 2). Although this is not a surprise given Thailand’s “collectivist culture” (Holmes *et al.*, 1995), it offers insight into the lack of persistence evidenced by school leaders in moving towards the goals embedded in Thailand’s educational reforms. Our results also affirm earlier findings that authentic leadership is moderately associated with teachers’ academic optimism and work engagement (e.g. Bird *et al.*, 2010, 2012; Wang and Bird, 2011). As such, to the extent that Thai principals demonstrate these practices associated with authentic leadership, we would expect the development of more productive school cultures in Thailand.

Implications of the findings

The current study sought to validate the Western construct of authentic leadership in Thailand. However, our procedures did not seek to determine if there was a uniquely Thai approach to understanding components of this leadership model. For example, as

Owusu-Bempah and colleagues (2014) pointed out, “Authentic Leadership” took on both similar and different meanings in New Zealand and Ghana.

Qualitative inquiry aimed at surfacing what it means to be an “authentic leader” in the Thai context would offer a useful extension of the current study. This might offer additional insight into why the ratings of the Thai principals were relatively low on the scale used in this study. For example, implicit in the theoretical foundations of authentic leadership is the belief that “value consistency” is a good thing. Remaining firm in one’s core values, even in the face of social pressure, is perceived to “desirable” in this model of leadership. Yet, one of the most influential cultural norm in Thai society, *greng jai*, runs directly in opposition to this stance. *Greng jai* refers to the normative expectation that one should defer to the desires and needs of others in social settings, rather than strictly adhere to one’s own personal value preferences (Holmes *et al.*, 1995). Indeed, one could argue that within Thai society, a leader who scores high on Internalized Moral Perspective could be perceived as “too strict,” “inflexible,” “uncaring” and “insensitive” to the needs of others. While this interpretation does not invalidate our earlier conclusions, it does highlight the potential cultural relativity of the Authentic Leadership construct. As such, it reinforces the need for additional validation using qualitative and mixed methods studies.

Another implication of this study lies in the recurring observation that Thailand’s principals continue to lack the leadership perspectives and practices needed to turn the vision of national education reform into reality. Indeed, despite national emphases on the “moral development” of pupils and “ethical leadership” of principals, we found weak evidence that our nationally representative sample of primary school principals are demonstrating “Authentic Leadership” at a level that would bring about these types of positive change. Moreover, this finding mirrors earlier research findings concerning relatively weak engagement among Thai principals on instructional leadership (Hallinger and Lee, 2013, 2014).

These conclusions offer additional evidence that the stagnation of education reform in Thailand is a systemic problem (Fry and Bi, 2013; Hallinger, In press). The principals who participated in this study were all selected by the Ministry of Education. If Thailand wishes to field a corps of principals with the perspectives and capabilities to provide leadership, be it instructional or moral in nature, significant change will be needed in the HR processes used to identify, select, train and evaluate principals.

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Further reading

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