

**Making Education Reform Happen:
Is There an “Asian” Way?**

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Bio

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Abstract

This paper presents a descriptive analysis of education reform in selected Southeast Asian nations between 1995 and 2007. It reports the results of a purposive survey of elite informants comprised of scholars and educational leaders involved in education reform in Thailand, Malaysia, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. The paper addresses two main questions: What have been the main obstacles to education reform in Southeast Asia? And is there anything unique or different about the process of educational reform and change in Southeast Asia from processes reported in the Western literature? Although the paper finds more similarities than differences in the process of education reform in Southeast Asia, the author notes distinctive obstacles to reform in these societies. These differences are linked to a cultural explanation of educational change.

We live during an era in which the pace and scope of economic, social and political change are unprecedented (Drucker, 1995). The same global change forces manifest in North America and Europe arguably have had an even greater impact in the developing economies of Southeast Asiaⁱ (Carnoy, 2003; Carnoy & Rhoten, 2002; Cheng, 1999a, 2003; Naisbitt, 1997; Ohmae, 1995; Rowher, 1995). The economic crisis of 1997 in Asia was, however, a salient example of what happens when the gap between the pace of economic growth and development of educational, political and governmental systems grew too large. Economic growth in the region ground to a halt while other societal systems changed gears in attempts to adapt to change. More recently, social unrest in Thailand has similarly been attributed a perception of differential access within the society to government-allocated resources, including though not limited to education (The Nation, 2010).

Over the past decade, the link between educational development and economic growth has taken on enhanced importance for Southeast Asia’s policymakers. Recent policy research has affirmed a strong relationship between educational attainment and societal economic growth (Carnoy, 2003; Carnoy & Rhoten, 2002; Levin, Belfield, Muennig, & Rouse, 2006; Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2002). Carnoy (2003) observed, “In labor market terms, the payoffs to higher levels of education is rising worldwide as a result of the shifts of economic production to knowledge-intensive products and processes. . . Governments are also under increased pressure to attract foreign capital, and this means a ready supply of skilled labor” (p. 44). Hanushek & Woessmann (2007) confirm that the supply of skilled labor is linked to the pattern of educational attainment within a nation.

New empirical results show the importance of both minimal and high-level skills, the complementarity of skills and the quality of economic institutions, and the robustness of the relationship between skills and growth. International comparisons incorporating expanded data on cognitive skills reveal much larger skill deficits in developing countries than generally derived from just school enrollment and attainment. The magnitude of change needed makes it clear that closing the economic gap with industrial countries will require major structural changes in schooling institutions. (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2007, p. 1)

These findings have given empirical support to policymakers intent upon education reform in a region that had already launched significant new policies and programs during the 1990s (Cheng, 1999a; Hallinger, 1998). Indeed, during an era when Asia’s economies have thrived on exporting goods and products to the West, they have been on receiving end of a virtual smorgasbord of imported education reforms – school-based management, curriculum standards, parent participation, student-centered learning, ICT and more (Carnoy & Rhoten, 2002; Hallinger, 1998, 2004; Hallinger, Walker, & Bajunid, 2005; Yang, 2001). Yet, observers have noted that these imported reforms have not always received a ready acceptance among users at the school level (Cheng & Walker, 2008; Chia, 2008; Hallinger, 1998; Mok, 2006; Pennington, 1999).

Southeast Asia represents a cultural and institutional context with values and traditions that vary sharply in certain respects with those of the Western societies from which these reforms have been imported (Cheng, 1999a, 2003; Cheng & Walker, 2008; Dimmock & Walker, 1998, 2005; Hallinger, 2004; Hallinger et al., 2005; Mok, 2004, 2006). Traditions of rote learning, teacher-directed instruction, rigid national curriculum systems, and highly centralized administrative structures evolved in this region with a

strength and character that, we assert, differs significantly from Western societies.

Moreover, the values that underlie imported educational innovations often conflict with those of the receiving culture.

Blaming Asian schools for focusing on memorization -- as opposed to “thinking” – is too pat an excuse, as schools reflect the basic values of a society. It is ingrained in the Asian psyche that “correct” answers always exist and are to be found in books or from authorities. Teachers dispense truth, parents are always right and political leaders know better. (Shaw, 1999, p. 23)

These contextual features set the stage for this inquiry into the implementation of education reforms in Southeast Asia. The paper examines the process of education reform in five of Southeast Asia’s most rapidly developing nations over the past decade. It addresses the broad question, “Is there anything uniquely ‘Asian’ about the process of educational reform and change in the Southeast Asia?” The analysis draws upon a purposive survey of selected educational leaders and scholars in Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Thailand, and Taiwan.

An Overview of Education Reform in Southeast Asia

Education reform has been a key component in the national development strategies among Southeast Asia’s most rapidly developing nations (Carnoy, 2003; Cheng, 1999a, 2003; Hallinger, 1998; Pennington, 1999). For example, Singapore has become known world-wide for the government-led transformation of its society between 1960 and today. As Singaporeans proudly observe, economic prosperity has been achieved without access to natural resources other than their location and people (MOE-Singapore, 2004, 2006). They attribute the city state’s rapid economic development to successful

efforts to use education and training to advantage of human capital in their society (Gopinathan, 1999; Kam & Gopinathan, 1999; Ng, Jeyaraj, Lim, Lee, Goh, & Chew, 2005).

During the late 1990's, Singapore's schools adopted a new mission, *thinking schools, a learning society*. This mission explicitly emphasized the connection between learning in schools and sustainable development of the society (Gopinathan & Kam, 2000; Ng et al., 2005).

Thinking Schools ensure that we equip students with skills and knowledge and values and instincts to face future challenges, while Learning Nation aims to promote a culture of continual learning beyond the school environment. (MOE-Singapore, 1998, p.16, quoted from Chan, no date)

As observed by Gopinathan, “Singapore previously relied on content mastery or the “pedagogy of the worksheet”. But the global economy of the future demands something more. ‘We need a learning environment that allows for flexibility and collaborative learning’ (cited in Pennington, 1999, p. 2). A perusal of the subsequent education reforms adopted in Singapore would appear familiar in the West: school-based management, professional learning communities, learner-centered instruction, teaching for creativity, ICT (Gopinathan & Kam, 2000; Ng, 2004). Singapore's implementation of these reforms, however, has been notable for enhanced results and performance on international examinations. Indeed, Singapore's reputation for effective planning and precision of implementation has made it a sought after partner among other developing nations in the Middle and Far East (Kolesnikov, 2010).

Malaysia adopted a similar human capital-based approach to national development (Abdullah, 1999; Bajunid, 2008; Lee, 1999). Starting in the 1980's, Malaysia implemented an ambitious national development plan, *Vision 2020*, that identified key targets which Malaysia would need to achieve in order to reach developed nation status by the year 2020 (Abdullah, 1999; Chia, 2008; Lee, 1999; Rahimah, 1998). *Vision 2020* is founded on an assumption that economic and social progress must be grounded in educational development. The nation's subsequent approach to education reform has included virtually all of the “global reforms” that have become part of the common language of education policymakers around the world (Carnoy & Rhoten, 2002; Chia, 2008; Malakolunthu, 2007). Malaysia's SMART Schools initiative achieved widespread attention and was a key factor in attracting greater international foreign direct investment (Chia, 2008). Yet observers have also noted that the results of education reform in Malaysia have often failed to live up to the promises (Bajunid, 2008). There have in fact been numerous u-turns in major policy initiatives as policymakers and local practitioners have tried to balance local needs, resource allocation, and national priorities (Chia, 2008; Malakolunthu, 2007, 2008; Pennington, 1999).

As much as anywhere in the world, Hong Kong society has undergone transformative social, political and educational changes over the past 20 years (Cheng, 1999b, 2003; Cheng & Walker, 2008; Dimmock & Walker, 1998; Hallinger, 1998; Mok, 2004, 2006). Reintegration with China has brought new challenges as well as opportunities that have placed new demands on the educational system (Cheng & Walker, 2008; Lam, 2003; Law, 2004; Mok, 2004). This has resulted in a redefinition of system goals which now include developing graduates who possess a global perspective, high

personal integrity, strong language ability, computer literacy, independent and critical thinking, and creativity (Cheng & Walker, 2008; Hallinger, 1998). In order to address these new educational goals, Hong Kong has implemented school based-management, education quality assurance, ICT in teaching and management, student-centered learning reforms, integrated curriculum, new language policies and more (Cheng, 1999b, 2003; Cheng & Walker, 2008; Hallinger, 1998; Law, 2004). While Hong Kong students continue to score well on international examinations, a vocal undercurrent of local dissatisfaction has emerged with both the process and results of these educational reforms (Cheng & Walker, 2008; Lam, 2003; Law, 2004; Mok, 2006).

Thailand, like other nations in the region, has spent the past 20 years expanding access to education from K-6 in 1990 to full and free access in 2010 (Hallinger, 2004; Thongthew, 1999). An ambitious education reform bill passed in 1997 set three broad educational goals: to develop graduates who were 1) capable of using knowledge to solve local problems, 2) virtuous and moral citizens capable of contributing to the nation's social development, and 3) happy citizens able to live satisfying lives in harmony with others (MOE-Thailand, 1997a, 1997b). This law led to the subsequent passage of numerous education reform policies and related programs, the thrust of which were to decentralize authority, engage greater local initiative in the management and delivery of educational services, and create a more active learning environment for pupils (Hallinger, 2004; Hallinger & Kantamara, 2001; Kantamara, Hallinger, Jatiket, 2006; Pennington, 1999; The Nation, 2010; Thongthew, 1999).

In recent years, however, progress towards implementation of these reforms seem to have stalled and observers have noted increasing public dissatisfaction with the lack of results.

The Thai government, meanwhile, has spent a huge amount of money to reform schools here. The intention to raise the standard of schools is admirable. But the means of upgrading school quality might need a more meaningful push. Simply throwing money at schools to build new buildings or increase teaching personnel without evaluating the level of education itself may not be money well spent. (The Nation, 2010).

Taiwan’s legacy of education reform over the past two decades has followed a roughly similar pattern of seeking to upgrade education in response to political demands for economic competitiveness (Law, 2004; MOE-R.O.C., 1998; Mok, 2004, 2006; Pan & Chieu, 1999). In the words of one observer, “As Western modernity has achieved global proportions, the race for development in non-Western countries feeds back and reinforces the compulsive attempt to “keep up” in a universal process of mimicry. . . Taiwan cannot escape the Western influences in educational innovation” (Yang, 2001, p. 1). Yet, the process of implementing these “Western educational innovations” has been anything but smooth (Chen, 2008; Law, 2004; Pan, 2008; Yang, 2001). Numerous disconnects between the intentions of those who have formulated the global educational innovations and the perspectives of those who are given responsibility for local implementation have led to an uneven record of reform in practice (Carnoy & Rhoten, 2003; Chen, 2008; Law, 2004; Mok, 2004, 2006; Pan, 2008; Yang, 2001).

The similarity in approaches to educational reform among these rapidly developing countries across the region is striking. Observers unfamiliar with the history

of the Southeast Asia might consider this regional convergence of education policy reforms as a natural phenomenon due to location, but it is not. Although regional education forums exist (e.g., Southeast Asia Ministers of Education Organization, SEAMEO), the nations of Southeast Asia have traditionally looked more to the economically developed nations of North America, Europe, ANZ and Japan for policy consultation than to one another (Carnoy, 2003; Carnoy & Rhoten, 2002; Law, 2004; Mok, 2006; Yang, 2001). Yet, this paper asserts that there is much for these countries to learn from one another, not only about ‘best practices’ but also about policy implementation and change.

Scholars throughout the world have observed that changes in educational practice seldom match the pace of change in political rhetoric and policy adoption (Carnoy, 2003; Carnoy & Rhoten, 2002; Cheng & Walker, 2008; Cuban, 1990; Hallinger, 1998, 2004). In the words of the noted futurist, Kenichi Ohmae: “The contents of kitchens and closets may change, but the core mechanisms by which cultures maintain their identity and socialize their young remain largely untouched” (1995, p. 30). While this observation also applies to attempts at educational change in ‘Western’ contexts (e.g., Caldwell, 1998; Cuban, 1990; Evans, 1996; Fullan, 2007; Hall & Hord, 2002), this paper contends that education reform in Southeast Asia faces special challenges. Understanding the nature of these challenges represents the focus of the empirical portion of this paper.

Research Focus and Method

Thailand, Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Malaysia were selected for inclusion in the study because among the countries of Southeast Asia they share the greatest commonality in terms of level of economic, social and educational

development.ⁱⁱ A search of the literature found a paucity of either descriptive or analytical empirical data on educational reform in the region. Therefore, this study was framed as a preliminary effort to generate empirical data describing broad trends across a group of similar societies in their approaches to educational reform and change.

Data were collected from a purposive sample of ‘elite informants’. They consisted of educational policy makers and scholars who had been intimately involved in the process of education reform in their nations between 1995 and 2007, and to whom the author had access. This sampling strategy limits the generalizability of the study’s findings. However, given the lack of empirical data on educational reform in the region, the study’s goals were more modest. We wished to generate a limited set of empirical data in order to highlight possible trends and generate hypotheses that could be studied further in subsequent efforts (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

Data were collected in two rounds. In the first round, short surveys were emailed to 35 participants divided equally across the five countries. This resulted in 28 responses. In order to obtain an even response rate across nations, a total of 18 additional respondents were contacted. The final sample consisted of 40 respondents spread evenly across the five national contexts.

The survey consisted of several open-ended questions soliciting respondents’ perceptions of reform obstacles and strategies that had emerged in these nations over the past decade. These included the following:

- What have been the most important educational reforms implemented in your country over the past five years?
- Please use your own words to describe the reform strategies that were used at the national level to implement these reforms in local schools.

- Please describe the key obstacles to the implementation of these education reforms that you have observed in your national context.
- As you reflect on the strategies and process of implementing these education reforms in your country, is there anything about them that you would characterize as ‘Asian’? If so, what are they?

The responses were collected and analyzed in terms of trends within and across countries for each of the four questions. A set of keywords was generated across the sample of interview responses (Cresswell, 1998; Merriam, 2000). The keywords (e.g., power, skills, goals) were then coded and then used to develop a count of frequencies of responses according to the keywords by question. These were entered into an excel table and analyzed to establish trends within and across the national contexts for specific issues such as obstacles (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This ‘counting’ approach to data analysis was supplemented by a textual review of the responses in order to gain a deeper understanding of specific perspectives and to seek illustrative examples of key trends within each country. Finally, the convergence of these patterns was used to assess the impact of culture on reform implementation. We emphasize at the outset that this survey was designed to yield *preliminary perceptions and propositions* about educational change and reform in Southeast Asia, not definitive conclusions or causal explanations (Cresswell, 1998; Merriam, 2000).

Obstacles to Educational Reform in Southeast Asia

Research on educational and organizational change has found that the change process is characterized by a variety of ‘predictable’ obstacles. These include shifting goals, unclear goals, lack of communication of the vision, absence of leadership for the change, lack of understanding and interest, lack of resources, staff resistance, lack of knowledge and skills, lack of institutional support, mistrust, and more (Drucker, 1995;

Evans, 1996; Fullan, 2007; Hall & Hord, 2002; Kotter & Cohen, 2002; McLaughlin, 1990; O’Toole, 1995). Not surprisingly, many of these obstacles were identified by respondents to our open-ended survey question concerning obstacles to change.

Table 1 presents key obstacles to education reform in the selected nations as identified by the respondents. It should be noted that these obstacles were not rank ordered or generated through a Delphi process. Thus, the results in Table 1 should be interpreted with caution. We cannot, for example, conclude that an obstacle missing from a particular column is not significant for a particular country. It simply was not mentioned among the top three obstacles generated inductively from our respondents.

Insert Table 1 about Here

Several features may be highlighted in Table 1. First, the difference between reform implementation in Singapore and the other societies is worth noting. Respondents from Singapore did identify obstacles related to the nature of reform goals and the uses of power. However, obstacles related to ownership, preparation and resources did not seem significant in the eyes of the Singaporean respondents. This may be explained by a combination of contextual differences in Singapore including size, stability of political and education system leaders, an earlier ‘start’ for education reform and institutional characteristics.

Second, we note that most of the obstacles listed in Table 1 would tend to accompany large-scale change in organizations – education or otherwise -- throughout the world (Fullan, 2007; O’Toole, 1996). For example, compare this table with a list of

common errors or obstacles encountered during organizational change compiled by Kotter and Cohen (2002).

- Allowing too much complacency.
- Failing to create a sufficiently powerful guiding coalition.
- Underestimating the power of vision.
- Under-communicating the vision by a factor of 10.
- Permitting obstacles to block the new vision.
- Failing to create short-term wins.
- Declaring victory too soon.
- Neglecting to anchor changes in the corporate culture.

Thus, at a high level of abstraction, the obstacles to educational change in the region seem remarkably similar to those reported in the Western literature. Yet, we also noted several obstacles less likely to appear on a list generated by respondents in the United States or England: cultural clash, power gap, surface changes. However, even more significant than differences in the *types of obstacles* were differences in their *character as presented in practice* (Hallinger & Kantamara, 2001). That is, the manner in which these change obstacles were manifested, as well as their strength seemed to differ in these societies. We highlight several of these instances in order to illustrate these potential differences.

Lack of Stakeholder Buy-in to Reform Goals and Pursuit of Surface Changes

To a large degree, education reforms implemented internationally during the 1990's were initiated by political leaders (Caldwell, 1998). This was also the case in Southeast Asia where there was relatively little participation from the teachers and principals. The process of hierarchical, top-down initiation was noted by respondents.

The typical educational reform movements in Malaysia have almost exclusively been initiated by the Minister of Education and [then passed on] down through the ranks. Teachers in schools are seen as implementers of the reform without any contributions upward to shape or decide on reform initiatives. (Malaysian respondent)

[In Thailand] people who implement system decisions – principals and teachers -- have never been viewed as equal partners in the change process, much less initiators of change. There has never been an emphasis on “developing a shared vision” of change, but simply on communicating decisions and orders. (Thai respondent)

While the story line varies from in details from country to country, with the exception of Singapore, there has been a significant problem in translating system goals into meaningful goals at the school level. Stakeholder buy-in has often been slow and uncertain. Surface indicators generated on checklists are officially accepted as proof of success. In the words of a Malaysian respondent:

Reform is usually taken at face value. Evidence of reform is usually produced in the form of documents. These documents are seen as fulfilling the requirements for reporting purposes so that I can get my superior out of my back. Real changes in terms of behavior and practices seldom happen because of lack of follow-up and follow through. (Malaysia respondent)

This pursuit of surface change maintains the face of all involved, especially in an enterprise where the methods for achieving the deeper reforms are difficult to specify and political will for change is unstable (Dimmock & Walker, 2005; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1997; Hofstede, 2001). In Thailand, for example, the Ministry of Education sponsored a major exhibition after the first year of implementation of its education reform law to highlight progress. A chart showed that 60% of the reforms had been

implemented in the first year. While showing visible evidence of progress can create momentum, this type of proclamation is also an example of Kotter and Cohen's (2002) error of "declaring victory too soon."

Reform Overload, Lack of a Systems Perspective and Strategic Coordination

Observers have highlighted the pattern of reform overload and work intensification that has emerged globally over the past two decades (Fullan, 2007). This was also observed in Southeast Asia.

Reforms seem to have come in a continual stream and covered almost all areas of education. Implementation problems associated with the sheer number (and pace) of reform initiatives have been accentuated by the increased demands they place on schools, teachers and principals. (Hong Kong)

There have been just too many reforms, too fast. There have been an indigestible slew of reform initiatives. Schools and teachers bear the burden of implementation. Even in well run systems like Singapore there is already evidence of reform fatigue. (Singapore)

Hasty and disorganized implementation of the education reform policies [has created barrier and increased opposition to reform]. All of Taiwan's 14 major education reform policies have been implemented top-down in a hasty manner, without small-scale experimentation, sufficient communication with schools and teachers, or enough public awareness-raising campaign. Therefore, after several years of implementation, confusion, discontent and opposition abounds. (Taiwanese respondent)

Change overload not only saps the energy and motivation of those who must implement the reforms, but changes also introduce contradictions into the system (Cheng

& Walker, 2008). Education reforms have traveled around the globe far from their points of origin and often do appear ‘foreign’ upon arrival in Southeast Asia.

School principals and teachers most of the time cannot make sense of the purpose for the reforms. . . Therefore, implementation by schools has always been piecemeal like jigsaw pieces that do not seem to fit. (Malaysian respondent)

The number and intensity of reforms is further confused by the fact that many of the reforms appear to have little relationship to each other. . . The reforms were pushed into a context which was often unprepared for such rapid change. (Hong Kong respondent)

Advances in communication technologies has enhanced the formation of a global network of policymakers with ready access to the same platform of educational innovations and reforms. As observed earlier by Yang (2001), there seems to be an inherent pressure to ‘keep up with one’s neighbors’ which leads to the adoption of very similar reforms around the region and throughout the world. In the local context, this often leads to the fragmented implementation of reforms without careful consideration of how the “new pieces of the puzzle” fit together (Carnoy, 2003; Cheng & Walker, 2008; Lam, 2003; Law, 2004; Yang, 2001).

Power Gap Between Levels of the System

Confucian societies tend to accept large differences in power, status, and rank as normal, a cultural characteristic referred to by Hofstede (1991) as “power-distance.” Thus, it is characteristic of Asian cultures to show respect for authority, age, rank and status. This applies not only in relationships between teachers and students, but also throughout the system hierarchies. Shaw noted:

In executive-led societies such as China and Hong Kong, leaders act like philosopher-kings, often uttering unchallenged banalities. Senior officials sometimes resemble the powerful palace eunuchs of the past dynasties: imperial, unaccountable, incompetent. Questioning authority, especially in public life, disrespectful, un-Asian, un-Confucian. (Shaw, 1999, p. 23)

These social norms translate into greater power among administrators at all levels of the system. It is the “natural inclination” of stakeholders in Southeast Asia to provide a polite, often unquestioning, audience at the announcement of change initiatives (Hallinger & Kantamara, 2001; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1997; Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1995). Unfortunately, this politely passive response often leads to insufficient understanding and lack of emotional connection to the change initiatives among stakeholders. This was highlighted by respondents in each of the countries surveyed.

In Thailand, the norm of *grewng jai* or deference to your seniors influences change, especially at the outset when the “marching orders” orders are handed out. Teachers and principals who are in the position to implement change are not asked for their ideas on how to implement the change. Even if they see that the change may not be practical, they keep quiet. They know their role. If they were to speak up and point out potential problems, they would simply be viewed as “trouble-makers.” (Thailand respondent)

Deference and respect for seniors and trusting that they know best, without questioning of policies is the norm here. (Singapore respondent)

This tendency to accept the decisions of those in authority might appear to create a smoother path towards implementation of change. However, this is not always the case. For example a respondent from Hong Kong observed: “In this part of the world, there is a

strong culture to believe that people on top know best. Things work well when this is true. But there are insufficient mechanisms in place to check against it when it turns out to be false” (Hong Kong respondent).

Indeed, with this mindset of ready acceptance of their proclamations, system leaders often fail to take the necessary steps to communicate fully the rationale for change and gain stakeholder involvement. This results in even higher degrees of passive resistance and explains the “lack of initiative” at the local level about which system level leaders in Southeast Asian often complain.

Lack of Stability in the Change Process

Although it may appear paradoxical, *successful change implementation requires a certain degree of stability*. If reform goals change too rapidly, the seeds of the new changes will crowd out the young shoots of other recent reforms before they have a chance to take root. This is, of course, a common problem more generally with respect to the institutionalization of change (Fullan, 2007; Kotter & Cohen, 2002).

Some degree of stability of leadership at all levels is required in order to maintain the vision of change and to persist in its implementation. It is no surprise that the system in which significant educational change has been most evident – Singapore – has also had the most stable leadership for education reform. This contrasts quite dramatically, for example, with Thailand and Hong Kong. In these nations, changes in the political and bureaucratic leaders responsible for education reform have been more frequent. This has had an impact on implementation of reforms.

During the last decade there has been a frequent change of education chiefs at the top of the hierarchy – the Secretary

for Education and Manpower, the Chairman of the Education Commission and the Director of Education. Inevitably each of them has a different understanding of what’s worth reforming, different priorities and schedules for reforms, and different strategies of implementing the reforms. Even professional education administrators experienced difficulties in following through the reforms; the bewilderment of the frontline teachers can be easily visualized. It is not surprising that very often a reform has only the form but not the spirit! (Hong Kong respondent)

In Thailand leadership of the Ministry has changed at least five times in the five years following passage of the National Education Reform act in 1999. Each Minister reinterprets the reforms according to his own desire. The only Education Minister who actually had expertise in education resigned abruptly within a few months citing stress due to his inability to fend off interference from politicians. This frequent change in leadership at the top of the system creates continuous instability as well as unclear direction, and fragmentation of efforts (Thailand respondent)

Lack of Staff Preparation for Reform

The development of new knowledge and skills among staff is necessary for the successful implementation of most innovations (Hall & Hord, 2002; Fullan, 2007; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Kotter & Cohen, 2002). However, with the exception of Singapore and Hong Kong, the other Southeast Asian countries have been slower to commit necessary resources towards the preparation and development of teachers and principals. This means that the capacity needed to foster effective implementation is often absent at the school level.

For example, following passage of the national education reform act in 1999, a key policy leader from the National Education Commission proclaimed:

Learning by rote will next year be eliminated from all primary and secondary schools and be replaced with student-centered learning. . . Any teachers found failing to change their teaching style would be listed and provided with video-tapes showing new teaching techniques. If they still failed to improve, they would be sent for intensive training. (Bunnag, July 27, 2000, p. 5)

While it is true that this implementation strategy reflects the resource limitations of a developing nation, that is only part of the explanation. It also reflects two deeply ingrained assumptions: first that people will change if they are ordered to do so and second that surface compliance equals deeper change in behaviors. Training is, therefore, viewed as a solution to be provided *after* the teacher has "failed to change" rather than as part of a capacity development strategy. Comments from respondents in several of the other countries reflected a similar attitude.

[I]nadequacy of the teacher preparation has been an obstacle to implementation of reform plans. *The assumption that preparation of a few will ripple through the whole teaching force through the multiplier effect did not see to be quite right on many occasions.* Secondly, when this is coupled with the fact that there was lack of proper supervision, implementation can be either diluted or totally ineffective resulting in the teaching and learning as well as management practices returning to their old ways. (Malaysia respondent)

With regard to the detail of changes . . . most teachers were unfamiliar with them. This happened despite the fact that the government had conducted many times of in-service training. It might be that teachers are unaccustomed to the changes or the reforms are not good. It was not clear. But one thing is clear; most teachers don't have detailed knowledge with regard to the reform and therefore cannot be the persuaders to convince parents to support the reforms. (Taiwan respondent)

Policy-makers often used a top down approach with emphasis on manipulation of resource inputs. . . Assuming that more input would result in more improvement and effectiveness, the proposed policies focused mainly on top down intervention, but ignored how the inputs would be transformed into the school processes that would generate the intended outcomes. (Hong Kong respondent)

Mismatch of Reform Initiatives and the Local Context

This obstacle reflects the fact that education reforms are traveling much farther from home, more quickly, and with greater momentum than ever before. Reforms vetted in any influential Western nation are likely to be adopted in some fashion by Asian policymakers for their own countries. Sometimes the effectiveness of a particular innovation is backed up research in the country of origin. Seldom, however, is similar research conducted – even on a small scale – prior to implementation in the foreign environment. Considerations of “cultural fit” are sometimes discussed, but less often is there any substantial adaptation of the innovation (Cheng & Walker, 2008; Dimmock & Walker, 2005; Hallinger, 2005; Lam, 2003). Such considerations are even more important when seeking to transplant the innovation from a Western to an Eastern culture where differences in cultural values and norms influence the receptivity of practitioners to innovations and the length of time it will take to change past behaviors.

Take the case of student-centered learning approaches which tend to be less familiar to many Asian teachers. The idea that students can learn from each other or from relatively uneducated community members may conflict with deeply held cultural assumptions (Dimmock & Walker, 2005; Hallinger, 2004). When this is coupled with the lower level of resources devoted to developing an understanding of the innovation prior to implementation, it becomes easy to see why change takes place slowly, if at all.

Traditional Chinese culture values fairness in *uniformity*, while the new reform espouses *diversity* for more choice. As the uniformity mentality with the tendency of pursuing socially recognized achievement (such as good school grades, entry into top colleges, good jobs, high status) are deeply imbedded in people’s minds, when education reform espoused the Western idea of diversity as the new value, and reform education system accordingly, people “resist” in their own way. (Taiwan respondent)

Thai teachers perceive the content of current reforms like student-centered learning as “foreign” in origin and in nature. Many English terms such as *student-centered learning* or *school-based management* imported from abroad have no equivalents in Thai. Thai educators are often unsure of the true intentions behind the words or phrases. This leads to numerous interpretations and considerable confusion as to both intent and approach. (Thai respondent)

Is there an Asian Way in Educational Reform?

The respondents were also queried about whether they believed that these obstacles to reform in their Southeast Asian nations could be considered uniquely Asian. Their responses supplemented our own analysis of change strategies and obstacles. Common responses from the respondents across the countries included the following:

- Hierarchical structure of the system
- Ministry power
- Key role of human capital in national development
- Explicit link of education reform to globalization
- Persistence of effort
- Pushing responsibilities to schools
- Wide media coverage of education reform policies and programs

The top-down approach utilized in Southeast Asia is certainly not unique as a strategy for large-scale system reform (Caldwell, 1998; Fullan, 2007). However, our analysis and the informants’ responses suggest that the strategies implemented in the region may differ in character and expression. The large power distance that characterizes the cultures of South Southeast Asia creates respect for authority and a passive receptivity to change, at least at a surface level. The high value placed on education as well as a strong cultural belief in the central role of educational attainment for social mobility further strengthen societal receptivity to educational reform.

However, this receptivity does not necessarily translate into higher engagement in real changes in practices at the school and classroom levels. Cultural norms of power distance as well as collectivism (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1997; Hofstede, 2001; Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1995) create tendencies to avoid public dissent and maintain group harmony. Thus, although resistance tends to be passive, it can be even stronger than in societies in which questions are openly asked. The fact that dissent remains hidden may also result in a longer process of mutual adaptation. There appears to be a process of consensus building that over time modifies the top-down proposals for change. However, this seems to occur only *after* the change has stalled due to lack of local understanding and support.

This recalls McLaughlin’s (1990) observation that, “You can’t mandate what matters to people.” Large power distance breeds a cultural tendency for Southeast Asian leaders to lead by *fiat* and to focus more on “telling” staff the tasks to be accomplished with relatively little two-way communication. This was the case even in Singapore which was an exception to the trend in several other respects. There is a shared cultural

assumption that leading change entails establishing orders – which will be followed -- and applying pressure in special cases where it is needed.

Even 20 years ago it made sense for a few smart decision-makers at the top of the Education Ministries across Southeast Asia to make system-wide decisions and pass these along through the principals to the schools. This is, however, an impractical approach to leading change today. The pace of change today is simply too rapid for a few smart decision-makers to keep up.

In our research on leading change in Thailand, we asked principals to identify successful change strategies. One veteran noted: “To bring about change, teachers must know that it is the supreme law of the land. Then as the administrator you must apply pressure to them constantly” (Hallinger, Chantarapanya, Sriboonma, & Kantamara, 2000). This response suggests that the strategy of telling teachers to “do it” is not a complete strategy even within cultures in which administrators are accorded a relatively higher degree of authority and social deference.

Although perhaps overstated, the *Supreme Law strategy* appears to be quite consistent with general norms of managing educational change across these Asian societies. It reflects the tendency to give great weight to formal authority (i.e., large power distance) and to accept top-down commandments, at least in terms of surface compliance. However, implicit in this strategy is the limitation of constant application of pressure. This principal was essentially saying, “If they know it’s the law of the land they will comply with it, at least as long as they know I am watching or until it has been ticked off on the checklist.” Once those conditions are no longer met, the behavior may return to its prior state.

Again, cultural norms such as power distance and collectivism are not in and of themselves obstacles to change. If the *interest* of relevant social groups in collectivist societies can be engaged, the group can provide even greater momentum for change than might be the case in individualistic societies. However, the reverse is also true. Failure to tap into the interests of the relevant stakeholder groups will create an even higher degree of resistance. Even though the resistance may be passive, it will be difficult to overcome.

Conclusion

Based upon this preliminary analysis, the Southeast Asian educational context appears to share both similarities and differences in the processes of educational reform and change with Western societies. At a broad level, most of the obstacles to successful education reform reported by scholars in the West also appeared on the lists generated by our informants. On the other hand, several obstacles (e.g., power gap, value mismatch) that emerged from our survey seemed different and possibly related to the region’s cultural context. Moreover, we suggested that even some of the obstacles that were ‘shared’ with Western societies could manifest themselves differently in the region.

This report was framed as a preliminary empirical effort to identify issues and propositions about educational change in the Southeast Asian context, rather than to draw firm conclusions. The empirical study of organizational and educational change is of great relevance internationally during this era of rapid policy-driven education reform (Carnoy, 2003). We suggest that its study in non-Western contexts has much to contribute to our theoretical understanding of change processes, as well as to the practical tasks of fostering successful change in schools both in Southeast Asia and throughout the world.

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ⁱ For the purposes of this paper, we include Hong Kong and Taiwan along with the traditional grouping of Southeast Asian or ASEAN nations. We do note, however, that Hong Kong and Taiwan are sometimes grouped with China, Korea and Japan and referred to as East Asian nations. While both are accurate, the distinction holds no particular importance for the analyses in this paper.

ⁱⁱ For example, China is so large as to be a case unto itself. Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Indonesia, while sharing many features in common with the five nations selected for this study differ significantly in their current economic and educational status. These societies are still working towards universal access to education and therefore can be considered to be at a different stage of educational development. The only other comparable country that we would have wished to include in the sample was Korea, but we lacked access to a comparable group of elite informants.