Presented at the Conference on Education Reform, Hanoi Vietnam December 2009
Submitted for review to School Leadership and Management, March 2010

Making Education Reform Happen:

Is There an "Asian" Way?

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Abstract

This paper presents a descriptive analysis of education reform in selected Southeast Asian nations between 1995 and 2004. It reports the results of a convenience survey of scholars and educational leaders involved in education reform in Thailand, Malaysia, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. The paper addresses two main questions:

1. What have been the main obstacles to education reform in Southeast Asia?
2. Is there anything uniquely Asian about the process of educational reform and change in the Southeast Asian region?

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. The author links these differences in obstacles to a cultural explanation of educational change. The paper makes several general recommendations concerning leadership for reform in the region and proposes issues for more systematic future study of reform implementation.

We live during an era in which the pace and scope of economic, social and political change are unprecedented (Drucker, 1995; Naisbitt, 1997). The same global change forces manifest in North America and Europe arguably have had an even greater impact in Southeast Asia (Cheng, 2003; Ohmae, 1995; Rowher, 1995). The economic crisis of 1997 in Asia was a salient example of what happens when the gap between the pace of economic growth and the development of educational, political and governmental systems grew too large. In the ensuing decade, the link between educational development and economic growth took on enhanced importance for East Asia's policymakers. Subsequent policy research affirmed a strong relationship between educational attainment and societal economic growth (Levin, Belfield, Muennig, & Rouse, 2006; Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2002).

> 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)

The momentum behind education reform, which moved to the forefront of public policy agendas in Southeast Asia during the mid-1990s, was further bolstered by these findings. Notably, however, the platform of the region's education policy reforms– school-based management, curriculum standards, parent participation, student-centered learning -- was largely borrowed from Western societies. Yet Southeast Asia represents a very different cultural and institutional context for the implementation of these Western reforms (Cheng, 2003; Dimmock & Walker, 1998, 2005). Traditions of rote learning, teacher-directed

instruction, and highly centralized administration of schools evolved in this region with a strength that differs significantly from Western societies. For example, as Shaw observed:

> 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)

Moreover, the social values embedded in these traditional educational practices had been widely cited as ingredients that explained the region's educational and economic success (Gopinathan, & Kam, 2000; Hallinger, 2004). These contextual features set the stage for our inquiry into implementation of education reform in Southeast Asia.

The purpose of this paper is to examine what we have learned about education reform from the experience of several of the most rapidly developing Southeast Asian nations over the past 15 years. The paper addresses the broad question, "Is there anything uniquely 'Asian' about the process of educational reform and change in the Southeast Asian region?" This analysis of Southeast Asian educational reform draws upon a purposive survey of selected educational leaders and scholars in Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Thailand, and Taiwan. The perceptions of these 'elite informants' on the process of education reform in the region is framed by reference to conceptual models related to both national culture (Hofstede 1991; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1997) and organizational change (Hall & Hord, 2002; Kotter, 1996; Kotter & Cohen, 2002).

An Overview of Education Reform in Southeast Asia

Educational development has been a key component of the national development strategies among Southeast Asian nations. For example, Singapore has become known world-wide for the government-led transformation of its society between 1960 and 2000. As Singaporeans proudly observe, their economic prosperity has been achieved without any natural resources other than their location and their people. Thus, they attribute their rapid economic development largely to successful efforts to take advantage of human capital in their society (Naisbitt, 1997; Rohwer, 1996). During the late 1990's, Singapore's schools adopted a new mission, *thinking schools, a learning society*, thereby emphasizing the connection between learning in schools and sustainable societal development (Gopinathan & Kam, 2000).

Malaysia has similarly become recognized for its human capital-based approach to national development. Starting in the 1980's, Malaysia implemented an ambitious national development plan, *Vision 2020*, which identified key targets Malaysia would need to achieve in order to reach developed nation status by the year 2020. *Vision 2020* is founded on an assumption that economic and social progress must be grounded in educational development. The nation's education reform strategy implemented over the past 20 years includes virtually all of the "global reforms" that have become part of the common language of education policymakers around the world.

As much as anywhere in the world, Hong Kong society has undergone transformative social, political and educational changes over the past 20 years (Cheng, 1995; Cheng & Walker, 2008; Dimmock & Walker, 1998; Hallinger, 1998). Complementing these social trends has been a redefinition of educational 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. In order to address these new educational goals, Hong Kong has implemented school based-management, education quality assurance, ICT, student-centered learning reforms, integrated curriculum, new language policies and more (Cheng & Walker, 2008).

We have observed a similar pattern of educational reform and change across the region. Observers unfamiliar with the history of the Southeast Asia might consider this regional convergence of education policy reforms as natural, but it is not. In fact, the nations of Southeast Asia have traditionally had less interchange on education policy with one another than with the economically developed nations of North America and Europe.

Despite this picture of widespread educational reform in the region, observers have noted that changes in educational practices seldom match the pace of change in political rhetoric and policy adoption (Cuban, 1990; Fullan, 2001. In the words of 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 untouched" (1995, p. 30). While this observation applies throughout the world, this paper contends that education reform in Southeast Asia faces special challenges. These derive from a mismatch between the nature of the reforms and the cultural contexts in which they are being implemented (Hallinger, 2004). Understanding the process that has ensued as nations in the region have sought to reform their education systems represents the focus of this paper.

Research Focus and Method

Thailand, Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Malaysia were selected for inclusion in the study because they share commonality in terms of level and pace of economic, political and social development. The author collected data from a sample of elites consisting of scholars and educational leaders who had been intimately involved in the process of education reform in their nations between 1995 and 2007. A purposive sample was selected from elite informants who had been involved in the implementation of education reforms in each of the societies.

The researcher proceeded to collect data in two rounds. In the first round of data collection, he sent email surveys to 35 participants divided equally across the five countries. This resulted in 28 responses. In order to maintain an even response rate across nations, a total of 18 additional respondents were contacted. The final sample consisted of 40 respondents spread almost evenly across Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Taiwan and Hong Kong.

The survey consisted of several open-ended questions soliciting respondents' perceptions of reform obstacles and strategies that emerged in the Southeast Asian nations over the past decade. In addition the respondents were queried about ways in which the respondents felt reform implementation had been influenced by culture. The survey was designed to yield preliminary perceptions and propositions about educational change and reform in Southeast Asia. This paper focuses primarily upon the obstacles to reform and the impact of culture on implementation.

The responses were collected and analyzed in terms of trends within and across countries for each of the three questions. Selected frameworks related to organizational change

were then used to illuminate patterns in the obstacles and strategies that characterized the implementation of educational reforms across the five countries. Finally, the convergence of these patterns was used to address the central question of the research concerning an Asian approach to educational reform.

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 (Evans, 1996; Fullan, 2001; Hall & Hord, 2002; Kotter, 1996; Kotter & Cohen, 2002; McLaughlin, 1990; O'Toole, 1995).

Table 1 presents the key obstacles to successful 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 the 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 notable. Respondents from Singapore did identify obstacles related to the nature of reform goals and the uses of power. However, other obstacles related to ownership, preparation and resources did not

seem as significant in the eyes of the Singaporean respondents. This may be explained by a combination of several contextual differences in Singapore including size, political stability, the duration of education reform, and economic wealth.

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, 1993, 2001; Kotter, 1996; O'Toole, 1996). For example, compare this table with a list of common errors encountered during organizational change compiled by Kotter (1996).

- 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. (Kotter, 1996, p. 6)

Despite these similarities, there were also obstacles that might not appear on a list of change obstacles generated by respondents in the United States or England (e.g., cultural clash, power gap, surface changes). However, more significant than differences in the *types of obstacles* were *differences in their character as presented in practice*. That is, the manner in which the predictable change obstacles appeared as well as their strength may be different in these Southeast Asian nations. We highlight several of these in order to illustrate these differences.

Unclear, Multiple Goals and Lack of Stakeholder Buy-in

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 top-down initiation as well as the consequences were noted.

> 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)

The initiation of education reform in Southeast Asia is often heralded by announcements of broad policy goals, such as 'teachers will adopt student-centered learning.' The pursuit of vaguely defined, multiple goals runs counter to the prescriptions of management theorists. Indeed, goal clarity has long been considered the first step towards producing results. Yet in the field of education, a lack of goal clarity has been linked to the absence of a proven methodology for achieving results. If one cannot reliably predict the outcomes of the working processes, goal clarity will only make it easier to show evidence of failure (Weick, 1982).

Thus, paradoxically, the adoption of multiple ambiguously defined goals reduces uncertainty by making it easier to redefine success as needed during implementation. Indeed, as Meyer and Rowan (1978) pointed out, in many domains of public

administration showing evidence of *effort, processes, and procedures* is more important than showing *results*. In these "institutionalized" domains of work, adopting institutionally-validated process actually substitutes for results. These observations would appear to apply in Southeast Asia as the following section elaborates.

Pursuit of Surface Changes

Another obstacle concerns the emphasis on surface changes in school practice. The prevalence of this trend in this region can be linked to the collectivist nature of Southeast Asian societies in which maintenance of harmony and face take precedence over performance results (Dimmock & Walker, 2005; Hofstede, 1991; Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1995; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1997). Surface indicators generated on checklists are officially accepted as proof of success. This pursuit of surface change maintains the face of all involved, especially in an enterprise where the technologies for achieving the deeper reforms are difficult to specify and implement (Meyer & Rowan, 1978).

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 an example of Kotter's (1996) error of "declaring victory too soon." 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)

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, 2001). 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)

Lack of a systems perspective towards reform can also lead to significant coordination problems during implementation of change (Fullan, 2001). Change overload and intensification not only sap the energy and motivation of those who must implement the reforms, but they also introduce contradictions into the system (Cheng & Walker, 2008).

It is often the case that newly implemented innovations conflict with past practices thereby producing inefficiencies and confusion. People become unsure of their roles and responsibilities. Lack of clarity leads to frustration and increased resistance (Evans, 1996). The pace and scope of reform adoption in the past decade have over-reached the capacity of the education systems for effective implementation.

> 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)

Just as debilitating is the conflict that occurs among the new policy reforms themselves. In the recent era, education reforms have traveled around the global far from their points of origin. A global network of policymakers feeding at the same table of reform innovations finds the whole buffet to their taste. These are brought home where they must be digested by practitioners. As a consequence, the process of reform has led to the piecemeal implementation of reforms without careful consideration of how the "new pieces of the puzzle" fit together (Cheng & Walker, 2008).

> In Malaysia ad-hoc arrangements [are made] without thinking of the implications for the total system, like the new approach to training future principals. The system operates on seniority, not meritocracy. This was not taken into consideration during the selection of teachers for administrative training. Thus after completion of the training, the system was unable to accept the would-be-principals since they were nowhere near the necessary zone of seniority for promotion. (Malaysian respondent)

> 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)

Power Gap Between Levels of the System

Confucian societies in Asia 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. 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, usually unquestioning, audience at the announcement of change initiatives (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 *greng 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)
>
> Lack of appreciation on the part of policy makers as to what reform means in terms of the effort required to change pedagogic habits is certainly an obstacle. Policymakers are strong on rationales, and the necessity for change. Teachers on the other hand have to cover content, prepare students

> for high stakes examinations in the midst of which they have to learn new pedagogies. (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."

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 at all stages of implementation and explains the "lack of initiative" 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 with respect to the institutionalization of change (Fullan, 2001; Hall & Hord, 2002; Kotter, 1996).

This observation can be also linked directly to the frequency of changes in senior leadership roles. 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 since 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

This obstacle is not unique to Asia. The development of new knowledge and skills among staff is necessary for the successful implementation of most innovations (Hall & Hord, 2002; Joyce & Showers, 2002). However, with the exception of Singapore, 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 necessary capacity needed to foster effective implementation is often absent within the system.

For example, following passage of the national education reform act in 1999, a key policymaker, 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 other countries reflected a similar attitude among system policymakers.

> [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. Improved systems of communication and transportation have resulted in the development of an international community of education policymakers. 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 the 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" often get lip service, but less often is there any substantial adaptation of the innovation (Dimmock & Walker, 1998, 2005). Such considerations are even more important when seeking to transplant the innovation from a Western to an Eastern culture. As suggested in discussions of several reform obstacles, differences in cultural values and norms influence the receptivity of practitioners to reforms as well as how long it will take to change past behaviors.

Take the case of student-centered learning approaches. These are completely "foreign" to Asian teachers. The concept that students can learn without directed instruction from the teacher seems to them on initial consideration positively absurd. Not only their experience, but also their cultural upbringing moderates their receptivity. The idea that students can learn from each other or from relatively uneducated community members conflicts with deeply held cultural assumptions. When this is coupled with the lower level of resources devoted to quality training, 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)

Analysis of Educational Change Process in Southeast Asia

Thus far we have examined the perceptions of a group of elite informants concerning the obstacles encountered in the process of education reform in their Southeast Asian societies over the past 15 years. Next we wish to consider whether there are features in the process of education reform and change in Southeast Asia that distinguish it from

findings reported in the Western literature. In this section, we analyze the reported change obstacles in light of conceptual frameworks on organizational change.

Stages of Organizational Change and the Process of Education Reform

Kotter (1996) developed a useful description of eight stages in the organizational change process (see Figure 1). He describes these as necessary, overlapping stages in which people pass individually and collectively during the process of organizational change. Figure 1 further suggests that the process of change is not linear in nature, but rather has "ups and downs" as people struggle to make sense of the change and learn how to implement it in practice (Fullan, 1993, 2001). As Kotter (1996; Kotter & Cohen, 2002) and others have noted, organizational change is a long process (Drucker, 1995; Hall & Hord, 2002). Scope, complexity and scale of the change implementation all impact on the time frame for success (Fullan, 1993, 2001).

A second conceptual framework is the *Concerns-Based Adoption Model* (*CBAM*) developed by Hall and Hord (2002). Based upon extensive longitudinal research in schools, they formulated a five-stage model of educational change. The model posits five stages of change or levels of use of innovations: *Information, Interest, Preparation, Early Use and Routine Use*. At the Information Stage, people know little or nothing about the change; either they are unconcerned with it or wish to know more about it. During the Interest Stage, concerns center on understanding more about how the change will affect them and whether that they will be able to do it. Only after reaching the Preparation Stage in the change process do people become concerned with learning how to use or manage the change. The Early Use Stage is when people actually begin to use the new methods and confront the difficulties of putting their new learning into practice. During the

Routine Use Stage people have become comfortable with the new skills, methods or practices, and their concerns shift towards how they can increase the impact of the change (Hall & Hord, 2002).

This model suggests several key propositions. First, it asserts that people only change *after their concerns or needs related to the proposed change have been met*. Second, it suggests that the nature of these concerns within any group of people will differ based upon a range of factors including personality, past experience and education, skills and knowledge related to the change, and more. Third, the concerns of people will differ at various points in the change process. Fourth, passage through these stages tends to be sequential in nature. Fifth, like Kotter (1996), Hall and Hord (2002) contend that the failure to meet the concerns of an earlier stage will often impede progress through subsequent stages.

Used in tandem, these two models provide a powerful conceptual lens for viewing the change obstacles encountered in Southeast Asian educational reform. Table 2 allocates the most common obstacles noted by the respondents (see Table 1) to the stages of change encompassed in these models.

Insert Table 2 about here

It should be noted that some of the obstacles appear in more than one stage. For example *Lack of Stakeholder Involvement* occurs as an obstacle in both the *Interest* and *Preparation* Stages. Similarly, this tendency to limit stakeholder involvement also affects the effort expended to *Develop a Guiding Coalition for Change* to *Create a Vision and Strategy* for change implementation. Other obstacles that are broader in description such

as the *Power Gap among Stakeholders* influence change implementation in significant but more diffuse ways. Thus, they appear in several stages.

Table 2 further suggests that education reform in the selected Southeast Asia countries has been most visibly hampered by obstacles during the *Interest* and *Preparation Stages*. Obstacles that occur during the *Interest Stage* result in key stakeholders withholding their support and commitment. In the terminology of Hall and Hord (2001), system leaders have failed to address the personal concerns of those responsible for putting the changes into practice. This creates resistance to change that tends to be expressed passively rather than overtly and leads to reform break down during the *Preparation Stage*. Principals and teachers are sent to workshops for which they may have little interest and return to their schools with minimal motivation or support for actual implementation. With this in mind, it is no surprise that schools have been referred to as *graveyards of partially implemented innovations*.

Is there an Asian Way in Educational Reform?

The respondents were also queried about whether they believed that the obstacles to reform in their Southeast Asian nations could be considered uniquely Asian. Common responses 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. However, the responses suggest that the strategy as implemented in the region differs in character and execution. The large power distance that characterizes the cultures of South Southeast Asia creates respect for authority and a passive receptivity to change. 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. This may explain why Table 2 showed so few obstacles to change at the *Information Stage*.

However, as Tables 1 and 2 also suggest, this passive acceptance does not necessarily translate into higher engagement in actual change. Cultural norms of power distance as well as collectivism (Hofstede, 1991; Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1995; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1997) create tendencies to avoid public dissent and to 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. As noted in Table 2, there is in fact a process of consensus building that over time modifies the top-down proposals for change. However, this typically only occurs *after* the change has stalled due to lack of local understanding and support.

This recalls McLaughlin's (1991) observation that, "You can't mandate what matters to people." This helps to explain why so many of "Asian" obstacles occur at the *Interest Stage* when people's concerns center less on the system's or nation's needs for change and more on how the proposed changes will affect them personally.

Large power distance breeds a cultural tendency for Southeast Asian leaders to lead by *fiat* and to focus more on "telling" staff the goals and 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 the pressure to them constantly" (Hallinger, Chantarapanya, Sriboonma, & Kantamara, 1999). This response suggests that the strategy of telling teachers to "do it" is not a complete strategy even within the traditional culture.

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 will tend to 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 sparked they can provide even greater force and momentum for change than in the West. 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.

Conclusions

This paper proposed two goals. The first was to report perceptions of the process of education reform and change from the perspectives of selected policymakers and scholars. The second was to explore whether there is anything uniquely 'Asian' about the process of change and reform in this region.

In the first part of the paper we noted that there was a commonality among the selected countries in the obstacles they have faced in the implementation of educational reforms. While many of these were similar to those reported in the Western literature, we suggested that the character and strength of the obstacles might differ in East Asia. We proposed a cultural explanation that highlighted collectivism and power distance as possible reasons for these differences.

Attempts to bring about reform to education systems Southeast Asia have encountered all of the obstacles reported in Western nations (e.g., Caldwell, 1998; Fullan, 2001). This

confirms the observation that resistance to change is a natural aspect of human nature and conditioning (Drucker, 1995; Evans, 1996; Fullan, 2001). As O'Toole (1995) has noted:

> A world in which change is the rule would be characterized by chaos, leading to social collapse. Therefore, a society must have one foot permanently on the brake; it must have a pre-disposition to tradition and conservatism. (p. 12)

This perspective suggests that "uncertainty avoidance" is a human tendency. However, research has found that there is both individual (Rogers, 1971) and societal variation on this tendency to avoid uncertainty (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1997; Hofstede, 1991). Asian societies have been categorized as tending towards higher uncertainty avoidance (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1997; Hofstede, 1991). As suggested in the prior section, obstacles such as lack of goal clarity and the pursuit of surface changes can be traced to uncertainty avoidance. Even the tendency to copy reforms from abroad reduces uncertainty by working with an already "legitimated" model. While this is not uniquely Asian, one can see how a need to reduce uncertainty could reinforce a tendency to seek out and adopt "foreign" reforms regardless of whether they are suitable in the local culture.

Although advocates for social change often propose as education as a tool for changing attitudes in societies, it is also the case that education is fundamentally a process of cultural transmission. Local educational practices tend to reflect the values and traditions of the given society, recalling Tyack and Hansot's (1982) observation that schools are the society's museum of virtue. As such change in educational practices will be slow and follow, not lead, changes in the society at large. Thus, proposed changes in classroom curriculum and teaching mirror broader changes in decision-making at the school system level, and patterns of citizen participation in the society as a whole. Therefore, students,

teachers, administrators and parents together face the challenge of changing deeply embedded mental models before they can implement these practices successfully.

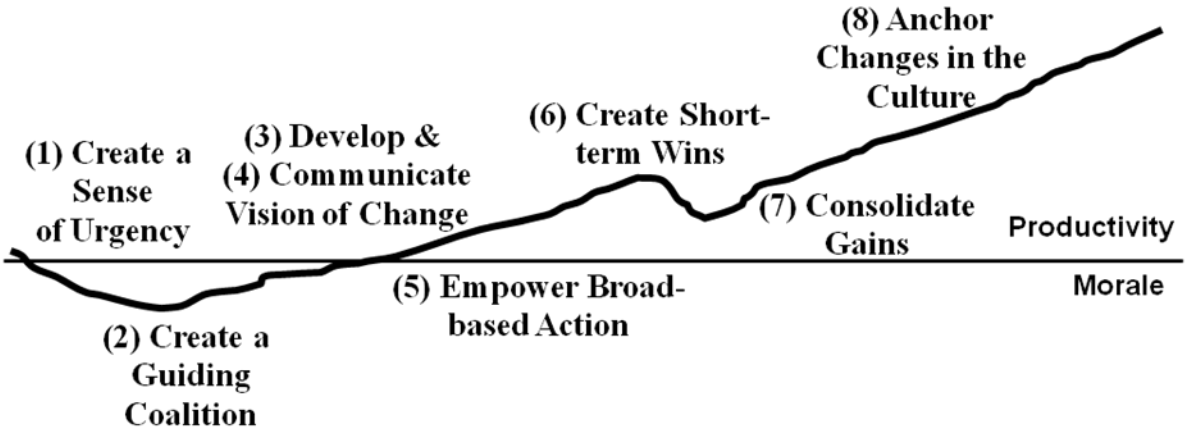

Figure 1:
Kotter's Model of the Change Process

Table 1: Obstacles to Education Reform in Southeast Asia					
Obstacles	**Thailand**	**Malaysia**	**Singapore**	**Hong Kong**	**Taiwan**
Unclear Goals			X	X	X
Changing Goals			X	X	
Clash of Values between Culture and Reforms	X	X		X	X
Lack of Systemic Perspective	X	X		X	
Lack of Commucation of Vision	X	X		X	X
Lack Stakeholder Involvement and Ownership of Change	X	X		X	
Lack Coordination in Implementation	X	X		X	X
Change in Leaders during Implementation	X			X	
Fear loss of Power	X	X	X		
Power Gap between Levels	X	X	X		
Implement Surface Changes and Ignore Deeper Reforms	X	X		X	
Preparation of Staff: Readiness and Skills	X	X		X	
Lack of Resources	X	X			X
Lack Research Base for Change	X			X	X

Table 2: Asian Reform Obstacles by Stages of Change								
Hall's Change Stages*	**Information Stage**		**Interest Stage**		**Preparation Stage**	**Early Use Stage**	**Routine Use**	
Kotter's Change Stages**	**Create Sense Urgency**	**Develop Guiding Coalition**	**Create Vision & Strategy**	**Communicate Vision**	**Empower Broad-based Action**	**Create Small Wins**	**Consolidate Change**	**Anchor Changes**
Reform Obstacles	Power Gap	Lack Stakeholder Involvement	Lack Stakeholder Involvement	Lack Comm of Vision	Fear Loss of Power	Lack Resources	Frequent Change of Leaders	
		Power Gap	Changing Goals	Value Mismatch	Lack Coordination	Lack Research base	Lack Research base	Lack Research base
			Unclear Goals	Pursue Easy Changes	Lack of Staff Preparation			
			Power Gap	Power Gap	Power Gap			
			Lack Systems Perspective		Lack Resources			
			Lack Research base					

* Hall & Hord, 2001; ** Kotter, 1996

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