School Reform, Culture and School Leaders in Asia
Understanding the Connection

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Abstract: Empirical studies on school reform have indicated the need to explore change process taking place during reform in relation to its socio-cultural contexts. The Western framework of change process is seen to have limited cultural validity when applied in different contexts. In Asian contexts, socio-culture has a main influence in defining successful implementation of reform efforts. In addition, empirical studies have shown that school leaders do have an important role in making school reform happen by creating structural and socio-cultural processes that develop the capacity of schools for improvement. In brief, it can be said that there is a close connection among school reform, culture, and school leaders. This article tries to explain the influence of culture on school reform efforts in Asia and how such circumstance affects the role of school leaders.

1 INTRODUCTION

These past decades have witnessed consistent and global efforts by educational policy makers to reform schools. These reform efforts aim to improve school effectiveness to provide better learning for students (Leithwood and Day, 2008; Pont et al., 2008; Robinson, 2010). The OECD defines school reform as a change in learning conditions and other related internal conditions through a systematic, sustained effort to accomplish educational goals more effectively (Velzen et al., 1985). This definition implies that the reform qualifies if changes happen at school as a whole and to all aspects such as structures, processes, and climate, which lead to a pedagogical change (Dalin, 2005). School reform is also described as a strategy to enhance student outcomes (Hopkins et al., 1994). Those definitions above imply that school reform is about raising student achievement through providing quality education.

2 SCHOOL REFORM IN GLOBAL CONTEXT

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To achieve the desired quality education, many governments around the world have redefined their approaches to reform schools. In some parts of the world, centralization of education has re-emerged. Countries such as Australia, previously known for their strong practices of decentralization, have become more centralized. In other parts of the world, there has been a noticeable resurgence of education decentralization. Countries which used to be centralized like Indonesia are now implementing policies of decentralization. These changing approaches to reforming schools have brought significant development in the field of education. The most obvious to notice is the redefinition of authority given to schools, resulting in a balanced and distributed role between central government and local

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schools in both decentralized and centralized systems (Dalin, 2005). Democratization of school systems through stronger participation of school stakeholders in school decision-making and the simplification and de-bureaucratization of school administrations are the tangible proof of the shared role (Dalin, 2005).

Although the literature systematically examining the processes and outcomes of school reform efforts has grown enormously over the past decades, there has been very little direct observational data to document how schools change from being less to more effective in educating their students (McDougall et al., 2007). The empirical basis for understanding the actual process of school reform is very limited. Few studies have examined the effects of reform models within experimental or quasi-experimental research designs that would provide clear conclusions about the effects of reform models on student learning outcomes. Even fewer studies have looked directly at the process of reform to examine prospectively the dynamics of leading school reform (McDougall et al., 2007). Without detailed knowledge of how schools change, the knowledge about why school reform efforts obtain the results they do will remain incomplete (Desimore, 2002; McDougall et al., 2007).

In addition to the shortage of empirical studies on how schools improve their learning performance and how reform models affect student outcomes, there is also the concern of existing bias in the conclusions of the empirical studies. Most published research has been done in countries where English is a common language and research on schools has been systematically organized in databases for years. The presentation of results from the conducted research can be biased and subjective to these contexts (Dalin, 2005). More importantly, the Western framework is seen to have a limitation of cultural validity when applied in different contexts (Cravens and Hallinger, 2012; Hallinger and Kantamara, 2000). This condition has led to the need to conduct more research on an international scale to get cross-cultural studies on school reform. Once this is accomplished, further progress to understand school reform can be done (Dalin, 2005).

3 SCHOOL REFORM, LEADERSHIP, AND SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT

The implementation of school reform has brought a substantial recognition of effective school leadership practices in managing school change. Effective school leadership has been described as a powerful medium in making reform efforts possible (Leithwood et al., 2008). Accumulating research evidence has shown a growing confidence in the role of effective school leadership as a key to both continuous improvement and major system transformation in schools (Bush, 2003; Leithwood and Riehl, 2003; Southworth, 2005). School reform requires the presence of effective school leadership as it facilitates mediating variables such as teacher motivation, classroom activities, school culture and organizational direction, all of which affect teaching and learning and influence student outcomes (Chapman, 2003; Day et al., 2008; Harris, 2008, 2002).

Empirical studies have shown that school leaders have an important role in making school reform happen by creating structural and socio-cultural processes that develop the capacity of schools for improvement (Chen, 2008; Fullan, 2007; Hallinger and Heck, 2010). Effective school leadership defines school capacity for reform through the development of a set of structural and socio-cultural processes (Chen, 2008; Robinson et al., 2008; Southworth, 2002). Such leadership is required to face the dynamic complexity of school reform and it cannot be reduced by mechanisms such as committees, standardized operating procedures, or participative decision-making (Chen, 2008). As change agents, school leaders develop school capacity to manage change and increase organizational productivity to restructure schools (Chen, 2008; Fullan, 2007; Hallinger and Kantamara, 2000). Their role is of importance, despite current trends toward emergent models of relational leadership such as facilitative and transformative (Fullan, 2007; Leithwood et al., 1999).

For reform to take place, change is introduced and implemented to all school aspects and incorporates other factors that may determine desired pedagogical improvement (Dalin, 2005). Therefore, to initiate school reform, a holistic approach should develop and connect all levels of the internal system to the external system that they interact with (Elmore, 2000). In addition, reform depends not only on the educational context of a certain effort, but also on wider contexts of political, social, economic, cultural and demographic factors (OECD Report, 1989 cited in Dalin, 2005) and requires a collaborative process between the schools and their wider communities (Sergiovanni, 2001; Dalin et al., 1994). Therefore, the focus of school reform efforts should be derived from contextual factors existing within a given school at a

given time (Ainscow and West, 2006; Harris and Chrispeels, 2006). These context-specific characteristics will determine successful implementation of reform efforts (Datnow et al., 2002; Elmore, 2000; Harris, 2008).

4 SCHOOL REFORM IN ASIAN CONTEXT

There has been a growing need to conduct comparative study of education systems between Western and Eastern contexts (Chen, 2008; Cheng, 2000; Cravens and Hallinger, 2012; Hallinger, 2010; Hallinger and Heck, 2010; Hallinger and Kantamara, 2000; Sofo et al., 2012). Such need is driven by the remarkable achievement of students from particular Asian countries (Cravens and Hallinger, 2012; Sofo, et al., 2012). Result of PISA 2015 shows contries such as Singapore, Japan, Taiwan, Macao, Viet Nam, Hong Kong, and South Korea have continue to be the top performers above OECD average particularly in mathematics and sciences (Cravens and Hallinger, 2012; OECD, 2016). Therefore, there has been an accumulating research interest in exploring the role of school leadership in educational change in Asian context.

Although there are some similarities of educational reform across West and East, Asian context is quite disctinctive in relation to its socio-culture. Two key cultural challenges of school reform in Asia are power gaps and value mismatches (Cravens and Hallinger, 2012; Hallinger and Heck, 2010). Large power gaps can serve to accelerate change in some circumstances, through enhanced compliance or take-up of initiatives; but this may not be the case when the reforms are more complex and require a greater degree of autonomy (Hallinger and Heck, 2010; Hallinger and Kantamara, 2000). Although the reform policies and programs have tried to accommodate the strengths of West cultures into Asian traditions, some inherent cultural influences are difficult to eliminate from the tensions that emerge from some of the educational policies and introduced programs (Ee and Seng, 2008).

The initiative of school reform in Asia is primarily driven by the proposition that educational reform has to feature a multicultural education format that can transform curricular content and process (Banks and Banks, 2004; Nieto, 2002). The students are expected to be able to surpass ethnic identity, self-concept, and personal viewpoint about life and create attitudes that would make them more tolerant to new experiences

and help develop broader perspectives (Nieto, 2002). Empirical studies have confirmed that the ability of school leaders to create socio-cultural processes is crucial to developing school capacity for academic improvement (Fullan, 2007; Hallinger and Heck, 2010; Leithwood et al., 1999). In Asian contexts, school leaders need to be competent in leading various polarized students from diverse and culturally ethnocentric societies (Malakolunthu, 2009). For any large scale change or transformation programs, this competence becomes paramount for the achievement of the necessary results (Malakolunthu, 2009).

Scholars have argued for a more holistic understanding of the cultural factors at play in educational reform, suggesting that any framework should specifically account for societal, community, school, and classroom influences (Cheng, 2000; Sofo, et al., 2012). Cultural norms provide those in the leadership level with more significant positions, power and informal authority and the opportunity to catalyze and sustain the change process (Cheng, 2000; Chen, 2008; Hallinger and Heck, 2010; Hallinger and Kantamara, 2000). However, the obligation to comply with this culturally-embedded power and authority can create surface politeness and passive resistance among staff (Hallinger and Heck, 2010; Hallinger and Kantamara, 2000). Therefore, it becomes important for leaders to transform cultural norms by reducing the power distance between them and their followers to initiate stimulus for change (Hallinger and Kantamara, 2000).

There are four identified tensions that are intrinsic in the Asian education system: diversity versus uniformity in school choice, national syllabi and examinations; autonomy versus control on quality assurance; innovation versus conservation where academic performance remains a measure of success built in a drilling and testing environment; and equity versus elitism in the implementation of meritocracy and absence of affirmative action policies, resulting in ethnic-based preferential treatment both socio-economically and educationally (Tan, 2007). The implications for school leaders will depend on their ability to make judgments on moral issues as education becomes more complex and schools are to work close to the boundaries of established rules and values (Ee and Seng, 2008). As there will be more predicaments and trade-offs in the education system, managing educational reform requires a delicate balancing act (Ee and Seng, 2008). Leaders must be thoughtful in exercising autonomy intelligently to ensure that the educational foundations are firm (Ee and Seng, 2008).

5 CONCLUSIONS

Nevertheless, empirical studies have shown that the dynamic complexity of school reform in Asian contexts signifies the importance of leadership and skilled leaders (Hallinger and Heck, 2010; Sofo et al., 2012). This requirement cannot be reduced by mechanisms such as committees, standardized operating procedures, or participative decision-making (Chen, 2008).Research has suggested that skilled school leaders are more likely to be able to initiate school change and make their reform efforts successful (Chen, 2008). A key conclusion is that understanding the nuances of reform in a non-Western context has much to teach us about the immense influence of culture and the embedded roles of leaders within the culture.

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