Globalisation and culture

Tension in educational policy reform

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Trends towards the globalisation and internationalisation of educational reform are characterised by the export of ideas and policies from some countries, such as Britain, the United States and Australia, and their importation into other societies, such as Hong Kong and Singapore. This phenomenon raises issues regarding the appropriateness and synchrony of the policy reforms for the host societies importing them. In the clamour to recognise the phenomenon of globalisation in education, relatively little attention has so far been given to the extent to which the policy-exporting and policy-importing societies differ, especially in their cultural contexts. This paper argues that while policy reforms in the international arena become more convergent, and while policy makers at the same time ignore the specific conditions of local cultural contexts, the likelihood of securing successful transformation of school systems becomes more remote. Our arguments are explicated using the educational policy arena of Hong Kong.

While it is acknowledged that societal cultures themselves undergo change, albeit slowly and at variable rates, their core elements often prove remarkably resistant to ‘globalised’ forces mostly associated with western and specifically American influences. Thus, Hong Kong, despite 150 years of British colonial rule, and exposure to American media and multi-national companies, still retains a distinctly Chinese culture. Its people are able to graft more recently imported ‘western’ habits on to deeply-ingrained and traditional Chinese customs, values and ways of life. In fundamental areas, however, such as interpersonal relations and communication, deeply entrenched values tend to remain intact.

‘Culture’ is defined in the current context as the values, customs, traditions and ways of life which distinguish one group of people from another. This definition aligns with that of Hofstede (1991), a noted authority on culture, who defines culture as, “patterns of thinking, feeling and acting” underpinning “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another” (pp.4-5). The “collective programming of the mind” refers to shared beliefs, values and practices of a group of people, whether that group be a society, nation state or organisation. We agree with Hofstede that culture is learned, not inherited, and that societal and organisational cultures are qualitatively different concepts. We particularly agree with his assertion that there is a need to develop cultural dimensions to compare and to measure cultures (see Dimmock & Walker, 1998a, 1998b).
While it is acknowledged that culture is not the only contextual factor – politics, economics, and religion may also play important parts in affecting the outcomes of policy reforms – it is, nevertheless, a much-neglected concept in educational policy analysis, especially at the societal rather than organisational level. Of the three stages of policy-making – formulation, adoption and implementation – it is the last of these – policy implementation – where the influence of the host system and particularly its cultural conditions are most felt. The formulation and adoption of policy reforms on a global and international scale – involving a convergence of educational policy heavily focused on decentralisation, accountability and school-based management – is best understood by the relative absence of alternatives to those generated by mostly Anglo-American countries, and the attraction for importing education systems of completing the formulation and adoption stages in as little time as possible. Moreover, support for the policies is gained by appeal to their international status, a process whereby policy-importers are seen to be up with the latest trends and fads. It is at the implementation stage, however, that the diversity of host societal cultures will continue to present major difficulties, especially for school practitioners charged with operationalising policies formulated in very different contexts. More sceptically, the appropriateness and efficacy of some of the policies is even questioned for the countries in which they have originated.

This paper explores the globalisation of educational policy reform and the ‘culturalisation’ of policy implementation in host societies. In particular, it examines the juxtaposition between policy reforms which assume predominantly Anglo-American values and traits, and their appropriateness for the Chinese society of Hong Kong. It argues that as educational policy reform becomes more globalised, there is a need to examine how societal culture influences education policy into practice. In order to research this theme, there is a need to conceptualise the field by developing models and frameworks to identify key issues and to assist in their analysis. The paper outlines an approach in this direction. Firstly, it presents a well-established model of cultural dimensions – by Hofstede (1980, 1991) – which enables major differences between Anglo-American and Asian cultures, such as that of Hong Kong, to be distinguished. Secondly, the paper offers a critique of the Hofstede model. Thirdly, we exemplify our argument by reference to selected aspects of reform policy and their degree of ‘fit’ in the Hong Kong culture for the purpose of deciding which aspects of policy should be adopted, adapted or rejected. Finally, some conclusions are drawn about the relationship between ‘global’ policies emanating largely from Anglo-American societies and divergent cultures which adopt them.

HOFSTEDÉ'S MODEL OF CROSS-CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

For authentic comparisons and contrasts to be made between cultures, there is a need for acceptable definitions of the concept ‘culture’ and for generic dimensions which facilitate measurement or positioning of cultures in relation to each other. Dimensions occupy a central place in operationalising the construct of culture. At the same time, however, the dearth of research on cultural dimensions in educational administration led us to search the business management literature. There, we discovered a significant volume of mate-
rial on the significance of cultural and cross-cultural issues in the study of multinational corporations, international management and comparative management theory, all of which has occupied journal space for some 20 years (for a review of this literature, see Redding, 1994).

Leading scholars in comparative business management, while mindful of serious shortcomings in the theoretical, conceptual and methodological development of cross-cultural research, acknowledge the seminal contribution made by Hofstede (Redding, 1994). Indeed, the cultural dimensions uncovered by Hofstede (1980) in his first major study still gain general acceptance, and have, according to Redding (1994, p.324), acted as "a unifying and dominant" influence. Hofstede's work is based on three empirical studies covering large numbers of respondents in more than 50 countries and territories. After reviewing this literature carefully it appears that, while further refinement of Hofstede's dimensions is needed (indeed, Hofstede himself admits that the dimensions are not necessarily exhaustive), scholars in the business management field have so far generally failed to achieve this breakthrough.

Our conclusion is, therefore, that Hofstede's cultural dimensions provide the most appropriate starting point for examining the influence of societal culture on global policy reforms. Future developments, especially those arising from empirical field testing of his dimensions within educational administration, may well result in modifications. Indeed, our current work is aligned towards this end.

In earlier work, Hofstede (1980) identified four cultural dimensions applicable across all societies or nations. A fifth dimension has been added more recently. The dimensions, presented as choices between pairs of alternatives and empirically verifiable, facilitate the identification of patterns within and between cultures, and their meaningful ordering (Hofstede, 1980, 1995; also see Hofstede & Bond, 1984). The five dimensions are summarised below:

*Power distance (PD).* This refers to the distribution of power within society and its organisations. It is defined as the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally. More specifically, it concerns how the less powerful members in institutions and organisations perceive and cope with the inherent inequalities of power distribution (Westwood, 1992). A society's level of inequality is endorsed by the followers as much as by the leaders. As Hofstede (1991) admits, "all societies are unequal, but some are more unequal than others" (p.151). In societies with large PD values, greater inequalities of power distribution are expected and accepted in the family, in school and in the workplace. Thus, in the home, children are educated towards obedience to parents, whose authority is rarely questioned; in school, teachers are respected, learning is conceived as passed on by the wisdom of the teacher, and teacher-centered methods tend to be employed; and in the workplace, hierarchy means existential inequality, subordinates expect to be told what to do and the ideal boss is a benevolent autocrat, a kind 'father' figure. By contrast, families in small-PD societies encourage children to have a will of their own and to treat parents as
equals; in school, more student-centered methods are used, teachers enjoy less respect and learning is viewed as impersonalised truth; and in the workplace, hierarchy means an inequality of roles established for convenience, subordinates expect to be consulted and the ideal boss is a resourceful democrat. Many Asian societies are high-PD cultures, while many western societies have low-PD values.

**Individualism versus collectivism (IC).** This dimension is the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups and to which there is closeness between persons in a relationship. Vecchio (1995) describes it as the extent to which a person is ‘inner-directed’ or ‘other-directed’. In individualist societies, individuals place their personal goals above those of their in-group, the ties between individuals are loose, people are expected to look after themselves and their immediate families. In collectivist societies, people place group goals above their personal goals, they are brought up to be loyal to, and to integrate in, strong cohesive groups, which often include extended families. In individualist societies, people are driven by an ‘I’ consciousness and obligations to the self, including self-interest, self-actualisation and guilt; in the school, emphasis is placed on permanent education and learning how to learn; and in the workplace, values tend to be applied universally to all, other people are seen as potential resources, tasks prevail over relationships, and the employer-employee relationship is described as ‘calculative’. In collectivist societies, by contrast, family members are brought up with a ‘we’ consciousness, opinions are predetermined by the group, and strong obligations to the family emphasise harmony, respect and shame; at school, learning is viewed as an activity primarily for the young, and focuses on how to do things and on factual knowledge; and at the workplace, value standards differ for in-groups and out-groups, relationship prevails over task, and employer-employee relationships have a moral basis.

**Masculinity versus femininity (MF).** This dimension is concerned with the ways in which “biological differences between sexes become perpetuated in differences in social and organizational roles played by men and women” (Harrison, McKinnon, Panchapakesan & Leung, 1994, p.246). Westwood (1992, p.38) notes this as a troublesome dimension because of the chosen label and explains that “men and women in societies share these values”. According to Hofstede’s findings, there is less variation across different societies in women’s values in comparison with men’s. Men’s values range from very assertive and competitive and maximally different from women’s values in some societies, to modest and caring and similar to women’s values in others. Thus the gap between masculine and feminine values is most discernible in masculine societies because it is men who display maximal variation in gender values and roles. Even though women in masculine societies tend to reveal more assertiveness and competitiveness they do so to a lesser extent than men assume feminine values in predominantly feminine societies. The assertive pole is termed masculine and the modest, caring pole, feminine. In more masculine societies, family values stress achievement, competition and resolution of conflict by power and assertive-
ness; at school, norms are set by the best students, the system rewards academic achievement and failure at school is seen as serious; in the workplace, assertiveness is taken as a virtue; selling oneself, decisiveness and emphasis on career are all valued. By contrast, in feminine societies, the family places emphasis on relationship, solidarity and resolution of conflicts by compromise and negotiation; at school, norms tend to be set by the average students, system rewards reflect students’ social adaptation and failure at school is taken as unfortunate; in the workplace, assertiveness is not appreciated, people are expected to undersell themselves, and emphasis is placed on quality of life and intuition.

Uncertainty avoidance (UA). This dimension relates to how people react to, manage, cope with and tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity in their lives. It indicates the extent to which people in a society are culturally programmed to feel either comfortable or uncomfortable in unstructured situations, that is, situations which may be exceptional or unique and call for impromptu reactions and decisions. Uncertainty-avoiding cultures try to minimise the possibility of such situations by proliferating laws, rules and safety and security measures, and, on a philosophical and religious level, by believing in absolute truth. People in uncertainty-avoiding cultures tend to be more emotional and motivated by inner nervous energy. The opposite is true of people in uncertainty-accepting cultures. They are more tolerant of a range of different opinions, they prefer fewer rather than more rules, and, on the philosophical and religious level, are more relativist and tolerant of different faiths and creeds. Such people are more phlegmatic and contemplative, and less emotional. Families in strong uncertainty avoidance cultures display an intolerance for deviating behaviour, and display more stress, anxiety, aggression and emotion; at school, students are more comfortable with structured learning situations, precise objectives, detailed assignments and strict timetables, and teachers are expected to have all the answers; in the workplace, people have an emotional need for rules, whether written or unwritten, and more normalisation and standardisation. By contrast, in weak uncertainty-avoidance cultures, what is different is acceptable, and there is less tendency to display emotion or aggression; at school, students are comfortable with unstructured learning situations, vague objectives, broad assignments and flexible timetables, and it is acceptable for teachers to admit that they do not always know the answer; in the workplace, people have a dislike of rules and regulations, whether written or unwritten, and there is less formality and standardisation.

Long term versus short term orientation (LS). This fifth dimension was added to Hofstede’s original schema after research by Chinese scholars (The Chinese Culture Connection, 1987) and is less validated than the other dimensions. Values associated with long term orientation, such as thrift, perseverance and willingness to make short-term sacrifices for long-term gains, are counterbalanced by values associated with short term orientation, such as, respect for tradition, fulfilment of social obligations and protection of one’s ‘face’. Although many of these values are associated with Chinese (Confucian) values, they also seem to apply to societies with no Confucian heritage.
Many other studies (see Blunt & Richards, 1993; Erz & Earley, 1993; Triandis, 1993) support Hofstede’s findings that power-distance scores are high for Asian, Latin and African countries and smaller for Germanic societies. Western countries tend to be high on individualism, while eastern and less-developed societies are more collectivist (Bond & Hwang, 1986; Redding & Wong, 1986). Masculinity is high in some European countries, such as Germany, and also Japan, moderately high in Anglo-countries, such as Britain and Australia, low in Nordic countries and The Netherlands and moderately low in some Asian countries, such as Thailand. Uncertainty avoidance values are high in Japan and Germanic countries, and lower in Anglo and Chinese societies. Long term orientation is mostly found in East Asian societies, in particular, China, Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan and Korea, and has been widely cited as a factor conducive to economic growth in the last 30 years.

Some of the cultural characteristics shared by different societies trace back to historical antecedents. For example, the Chinese empire was centralised but it depended on powerful emperors and, at least in western terms, lacked a system of laws. In those countries once subject to Chinese rule, the mindset fostered by the empire is still reflected in large power distance, but medium-to-weak uncertainty avoidance. By contrast, a common and enduring central authority was never established to the same extent in Western Europe, including Britain, hence these separate civilisations tend to display smaller power distance.

While it was recognised earlier in the paper that Hofstede’s model is still regarded in the international business field as seminal, it does have flaws, as the following section argues.

A CRITIQUE OF THE HOFSTEDER MODEL

Hofstede’s model is open to the following criticisms. First, the model is some 20 years old, having originally been published in 1980. This may not of itself be a fatal flaw, since societal cultures tend to change slowly, if at all. Core values underpinning a culture tend to be more enduring than peripheral values. However, some cultures may change faster than others, and it is plausible that after 20 years some of Hofstede’s empirical findings on particular cultures – rather than the dimensions themselves – might have changed considerably.

A second criticism is that Hofstede’s study lacks grounding in the context of each nation sampled, particularly the degree to which the values and norms studied are historically embedded in social and institutional developments (Child, 1981; Trice & Beyer, 1993). Thirdly, a related problem concerns the sample and, in particular, its confinement to IBM employees. While the principle of sampling employees in different countries working for the same company has the attraction of comparing ‘like with like’ in each society (for example, people from the same socio-economic group and education), it is a restricted group on which to base a society’s representative set of cultural values. In addition, some critics might claim that because all of the people surveyed worked for a company (IBM) with a strong organisational culture – this may have biased the results on societal culture.
A fourth drawback is that it is focused on only four or five sets of values and thus may not be exhaustive - as Hofstede himself admits. A fifth weakness is the measurement of cultural values by questionnaires. This is deemed a problem for two reasons: one, to the degree that culture is implicit, respondents may not be fully aware of their values and ideologies and thus cannot report them accurately; and two, the method has biasing features - different respondents can have somewhat different understandings of the words used in the survey, leading to their minimising or exaggerating feelings or views on a numerical scale. In addition, researchers can impose their own conceptions on respondents by the questions which are asked and the ways those questions are worded.

A sixth problem concerns the absence of data on the levels of agreement across individuals in the same country: it is possible that people in multicultural societies, such as the USA, Canada and Australia, will exhibit prominent sub-cultural differences and therefore more than one pattern in their values. Thus, as Trice and Beyer (1993) note, "It is not clear whether the mean values reported are really accurate representations of collectively shared cultural values for whole countries" (p.338). Expressed another way, the more multicultural the society, the harder it becomes for a society's culture, as measured by the Hofstede dimensions, to embrace its people.

The seventh and final concern focuses on objection to the label applied as a descriptor of one of the dimensions, namely, 'masculinity - femininity'. In these postmodern times, not only is it probably better to avoid what some might regard as sexist language, but the descriptor does not in fact accurately capture the essence of the dimension, which centres on aggression, competitiveness and assertiveness, on the one hand, and care, affection and concern on the other.

Despite these criticisms, Hofstede's five cultural dimensions still remain, after some 20 years, as the most accepted cross-cultural framework yet published. His work in the field of cross-cultural and international business management is regarded as seminal. However, as the above discussion shows, there is a clear case to update his work, and there is a real need to generate and apply cross-cultural dimensions in educational administration and policy (see Dimmock & Walker, 1998a, 1998b). In the following section, we explore aspects of the relationship between globalised policy reform and societal culture, referring to the case of Hong Kong.

**JUDGING THE FIT BETWEEN GLOBALISED POLICY REFORM AND SOCIETAL CULTURE: THE CASE OF HONG KONG**

During the 1990s, the policy arena for reforming Hong Kong's school system has centred on three policies, all of which align with, and emanate from, similar policy initiatives taken in Anglo-American systems (see Dimmock, 1998, for a full account of the three policies). The policy documents make explicit reference to their Anglo-American-Australian origins. Two of the three policies - the School Management Initiative (SMI) (Education and Manpower Branch and Education Department, 1991) and Quality School Education (Education Commission Report, No.7 (ECR7) (1997) - relate to school-based management, the involvement of parents and teachers in school decision-making, the increase of school
accountability to the centre, and to school control over the allocation of financial resources. More recently, other measures have been added, including teacher appraisal and school evaluation, the latter based on performance indicators to gauge the ‘value added’ by the school. The third policy instrument – known as the Target-Oriented Curriculum (TOC) (1994) – is concerned with introducing a student-centred approach to teaching, learning and curriculum. Together, these three provide the policy formulation and adoption context within which Hong Kong schools are expected to undertake implementation. Below, we apply a process of deductive reasoning combined with research evidence to draw conclusions about the degree of fit between some of the measures and Hong Kong’s culture.

Principals’ leadership style

Hong Kong’s recent reform policies emphasise the need to build quality schools which maximise the ‘value added’ in regard to student learning, all within a framework of school-based management. This requires a task-oriented approach geared to instructional leadership and a greater awareness of, and catering to, individual student difference. Within a context of school-based management, flexible and proactive management are implied as desirable and essential qualities for school leadership. With the growing trend towards school-based management, schools themselves become more politicised, and principals consequently assume a more important role as managers of human resources and relationships.

However, recent research (Walker & Dimmock, 1999) reveals that many Hong Kong principals are not proactive managers and leaders of the instructional program, nor do they address issues related to human resource management. While Anglo-American school principals will often become involved in conflict management whenever important disputes between personnel arise, Walker & Dimmock (1999) found little such tendency among Hong Kong principals. Rather than get involved in sorting out the problematic issues underlying a dispute, Hong Kong principals tend to focus on preserving balance and harmony in relationships. Relationships are given precedence over tasks, and harmonious relationships over almost everything else. In a situation where they are expected to satisfy two or more conflicting individuals or groups, principals will invariably opt for a strategy which appeases that individual or group which has greater seniority, or enjoys an elevated position in the hierarchy. The result is what we term ‘surface harmony’. That is, on the surface, amicable relationships are preserved and ‘face’ is saved, but underneath the surface, the real and substantive problem may still be smouldering. As an apt description of such leadership and management in Chinese and Asian school settings, we have coined the phrase ‘harmony management’, in contrast with the Anglo-American notion of conflict management.

Teacher involvement in school decision-making

Both the SMI and ECR7 policy reforms in Hong Kong emphasise the need for greater teacher involvement and participation in school decision-making. They envision future schools being more open and democratic. Achieving such a transformation, however,
will present a major challenge for two reasons. First, many principals are unwilling to relinquish power which traditionally their culture has bestowed on them; and second, some teachers are only too willing to perpetuate the grip over school decision-making held by the principal. According to Hofstede (1991), Hong Kong, like most Asian societies, has a high-PD culture. School principals generally exercise greater authority and power over their teachers than do their counterparts in Anglo-American societies. Conversely, teachers are more willing to play subordinate roles and to let decisions made by principals go unchallenged, even where they disagree.

Position power exercised by Hong Kong principals illustrates how societal culture can serve to perpetuate traditional patterns of power and relationships long after new reform policies have sought to change the status quo. In this case, a policy measure aimed at redistributing power and influence in school communities – and emanating from an Anglo-American educational reform agenda – is tangential to traditional Chinese norms and institutional configurations.

*Parental involvement in school decision-making*

The SMI policy refers to the fact that very few schools have parent-teacher associations or parent representation on school management committees. It goes on to claim that close contact between schools and parents could foster more effective learning, and should be encouraged in all schools. The same point is repeated in ECR7. In low-PD cultures in the West, parents are inclined to see active participation in school affairs as a democratic right. Some parents, for example, sit on governing boards to select teachers and even help in classroom teaching. According to Hofstede (1980, 1991) parents in high-PD cultures, in deference to teachers, are more likely to leave the task of educating their children to the school. Parental involvement is interpreted by some parents as interference in the work of the school. Parents are interested in their children’s education, but they do not wish to participate in what they perceive as the affairs of the school. Cheng (1995), citing the work of Wan (1992), concludes that:

> Hong Kong parents ... are highly concerned with school affairs, but are reluctant to participate in detailed school decision-making. Schools are seen as irresponsible if such decisions have to rely on parents who are not supposed to be professionals in education. In other words, East Asian parents prefer a holistic approach to school control. Parents in the West often prefer an analytic approach. In this context, forcing parents into a Western model may not meet with a favourable response from parents (pp.97-98).

Since the cultural antipathy towards parental involvement in school affairs is based on the notion of parental intrusion, policy-makers in Hong Kong might be better advised to focus on ways in which parents can be encouraged to further their children’s progress through supporting learning in the home.

*Teacher appraisal*

Both the SMI and ECR7 are unequivocal about the necessity to introduce a staff appraisal system. The importance of appraisal, as set out in the SMI, is its assessment of staff
strengths and weaknesses, clarification of staff development needs, and its contribution to ensuring a meritocratic basis for promotion. The same arguments are repeated again in the ECR7, only this time appraisal is seen as part of a quality assurance process. By 1997, few schools, even those which were part of the SMI scheme, had introduced appraisal.

Is Hong Kong's culture suited to appraisal? This issue has been addressed in the context of the business world, where performance appraisal systems, strongly advocated in Anglo-American management literature, suggest that employees' performance will improve when they receive direct feedback, usually from a superordinate. This may be true for individualist cultures. Anglo-American models of appraisal not only assume direct feedback, open communication and more equal relationships between the superordinate and subordinate, but also that organisational members see themselves as individuals rather than as team or group members. In collectivist societies, however, these assumptions may not hold, and the giving of direct feedback can destroy the harmony which is considered so important in governing interpersonal relationships. The employee may lose 'face' and with it, personal loyalty to the organisation.

The implication is that introducing appraisal into the collectivist societies of East Asia calls for a different, more culture-sensitive approach. Feedback, for example, might be given indirectly rather than directly, by using a third party. Other more culturally sensitive methods might include an emphasis on group-oriented rather than individual appraisal and the adoption of self-evaluation.

Reforms to teaching and learning

How appropriate are reforms to teaching and learning recommended in Hong Kong's TOC policy, given the prevailing cultural characteristics? What should be the future design features of core technology in Hong Kong's schools? The quick response from most teachers and academics in Hong Kong is that student-centred methods will not fit the culture. Hong Kong teachers rely heavily on didactic methods, have large classes and work in overcrowded classrooms. While classroom conditions, class sizes and traditional teacher-centred methods militate against student-centred learning, some evidence suggests that the collectivist dimension of the Chinese culture seems well suited to cooperative learning and peer tutoring, both of which are consistent with the reform policy. In addition, peer tutoring and cross-age tutoring are convenient and appropriate teaching methods for overcoming large student/teacher ratios and would seem to fit well with the culture. While the current over-reliance on didactic teaching needs to be reduced, the expository methods in which Hong Kong teachers are well versed could serve as a useful base from which to develop best practices of direct teaching, a highly efficacious teaching method.

This example shows that the 'cultural fit' of some reform policies may be a complex issue, with some aspects of the indigenous culture attuned to reform measures while others elements appear alien. The moral of such scenarios is for policy-makers and school administrators to be selective and adaptive in how they shape their implementation response.
CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we mention other cultural issues relevant to school management in Hong Kong, and summarise our argument. The contemporary culture of Hong Kong is a blend of western (largely Anglo-American) culture grafted on to an otherwise historically ingrained Chinese culture. The western elements in Hong Kong’s culture are attributable to its exposure to education, religion, law and government associated with a long period of British colonisation, and to commerce, trade and tourism, all promoted by Hong Kong’s strategic geographical position. Despite these powerful western influences operating over a long period of time, the majority of Hong Kong people have maintained their inherent ‘Chineseness’.

Traditional Chinese values, some deriving from Confucianism, are deeply embedded in schools. These values suggest that imported western policies will need to undergo more rather than less adaptation if restructuring is to be successful. The first value concerns the comfort with, and some might claim preference for, hierarchical organisational structures, earlier recognised in Hofstede’s high-PD index. A second relates to respect for age and its implications for reform. Many younger school principals express difficulty in exercising their positional authority over older, especially male, staff, to whom respect is accorded on the basis of age. Being older, many such teachers are more conservative and resistant to change. The third is the tendency to view schools as extensions of the family, a perspective which may lead to a departure from merit-based hiring of staff. Teacher appointments, for example, are sometimes made on the grounds that the favoured applicant is a past student of the school, or is recommended by a friend of a respected or influential person. Such people are seen as more trustworthy, and as more likely to be loyal and committed to the school. The Chinese assume that appointing teachers on the basis of their loyalty and willingness to work hard rather than on the grounds of merit or ability, is more likely to produce effective teachers. As Cheng and Wong (1996) assert, “The extreme case is in China, where personal connections (guanxi) are often seen as a legitimate element in personnel matters such as recruitment and promotion” (p.44). Relationships often seem to supersede merit or ability as the criterion for decision-making. The fourth recognises that the emphasis placed on harmony and the preservation of relationships, values on which the Chinese place great store, makes it unlikely that serious personal, professional and organisational issues will be confronted. Consequently, Anglo-American notions of ‘tackling problems head-on’, conflict management, maximising task achievement, setting individual motivational goals, and individualised performance appraisal are less compatible with many Chinese characteristics.

The fifth centres on the large number of schools in Hong Kong sponsored by religious bodies, which require that principals not only have to balance western and Chinese values in their decision-making, but also those of a particular religion. A final consideration is the reality of restrictive logistical and resource conditions in most Hong Kong schools, which impose limitations on possible reforms. Classes of 40 plus students, in small classrooms and working in confined spaces, often with limited facilities and equipment, are common-
place. These overcrowded conditions are reinforced by a belief in communitarian and collectivist values in the culture favouring the equal treatment of all children.

Important differences may also be found in the connotations underlying the concept of equality between Asian and western societies. Hong Kong people tend to define equality as equal resource provision across the student body. They accept that students will perform differently, and believe that differences in achievement are down to work effort rather than ability. In contrast, equality in the West tends to mean unequal resource provision, with the disadvantaged receiving more. As broad policy agendas, theories and practices are imported and interchanged between education systems, there is danger that more subtle cultural differences, such as different meanings attributed to the same concepts, receive little or no recognition. These differences invariably lead to cross-cultural confusion (Shaw & Welton, 1996) and difficulties of translating policy into practice.

Education is culture-bound. Policy-makers therefore need to be mindful of societal cultural characteristics when formulating, adopting and implementing policies. School-level administrators, likewise, need to take cognisance of societal (and organisational) culture when implementing restructuring policies. Our argument is that the prospect of successful implementation is enhanced when policy-makers and school administrators adopt policies consonant with the prevailing and dominant characteristics of their own societal culture. In the clamour to recognise prevailing tendencies towards globalisation and internationalisation in the educational reform policy arena, it would be unwise to ignore the influence of societal culture.

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