ENSURING ACCEPTABILITY AND FEASIBILITY: THE CHALLENGES OF EDUCATIONAL POLICY REFORM IN MALAYSIA

Abstract

This article reports research on the implementation of the Malaysia Education Blueprint, 2013-2025, drawing on 49 extended interviews with senior policy makers at federal, state and district levels, and school principals, informed by a systematic review of international and Malaysian literature. The findings show that the reforms are poorly understood by officials and school leaders, leading to partial and unenthusiastic enactment. The paper concludes that such ambitious reforms need to be acceptable, to ensure 'ownership' of the reform agenda, and feasible, to avoid disenchantment by officials, school leaders and teachers.

Key Words

Globalisation, policy reform, Malaysia, implementation gap, Malaysia Education Blueprint

Background

Many countries are seeking to improve their education systems in order to compete more effectively in what is increasingly a knowledge-based economy. Globalisation means that governments are well aware of how other economies and education systems are progressing and they may wish to emulate what appears to have succeeded in other countries, despite the well-established view that the effectiveness of such 'policy-borrowing' is limited by contextual and cultural differences. The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), for example, shows that there are stark variations in student outcomes in language, mathematics and science, leading education systems to seek ways to enhance the quality of their provision.

The Malaysia Education Blueprint (Ministry of Education, 2013) provides one Asian example of an ambitious reform plan. However, there is evidence in Malaysia (name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process), and in Thailand (Hallinger and Lee 2014), that reform initiatives may falter because school-level implementation is flawed. The complexity of managing top-down initiatives in large systems, with very many 'zones of implementation', thousands of schools and classrooms, means that ambitious reforms may rarely be more than partly successful (name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process).

Literature Review

The research team carried out a systematic review of the international literature on policy process in education, structured to address the research questions (see below). It also examined the literature on educational policy reform in Malaysia, drawing on both English and Bahasa Melayu sources. This 'hidden literature' (Hallinger and Lee 2014: 8) is often neglected in literature reviews but they provide important additional insights into educational policy and practice.

A Framework for Policy Reform and Implementation

Moos (2014: 424) offers a framework for policy reform, arising from his research in Denmark. He argues that relations between the state and institutions are transforming from traditional democratic, public-sector, models of governance into new forms characterized as corporate and market-driven approaches, with an emphasis on strategic planning, accountability, quality standards, and reports.

Ingram and Schneider (2007) discuss a policy design approach that was initially proposed to address the welter of intervening variables that affect the design, selection, implementation, and evaluation of public policy. By the late 1980s, the concept of social construction of target populations was introduced. This work posited that public policymakers typically socially construct target populations in positive and negative terms and distribute benefits and burdens to reflect and perpetuate these constructions. They note that people use "social construction" to filter information in a biased manner, resulting in a tendency for individuals to confirm new information that is consistent with pre-existing beliefs and reject information that is not. They add that power is not equally distributed among individuals within a political environment and that policies send messages to citizens that affect their orientations and participation patterns.

An early contribution to implementation theory was offered by Becher (1989), who outlines three 'broad approaches' to policy implementation:

1. A form of coercion, through the direct or indirect exercise of force. 'This 'top down' approach is perhaps most typically adopted within hierarchical, bureaucratic structures, in which orders are conveyed from central management to those concerned with the day-to-day running of the enterprise' (Ibid: 52-53).
2. Bargaining and manipulation, often operating through emotionally charged appeals, or through a reference to self-interest. 'Manipulative styles of policy implementation tend to flourish in a setting characterised by rival interest groups' (Ibid: 53).

3. Reasoned persuasion, impartial analysis or logical argument. This is a collegial or professional form of organisation.

Becher (1989) adds that coercion is more "prompt and efficient" but those responsible for carrying out the resulting policies have no 'ownership'. This may lead them to ignore the new policy or to interpret it in ways that serve their own interests.   This contributes to what Becher (1989: 54) describes as the "implementation gap"'. Similarly, Fullan (2001: 80) argues that there is likely to be an "implementation dip", as leaders cannot avoid the inevitable early difficulties of trying something new.   He also stresses the importance of re-culturing, adding that much change is superficial. Transforming culture, changing what people in the organization value and how they work together to accomplish it, leads to deep, lasting change. Jahnukainen et al 2015: 162) stress the importance of professional trust for successful implementation of policy change.

Spillane et al (2002) argue that local implementation of educational policy is difficult. They offer a cognitive framework to characterize sense-making in the implementation process. A key dimension of the implementation process is whether, and in what ways, implementing agents come to understand their practice, potentially changing their beliefs and attitudes in the process. They also refer to the importance of "situated cognition", arguing that situation or context is critical in understanding the implementing agent's sense-making.   They conclude that "policy evolves as it is implemented . . . If implementing agents construct ideas that misconstrue policymakers' intent, then implementation failure is likely . . . not because implementing agents reject the reform ideas but because they understand them differently" (Ibid: 419).

Lima and D'Ascenzi (2013: 3) offer two analytical perspectives for understanding policy implementation. The first perspective is based on the sequential approach, where public policy is seen as a sequence of distinct steps and guided by different logics. The formulation process would be permeated by the logic of political activity, while implementation would be within the scope of administrative practice. This is a "top-down" design and, as a result, implementers have limited room for manoeuvre.   The second analytical model assumes that the discretion of implementers is inevitable, and may be desirable, since these actors are aware of local situations and can adapt the plan to them. Such adjustments may be possible sources of innovation. This approach is commonly called the "bottom-up" design.

Signé (2017a) examines policy implementation and the causes of policy failure.   He argues that top-down policy implementation models have largely fallen out of favour because they wrongly assume that policymakers can master control of the policy implementation environment, as in new public management (NPM) (DeGroff and Cargo 2009). An example of NPM is the introduction of policy

Bottom-up theorists tend to believe that centralized decision-making is poorly adapted to local conditions and that flexibility is important to reach goals. For example, Hjern, Hanf, and Porter (1977), and Hjern and Hull (1982), argue that those responsible for implementation (front-line service deliverers) are more important to success than centralization or top-down administration.

Signé (2017a: 5) argues that goal ambiguity influences policy implementation in many ways, for example, variations in how the policy is implemented and the roles of actors involved in different sites. He notes that "street-level bureaucrats" (Lipsky 1980) exercise considerable discretion and influence. Policy goals may be displaced or distorted when front-line workers focus their energies on managing workloads, coping with job demands, or pursuing their own ideological, policy, or political interests. Access to funding and resources is also a precondition for successful implementation. Conflict plays a central role in distinguishing between descriptions of the implementation process. Both rational and bureaucratic models of decision making assume that individual actors are rationally self-interested. However, in practice, there may be limited goal congruence (p.21). This links to Becher's (1989) "bargaining and manipulation" model.

Signé (2017b) outlines requirements for policy implementation and argues that effective collaboration is required to solve problems. This requires visible commitment at the upper levels of the administrative hierarchy, particularly when implementation faces challengers. It also requires "organisational fit", so that the intervention is well received by the group relied upon to accept an innovation and implement it successfully. Adaptability is also important because the implementation of an intervention will rarely, if ever, be replicated identically in all cases. He adds that "champions" are necessary to take the lead in building support for an intervention (p.14).

Honig (2006) explores the role of intermediary organizations in educational policy implementation. She defines intermediaries as organizations that operate between policy makers and implementers to affect changes in roles and practices for both parties. She also presents three dimensions of implementation, policy, people, and places, that come together to form a conception of implementation as a highly contingent and situated process.

Fullan (2009) examines educational reform in five successful jurisdictions that are successful in the PISA rankings, Finland, Singapore, Alberta (Canada), Hong Kong and South Korea, and outlines four policies and strategies that appear to contribute to their success. First, attracting high quality people to teaching. Second, a focus on developing high quality instructional practices. Third, cultivating, selecting and developing instructionally oriented leaders, especially principals. Fourth, data-based attention to how individual students and schools are progressing, with early intervention to address any problems (ibid: 108).

Educational policy reform in Malaysia

Lee (2010) claims that, under the rubric of Vision 2020, there is a liberalisation of educational policies leading to the democratisation, privatisation and decentralisation of the Malaysian educational system. The administrative system has been decentralised to promote school-based management and teacher empowerment. The Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) envisages greater school-based management and autonomy from 2021 but this relates only to curriculum implementation and limited budget allocations (MEB 2013: E38). These changes are very modest by international standards but consistent with practice in many other centralised systems.

Sua (2012: 62) adds that, to ensure equality of education, the government has attempted to narrow the gap between urban and rural schools to improve the disadvantaged position of rural students. The government has also implemented a preferential educational policy to help the Malays who have lagged behind the non-Malays in terms of socio-economic mobility. Without such a concerted measure, the Malays would have not been able to compete with the non-Malays on an equal basis. However, this has not been well received by the non-Malays who do not see the policy from the perspective of the disadvantaged group.

Globalisation has a major impact on educational reform, notably through policy borrowing. The MEB, for example, benchmarks Malaysia's student performance against that of other countries, and this drives educational policy. The poor performance by Malaysia, in TIMSS 2011 and PISA 2009 and 2012, in which the scores obtained by Malaysia were lower than the international average (Ibrahim et al., 2015; Abu Hassan, 2016), led to a change in the current teaching system and contributed to the introduction of the MEB.

The MEB is a very significant policy document for several reasons. First, it has a long-term orientation, covering a 13-year period from 2013-2025. Second, it draws on international research and literature "to identify and prioritise the factors that would make the most difference in system, national and

student improvement" (MEB 2013: E18). Third, it envisages a holistic system-wide transformation of the Malaysian education system.   It has eleven dimensions, or "shifts", each intended to contribute to a "step-change" in the trajectory of school and student outcomes. These shifts collectively address the main levers of school and system improvement, including access, values, ICT, the ways in which the Ministry works, partnerships with parents and communities, value for money, and transparent accountability.

Shift two relates to language acquisition with the aspiration for every child to be proficient in Bahasa Melayu and English.   The provision for Chinese and Tamil students to learn in their home language in primary schools has implications for competency in the national language.   The Blueprint (E23) shows that 84% of Malay students achieve a minimum pass in Bahasa Melayu at primary level, while the figures are only 63% and 57%, respectively, for Chinese and Indian students. In contrast, proficiency in English is higher for Chinese (42%) and Indian (35%) students, than for Malay children (23%).   The Blueprint envisages upskilling English teachers to address this latter issue.

International research and literature (e.g. Leithwood et al 2006) show that the main factors influencing student outcomes are classroom teaching and school leadership, and these findings are echoed in the Blueprint (Ibid: E25 and E27).   Shift four aims to 'transform teaching into the profession of choice' (Ibid: E25). This ambition follows internal research which shows that only 50% of lessons are being delivered in an effective manner. Shift five aims to 'ensure high-performing school leaders in every school' (Ibid: 27).   An important aspect of this provision is to change selection criteria, so that principals are appointed on the basis of leadership capability rather than seniority.   Principals are also exhorted to adopt distributed and instructional leadership styles rather than continuing to be administrative leaders.

Policy implementation in Malaysia

The MoE established the Education Performance and Delivery Unit (PADU) in 2013. The primary role of PADU is to facilitate, support, and deliver the Ministry's vision in transforming Malaysia's education system through the Malaysia Education Blueprint for 2013-2025. PADU also collaborates with the Ministry to develop remedial action plans, which ensure ongoing improvements to Malaysia's education structure.   The MoE also introduced School Improvement Partners (SIP+), and School Improvement Specialist Coaches (SISC+). These initiatives are part of the transformation program to improve schools' performance. SISC + is only open to 3 core subjects, namely Bahasa Melayu, English and Mathematics. Their task is to guide teachers in pedagogy and curriculum, and to act as a direct link between the Ministry and the school. SIP+ is a mentorship program for principals and school

management to improve the quality of administration in schools. The majority of SIP+ and SISC+ staff are selected by the Ministry from former principals, senior assistants and officers from the District Education Offices (DEOs), and State Education Departments (SEDs).   These staff (SIP+ and SISC+) may be regarded as "intermediaries" (Honig 2006) in the implementation process.

Research Design and Methods

The broad aim of the research was to examine the linkages between different levels of education systems to explore how they support, or may inhibit, policy reform in Malaysia.   The research team adopted a qualitative research design, focused on interviews with 49 'key informants'; senior national government officials, state and district leaders, and school principals or senior leaders. These participants were sampled purposively. The national, state and district officials all hold senior roles in the Ministry.   The heads and principals all lead schools within the sampled districts. The research team secured ethical approval from the University, and approval to conduct the research was obtained from the Educational Planning and Research Division (EPRD) of the Ministry of Education, and subsequently at state and district levels.

As well as the national perspectives, research was conducted in six states, selected to include urban and rural contexts, and the two states in East Malaysia. The intention was to conduct six interviews in each of the six states (two each at state, district and school levels) but, in practice, researchers used their discretion during field work, and between five and ten interviews were conducted in each state. Table 1 shows the sampling frame for the interviews.

Location	Interviews completed	Coding
National	Ten	MoE1 – MoE10
Johor	Seven (three state, two district, one secondary principal, one primary head)	JS01-JS03, JD01-JD02, JOP, JOH
Kelantan	Five (one state, two district, one secondary principal, one primary senior assistant)	KS1, KD1-KD2, KP, KSA
Kuala Lumpur	Five (two state, one district, one secondary principal, one primary head)	KLS1-KLS2, KLD1, KLP, KLH
Sabah	Six (two state, two district, one secondary principal, one primary head)	SABS1-SABS2, SABD1-SABD2, SABP, SABH
Sarawak	Ten (five state, four district, one principal)	SARS1-SARS5, SARD1-SARD4, SARP
Selangor	Six (two state, two district, one secondary principal, one primary head)	SELS1-SELS2, SELD1-SELD2, SELP, SELH
Total	49	

Table 1: Project interviews

Interview questions

Interview guides were prepared for each participant group, intended to address the following research questions:

1. What factors motivate policy reform in education?
2. How, and to what extent, is the implementation phase considered when designing reform initiatives?
3. What, or who, are the main change agents for educational reform?
4. What are the implications of the 'filtering' process as national policies are disseminated through the various levels in the education system?
5. How well are policy initiatives understood by school leaders, teachers, and other stakeholders?
6. What are perceived to be the facilitators, and barriers, for the implementation of policy reforms within the wider education system?
7. What are perceived to be the facilitators, and barriers, for the implementation of policy reforms at school level?
8. To what extent is partnership between policy-makers and professionals a feature of the policy formation and implementation processes?
9. To what extent is policy-making perceived to be both visionary and consistent?
10. How is implementation of policy reforms monitored?
11. What is required to leverage more effective adoption of policy reform initiatives?

Data analysis began by organising findings into separate data sets for each state, and for the national participants, using consistent themes derived from the research questions and integrating the findings from the various interviews. Data were then organised thematically, integrating the seven data sets, and connecting them to insights from the literature and from official documents, including the Malaysia Education Blueprint. Sub-themes are 'emergent' from the data.

Findings

The findings are structured thematically, to address the issues identified in the research questions. The findings are discussed and interpreted through links to the literature on policy reform and implementation.

Initiation of Educational Policies

Education in Malaysia is managed at four distinct levels; federal, state, district and school (UNESCO 2011).   The federal level Ministry of Education (MOE) takes overall responsibility for developing policies and regulations, with the leadership of the Director-General of Education. The State Education Department (SED) coordinates and monitors the implementation of national education programs, projects and activities, as well as providing feedback to the MOE on overall planning. In most states, there are additional administrative units at the district level called District Education Offices (DEO). The DEOs provide links between schools and SEDs by coordinating and monitoring the implementation of programs, projects and activities at grass-roots level.   At primary and secondary school level, principals and head teachers are responsible for providing professional and administrative leadership (UNESCO Ibid).

Malaysia Education Blueprint

As noted earlier, the Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013-2025 is the main contemporary policy reform document.   It sets out an ambitious target to transform the education system so that Malaysia appears in the top third of countries in international rankings, such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) by 2025, from its 2012 positions in the bottom quartile. The effective implementation of policy intentions is critical if such bold aspirations are to be achieved.

Policy Formation in Malaysia

There are three main features of educational policy reform in Malaysia.   First, there is evidence of the impact of globalisation, manifested through policy borrowing.   This is illustrated by the strong focus on international comparisons in the Blueprint, and by the aspiration to improve Malaysia's position in global league tables, such as PISA and TIMSS.   Second, while top-down processes are still dominant in this centralised country, there is increasing recognition that consultation with legitimate stakeholders is essential if reform is to be fully understood and accepted.   However, there is only limited evidence about the impact of such consultation on the nature of policy reform.   Third, there is emerging recognition that a 'one-size-fits-all' policy orientation is ill-suited to such a diverse country, and that a more customised approach may be necessary to achieve reform objectives.

Policy Reform and Vision

Major policy reforms require a clear and widely supported vision if they are to capture stakeholder imagination and to have a good prospect of successful adoption. The concept of vision generally refers to a dream of a better future (name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process). The MEB

fits this definition by its long-term orientation (2013-2025) and through its aspirations to improve access, quality, unity, equity, and efficiency. This "vision", especially for enhanced quality, was reinforced by the national officials, but a mixed picture emerged from the participants in the six states. Selangor officers and principals agreed that the Blueprint is visionary and "forward thinking" (SELD1), a view shared by participants in KL e.g. KLD1). However, one Kelantan principal (KP1) argued that there is "no clear vision" and criticises the MEB as being "difficult to read". Similarly, one Johor district official (JDO1) claimed that the MEB is too complex and that "school leaders do not have the time to read it". Participants in Sabah focused on what they regarded as the "obstacles" (SABD2) to achieving the vision, notably inadequate resources. A related issue is the question of "whose vision"? Despite the extensive consultation, including numerous road shows, it appears that the vision was set by national politicians and officials, and passed down to other levels.

Linking Policy Development to Planned Implementation

Participants at all levels are aware of the complexity of implementing educational policy reform, and the potential for an "implementation gap" (Becher 1989: 54) between policy intentions and implementation in schools and classrooms, described as 'extremely significant' by one Sabah participant. The three models identified by Becher (1989) are all evident in Malaysia. First, there remains a strong emphasis on "top-down" processes in this centralised system, described as "cascading" by participants in contexts as diverse as Kelantan, Kuala Lumpur and Sabah. This leads to information being "diluted" or being understood differently from that intended by policy makers. There is much less emphasis on Becher's "bargaining model" but the direct involvement of SIPs and SISCs in schools appears to have led to some of the targets in the Blueprint being negotiated and modified. Becher's "persuasion" model may be seen through the extensive consultation processes adopted as the Blueprint was developed. This appears to have been largely successful, as there is evidence of widespread support for the principles of reform.

Policy Implementation and Dissemination

Honig (2006: 17-24) distinguishes between two types of policies. "Implementable" policies are those where practice resembles policy designs. "Successful" policies are those that produce demonstrable improvements in student outcomes. Given the Blueprint's emphasis on raising standards, for example in relation to PISA and TIMSS, Malaysia requires such successful policies. This means that effective policy implementation and dissemination are essential if the ambitious aspirations articulated in the Blueprint are to be achieved.

Honig's (2006) notion of policies being "implementable" resonates with the comments of the participants in the present research. Several key points emerge from the data. First, top-down expectations are reflected in the comments from Selangor (SELS1), "not questioning top officials", and Johor (JSO1), disseminating "mandates". This state official in Johor explained the process:

> It is not my duty to question the top people about the policies that we have to implement. My job is to accept them . . . and then think of ways to operationalize the mandates. Then we *tell* the principals and head teachers what they have to do (JSO1). (present authors' emphasis).

Such perspectives indicate reluctance to challenge policy-makers and suggest weak 'feedback loops' to senior officials. There is also evidence of the limitations of the cascading process with information being "lost" between administrative levels, when "officials fail to deliver related knowledge to district and school levels" (KD2). Similarly, in Kuala Lumpur, there is a perceived 'lack of consistent messaging, particularly in respect of the district officials' role in guiding or supervising schools' (KLD1). This may underpin teachers' feelings of helplessness, and lack of trust in policy makers, as shown in the Sabah data. Finally, some participants, for example those in Johor, mention the "disconnect" (JPO1) from reality in implementing policy, notably in respect of infrastructure limitations or teacher attitudes. These issues need to be addressed if policies are to be "successful" (Honig 2006: 22) in the ways outlined in the Blueprint, notably in raising student outcomes to the top third in international league tables.

Understanding of Policy Initiatives by School Leaders, Teachers and other Stakeholders

Understanding of policy initiatives is a key prerequisite if they are to be acceptable to stakeholders. Aida Suraya's (2001: 1-5) view that policy reforms "falter at lower levels" is supported by the current data. This appears to be due to weak understanding of policy initiatives by principals, teachers and other stakeholders, including state and district officials. This is described as a "huge challenge" by one senior national MoE official (MoE 2), while another (MoE3) accepts that "on the ground" understanding differs from national policy-makers' intentions. This is illustrated most starkly by the Sabah state official's admission of limited awareness of the content of the Blueprint. "I know the number of shifts in the Blueprint, but I do not know the content of them. There is too much information" (SABS 2). Limited awareness of the Blueprint is also evident amongst school leaders and teachers, as also found in (name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process) study of school leadership and the MEB. National officials (e.g. MOE FG) advocate a "mixed economy" of cascading, showcasing, teacher development, and district support, notably through School

Improvement Partners (SIP+) and School Improvement Specialist Coaches (SISC+). The Selangor participants (e.g. SELP2) stress the importance of SIPs coaching principals and SISCs coaching and supporting teachers.

In contrast, several Sarawak state officials comment that cascading is ineffective, for two reasons. First, there is a loss of information during the cascading process, as noted by one state official:

> Because they have to go through a few levels, so you find that the information passing from one level to another level normally it won't be 100%. So maybe after a few levels, you'll be left with only 50% (SARS4).

Second, inadequate time is allocated for information transfer, as one district official suggests:

> Normally the way they do it is that they train one person. Then that teacher goes back and shares the information. The briefing or training will last for 3 days, but when the teacher goes back to school, he/she only presents for 1 or 2 hours (SARD1)

In summary, cascading in Sarawak has caused "less accurate information" (SARD4), "watered down information" (SARS1), or "no information" (SARS5), and is perceived to have a significant effect on the implementation process.

A more profound problem may be teacher attitudes to policy reform, described as "apathy attitudes" in Kuala Lumpur (KLD1), being "resistant to change" (SELP2), or being "too comfortable in their comfort zone" (SABP). One headteacher (SABH) adds that "understanding of teachers about educational policies is low, except for those who continue their studies at higher education institutions". While this may be partly due to weak professionalism, there is also an issue of the extent and nature of professional trust (Jahnukainen et al 2015: 162). Bringing about attitudinal change is an even bigger challenge than enhancing stakeholder understanding but is essential if reforms are to be accepted by stakeholders and implemented successfully in schools and classrooms.

Factors Facilitating Effective Implementation of Policy Reforms

Wongwanich et al. (2015: 1370) examined policy delivery strategies in Thailand from 2011-2013, and concluded that "it is highly recommended for Thailand education reform to establish policy delivery units". In this vein, the Malaysian MoE established the Education Performance and Delivery Unit (PADU) in 2013. The primary role of PADU is to facilitate, support, and deliver the Ministry's vision in transforming Malaysia's education system through the Blueprint. PADU focuses on specific issues, including teachers and leadership, while there is also another federal-level audit authority (Jemaah Nazir), which performs overall audits of a school's performance. Both these bodies use a common

tool (SKPmg2) to assess performance.   This tool was described by one Selangor official as "a great instrument that provides an overall view . . . on how to achieve the stated KPIs in the Blueprint" (SELD1).

PADU's work is commended by national officials, with one stressing its importance to drive delivery, monitor progress, and "problem solve" implementation issues (MoE2).   It is also supported by some state participants, for example in Selangor, and in Kuala Lumpur, where it is seen as providing a clear support structure to drive effective implementation. However, "delivery" is a concept closely linked to top-down processes and seems less well-suited to the 'contextualised' implementation supported by participants at all four levels.

The SIP+ and SISC+ appointments seem more appropriate for a contextualised model and these are widely regarded as facilitators of educational change. In Johor, however, the comments were more nuanced with the role of SISCs being praised while there were reservations about the SIPs, as noted by one Johor head:

> It is difficult with SIP+ officers, as they are official visitors from the District Office, and therefore they report to the District Office. So, we seldom talk about problems with them because the problems might be reported to the District Officer (JHT2).

Factors Hindering Effective Implementation of Policy Reforms

Several Malaysian researchers identify the hierarchy as a major factor inhibiting effective policy implementation. The federal Ministry of Education is perceived to be controlling, following a top-down highly centralised approach (Musa 2003: 12), with the state education departments and district education offices helping to administer policies (Ibrahim et al., 2015).   Centralised policy making poses challenges for teachers, who perceive teaching policies from top management to be unrealistic (Ibrahim et al., 2015). According to UNESCO, centralised policies cannot be easily disseminated to all schools, as officials at federal, state and district level are incapable of monitoring or evaluating the process of implementation at all schools (Ibrahim et al., 2015). In addition, teaching policies overly emphasise the obligation to follow execution guidelines, not encouraging variety in implementation based on the school context, leading to failure at school and classroom level (Ibrahim et al., 2015).

The research participants identified several barriers to the effective adoption of policy reform. Four of these appear to be particularly significant. First, participants at all levels expressed concern about teacher and leader attitudes towards change.   Education is a complex public service to lead and

manage because implementation takes place in thousands of schools serving very different communities. Principals in Johor, for example, claim that teachers are passive:

> Teachers did not take it upon themselves to understand the objectives of . . . programs and activities and consider them as tasks that needed to be carried out. There was no sense of ownership as they were not their programs and they were not consulted. The teachers just do what they have to do (JP1).

Similarly, officials in Kualu Lumpur claim that the mentality and quality of teachers compromise the implementation process. "Teachers who are resistant to change . . . are not open to adopting the new teaching methods" (KLD1). As one KL principal outlines, "without the support and cooperation from the teachers, policy reforms will remain an ideal as they will not reach the students effectively" (KLP2). In the same vein, a Kelentan official stresses that "teachers normally are doing without knowing the purpose of education policy reform", indicating weak ownership of the policy agenda (KS1).

The Ministry needs to consider how to respond to "inappropriate attitudes", beyond expressing its disappointment.   In particular, strategies to enhance teacher "ownership" of change seem to be essential.   Many teachers perceive that teaching policies are unrealistic (Ibrahim et al., 2015). Policy makers need to consider whether its consultation processes, for example during the Blueprint development, constituted "seeking consent" or whether this was just "window dressing".

Second, concern was expressed by the research participants about the centralised, and "mandated", nature of policy reform and the need to contextualise implementation. While district-level initiatives, such as the appointment of SIP+ and SISC+, help to address this issue, it seems that this is insufficient to satisfy the concern that change is imposed, rather than being "owned" by schools and teachers.

The third factor is that of perceived limited resources, with infrastructure problems, lack of equipment, and cascaded teacher training, all serving to limit effective implementation.   One Kelantan principal, for example, claims that "the technical infrastructure provided in the school does not ease . . . implementation" (KP1). This issue applies differentially across states. While participants in the predominantly urban states, Johor, KL and Selangor, were primarily concerned with teacher attitudes, those in more rural settings, Kelantan, Sabah and Sarawak, also faced basic communication challenges, including lack of infrastructure and long travel distances, that inhibit effective policy dissemination.

Finally, a consistent approach is important for policy initiatives to endure over time.   The extended timescale (13 years) for implementation of the Blueprint implicitly acknowledges that extensive

reform takes time.   The importance of consistency was recognised by the participants, with some concern about new policies superseding those that are still not fully implemented.   However, national policy makers stated that some changes are inevitable due to political change and/or global pressures.

Professional and Stakeholder Involvement in Policy Formation and Implementation

Given that implementation of policy reform largely takes place in schools and classrooms, stakeholder involvement, especially from teachers, is likely to enhance the prospect of successful policy adoption. Professional "ownership" of the reform agenda is a pre-requisite for effective implementation, even in centralised education systems, as the discussion above indicates, and as also noted by Becher (1989: 56). This is widely acknowledged by the participants. One national participant described the Blueprint development process as "the biggest public consultation" (MoE 3), with the draft report being shared with thousands of teachers, and the public.   However, as noted in Kuala Lumpur, professional involvement in the Blueprint consultations largely involved principals and district officers, rather than classroom teachers.   "The voices of those directly implementing the educational reform, the teachers, may not be represented.   These teachers are usually more interested in teaching than in educational leadership or administration" (KLD1).

Monitoring Policy Reforms

Measuring performance is regarded as a means to assess policy effectiveness. It is clear that PADU has a major role in monitoring the implementation of policy reform, and many participants welcome the clarity of the processes it introduced. However, it is also an example of new public management (NPM) (DeGroff and Cargo 2009), with its focus on measuring performance using standardised instruments, rather than focusing on process. Given the aspiration for a "step-change" in student outcomes, to achieve much higher places for Malaysia in PISA and TIMSS, a strong focus on outputs may be inevitable.

Requirements for Effective Adoption of Policy Reforms

The Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025) envisages the empowerment of the State Education Departments and District Education Offices (MoE, 2013; Ibrahim et al. 2015), as a partial response to the critique of top-down decision-making. They have both gained more autonomy in making key operational decisions in budgeting and personnel matters, but these changes may be regarded as "deconcentration" of central power rather than decentralisation and genuine empowerment.

Three main points emerge from the data on policy adoption. First, the intention to decentralise the implementation of policy is welcomed at all levels because of widespread recognition that diverse

school and community contexts require customised, rather than standardised, responses. The roles of SIP+ and SISC+ in decentralising adoption appear to be particularly valuable, as noted in Selangor. "The introduction of SIP+s and SISCs are very good initiatives, as they provide a personal approach . . . to drive policy adoptions" (SELD2). Second, limited resources, including weak infrastructure in some contexts, and mixed teacher quality and commitment, are seen as impediments to effective adoption. Third, the need for teacher professional learning was stressed by some participants, for example in Kelantan. "Professional learning workshops should be conducted . . . to produce more excellent teachers" (KD2). The challenge here is how to promote teacher professionalism with a prescriptive curriculum, policed through PADU and other delivery monitoring mechanisms.

Discussion

The findings indicate five main factors that affect the implementation of educational policy reform:

- Relationships between actors at different levels
- The nature of communication
- The influence of hierarchy
- Fixed or flexible policy implementation
- Acceptability and feasibility

<u>Relationships between actors at different levels</u>

Malaysia has a complex and distributed educational system, with many levels, and policy is "filtered" down through these levels, with the potential for misunderstanding and differential interpretation by the participants at each stage. In Malaysia, five levels can be identified; national, state, district, school, and classroom, with actors at each level having different interests and priorities. This contrasts with smaller unitary systems, such as in Singapore, where there are fewer levels and reduced scope for misunderstanding.

The data show two problems arising from this complexity. First, the messages received by professionals may be different from those intended by senior policy makers, because of the cascading approach. Many participants attested that school-level understanding of policy often did not match national expectations. One reason for this is that most practitioners have not read the Blueprint (name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process) and thus rely on perceptions of policy from more senior colleagues in states and districts, leading to inconsistent messaging. Second, weak understanding led to variability in implementation and limited "ownership" of policy initiatives.

"Reasoned persuasion" (Becher 1989: 53) is required to encourage professional ownership of the policy reform agenda in this centralised context.

The nature of communication

As implied above, Malaysia has traditionally adopted a top-down communication model, with policies and decisions being communicated to schools via states and districts, usually through Ministry of Education circulars. This "cascade" model has several limitations.   First, it is apparent from the research data that the messages received and understood by teachers can be different from those intended by senior policy makers, as a consequence of selective "filtering" at state, district and school levels.   Ingram and Schneider (2007: 94-96) note that people use "social construction" to filter information in a biased manner, resulting in a tendency for individuals to confirm new information that is consistent with pre-existing beliefs and reject information that is not.   This suggests that simply communicating in a top-down manner, using "force" (Becher 1989: 52), is unlikely to modify pre-existing attitudes about educational policy and practice.

Second, cascading is unsuited to major policy reforms, such as the Blueprint. It is evident from the data, and from previous research (name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process), that many teachers have not read the document, leaving them to rely on interpretations from district officials and principals, who may also have not read it carefully.   National policy makers recognise this challenge and have developed alternative communication methods, such as road shows and use of social media, but it is not yet clear if these approaches have been more successful in engaging school-level professionals.

Given the continuing prevalence of top-down communication, it would be valuable to build in effective feedback loops, to enable practitioners to advise policy makers of the operational aspects of policy reform.   A clear example from the research findings is the aspiration to achieve 100% access.   This aim is widely supported but there are insufficient school places to make it a reality. Sound feedback loops might have enabled the national Ministry to modify this policy and to link it to a school building programme.   Similarly, lack of suitable hardware or, in some rural areas, lack of electricity, make some of the ICT policies unrealistic. Establishing policy forums in each district would enable school leaders and teachers to explain the implications of new policy initiatives but this would also require re-culturing (Fullan 2001), to give practitioners the confidence to critique policies rather than simply accepting them, followed by passive implementation.

The influence of hierarchy

There is a contrast between strongly hierarchical and centralised education systems, such as that in Malaysia, and devolved systems, where more decisions are made at local or school level.   The evidence from the international literature is that "ownership" of interventions, and successful adoption, is more likely when local actors, including education professionals, are involved in policy formation and are not simply implementing policy imposed by national politicians and senior officials.

The data suggest emerging recognition of the limitations of implementing policy solely through the formal hierarchy. System leaders acknowledge that top-down policy-making and implementation have limited effect and that a more nuanced approach is required.   Instead of relying mainly on circulars, the Ministry has re-balanced its staffing, with fewer people at the national headquarters in Putrajaya, and more located in states and districts. This was done to provide more support to principals and teachers, and to monitor the implementation of key policies. It was also recognised that all staff, including head teachers, principals, and teachers, need to understand and "own" new policies if they are to be implemented enthusiastically and successfully.

The regional data offered a more mixed picture of the influence of hierarchy. While the opportunity to localise policy adoption was welcomed, some participants, for example in Sarawak, still followed the hierarchy "strictly"'. It was evident also that participants were cautious about acting autonomously, because of "fear" (Johor) of acting inappropriately, or because they were concerned about being "wrong" (Sarawak). These data connect to Lima and D'Ascenzi's (2013: 108-109) two-part policy implementation model.   In their "top-down" design, the implementers have limited room for manoeuvre. Their "bottom-up" model assumes that the discretion of local actors is both inevitable and desirable, so that they can adapt plans to the local situation.   The present research indicates that local participants are reluctant to move away from what they perceived to be mandated implementation, thus reinforcing the "top-down" model.

Hierarchy and professionalism

Malaysia is one of many centralised countries to employ teachers as civil servants. As a consequence, they are part of the administrative hierarchy. This also explains, in part, why the role of principals and head teachers has been traditionally viewed as primarily administrative, implementing the Ministry's policy imperatives.   This emphasis on vertical accountability helps to tighten links between levels and means that there is little overt opposition to policy initiatives.   However, the research shows that implementation may be unenthusiastic and, hence, only partial. The normal expectation is that professionals exercise a great deal of discretion when working with their clients.   Teachers have subject and pedagogical expertise, but the evidence suggests that this has been subordinated to the

expectations of the hierarchy. A priority for policy makers is to consider how to promote professionalism by empowering teachers and leaders to interpret and adapt policy rather than simply implementing it. This is what distinguishes professionals from administrators.

The literature reviewed for this research (e.g. Spillane et al 2002) shows the importance of teachers and school leaders "owning" policy initiatives, if they are to implement them enthusiastically and effectively. However, the research data indicate very limited ownership of the Blueprint and linked policy thrusts. It is disappointing, but perhaps not surprising, to record that the research participants reported that most professionals have not read the Blueprint and know very little about it, a finding also reported by (name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process). The perception is that the reforms are "owned" by the political and administrative elite and not by the professionals who have to implement them. It might be sensible for the Ministry to consider inverting the pyramid to allow policy initiatives to emanate from teachers and principals. One way to achieve this would be to survey professionals with open questions such as "what do you recommend to improve the quality of teaching and learning in your school?"

<u>Fixed or flexible policy implementation</u>

Top-down approaches to policy change tend to assume a "one-size-fits-all" adoption model, with prescriptions about how policy should be implemented. Ministry circulars offer detailed instructions on how interventions should be introduced, leaving little or no scope for adaptation to local or school contexts. An alternative approach would be to explain the aims of new policies, with "broad brush" guidance on implementation rather than tightly defined prescription. This would also lead to greater professional ownership of change, with the potential for more effective but less rigid implementation.

Signe (2017a) argues that fixed policy implementation policy models have fallen out of favour because policy makers cannot control the implementation environment. This suggests that flexibility is required, as suggested by Hjern and Hull (1982: 112). Signe (2017a: 5) adds that "street level bureaucrats" (Lipsky 1980) need to be able exercise discretion and influence, not simply accept top-down mandates.

The participants offered some evidence of a less rigid approach to policy adoption. One important example of greater flexibility lies in the role of SIP+ and SISC+, professional district-level colleagues, whose role is to support principals and teachers, respectively. They also have the power to modify targets in response to local variables, an important example of flexible policy implementation. This flexibility was welcomed, for example in KL and Selangor, and perceived to be an effective approach

to implementation approach. Principals and district officials can be more innovative and creative in finding solutions, making policy implementation less rigid and more relevant for the schools.

Implementation or interpretation

The term "implementation" implies a linear approach where policy reform is accepted and adopted without question. This is consistent with New Public Management (Honig 2006), where the aims of reform are taken for granted and the focus is on "delivery", epitomised in Malaysia by the creation of PADU. An alternative approach would be for ministers and senior officials to indicate the intended policy aims, for example to enhance student outcomes, but leave it to states, districts and schools to decide the most appropriate ways of achieving these aims. This would increase "ownership" and enable adoption to be "interpreted" and customised for specific school and community contexts. A linked approach would be to invite schools to participate in pilot schemes, which would be subject to independent evaluation. The role of SIP+ and SISC+ might be seen as a starting point for a customised approach but this proposal would extend this orientation. Another advantage of this stance would be that it would focus more on empowerment and less on monitoring; inspiration rather than control.

Acceptability and feasibility

The success or failure of policy reform depends on two overlapping considerations, acceptability and feasibility, as we noted earlier. First, the extent to which stakeholders, professional and lay, accept and "own" the new policy, is critical to its successful implementation. Barker and Beetham (2007: 361) argue that the "ultimate test of correct policy can only be its popular acceptability" and contend that the state has a role in guaranteeing favourable conditions for change. MacBeath (2010: 4) refers to the 'principle of reciprocity' when considering educational change. Similarly, Spillane et al (2002: 393-395) stress that policy implementation depends on the sense-making of the policy by all stakeholders. Their interpretation affects the acceptability of change and the feasibility of implementation:

> What is understood from a new message depends critically on the knowledge base that one already has. This means more than simply recognizing that lack of knowledge interferes with the ability to understand. It means that different agents will construct different understandings . . . What we see is influenced by what we expect to see (Ibid: 395).

The Blueprint development process involved extensive consultations but it is not clear if this process led to significant changes to the Blueprint or was just designed to enhance awareness of it; "selling" rather than meaningful consultation. The data show that, while the broad vision underpinning the

Blueprint has wide support, school and classroom-level implementation was sometimes passive rather than enthusiastic.

The second consideration relates to the feasibility of the policy, as also noted by Spillane et al (2002). This has both "big picture" and local dimensions. While there is broad support for the Blueprint's vision, as noted above, it is becoming clear that achieving a position in the top-third of PISA and TIMSS rankings, is unlikely. Given the centrality of this commitment, the lack of feasibility may be regarded as a serious weakness, as this provides much of the rationale for this far-reaching reform. An alternative interpretation is that this is a legitimate aspiration and that setting the "bar" high is better than simply accepting the current modest position of Malaysia in the international league tables.

Another example of feasibility relates to the aspiration to achieve 100% access for pupils at all levels from pre-school to upper secondary by 2020. This is appropriate because access to education is a fundamental human right but it is clear from the research data that Malaysia does not have sufficient school places for this aspiration to be achieved in this time-scale, a point made by several participants in different parts of Malaysia. Failure to achieve such targets leads to disappointment and apathy, exacerbating rather than resolving the problems.

Conclusion

The data show that delivery does not always follow a linear process, where policy innovation is adopted just as intended by policy makers. Even in a centralised system, as in Malaysia, the filtering process leads to uneven understanding, enthusiastic or token acceptance, and variable implementation. Lipsky's (1980) notion of "street-level bureaucrats" is helpful in interpreting the limited uptake of national policy reforms. He argues that public servants do not simply implement policy but rather have wide discretion so that, in practice, they are policy makers in their interactions with citizens. This argument may be even more valid in professional settings, such as schools, where teachers expect a degree of autonomy in the classroom. In Malaysia's multi-level system, policy initiatives are filtered by officials so that the reforms are interpreted and implemented in different ways from those intended by national policy makers.

Becher's (1989) model identifies three implementation approaches, as noted earlier. The evidence presented in this paper indicates that the approach used in Malaysia most closely matches Becher's coercive model, through the indirect exercise of force. This top down approach occurs by cascading policy through Malaysia's multi-level bureaucracy. Becher (1989: 52-53) describes the process as one in which orders are conveyed from central management to those concerned with the day-to-day

running of the enterprise. National officials prefer to portray the approach as "reasoned persuasion, impartial analysis or logical argument" (Becher 1989: 53) but state and district officials regard policy initiatives as imperatives, and not the starting point for discussion or debate. Becher (1989) claims that coercion is more "prompt and efficient" but the present research contradicts this view, as policy implementation is flawed, partly because those responsible for carrying out policy have no "ownership". This contributes to what Becher (1989: 54) describes as the "implementation gap".

We noted earlier that Fullan (2009) identifies four strategies for successful educational reform. Malaysia meets some of these criteria, notably in prescribing instructional leadership, and in mandating leadership preparation, with an instructional focus, for new principals. However, it is arguably less successful in attracting sufficient high quality people to teaching, and in motivating them to adopt educational reforms in their classrooms. As Greany (2018: 65) notes, 'system-wide change is possible, but requires strong and sustained political support and capacity building within a values-based framework that allows for local agency and adaptation'. In the Malaysian context, this requires a more even distribution of power between and among the stakeholders at all five levels of the education system, from the classroom to the national Ministry of Education.

References

Abu Hassan, F. (2016). *Transformasi dasar dalam pendidikan nasional.* In Ahmad, H. H., & Ibrahim, M. S. (Eds.), *Transformasi pendidikan nasional: Antara aspirasi dan anjakan* (pp. 49 - 56). Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Penerbit Universiti Malaya.

Aida Suraya, M. Y. (2001), *Education Reforms in Malaysia,* Paper presented at the International Conference on Educational Research: Understanding Educational Issues in the Asia Pacific Region. Seoul, Korea, 25–26 October, 2001. Retrieved from http://www.eric.edu.gov/PDF/ ED464406.pdf

Barker, R. and Beetham, D. (2007), The legitimation of power, *The British Journal of Sociology*, *44*(2), 361-362.

Becher, T. (1989), The national curriculum and the implementation gap', in Preedy, M. (Ed.), *Approaches to Curriculum Management*, Milton Keynes, Open University Press.

DeGroff, A. and Cargo, M. (2009), Policy implementation: Implications for evaluation, *New Directions for Evaluation,* doi:10.1002/ev.313, 47-60.

Fullan, M. (2001) *Leading in a Culture of Change,* Jossey Bass, San Francisco

Fullan, M. (2009), Large-scale reform comes of age, *Journal of Educational Change*, 10: 101-113.

Hallinger, P. and Lee, M. (2014), Mapping instructional leadership in Thailand: Has education reform impacted principal practice, *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership*, 42 (1): -29.

<mark>Greany, T. (2016), Innovation is possible, it's just not easy: Improvement, innovation and legitimacy in England's autonomous and accountable school system, *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership,* 46 (1): 65-85.</mark>

Hjern, B., Hanf, K. and Porter, D.O. (1977), Implementation of Manpower Training: Local Administrative Networks in the Federal Republic of Germany and Sweden, *Working Paper: International Institute of Management,* Berlin, Federal Republic of Germany.

Hjern, B. and Hull, C. (1982), Implementation research as empirical constitutionalism, *European Journal of Political Research,* 10 (2): 105–15.

Honig, M.I. (2006), Complexity and policy implementation: Challenges and opportunities for the field, *New DIrections in Education Policy Implementation,* 1-23

Ibrahim, M. S., Razak, A. Z. and Kenayathulla, H. B. (2015), *Strategi implementasi: Pelan pembangunan pendidikan Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Penerbit Universiti Malaya.

Ingram H. and Schneider, A. (2007), Social construction and policy design, in P. Sabatier (Ed.), *Theories of the Policy Process* (pp. 93–126), Chicago, Westview.

Jahnukainen, M., Pesonen, H., Itkonen, T., Kontu, E., Kokko, T., Ojala, T. and Pirttimaa, R. (2015), The Implementation of New Special Education Legislation in Finland, *Educational Policy,* 29: 162-178

Lee M.N. (2004), Malaysian teacher education into the new century. In: Cheng Y.C., Chow K.W., Mok M.M.C. (Eds), *Reform of Teacher Education in the Asia-Pacific in the New Millennium. Education in the Asia-Pacific Region: Issues Concerns and Prospects*, Vol 3. Springer, Dordrecht

Lee , M.N. (2010) Education in Malaysia: Towards Vision 2020, *School Effectiveness and School Improvement,* 10:1, 86-98, DOI: 10.1076/sesi.10.1.86.3514

Lima, L. and D'Ascenzi, L. (2013), Public policy implementation: analytical perspectives, *Journal of Sociology and Politics*, 21 (48): 101-110

Lipsky, M. (1980), *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

MacBeath, J. (2010), *Leadership for Learning: Concepts, Principles and Practice*, Leadership for Learning, The Cambridge Network.

Ministry of Education (2013), *Malaysia Education Blueprint*, Putrajaya, Ministry of Education.

Moos, L. (2014), Educational governance in Denmark, *Leadership and Policy in Schools,* 13 (4): 424–443.

Musa, M.B. (2003) *An Education System Worthy of Malaysia,* Petalang Jaya: Strategic Information Research Development.

Signé, L. (2017a), *Policy Implementation – A Synthesis of the Study of Policy Implementation and the Causes of Policy Failure*, OPC Policy Centre.

Signé, L. (2017b), *Public Policy Change: Successful Implementation*, OPC Policy Centre.

Spillane, J.P., Reiser, B. and Reimer, T. (2002), Policy Implementation and cognition: Reframing and refocusing implementation, *Review of Educational Research,* 72 (3): 387-431.

Sua, T.Y. (2012), Democratization of secondary education in Malaysia: Emerging problems and challenges of educational reform, *International Journal of Educational Development*, 32 (1): 53-64.

United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organisation (2011) *Secondary education regional information base: country profile – Malaysia.* Bangkok, UNESCO

United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organisation (2014), *Educational Systems in ASEAN and Six Countries: A Comparative Analysis of Selected Educational Issues*, Bangkok, UNESCO.

Wongwanich, S., Piromsombat, C., Khaikleng, P. and Sriklaub, K. (2015), Policy Delivery Strategies for Education Reform: A Formative Research and Development, *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences,* 171: 1365-1372

[three references deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process]