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The changing nature of the work of Chinese school principals in the wake of national curriculum reform

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Abstract

The purpose of the article is to explain shifts in the priorities and work practices of Chinese school principals in response to national curriculum reform. The research focused on three school case studies based on semi-structured interviews with the principals of the three schools and focus group interviews with the senior management teams, department heads and classroom teachers in each of the schools. Supplementary evidence was obtained from school documentary sources and informal observations. The results of the study indicate a shift of school principal priorities and work practices from routine administration to the leadership of external relations and networking; teaching staff and teaching quality; and curricular and pedagogical change. The conclusions indicate broad commonalities in leadership purpose towards these three objectives, but also indicate significant differences related to leadership style and organisational context. The findings contribute to a deeper international understanding of changing school principal work practices and priorities.

Key words: Chinese school principals; school principal priorities and work practices; case study; curriculum reform

Introduction

While there has been extensive international research on the changing nature of the role of school principals in response to curriculum reform and other externally-driven change, there is relatively little known about the precise impact on the priorities and day-to-day behavioural practices of school principals. In China there has been over two decades of national curriculum reform requiring fundamental shifts in approaches to teaching, student learning and attitudes to disadvantaged groups. The purpose of the article is therefore to provide fresh evidence on how Chinese school principals have responded to the new challenges through adjustments to their priorities, leadership styles, behaviours and work patterns. The focus is internationally significant because, while most research literature relates to Western contexts, the pressures of incessant externally-driven educational reform have become a global phenomenon.

The article begins with a critical review of the international literature in relation to the impact of national reform on the nature of school principals' work, followed by a review of the Chinese context. It then focuses on the research investigation, describing the design and methodology, reporting the key findings, and finally discussing their significance to a wider understanding of the changing work patterns of school principals. A short conclusion considers the implications for further research.

Literature review: national reform and its impact on school principals' work

This section focuses on three fundamental issues that place the Chinese experience in a wider framework of understanding of the impact of national reform: the purpose of the national reform, the effects of the national reform on principals, and managing national reform to ameliorate the negative impact on principals.

Purpose of national reform

National educational reform has become a global phenomenon associated with central government efforts to improve school effectiveness and educational standards through a combination of: (a) neoliberal policies to enhance market competition between schools, and (b) diverse mechanisms of accountability supported by evermore rigorous systems of school inspection (Møller, 2007, 2009; Pollock & Winton, 2015). The impact on educational professionals has been well documented in Western countries, especially the effects of 'high-stakes' testing in schools, symptomatic of an emphasis on the measurement of educational outcomes rather than attention to educational processes. Although well-intentioned, some reforms aimed at raising test scores through what Pollock & Winton (2015) describe as 'performance-based accountability', have been criticised for their negative impact on the emotional welfare of teachers (Leithwood et al., 2002) and school principals (Bennett, 2002), creating what McGhee & Nelson (2005) describe as a 'culture of fear, driven by unanticipated consequences of the system' (p.368).

Effects of national reform on principals

The effects of externally-driven reform on school principals' work, values and emotions are emerging from research findings. Lunenburg's (2010) study of the work of American principals draws attention to: (a) the increasingly heavy workload and fast pace, dominated by meetings and punctuated by unexpected interruptions and disturbances; (b) the variety, fragmentation and brevity of activities, necessitating quick responses and little time for reflection; and (c) the high percentage of time (between 70 and 80%) spent on electronic and oral communication, both internal and external. Mulford's (2003) study of the changing roles of school principals in the UK and the USA highlights evidence of principal shortages

arising from job-related stress due to a wide range of negative factors, including long hours of work, budget cuts, a shortage of well-qualified teachers, the pressure of unrelenting policy changes, time fragmentation, a feeling of isolation, facing the harsh realities of the impact of social disadvantage, and an unsupportive political environment. In his *architecture* of educational leadership, Gronn (2003) describes the changing nature of school leadership in terms of three perspectives which have had a negative effect on school principal recruitment and job satisfaction: (a) *design*, determined by mandatory standards of assessment and accreditation; (b) *distribution*, in the sense of more distributed forms of leadership in response to the intensification of principals' work; and (c) *disengagement*, characterised by a culture of abstention.

Managing national reform to ameliorate the negative impact on principals

Recently commissioned research in Ontario has cast more light on the changing work patterns of school principals as a result of national reform and ways in which associated difficulties might be ameliorated through changes to policies and practices. The study by Leithwood & Aznah (2014) acknowledges the excessive workload of school principals but suggests how it can be avoided by focusing on priorities, especially aligning the structure of the organisation to support what they describe as the 'learning imperative' (p.62). Another observation from their report is the significance of effective departmental functioning, because 'high functioning departments and effective leadership from heads make the workload more manageable; when neither of these prevail, workload increases significantly' (p.63). These observations emphasise the importance of subject departments as pivotal centres for initiating and implementing school improvement, with significant implications

for both leadership development opportunities for department heads and more distributed patterns of leadership.

A complementary Ontario study by Pollock et al. (2014) highlights the significance of the influence of provincial educational policies and mandates on the work of school principals, including the need to cope with staff resistance to change and the 'emotional toll of their work' through self-medication and the support of family and friends. The study concludes that in order to navigate their way successfully through the reforms, principals require three essential leadership skills to help to determine their priorities and shape their work pattern behaviours: emotional intelligence and relationship building; interpersonal communication; and knowledge of effective teaching and learning (Pollock et al., 2014: 3). All three are dependent on leadership behaviours to build school cultures that are more 'humane and interpersonally connected', characterised by virtues of mutual trust, openness, respect, care and support, bolstered by strategies that facilitate, 'teacher empowerment', 'more collaborative relationships' and a 'departure from traditional hierarchies' (Beatty, 2011, p.221). As the gatekeepers of externally-determined reforms that must be implemented, school principals all too often see turning to teachers for support and companionship as a sign of professional weakness and a loss of the security of positional authority. Removing hierarchical barriers to bolster collaborative working and mutual trust requires what Beatty (2011, p.231) describes as 'breaking the silence on emotion'. Earning the respect and winning support from teachers is crucial for principals. In this way, they will be better placed to mediate and filter reform agendas that are increasingly 'rooted in compliance', leave limited opportunity for 'professional judgement' (Pollock et al, 2014, p.3) and are frequently at odds with their educational values (Hammersley-Fletcher, 2015).

Changing work patterns of Chinese school principals

In turning to a review of the impact of national curriculum reform on the work of Chinese principals there are three focal points for discussion: the national curriculum reform context, the objectives of the reforms, and their impact on Chinese principals.

The Chinese national curriculum reform context

The Compulsory Education Law (1985) marked the beginning of three decades of educational reform in China by first establishing nine years of free compulsory basic education, consisting of six years at primary school (*xiaoxue*) (aged 6-12) and three years at junior middle school (*chuzhong*) (aged 12-15). Admission to the senior middle school (*gaozhong*) (aged 15-18) remains competitive, based on success in the *zhongkao* examination at 15. The expansion in pupil enrolment was a remarkable achievement rising from 95.9% to 99.3% in primary schools, and from 53.5% to 97% in junior middle schools, over the years 1985 to 2006 (Law and Pan, 2008). In the wake of this reform, the *principal responsibility system* entrusted school principals with greater delegated powers for school-based management. The responsibilities were largely administrative and managerial and included recruitment, reward, discipline and supervision of staff; management of school funds; and deployment of school resources (Lin, 1993). However, in spite of more than a decade of mandated national curriculum reform after 2001, the official role of the Chinese school principal had hardly changed.

The study of 81 Chinese principals by Yang and Brayman (2010) found that principals perceived their role as that of government officer accountable only to higher-level officials in local and national government, with less autonomy than their counterparts in the West.

As a result, 'normally in Chinese culture the role of principal is not directly connected to student achievement', but perceived in terms of external coordinator, planner, decision-maker, guide and supervisor (Yang and Brayman (2010: 242). A combination of lack of autonomy and a pre-service and in-service leadership training agenda determined by government priorities, rather than the expressed needs of the principals themselves, has resulted in Chinese school principals feeling ill-equipped to cope with the far-reaching curricular reforms (Wilson and Xie, 2013).

Objectives of the Chinese national curriculum reform

The reforms of the national curriculum call for a new approach to leadership in Chinese schools. The progressive implementation of the new curriculum over the past decade has focused on two primary objectives of the Chinese Ministry of Education (MoE): first, *suzhi jiaoyu* (quality education) by easing the schoolwork burden on students and introducing more progressive, child-centred approaches to teaching (MoE, 2010); and, second, achieving greater fairness and equality of opportunity for disadvantaged groups, including ethnic minorities (MoE, 2010), children with special educational needs (MoE, 2010) and the children of migrant families (Zhu and Lin, 2011; Ming, 2014). Added to these initiatives is the ongoing reform of the traditional examination system, which has been out of kilter with the progressive reform programme because of its emphasis on rote learning.

The national reforms have expected Chinese school leaders to take more direct responsibility for curriculum change and implementation. As a consequence, progressive Western ideas have entered the discourse of Chinese academic literature, including instructional leadership (Chu, Lu and Liu, 2010; Hu, 2013) and distributed leadership (Feng, 2012; Jiang, 2013). This revision of government expectations was formalised in 2013 with

the publication of the *Professional Standards for Headteachers in Compulsory Education Schools* by the Chinese MoE (MoE, 2013; Liu et al, 2015).

These fundamental changes have put pressure on Chinese principals to adjust their priorities and work practices. Not only have they had to cope with tensions and contradictions in educational policy, particularly between the requirements of the new curriculum and an outdated examination system, but also with the pressures of intensified market competition arising from public access to school examination results and parental choice of school. Law (2012) explores the cultural impact of reform inspired by progressive Western ideas on teaching, learning, leadership and management, which are seen at odds with traditional Chinese values of hierarchy, compliance and deference for authority. Evidence suggests that Chinese leaders in both educational and commercial organisations have responded pragmatically by integrating Chinese and Anglo-American leadership values according to context (Tang and Ward, 2003; Gao et al., 2011; Law, 2012). However, this is not to underestimate the challenge facing Chinese principals in adapting their leadership values and work practices to satisfy the complex demands being placed on them. Qian and Walker (2011) sum up the tensions in highlighting the conflict between ensuring good student examination performance, while complying with the new curriculum policies, and in adopting a leadership style that can be both caring and ruthless – what they describe as a ‘disconnection between enduring and new policy expectations [which] inevitably tears principals apart’ (pp.205-206). The implications are further examined from the evidence of the research investigation.

Research Design

The study was underpinned by a single research question: ‘How has the reform of the Chinese national curriculum impacted on the role, work priorities and leadership behaviours of school principals in the province of Zhejiang?’ Zhejiang was selected for this study because research collaboration had been established between the partner universities, local government and the three participating schools. It is also one of the most advanced provinces in China that has been particularly innovative in its implementation of the national reforms.

Case study profiles

The three schools were selected for this study because they could provide evidence of how school principals operate and adapt their work priorities across the three key stages of schooling and in significantly different contexts. The first case study school was a well-resourced Experimental School (*shiyan xue*) that consisted of 1900 students and 150 teachers. Its *experimental* status brought additional government funding and resulted from the merger of a primary and junior middle school (6-15 years). Combining the nine years of compulsory education in a single school was an experimental strategy for easing primary-secondary transition for its 80% majority of students drawn from relatively disadvantaged rural migrant communities. The pressures facing the school related to overcoming socio-economic barriers to educational opportunity and achieving improvements that could be disseminated both regionally and nationally, thus justifying its privileged status as an experimental school.

The second case study was a Key Junior Middle School that consisted of 1600 pupils, aged 12-15. As a result of its privileged status as a *key* school, it was oversubscribed and allowed to generate additional income from up to 15% intake of fee-paying students from outside

the district. The pressures facing this school were maintaining its reputation, measured in terms of its success rate in the *zhongkao* examination and the percentage of its students progressing to senior middle schools.

The third case was a Senior Middle School that consisted of 1100 students aged 15-18 and 88 teachers. The school did not have a high reputation in traditional academic subjects, so its main challenges were improving the results in the *gaokao* (university entrance examination) and coping with strong competition from other more prestigious senior middle schools in recruiting able students from feeder junior middle schools.

Overview of methodology

Qualitative data were collected from semi-structured interviews (Brinkman and Kvale, 2015) with the principals of the three schools, based on relatively open questions on how the national curriculum reform had influenced their priorities and work practices; perceived positive and negative effects of the reform; and leadership implications. Five focus-group interviews were also conducted in each school (Krueger and Casey, 2008) with the senior management team; the department heads of the three core subjects (Chinese, English and mathematics); and a sample of teachers from each of the three departments in three separate focus groups. In all, 75 people were interviewed. The focus groups were made up of staff of equal status to facilitate free expression in the absence of more senior colleagues, with agreed guarantees of confidentiality within the group. In supporting the principles of methodological and respondent triangulation, data were generated from multiple sources, including the interviews, school prospectuses, school development plans and informal observations while touring the school premises and attending lessons.

Rather than applying a preconceived theoretical framework, the data analysis followed the principles of grounded theory and the Constant Comparative Method (Boeije, 2002) by: (a) comparing data in each school from a single interview, between interviews within the same group, and between interviews in different groups; (b) comparing data between the three schools for each of the three focus groups and the three school principals; (c) complementing the interview data with observational and documentary data. The data sets were revisited and reworked, involving an iterative process of revised thematic coding and data categorisation.

Research Findings

Four key themes emerged from the data analysis. The first was contextual in providing evidence of the new challenges in the wake of the reforms. The others related to leadership priorities for action in response to those challenges: external relations and networking, teaching staff and teaching quality, and curricular and pedagogical change. Each is examined below.

The challenges

Contextual challenges were experienced by principals and teachers in each of the three schools. At the Experimental School, a fundamental challenge was the pressure of the top-down, uncompromising nature of the reform process on the school principal. The Principal explained how a top official in the education bureau 'checked all the time regarding whether or not we are following the policy' and bemoaned the fact that the controls are so tight that what schools can do is very constrained. Implementation not only affected the

principal but inevitably increased pressures on other staff because of a need to comply and conform to 'external criteria of evaluation' (Deputy Principal). Teachers complained of the long hours, the tensions between the new curriculum and the examination system, and a failure of textbooks to keep up with the reforms. The Department Head of English expressed resentment of the osmosis of managerial control over professional practice within the school, stating: 'Our leaders check our teaching plans or homework every month. This is a big burden for us. I think I know how to teach English; I needn't be checked by others!' Similarly, the Department Head of Social Studies summed up the mood:

We set off at half past six in the morning and get back home at half past six in the evening. Despite this, the time we spend on teaching is very limited because there is too much unnecessary administration work ... All the work we do needs to be recorded for inspection ... It should not be necessary to record everything, but our leaders will check everything.

Such sentiments reflected a lack of trust and excessive accountability, with serious consequences for what is perceived as an unnecessarily heavy burden. Teachers at the experimental school also perceived the large intake of disadvantaged migrant children as a serious challenge in terms of lack of student motivation and parental engagement. However, the school was largely spared the pressure of the *zhongkao* examination, because most migrant children had to return to their home provinces to take the examinations in accordance with the requirements of the *hukou* (household registration system). A Chinese language teacher also explained how the district authorities now mainly looked at value-added measures in evaluating school performance, rather than raw examination scores.

In turning to the Key Junior Middle School, the Principal commented on the enormous pressures resulting from the reforms, saying in the interview: “Junior middle school principals’ faces are as pale as wax” on account of being “sandwiched between two requirements”: the stress of pressurising children through the *zhongkao* at the same time as ensuring the overall wellbeing of children by reducing the burden of academic work. Teachers expressed their frustration at the impossibility of the conflicting demands of the new curriculum and the outdated examination system, referring to the demands as ‘a paradox’ and ‘not realistic’.

In her commitment to the values of the new curriculum, the Principal of the Key Junior Middle School increased the pressure of teacher accountability directly to the students, saying: “It’s not just about your subject knowledge or new curricular ideas but also about your personal characteristics. We ask students to vote their top teachers every term”. The observation of a large billboard in the school playground, displaying pictures of all the teaching staff with their stated educational values for children to read, reinforced this image of direct accountability to students.

Finally, the pressures and challenges described at the senior middle school echoed the sentiments of staff at the other two schools. The Principal drew attention to influence of the *gaokao* as a barrier to more progressive approaches to teaching and learning. Attention was also drawn to the increased demands on timetabling to accommodate the additional optional modules in the new curriculum. Although this had reduced some class sizes it had increased the number of lessons to be taught.

There can be no doubt that the national reforms had created immense pressures for all three school principals and their teaching staff, prompting a leadership response which

prioritised external relations and networking, teaching staff and teaching quality, and curricular and pedagogical change.

External relations and networking

The importance of external relations and networking is consistent with the traditional role of the Chinese school principal as “external coordinator”. However, the evidence clearly suggests that networking is a significant consequence of the new curriculum reforms. The schools cultivated partnerships with: (a) higher education institutions to assist with school-based research and innovation; (b) ‘sister schools’ to share best practice; (c) local companies to sponsor innovation and provide student work experience; and (d) parents to build effective home-school collaboration. Teachers in the three schools drew attention to the importance of provincial and district government in supporting such partnership initiatives.

The Principal of the Experimental School placed particular emphasis on forging stronger links with the local migrant community and home-school partnerships. As parents were initially reluctant to visit the school, the Principal had made the school the hub of the community, offering adult courses for parents and access to the school’s sports and other recreational facilities for community use. There was also a policy of home visits by staff concerned about a child’s progress. The strategy was paying dividends in breaking down relational barriers. An active researcher himself, the Principal also appreciated the support from academics and his school’s affiliation with the Zhejiang Institute of Education. He said:

After all, experts and academics are ahead of us at a theoretical level ... We often say that ideas go before behaviour. We can use this to change our teachers and it is effective.

Inter-school networking was valued particularly for its contribution to shared thinking and expertise in finding more effective ways of easing the transition from primary to junior

middle school education. The Deputy Principal explained how “the education bureau has helped us build connections with other schools, but they are organised by ourselves”, resulting in students being “in a better position when they start junior middle school”.

At the Key Junior Middle School, emphasis was also placed on parental support and engagement. The school’s Director of Studies explained how the launch of a parents’ representative system had facilitated teacher-parent communication and eased conflict. Teachers in the Mathematics Department also made reference to the value of visiting “sister schools” and sharing school-based curriculum materials online to reduce preparation time.

At the Senior Middle School, parental engagement was also actively encouraged through the formation of a parents’ committee. The Principal explained that this provided an additional learning resource for the school: “For example, we have a parent of one of our students who is researching water conservation at Zhejiang University, so we invited him to give a lecture on his project”. The school’s growing national and international reputation in robotics as a new curriculum option also encouraged the Principal to seek sponsorship from the industrial Supcon Group, which also provided opportunities for student work experience. Overseas partnerships, including one with a “sister school” in Germany, were facilitated by local and international student competitions in robotics.

Teaching staff and teaching quality

Staff recruitment, reward and discipline, along with the supervision of teaching, are well-established leadership responsibilities in Chinese schools. However, the research findings indicated a subtle shift towards addressing two key challenges: (a) the lack of preparedness of teachers for the successful implementation of the reforms and (b) improving staff motivation. How each principal responded to these challenges is discussed below.

The Principal of the Experimental School first criticised the government's teacher training policy in failing to prepare teachers for changes in the national curriculum, most notably the switch from individual subjects to combined natural sciences and social sciences. He concluded that "training is behind, to be honest, and few teachers are able to train others". In order to address these deficiencies, he deployed most of the school-based funding for professional development to the establishment of the School Teaching and Research Society, an internal school committee of teachers and senior staff to take responsibility for school-level training, which, he said, "is better than the higher-level training because it is more specific, and teachers' specific problems can be dealt with".

Conscious of the increasing demands on teachers, the Principal of the Experimental School was anxious to avoid conflict and to motivate staff by "selling" professional development as an opportunity for personal enrichment: "We don't judge who teaches well anymore; we give teachers opportunities to improve themselves through action research. There is a lot of support in this respect". Official recognition of individual achievement was also built into the mandatory appraisal system to ensure transparency in staff appraisal and performance-related pay. In the words of a year 7 Chinese language teacher: "Schools give prizes which are taken into consideration when they carry out school-level appraisal; for example, if your papers are awarded certificates". A particular challenge was the motivation of older staff unwilling or unable to adapt their teaching methods. Rather than invite confrontation, the Principal mediated between the demands of the new curriculum and the aptitudes of his teaching staff. He explained: "We have different requirements for different teachers. This is our way to implement the new curriculum; otherwise it won't work. We refer to young teachers' classes as *learning-based lessons* and old teachers' classes as *classic lessons*." Such flexibility was seen by the Principal as a motivating factor by

allowing older colleagues to avoid losing face and minimising their stress in adjusting to the demands of the new pedagogy.

Turning to the Key Junior Middle School, the Principal and her senior management team had similar concerns regarding the reluctance of many experienced colleagues to comply with the requirements of the new curriculum. The Director of Moral Education gave an example: “Teachers, especially experienced teachers ... don’t want to implement the *new concept homework*, focused on student research and discovery, and *teaching after learning*, based on student reading and learning of a topic in preparation for the lesson. They think the traditional model is good enough”. However, the Principal was determined to eradicate old fashioned approaches to teaching through school-based training, stating:

Decisions are made by me, the Deputy Head in charge of Teaching and Learning and teaching and research teams. We have a training programme called ‘school-based training’, which is based on the situation of the school. It is held weekly.

She also delegated responsibility for the effective implementation of change to her Department Heads, saying that ‘the most important facilitator of the new curriculum is the effective leadership at subject level’, coupled with ‘attention paid to teacher training’. Nevertheless, conscious of the need to motivate teachers, she also displayed a softer and more caring side, stating:

We care about our teachers. We renovated our refectory to make our environment better. We decorated teachers’ offices and gave bonuses, not money but gifts including sports clothes and uniforms. As most of our teachers are female, we also washed food for them before they left school so they could use prepared food when they got home.

Teachers work hard during the day. If they go to market to buy food after work, they'll arrive home late.

In addition to providing teachers with specific subject-knowledge training, the Principal also provided teachers with opportunities for wellbeing and personal development every Friday from 3.30 to 4.30 p.m. With the assistance of guest speakers and various experts, such recreational courses focused on: managing personal finances and promoting both physical and psychological health (e.g. aerobics training and anger management). She had also conducted a survey on teachers' perceptions of their wellbeing, finding that holidays topped the list of positives, whereas 'parental obsession with their children's exam results' and 'being told off by managers' were the most serious negatives.

In the case of the Senior Middle School, the Principal added his concern about a lack of teacher incentive for implementing the new curriculum, drawing attention to a wide disparity between average budget of 45,000 *renminbi* (RMB) for results-based bonuses and 10,000 *renminbi* (RMB) for the new-curriculum incentives. He was also mindful of the frustrations of veteran teachers having to learn new skills from scratch and the way that this could undermine their confidence and morale. An empathetic leadership style enabled him to engineer change as a positive vehicle for staff learning and development and to cushion teachers from the worst impact of the reforms by playing to their strengths. He explained:

Experienced teachers who knew their stuff inside out are now back at the starting point, but it is an opportunity for development ... For example, we had a teacher who couldn't teach Chinese well but became an outstanding teacher in supervising students' research thanks to the research-based study made possible under the curriculum reform ... These activities provide teachers with a platform to show their strengths.

He also referred to two strategies of 'emotional communication' to enhance motivation. The first related to training, not only as an opportunity for development but as a reward, including learning opportunities abroad and the gift of books paid from the school library. The second related to supplementary benefits, including prizes, recreational classes and free suppers for teachers who worked late into the evening, concluding that 'all these things enrich teachers' lives and make them feel our school is providing a good environment'.

Motivation at the Senior High School was also conceptualised *collectively* as well as *individually*, in the sense that overall motivation within the school could be enhanced by forging closer bonds between stakeholder groups. The Director of Moral Education explained how the school had created a 'teacher-student festival to develop communication between teachers and students [so] students to feel cared for by the school'. This was extended by launching a teachers and friends program to facilitate better communication between teachers, students and parents.

Evidence from all three schools indicated how a subtle combination of pressure and support had become a major strategic priority in motivating staff to implement the new curriculum.

Leading curricular and pedagogical change

In response to the mandates of the new curriculum reform, all three school principals perceived the leadership of change in teaching and learning as fundamental to raising student achievement and the effective delivery of the reform programme. All three reported that they had gained approval and support for their innovations from district government.

The Principal of the Experimental School had introduced a number of general projects to improve the overall quality of teaching and learning including the 'learning-based classroom project' that limited teacher talk and maximised student engagement. Arguably, however, his most significant initiatives had been to address the transition from the primary level year 6 to the junior middle school level year 7 and raising the achievement of the academically 'bottom third' – mainly underachieving migrant children. In addressing the first of these, the Deputy Principal explained how the teachers of years 6 and 7 were asked to familiarise themselves with each other's textbooks and to communicate on teaching strategies in order 'to make the transition smoother and to help students settle better in the junior middle school'. The Director of the Student Development referred to the benefits of an exchange of ideas resulting from mutual lesson observations, while a Chinese language teacher drew attention to the advantages of 'teachers carrying out lessons together'.

In respect to addressing the second priority of improving the motivation and attainment of the 'bottom third' of students, the Principal's initiative was warmly welcomed by teaching staff. A mathematics teacher explained how many migrant children lacked 'education, care and love at home ... but some of them are very clever'. The Head of Year 6 similarly added how in the past the bottom students were not liked by themselves or their parents or even by their teachers, but 'now teachers are paying more attention to them'. Experimental systems of student grouping ensured that students were taught in a combination of both equal ability sets to foster healthy competition and mixed-ability classes to foster collaboration.

The Principal of the Key Junior Middle School had an equal commitment to improving the quality of teaching and learning through uncompromising and rigorous implementation of

the new curriculum through the school's three-year development plan and regular meetings of the teaching and research teams. The Principal's motto is 'Light Burden and High Quality', with a focus on reducing the workload for both teachers and students. She explained her principle of 'smarter approaches' to teaching with an example:

Why do maths teachers set 20 questions, which have to be marked, when 10 will do?
Teachers and students can reduce the burden together and still achieve high quality education.

Thus, although teachers complained of an externally-imposed excessive workload, the Principal pointed out how this was also partially self-inflicted.

Three whole-school initiatives had been recently introduced to facilitate improvements in student learning: (a) 'teaching after learning' to encourage exploration and independent learning; (b) 'same topic with different structures' as a basis for observing and debating different approaches to teaching; and (c) 'new concept homework', requiring independent enquiry-based learning. The school had also developed differentiated, personalised approaches to learning to cater for student differences in ability and aptitude. In achieving these goals, the Department Head of English highlighted the importance of peer support among teachers in the 'same research teams' (e.g. history and geography) in preparing lessons for the new integrated subjects. A mathematics teacher also highlighted the benefits of cross-departmental collaboration, stating that 'although the subjects are different, we can learn a lot about the way of teaching'.

The Principal of the Senior Middle School welcomed the reforms for 'caring more about students', stating: 'In the past we only concentrated on teaching, but now we attend to learning'. He was particularly enthusiastic about the greater flexibility made possible by the

introduction of optional modules. He referred to two examples of former extracurricular activities which had become optional modules in the new curriculum: the course in robotics, for which the school had earned an international reputation, and a creative writing course in the Chinese department, which had emerged from voluntary classes offered by the school's Chinese Literature Society. He concluded by saying: 'It is a good opportunity for schools with a lower-than-average student intake to develop into a specialised school'. Nevertheless, he was also mindful of the constraints imposed by the *gaokao* examination and how he had tackled these to minimise the negative effects on student learning. He explained:

We need to survive the *gaokao*, otherwise nobody would come to our school. We have to combine both. In the first one and a half years we explore, while in the other one and a half years we concentrate on the *gaokao*.

The success of these initiatives had been attributed to the quality of the pedagogical leadership of the Principal, an indication of a marked shift in leadership behaviour towards curricular innovation and greater distribution of leadership responsibility. One of the year leaders praised the Principal's introduction of flatter management structures, including the delegation of power to year leaders as a 'very practical approach because we year leaders deal with students all the time and know what students need'.

Discussion

The research findings confirm the negative impact of the national curriculum reforms on Chinese principals and teachers reported in the literature. These include the stress of performance accountability, the conflicting demands of a quality education and an outdated

examination system, a culture of compliance undermining professional judgement, and a perceived deficiency in leadership training to meet new challenges. But the research findings also provide evidence of resilience and leadership ingenuity. All three principals worked relentlessly to satisfy the expectations of government, teachers, parents and students. They demonstrated a radical shift from routine administration to a reconfiguration of organisational values focused on curriculum development and more meaningful approaches to learning and teaching. This was achieved through two key leadership innovations: first, the cultivation of supportive school networks with local communities and parents, 'sister' schools, international collaborators, commercial organisations and universities; second, the motivation of teaching staff through an optimal combination of high expectation and strong support.

Although the common nature of external pressures facilitated similarities in the leadership response, there were also differences in leadership style, particularly in their management and motivation of teaching staff. While the Principal of the Key Junior Middle School cared about the wellbeing of her teachers, the initiatives were prescribed in top-down fashion and characterised by a centralised approach to strategic decision making, although department heads were entrusted with school policy implementation. This leadership had much in keeping with the traditional Chinese values of deference and respect for authority. In contrast, the Principal of the Senior Middle School introduced a flatter management structure with far more delegation of power in keeping with the principles of distributed leadership. The Principal of the Experimental School was positioned in between. On the one hand, he was critical of government policy and clearly protective of his staff, especially of older teachers finding difficulty in adapting to the

reforms. On the other hand, he was perceived by others as demanding in his teacher accountability.

The work practices of all three principals illustrated the difficulty of balancing the role of 'caring parent' with the ruthless imposition of performance requirements as identified by Qian and Walker (2011). Mindful of the need to satisfy performance targets, the principals nevertheless protected their staff and promoted their wellbeing in ways that made them feel valued, especially in providing extra support and perquisites, including bonuses, overseas study opportunities and the provision of free leisure courses to promote staff wellbeing. All three principals displayed qualities of 'emotional intelligence', 'relationship building' and an effort to build cultures that were 'humane and interpersonally connected', in keeping with insights of best practice from Western literature (Beatty, 2011; Pollock, 2014).

The normative and cross-cultural evidence from this study indicates the importance of mutually supportive relationships, both within the school as an organisation and through external networking. This, in turn, suggests Relational Leadership Theory (RLT) (Uhl-Bien, 2006) as a useful theoretical framework for further understanding the behaviours and work practices of school principals in response to pressures of national reform. Indeed, the research evidence indicated potential benefits from a conflation of two RLT perspectives with contrasting but complementary ontological and epistemological implications. The first is an *entity perspective*, focused on individual agency and cognition of principals as bounded entities in their interactions with significant others. This was most evident from the face-to-face interviews with the three Chinese principals in exploring their inner thoughts, reflections and motivations. The second is a *relational perspective*, focused on leadership

action as a socially constructed, interdependent and unbounded process. This was most evident through the focus group interviews and informal observations, which illuminated such interrelationships.

Conclusion

The findings provide a deeper understanding the changing work patterns and priorities of Chinese school principals based on rich qualitative data. They indicate a number of important similarities, both in terms of the pressures facing school principals in a climate of externally-driven educational reform and in the strategic responses of school principals. Significant priorities and normative work practices include a greater emphasis on curricular and pedagogical innovation despite bureaucratic constraints; external relations and networking; and investment of both time and emotional energy in supporting and motivating teaching staff.

Further research within the conceptual framework of Relational Leadership Theory can apply a wider range of innovative data collection methods to build on these findings in other school contexts. Observation through shadowing (Polite et al, 1997; McDonald, 2005) offers a particularly promising means of advancing understanding school leadership, as it provides the means of capturing the detail and essence of activities, encounters and communications of school principals in their daily work practices,.

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