LEADING SCHOOL CHANGE IN CHINA: A PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION

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ABSTRACT

Mainland China has undergonecontinuous reforms in educationover the past decades. In this context, China's Ministry of Education has cast school principals as key actors in leading and managing change in schoolsat the local level throughout the country. This article reviews the literature background of Chinese school change and explores how school leaders in one city in South China foster successful change. The study employed qualitative interviews with five school principals who had demonstrated success at leading change in their schools. The purpose of the study is to explore how Chinese school leaders successfully respond to the implementation of educational reform. The paper also seeks to uncover directions for future research and offer implications for school leaders in implementing educational change in China.

Keywords: *school principal, change, educational reform*

INTRODUCTION

Nearly everyone agrees on the problems [encountered in implementing China's education reforms]: overemphasis on rote memorization, a top-down instructional style that crushes individuality and a near-total reliance on exams to evaluate progress. But educational reform is a fraught process in any country, China perhaps more than elsewhere. . . A new 10-year reform program that went into effect in 2010 acknowledges these problems and advocates the loosening of state controls over education. (Abrahamsen, 2012, p. 1)

In the past 20 years, the challenge of implementing change has been a core theme of education reform in China (Cheng, 2001; Feng, 2006; Hannum & Park, 2002; Ke, 2007; Mok, 2004; Qian, 2008; Wu & Pang, 2011; Ye,2009; Zhong, 2005). However, as suggested in the above quotation, progress has been slow. Thus, recently, it has become increasingly clear to China's policymakers that national education reform goals could not be met unless individual schools can develop a more robust capacity to change (Chen, 2004; Chen, 2005; Cui, 2006; Dong, 2006).

This realization reflects a subtle and as yet uncertain shift from a long-standing emphasis on change from the top-down and outside-in towards a greater appreciation

for the dynamics of change inside of China's public sector organizations in general (e.g., Cheng, Huang & Chou, 2002; Lau, Tse & Zhou, 2002; Lin, 2008), and schools in particular (Dong & Geng, 2008; Li, 2005; Li & Ma, 2006; Meng, 2008). Consequently some of China's recent education reform policies have begun to move away from a sole reliance on implementation by mandate and towards creating conditions that will support change in practice inside of schools (Dong, 2006; Ma, Wang & Xie, 2008). This shift is simultaneously creating new challenges for China's school leaders (Dong & Geng, 2008; Feng, 2006; Gao, 2002; Ma, Wang, & Yan, 2005; Meng, 2008; Qian, 2008; Ye, 2009). Perhaps foremost among these challenges for school principals is the need to enhance their own capacity for leading change (Chen, 2005; Chen, 2004; Du, 2004; Feng, 2003, 2006; Gao, 2002; Li, 2005; Li & Ma, 2006; Su, 2009; Walker et al., 2011).

Numerous international studies indicate that schools which demonstrate the capacity to improve are led by proactive principals with the capacity to lead staff towards achievement of new goals (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008). In a dynamic context of education reform and change, simply seeking to maintain and repeat past success is seldom a robust formula for future success (Drucker, 1996; Fullan, 2001; Kotter, 1996; Stoll & Fink, 2010). In Fullan's (2007) words, there is "no improving school that doesn't have a principal who is good at leading improvement" (p. 160).

It should be noted at the outset that China is not alone in meeting the challenges of putting education policy reforms into practice. National education systems throughout the world are finding it difficult to implement reforms in ways that produce positive changes in classrooms for children. The challenges of implementing successful education reform have been documented not only in developed Western societies (e.g., (Caldwell, 1998; Cuban, 1990; Evans, 1996; Fullan, 2007; Hall & Hord, 2003; Hallinger, 2003; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Jackson, 2000), but also in rapidly developing societies of East and Southeast Asia (Dimmock & Walker, 1998; Hallinger, 2010; Mok, 2004). For example, the challenges of implementing successful education reform have been documented in Malaysia (Bajunid, 2008; Malakolunthu, 2007; Rahimah, 1998), Taiwan (Chen, 2008, Law, 2004; Pan, 1999; Yang, 2001), Hong Kong (Cheng, 2005; Cheng & Walker, 2008; Lam, 2003), Singapore, (Kam & Gopinathan, 1999; Ng, 2004), Thailand (Author, 2001, 2006, 2011), as well as mainland China (Pepper, 1996; Qian, 2008; Walker et al., 2007).

Unfortunately, system- and school-level leaders in these Asian societies are to some extent 'flying blind' when it comes to leading change. Both the theoretical and empirical literatures that bear upon the challenges of leading change come from a limited set of Western societies (Hallinger, 2010; Qian, 2008). Thus, scholars and practitioners have questioned the extent to which theories, principles, and strategies from very different socio-cultural contexts will transfer to these developing Asian societies (Bajunid, 2008; Cheng, 1995; Dimmock & Walker, 1998; Hallinger, 2010).

The current study took place in the context of a research and development (R & D) project aimed at designing a training curriculum on change leadership for Chinese school principals. Given the lack of a robust *internationally accessible literature* on change leadership in the Chinese context, we decided to undertake a both a literature review and a small-scale qualitative study into change leadership in the mainland China education context. It was hoped that these would inform our understanding of the change, context, obstacles and strategies that describe the context of school change in mainland China.

Education Reform and Change in China

We begin our inquiry into the dynamics of leading change in China with a review of recent literature. At the outset we note that the internationally-published literature on school leadership in China remains limited both in breadth and depth (Walker et al., 2012). Indeed, most of the relevant literature has been published in Chinese language, primarily for domestic consumption. Thus, a key feature of our literature review was to uncover relevant Chinese language literature on leading change. In this regard, we sought to understand the nature of the knowledge base that currently informs Chinese school leaders as they confront the challenges of leading education reform in their schools. This knowledge base consists of cultural assumptions about both the role of leaders and the nature of change, forces that bear upon change in the Chinese education context, as well as predictable obstacles face China's change leaders, and strategies that have been reported to achieve success.

The literature review is divided into two sections focusing first on the context of education reform and change in China, and second on leading change in China. We wish to note in advance that due to the dual goals of this paper (i.e., literature review and empirical study), our review is necessarily truncated. In addition, following the observations and Walker and colleagues (2012), we found that the Chinese literature on school leadership is quite different in composition from the Western published literature. The Chinese literature consists primarily of a combination of prescription and 'commentaries' based either on in-depth analysis of an issue or presentation of single case studies. As Walker and colleagues observed:

> "Interestingly, because the empirical studies are seen to produce little more than ''commonsense'' findings (what people already know), their influence in the Chinese educational community remains marginal. As a result, non-empirical research still dominates the Chinese literature and commonly accepted research norms". (Walker et al., 2012, p. 390).

With this in mind, our literature review is necessarily exploratory rather than explanatory (Author, 2013). It is aimed at surfacing trends, identifying potential issues and generating propositions, rather than drawing conclusions and providing explanations.

The Context of Educational Reform in China

According to Wu and Pang (2010), educational reform in China since the establishment of the People's Republic of China can be classified into three stages. The first stage occurred period before the Cultural Revolution (1949-1966). During this period, the Chinese education system largely mirrored features of the Soviet Union's educational concepts and practices. The second stage is represented in the Ten-year Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). During this stage, formal education in China was widely disrupted, and the emphasis on education as political transformation intensified further. The third stage can be characterized as Reform and Openness (1978 to the present). During this stage education has been approached with dual priorities on social-moral development and instrumental knowledge and skill development. The former emphasis aims at socialist modernization and the latter on the nation's economic development and competitiveness.

Acceleration of developments during the third stage has, over the past 20 years, led to a series of new waves of reform in the Chinese context. In May, 2001, a document entitled "Decisions on the Basic Education Reform and Development" was issued by the State Council (MOE, 2001b). This delineated an innovation blueprint for education reform. The blueprint ranged from moral education to overall social-educational development, and encompassed system management, curriculum, teaching, and assessment (Gao, 2002;Hannum & Park, 2002).

Grounded in the above document, a new education reform, unprecedented in the history of Chinese education, was launched in June of the same year, This was known as the New Curriculum Reform in China. Subsequently, The Outline of the Basic Education Reform (Tentative), was issued by MOE (2001a). This elaborated on the underlying concepts of education innovation and made priority assumptions more explicit. For example, it stated that that educator should:

- pay close attention to students' interests and experience
- carefully choose the basic knowledge and skills for lifelong learning
- respect students' personality, show solicitude to student differences and satisfy different students' requirements. (MOE, 2001a)

In sum, based on the Outline, the new curriculum reform aims to realize three transformations. First, curriculum policy would be transferred from centralized authorities and distributed more broadly to other levels of the education hierarchy. The underlying curriculum paradigm would change from the science-centered to social construction-centered. The norms of classroom teaching and learning would change from an emphasis on teacher direction to student exploration (Zhong, 2005).

During the 10 years that passed since adoption of the new curriculum reform, Chinese authorities concluded: "[although] achievement is great, but there are also numerous problems" (EOE, 2010). Problems included relatively backward ideas of

education, outmoded teaching content and methods, students overloaded by schoolwork, difficulties in gaining acceptance of new concepts of quality education, student problems in adapting to society, and insufficient collective energy and capacity in running schools (EOE, 2010; Feng, 2006) .

With these 'implementation challenges in mind, in July 2010 China announced the "Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)" (MOE, 2010). This document stated that, "the students' healthy development is regarded as the starting point and the end of all school work." We should "create education that is suitable for students" (MOE, 2010).

Compared to educational reforms undertaken in the late 20th century, this latest effort at educational reform pays greater attention to integrity and harmony of social development. It emphasizes the cohesiveness and relationship between social development and lifelong learning and development of citizens. This has represented a significant change in the direction of education for China's schools. Moreover, the diversification of goals in these non-traditional directions introduced new levels of complexity into China's education reform (Feng, 2006). This has created new challenges and for school leaders, even in the face of previously unmet expectations and goals (Chen, 2005; Dong & Geng, 2008; Feng, 2006; Ye, 2009; Zhong, 2005).

Leading Change in China

The Soviet Union's top-down traditions of management as well as more general educational practices still deeply influence the present Chinese system of education (Wu & Pang, 2011). These structural features are further strengthened by cultural norms of Chinese society that emphasize status differences, hierarchical organization, and the use of position power (Cheng, Huang, & Chou, 2002; Dong, 2006; Gao, 2002; Hofstede, 1983; Lin, 2000; Xu, 2005; Zhang & Zeng, 2006). Thus, a top-down norm of system management has, in the past, predominated in the implementation of China's educational reforms (Dong, 2006; Wu & Pang, 2011). Nonetheless, as noted above, the most recent round of curriculum reform has sought to provide schools with more autonomy than in the past (Feng, 2006; Xu, 2005). Autonomy has, as in other countries (Caldwell, 1998; Leithwood, 2001), also been accompanied by increased accountability (Cui, 2006; Gao, 2002; Qian, 2008; Xu, 2005).

Thus, the new curriculum reform has brought with it increasing demands for change among local schools and more specifically in the role behavior of principals (Chen, 2005; Du, 2004; Ma, Wang, & Yan, 2005; Meng, 2008; Qian, 2008). The key problem confronting Chinese educators in this regard is, "How to adapt?" As Cui (2006) has noted, although schools leaders are already adept at announcing visions of change and displaying blueprints for change, implementing these changes in the real situation is another matter (see also Lau, Tse & Zhou, 2002). Ke (2007) referred to a continuing emphasis on schools produce the appearance of results that meet the

expectations of system leaders as the new institutional system. Or as Walker and colleagues observed:

> "In reality, the complexity of the context seems to result in a disconnection between principal practice and the leadership approaches promoted in both policy and the literature. Thus, despite policymakers and academics advocating curriculum and distributed leadership, the continuing emphasis on high-stake exams by educators across the educational spectrum (education officials, principals and even teachers) means that principals tend to pay lip service to these ideals while continuing to do things 'the same way as they have always been done". (Pepper, 1996, pp. 104-111), (Walker, et al., 2012, p. 388).

One study examined the response of Shanghai secondary school principals to the curriculum reforms of the past decade (Walker, Qian, & Zhang, 2011) . The results showed that, "the enduring cultural norms which continue to underpin societal expectations and accountability" is one of the main reasons why curriculum reform has so far not been able to bring about deep change at secondary school level" (Walker et al., 2011).

Ke (2007) has asserted that compared with the grand plans for change, China's schools have been remarkably stable over the past half century. Yet, there have been cases of successful change reported in the Chinese educational leadership and management literature (e.g., Chen, 2004; Cui, 2006; Dong, 2006; Ma, Wang, & Xie, 2008; Su, 2009; Wei, 2006). Our review of these articles revealed a number of common themes concerning descriptions of successful school leadership and change in the Chinese context. More specifically, reports on successful leaders of change in Chinese schools identify the following characteristics.

1. Rely more heavily on influence and moral suasion than on position power to engage staff in successful change efforts (Dong, 2006; Li, 2005; Lin, 2000; Qian, 2008; Su, 2009; Xu, 2005);
2. Articulate a definite, firm set of beliefs about education as well as an inspiring vision of change (Dong, 2006; Li, 2005; Ma et al., 2005, 2008; Su, 2009);
3. Work to create a united and proactive leadership team (Chen, 2005, Chen, 2004; Cui, 2006; Hu, 2005; Li, 2005)
4. Gain support from external stakeholders (Cui, 2006; Zhang & Zeng, 2006)
5. Cultivate school culture capable of supporting the innovation (Dong, 2006; Li, 2005; Li & Ma, 2006; Ma et al., 2005, 2008; Wei, 2006);
6. Model just and democratic behavior in their relationships with staff (Hu, 2005; Li, 2005);
7. Provide diverse opportunities for teachers' professional development (Dong, 2006; Jia, 2007; Wei, 2006; Wu & Pang, 2011);
8. Model professional growth through engaging in their own personal learning (Chu & Cravens, 2012; Cui, 2006; Dong, 2006; Li, 2005; Qian, 2008)

These themes are surprising in two notable respects. First, they reflect a more ransformational than transactional approach to leadership than one would expect in the Chinese context (see Dong, 2005; Gao, 2005; Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Li, 2005; Lin, 2008). That is, these conclusions appear to emphasize empowerment, use of expertise and influence, and capacity building, as opposed to direction, coercion, and use of rewards and sanctions. Second, these conclusions, on the whole, could have been derived from a handbook on leading change in the USA or UK (e.g., Fullan, 2007; Kotter, 1996). similar to guidelines found in the Western change leadership literature (e.g., Drucker, 1995; Fullan, 2001; Gao, 2002; Hall & Hord, 2002; Hallinger, 2003; Kotter, 1996). It should, however, be noted that these 'propositions' have not been 'tested empirically' in the manner that we might expect in the Western research tradition (Walker et al., 2012; Ye, 2009). Thus, it is difficult to assess the extent to which they reflect an emergent normative ideology, or actual practice in schools. Moreover, previous studies of change in the region suggest that although many of the broad principles in the Western literature apply in leading change in selected Asian contexts, there is a culturally defined expression to these principles. Thus, it seemed essential to gain first-hand accounts of how organizational change manifests in the Chinese cultural context.

With these themes and questions emerging from our review of the relevant Chinese language literature, we proceeded to the next stage in this research and development project. We conceived of a small-scale research study that would allow us to examine the themes and explore further some of the questions noted above.

RESEARCH METHOD

Our review of the Chinese literature on leading educational change suggested that there could be both similarities as well as potential differences in the challenges and strategies entailed in leading successful change in schools in the mainland China education context. Consequently, we initiated a small-scale qualitative study to examine propositions that emerged from the literature review. We describe the design and method of the study in this section of the paper.

We chose to begin the research by interviewing a small number of 'successful' experienced school principals. The interviews would allow us to further explore the themes and questions posed above through the eyes of experienced change leaders. Although the results would, of course, not be definitive, we believe that they would move us one step farther along the trail of understanding the types of propositions that could be tested in a broader study.

Selection of Subjects

We built upon the work of others noted in the previous section of the paper to develop an operational definition of successful principal leadership. This was defined as 'principals capable of leading staff to reach the goal of school development and outstanding results in the implementation of changes in their school'. The

achievement of these school leaders should not only be perceived by our researchers, but also widely agreed by school practitioners in the same region. In addition to consensual recognition by the government and peers, we considered five additional factors in selecting participants for the interview:

1. Variation in school size;
2. Coverage of both primary and secondary schools;
3. Coverage of both private and state-run schools;
4. A mix of schools in the city, town and countryside; and
5. Inclusion of male and female principals.

Five school principals were identified and successfully approached in Guangzhou, China. Four principals came from state-owned schools, and one from a private school. Two principals came from primary (i.e., grades 1-6) schools from, two middle schools (i.e., grades 7 to 9), and one 9-year school (grades 1-9). Three schools were located in cities, one in a town, and one in the rural countryside. School size varied from 803 to 1600 students, and the number of teachers working at respective schools varied from 67 to 110. The duration of working in the present schools among the principals ranged from 2 to 14 years. The profile of sampled schools was representative of the schools in Guangdong region. A summary of participants' basic information is showed in Table 1.

Table 1: *Characteristics of the participants*

Identifier	School Category	Gender	Exp as Principal	School Location	No. of Students	No. of Teachers
P1	Private Secondary School	Male	22 yrs	City	1,300	110
P2	State-run Middle School	Male	6 yrs	Rural	1,350	87
P3	State-run 9-year School	Male	16 yrs	Town	803	67
P4	State-run Primary School	Female	17 yrs	City	1,360	87
P5	State-run Primary School	Female	9 yrs	City	1,600	92

Focus of the Interviews

The three foci identified above included the context of change, obstacles to change and change strategies. Thus, the interview questions were aimed at a set of broad issues concerning change leadership in Chinese schools:

1. leadership strategies employed in order to launch, engage, and sustain change (Author, 2011; Hallinger, 2003; Kotter, 1996);
2. nature of the change process as experienced by staff and students (Bridges, 2003; Fullan, 2007; Hall & Hord, 2002; Lewin, 1951);
3. obstacles and forms of resistance faced during the change process (Author, 2011;Evans, 1996; Hall & Hord, 2002; Maurer, 1996);
4. strategies and activities employed to motivate staff and build staff capacity for change (Author, 2001, 2006; Evans, 1996; Fullan, 2007; Hall & Hord,

2002; Kotter, 1996);

5. features of the school's environment that impacted staff motivation and capacity to implement successful change (Drucker, 1995; Fullan, 2007; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Kotter, 1996);

Data Collection

The interviews were conducted in Chinese by the lead author. The interviews each lasted between two and three hours. The interview questions designed around our research foci are displayed in Appendix A. With the consent of participants, the interview was tape-recorded and transcribed into Chinese. After the transcription, participants were invited to check the transcript to guarantee its accuracy. Then the transcription was translated into English for cross-case analysis.

Data Analysis

Interview data were content coded based on the core research foci noted above. Double coding and triangulation were employed to minimize the scope for subjective judgment and assure the validity of our findings (Miles & Huberman, 1984). The first and second authors separately coded the data from first interview. The few inconsistencies that emerged were discussed until the two authors reached an agreement. The first author then coded the remaining data. We also used triangulation across multiple sources of evidence for each case (interviews, observations, and school documents), which revealed a high degree of consistency.

RESULTS

The Context of Educational Reform

Above all, all school changes reported in this study occurred against a common educational policy context. The tidal waves of the educational reform have spread over China since the new curriculum was carried out in 2001 (Ye, 2009; Zhong, 2005). With the launch of the new policy, the goal and the principles of the new curriculum reform became both the objectives and guidelines for school change across China (Feng, 2006; Li & Ma, (2006; Ma et al., 2008).

All five of the principals in this study used the national curriculum reform as a point of leverage for change and improvements in their schools. For example, Principal 3 (P3) arrived at her present school in 2005. The school was set up in 1998 to enroll children of immigrants working in and around Guangzhou's new international airport. The students were of relatively low socio-economic status and among the lower achieving students in the district academically. She first proposed to the district's education department to be the first experimental school in the region. In line with the direction of the curriculum reform policy, she built her school improvement effort around the implementation of new instructional methods. After

six years of experimentation, the school had demonstrated great improvements in student academic performance and as well as other areas. Indeed, the school has transformed into one of the best known primary schools in the city.

A second common feature across cases was that all changes reported were undertaken in the context of policy-stimulated decentralization of school governance. It was obvious that school principals in our study made explicit use of increased autonomy over various aspects of school management. Perhaps foremost among these was the authority to set the direction of change in domains such as school improvement, school-based curriculum and teacher training. As Principal 5 (P5) recalled:

> "When I came to the present school as principal, which was established in 2002 in a new resident district, I felt it gave me much more autonomy in running the school than before to promote and sustain my previous efforts at teaching reform. Then I set this as the direction and vision for my new school".

Indeed, all five principals stated that the focal changes on which they built their school improvement efforts were selected by the school staffs, rather than through direction or mandate from higher authorities. This suggests that the curriculum policy not only provided a powerful framework in terms of targets (i.e., outcomes), but also allowed autonomy in determining the methods to be used by the schools. These principals were able to use both features of the new policy productively in reshaping their schools' priorities and strategies.

When P4 consult the opinions of some leaders in the District Education Bureau about her idea of introducing a new teaching method, she actually faced mild opposition. Some of the district leaders did not see her proposed change in teaching method as consistent with the trend of education reform. Nonetheless, even in the face of lack of support from the district office, P4 believed that the new teaching methods presented a better approach to changing students' learning habits and improving students' overall quality. Consequently, she employed the autonomy offered in the new policy to persist in implementing this change at her school.

Focus for School Change

As noted earlier, China's curriculum reform aimed to reshape the teaching and learning process in classrooms and schools. Thus, the key changes discussed by all five of the principals focused on the implementation of new teaching method. The principals' perspectives on the focus of change were aptly captured in the interview with P3.

> "During these recent years, we have been looking for a way to change the approach to studying and teaching. Actually, in 2003 in my school we had implemented a new approach to moral teaching. However, this still didn't

address the main challenges of teaching in the subject areas, so we looked for another way. Finally we chose to implement a new teaching learning method on our own judgment. It was not an order from the top. We chose it because we thought it would be a good direction that was suitable for our school". (P3)

P5 thought that his school's change of teaching and learning method brought about a deep change of school culture. He stated:

"When I learnt about this teaching method in a conference introduced by an expert, I was deeply attracted and moved by its potential. Then I made up my mind to pursuit this as a goal for my school. So I decided to implement it in our school and brought it back to share with my teachers". (P5)

These quotes, as well as other examples encountered in the interviews, convey the sense of excitement, optimism, possibility and inspiration of the principals themselves when they came across these innovations. In their own words, the innovations were "very amazing", "useful, and important", "worth and useful", and "active and full of expectations". This emphasizes the importance of the leader as a learner, and the role of inspiration in fostering change (Dong, 2006; Feng, 2003; Fullan, 2007; Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Li, 2005).

Obstacles to Change

A common feature of education reform throughout the world, is the relatively slow pace of change (Author, 2011; Cheng, 2001; Cheng & Walker, 2008; Cuban, 1990; Fullan, 2007; Hall & Hord, 2002; Jackson, 2000; Kantamara et al., 2006; Lam, 2003; McLaughlin, 1990). This has also been the case in China where it is quite common for schools to claim it have successfully implemented change, only to withdraw their efforts after only one or two years. Kotter (1996) referred to this general change phenomenon as "declaring victory too soon". Other theorists such as Lewin (1951) and Hall and Hord (2002) highlight the distinction between "adoption" and actual "implementation" of the innovation.

The pathway towards successful change is strewn with obstacles. Indeed, the obstacles to change have been described in great detail. The Western literature highlights obstacles such as complexity of the change, lack of resources, lack of staff interest and capability, and lack of urgency (Cuban, 1990; Kotter, 1996). The East Asian literature mentions these as well as others such as 'disconnects' between values underlying the change and the culture of the receiving organization (Author, 2011; Hallinger, 2010; Lam, 2003; Lau et al., 2006; Pan & Chieu, 1999).

Based on our interviews with these successful Chinese change leaders, we were able to identify eight specific obstacles. Listed by the order of frequency, were mentioned by the participants. They are:

1. Negative teacher attitudes towards the change,

2. Lack of teacher knowledge and skills in the area of the change,
3. Impatience to see quick results (e.g., quick gain in student achievement),
4. Limited experience and availability of teachers to serve as models at the beginning,
5. Lack of teacher interest and understanding of the new change,
6. Limited resources to support implementation (e.g., funding),
7. Conflicting tasks and distractions initiated by the education bureau that diffused staff focus,
8. Lack of parental understanding and support of the change.

The most frequently mentioned obstacles for change concerned teacher attitude and capability to implement the change. The principals, as a group, emphasized the importance of teacher-related obstacles. They indicated that in the early stages of their efforts to bring about change, "teachers' quality was low" and "teachers did not understand or accept the change". The principals also highlighted the tendency of staff and other stakeholders to see change as an event, rather than as a long-term process (Hall & Hord, 2002). They wanted to see and obtain instant benefits in a short period of time.

We would note, again, that these obstacles do not differ substantively or in emphasis from lists generated by educators in other East Asian or Western societies. As judged by the interviews with these principals, the obstacles to change look more similar to those encountered by principals in New York, London, Bangkok, and Sydney than different.

Leadership Strategies and Activities that Fostered Change

With these obstacles in mind, we set out to explore the types of strategies and activities used by these successful Chinese school principals to launch and sustain innovations in their schools. We refer to strategies as sets of actions taken with the intent to achieve a particular outcome (e.g., 'create a guiding team'). Activities are actions undertaken to implement a strategy (e.g., appoint key formal and informal leaders to a project implementation team) . Coding and subsequent analysis of the interview data led to the identification of a variety of strategies and activities used by the principals to introduce and support change. The frequencies associated with these are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: *Strategies used to launch and gain momentum for the change*

No.	Strategies	Frequency
1	Concentrated on training some key teachers as models	5
2	Organized teachers to attend training on the new methods	5
3	Provided learning opportunities for staff, such as going out to visit schools and exchange activities on teaching and learning	5
4	Established incentive systems for successful implementers, such as bonus, promotion, and recognition	5

5	Built a guiding team of middle-level leaders and key teachers	5
6	Regularly invited experts into the schools to help in guiding and supporting implementation of the new teaching methods	4
7	Periodically reflected on collective experience and supported creativity suggestions to enhance engagement and impact	4
8	Introduced the new teaching methods through multiple channels	4
9	Sought to create a safe environment for innovation and reduce the risks for teachers to	4
10	Provided teachers with successful models of new methods	4
11	Provided opportunities for successful teachers to share their experience with others	3

Kotter (1996) emphasized the importance of "creating a sense of urgency" during the early stage of the change process. This strategic intent alls for actions that enable change leaders to break through the initial resistance to change that is often natural among people in organizations. To create a sense of urgency, the principals focused on both the content and means of communication about the impending change in teaching methods. They emphasized the need to use multiple channels to communicate the rationale for change, and to persist in ensuring that the focus retained a visible presence in their schools.

They also led staff meetings to explain the need for change, and used face-to-face discussions with teacher teams, and individual teachers. Three of the five principals also explained how they had prioritized implementation of the change within the scope of activities carried out in their own daily work. In doing so they sought to model and 'be the change' themselves.

Fullan (2001, 2007) has described how a key role of leaders involves helping others to 'make sense' of change. In several instances, the principals employed 'outside experts' to introduce the changes to the teachers. In high power distance cultures such as mainland China (Hofstede, 1983), these outside consultants embodied a form of expert power that conferred some degree of legitimacy on the new methods. Thus, employing 'expert power' from outside the school was a useful way of capturing the attention of the teachers and conveying the fact that the proposed change was not just a fad favored by the principal.

As noted earlier, the principals also framed these changes in teaching method within the context of China's national curriculum reform policy. Again, this strengthened the perceived legitimacy of the change. However, reliance on reference of national policy alone would have represented a 'weak strategy' when working with teachers who face a continuous stream of requests for change (Drucker, 1995). With this in mind, the principals also emphasized the importance of letting teachers know that 'this change' was a personal priority of theirs, and a priority for the school.

Thus, during the interviews, all five principals described how they had also introduced the new teaching methods within the context of their 'personal visions' of

school development (Barth, 1990). By doing so, they tapped into the existing reservoir of teachers' trust and respect for the principal. The principals used their relational power and influence in asking for the teachers' cooperation and support. In the words of two of the principals:

> P1: Firstly I clearly stated my own perspective and understanding of new teaching method and emphasized the need to change to all staff in the teacher meetings. I also discussed it at length with my key school leaders. By doing this I gained the necessary support and understanding from staff to move forward.

> P5: I first introduced this new change to middle-level school leaders. Initially, I showed them the new teaching method and its then discussed it promising prospects for our staff. Besides this, they believed in me. They thought that if the principal recognized it as a good thing, it could be.

In a sense, the principals were employing a type of 'tri-focal vision' that legitimated the change both through reference to experts in teaching and learning, national education policy, as well as to their personal visions of quality education. In the "high power distance" (Hofstede, 1983) context of Chinese society, this strategy of legitimizing the change through reference to these varied sources of power was a useful means of creating a "sense of urgency" in the eyes of the teaching staffs.

Kotter (1996) has articulated the importance of building a coalition of support to help in communicating and guiding the change in practice. Hall and Hord (2002) similarly noted that "principals cannot do it alone". Even in the Chinese context where principals have a considerable degree of position power, we saw evidence that these successful change leaders created coalitions for change. Three of the principals highlighted the importance of gaining support from middle-level school leaders. They noted that they had sought assistance in coordinating implementation of the changes from the outset.

Gaining the attention of staff and providing a vision of the change are not, however, sufficient to bring about productive changes. A successful change strategy must also equip those responsible for making the change happen with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to put the new methods into practice in their classroom. In Kotter's (1996) terms, change leaders must put into place a strategy that 'enables people to act'. So for example, in these schools teachers would need to understand the theory behind the new teaching methods, and learn how to use them skillfully in their classrooms. This typically requires capacity-building of teachers through some combination of training, professional development, and coaching (Hall & Hord, 2002; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Kotter, 1996).

As show in Table 2, all five principals invested in preparing teachers for change with training. These responded to the obstacles mentioned earlier and ensured that teachers had access to training and professional development. As noted in Table 2,

several of the principals again reached out to consultants to provide expertise in the form of training and feedback to teachers on how to use the new teaching and learning methods in practice. For example, P5 invited two outside consultant twice a week to observe classes and give feedback to teachers. P4 regularly gathered teachers to discuss lessons and identify areas of strength and in need for further development.

Sustaining the change also represents a key phase in the change process. As Fullan has pointed out, an implementation dip often follows the frenetic activity that often characterizes the early stages of implementation (Fullan, 2007). Several of the principals had incorporated strategies that sought to engage and encourage staff who joined the change effort (see Table 2). P5 mentioned that,

> "We tried to build up an incentive system to reward teachers who used the new teaching methods. For example, we would try to give them more recognition and opportunities for promotion. We also let them share their experiences with other staff at our school and other schools. This would make them feel that their work was more meaningful and had benefits for the school and our students".

Several of the principals also discussed how they had 'protected the change' by implementing it in small steps. In Kotter's (1996) terms, this could be interpreted as an example of "creating quick wins'. Several of the principals initially implemented the change in teaching methods in a small number of classes, and built on the success of those teachers. In addition, several of the principals sought to create a favorable atmosphere for the change by creating a safe environment in which to take risks. For example, among the primary school principals they intentionally selected lower grade classes which face less pressure for examination results.

Modeling was another important feature used to engage and support teachers during implementation. Three of the principals explicitly discussed how they employed successful implementers as models. These teachers provided an image of successful implementation in the eyes of other teachers. They also became resources who could demonstrate practical examples and models of how to make the change work in their school contexts.

Modeling sometimes encompassed activities that went beyond the schools themselves. For example, P3 stated:

> "Every summer holiday, our school organizes some travel activities with other schools that were trying to use similar teacher approaches. This not only gave our teachers opportunities to relax, build up personal relationship among colleagues, but also to exchange teaching experience with teachers in others schools. Every time when we held these activities, teachers were in high spirits and thought that they could improve a lot".

Other less frequently mentioned activities were also notable in that they reflected the relational influence that appeared to grow from principals' consideration of teachers' individual needs. For example, P1 talked about how she expressed an interest in teachers' individual and family needs, such as living condition, children, and family's life. In the Chinese context this would gain teachers' respect and support, and build up good relationship between principal and staff.

DISCUSSION

This study was undertaken in advance of an effort to develop a curriculum for training Chinese school principals in leading change. Competency in this domain is viewed as increasingly important to achieve successful long-term implementation of China's curriculum reform. We began with a review of the predominantly Chinese-language literature on principal leadership and change management since we hoped this might provide a knowledge base for understanding successful practice in mainland China.

The literature that we review from China was mostly published in Chinese, and therefore largely inaccessible to the international scholarly community. The picture of change leadership in the Chinese context that emerged was indeed quite surprising. The general literature on leadership in Chinese societies suggests that the relationship between leaders and followers is characterized by high power distance and transactional exchange considerations (Casimir, Waldman, Bartram, & Yang, 2006; Hodstede, 1983; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman & Gupta, 2004; Triandis, 1994; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998). In the terms of leadership theory, this approach is more closely aligned with transactional than transformational leadership.

In contrast, the strategies reported among successful change leaders in Chinese schools were more closely aligned with a transformational leadership perspective on leading change. Moreover, the descriptions of successful school leadership for change in China bore a clear resemblance to best practice recommendations that appear in the Western literature on leading change in schools (e.g., Fullan, 2007; Hall & Hord, 2002; Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). Thus, in our literature review, we frequently encountered terms associated with transformational school leadership (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000) such as vision, inspiration, engagement, empowerment, and capacity-building. The use of terms such as direction, command, control, authority, reward and sanction was much less frequent. However, we noted that the Chinese literature was highly descriptive, often consisting of single case studies.

With this in mind, we treated the findings from our literature as tentative, suggestive and emergent rather than conclusive. We decide to explore the findings further in a small-scale qualitative interview study with five school principals who had successfully implemented changes in teaching methods in their schools. The sample of principals, though small, did include primary and secondary school principals of both genders and from urban and rural schools. The interviews

employed open-ended questions about selected aspects of the change process as it has unfolded in their schools. Again, surprisingly, the findings cohered into a set of change strategies that were remarkably similar to those that have emerged from 60 years of research on change in Western organizations, including schools (e.g., Hall & Hord, 2002; Fullan, 2007; Kotter, 1996; Lewin, 1951; Rogers, 2003).Moreover, they suggested that these successful change leaders had employed a transformational leadership style in advancing change in their schools. In this final section of the paper, we first review the limitations of the study. Then we discuss these findings and their implications.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This research was framed as a preliminary study of leadership for change in the context of education reform in mainland China. Despite its relevance to current practice, our literature review found surprisingly few studies published in English on this topic and the Chinese literature was less empirically-grounded than we might have liked. Although we lacked the resources to undertake a large study, we decided to explore further some of the findings from our literature review through a small-scale qualitative study. Our own findings are, however, subject to several limitations worthy of explicit delineation.

First, the size of our sample of principals was very small. In any national context, never mind mainland China, a sample of five principals would be insufficient to produce conclusive generalizable results. Moreover, although our sampling strategy sought to encompass some potentially important differentiating factors (e.g., principal gender, school level and location), the size and diversity of mainland China further limit our exploratory findings to Southern China. Of course, as stated earlier, our goals for this study did not include broadly generalizable results, so we proceeded while keeping this limitation in mind.

Two additional limitations related to the research design are worthy of mention. In this research design, we lacked a comparison group against which to assess the change strategies and activities of the successful change leaders. Although we could describe trends in leadership practice of a group of successful change leaders, lack of a comparison group made it impossible to determine if the same trends would differentiate these principals from their peers in more typical schools (e.g., schools that had not succeeded in efforts to change). In addition, the qualitative interview method employed in the study, while suitable for our exploratory purposes, remains subject to the limitations of non-quantitative interview methods.

With these limitations in mind, we make no claims that the results of our qualitative study conclusively confirm or disconfirm the findings reported in the literature review. Rather we offer the empirical results as an incremental step forward as scholars begin to explore the nature of leadership practice in the context of China's education reform. Our findings do, however, lay a foundation for future larger-scale studies of change leadership in China.

CONCLUSIONS

China's curriculum reform policy is falls into the category of top-down, outside-in, mandated change. As observed by Zhong (2005), despite the effort to create greater autonomy for local schools, this education reform effort is still widely perceived as an order from the top and limited in its ability to inspire change among front-line educators. This reminds us of McLaughlin's conclusion that, "You can't mandate what matters to people, but what you mandate matters" (1990, p. 14). Thus, as has been observed in other East Asian countries (Cheng, 2001; Cheng, 2003; Hallinger, 2010; Hallinger & Lee, 2011; Malakolunthu, 2007; Pan & Chieu, 1999), even a well-intentioned plan for change can create resistance among those who are ultimately responsible for implementation. This raises the critical importance of school-level leaders with the perspective, commitment and capability to translate and transform intentions into practice and results in schools, classrooms and communities.

Compared with their counterparts in Western countries, Chinese principals also encounter a number of rather different contextual constraints. China's social structure, government policy, cultural norms, educational theories and teaching principles cohere into a context that deeply influences the attitude of educators towards educational reform and change. This carries over into the role orientations of school principals. As reported in several other Asian societies (e.g., Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam), China's principals are first and foremost government officers (see Hallinger & Lee, 2011). Although principals are expected to lead the local implementation of government policy, they have no authority over the recruitment of new teachers and are subject to endless checking by a top-heavy supervisory system.

Yet as in other societies, it is possible to find cases of school leaders who are able to achieve results within a context comprised of a particular set of contextual constraints. These principals use their wisdom and competence to transform challenges into opportunities. As noted in this study, the successful principals leveraged the content (i.e., student development) and process (i.e., autonomy) features of China's curriculum reform in order to achieve meaningful changes in their schools. Unlike the main body of principals who just 'wait-and-see', these leaders were active in pursuing their 'personal visions' (Barth, 1990) of education despite the risks. They chose the way of change by themselves, but framed the change within the context of government policy. They dared to risk lack of support from system administrators and persist in their beliefs during the process of change.

During our interviews with the principals, it was clear that, "the culture of a nation exerts a hidden but demonstrable influence on its organizations and their capacity to change" (Author, 2001, p. 388; see also House et al., 2004). Nonetheless, key factors that influenced their capacity to 'make change happen' in their schools included many of the high leverage practices reported in the Western literature on leading change (Hall & Hord, 2002; Hallinger & Lee, 2011; Kotter, 1996; O'Toole, 1995) and transformational school leadership (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood & Jantzi,

2000; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006; Marks & Printy, 2003). This included offering an inspiring vision of change, creating a coalition for the change, motivating and engaging teachers, building staff capacity to implement through training, coaching and feedback, modeling change practices, maintaining support with external stakeholders such as parents and the system level, and persisting in the face of predictable resistance and obstacles.

The direction and way of the change principal choose must be consistency with the rationale and principles of the new curriculum reform and be accordance to the nature and rules of education. Direction is always more importance than the speed. If the direction of the change goes against the destination of the reform, success will never be achieved. For example, if the goal of change at the school level only focuses on examination scores neither teachers nor students will ever be liberated from the burden of examinations. Yet, even with the national mandate to focus more upon student social development, this change takes place within a context that remains locked into structural and normative rewards linked to examination results. The change leaders in our study found ways to manage this tension successfully. They framed their visions for change within the curriculum reforms and then created safe environments within which teachers could experiment with new methods of teaching and learning. Change implementation proceeded in small steps as the principals and their change teams built upon successes located within small groups of teachers. Persistence and a suitable time-frame for implementing change were, therefore, also essential. It is impossible to succeed if one is too eager to gain success in a short period of time.

Educational reform is not at the end of the day a policy of the national government. It exists in the professional behavior of educators. Teachers are both practitioners and critical resources in the process of change. The ability both to stimulate teacher interest and professional development decides the quality of educational reform (Hall & Hord, 2002; Joyce & Showers, 2002). How can reform succeed unless actually engage in meaningful change?

Under China's curriculum reform policy, school leaders have been entrusted with greater autonomy. However, the DNA of the Chinese principalship is still imbued with the political-managerial ethic of the government official (see also Cuban, 1988; Halliner & Lee, 2011). This DNA creates an aversion to risk and a tendency to look upwards to assess the expectations of system administrators rather more than towards the needs of teachers and students. Nonetheless, our study suggests that it is possible for Chinese principals to transform the framework of curriculum reform into opportunities for the development of their schools.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

We wish to highlights three implications of this study. First, despite the unique features of the Chinese socio-cultural, political context, both change obstacles and strategies, in the main, reprised themes that dominate the Western literature on educational leadership and change. The consistency of this finding came as a surprise to the research team. As noted earlier, the leadership style of Chinese principals who bring about successful change in their schools resonates closely with the characteristics associated with transformational school leaders (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). We should note that although this finding was not expected by the research team, it is consistent with Bass' (1997) proposition that transformational leadership is a construct that is not limited by cultural context. With that in mind, and given the consistency with which this is reported across many small-scale studies suggests that a larger-scale investigation that explicitly tests this proposition is warranted.

A second implication lies in the domain of organizational change processes. In their research on the implementation of educational reform in Thailand, Hallinger and Lee (2011) earlier suggested that many features of organizational change and change management appeared to apply across cultures. They proposed, however, that the normative values and traditions of a particular society could influence how resistance is expressed and therefore call for the use of different strategies to achieve success. Although the current study did not surface similar patterns of behavior related to the socio-cultural context, this could have been related to limitations of our research methodology. Therefore, in addition to larger-scale quantitative studies that examine leadership styles of Chinese change leaders, we suggest that the literature will also benefit from more in-depth qualitative studies that seek to describe in rich detail leadership and change within the existing socio-cultural context of China's schools.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. How long have you worked as a school principal in this school?
2. Can you please identify an important change that you have been implementing in your school? Please be specific, for example, a new teach method, a new curriculum, or ICT.
3. When did your school begin to implement this change and why? Was it a new Ministry policy or something that the school chose to implement on their own?
4. How did you feel about this change at the beginning (e.g., important, useful waste of time etc.)?
5. How did you first communicate the need to implement this change to your staff?
6. What was the response of staff (students and parents—if relevant) when you first informed them about it? (e.g., happy, no response, some quiet resistance, open opposition).
7. Would you please describe the process of leading the school change?
   a) How did you start the change?
   b) Who was responsible for leading the change (be specific)?
   c) At the time that you began to make this change, please describe briefly:
      1) Factors in your school that supported the change
      2) Factors in your school that would make implementing the change difficult (e.g., budget, staff attitude, staff skills, school culture)
      3) What obstacles or problems did you face in getting the change started? Please describe these in some detail with examples.
8. What kind of activities have you done to motivate your staff to implement the change?

9. What was the percentage of staff who could implement the change after:
    a) One year?
    b) Two years?
    c) Longer?
10. What percentage of staff are now able to use the change now? How successful do you think it has been? Why do you think that? (what evidence of success)
11. What obstacles or problems did you face in moving the change along during the period after you got it started? Please describe these in some detail with examples.
12. Who were the important people in your staff that helped make the change happen? How did each of them help?
13. If you look back now, what were the key factors supporting the change in your school? How did you get these supports?
14. How long did it take for your school to have changed obviously?
15. Would you please provide 4 specific suggestions for other school leaders on how to lead successful school change in Chinese schools? Can you order these by importance?