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Moving mountains stone by stone: Reforming rural education in China

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ABSTRACT

The widely reported economic divide between the richer eastern provinces and the poorer western provinces in China has an exact parallel in the development of basic education. As a result of geographical, historical and social factors the quality and management of the education system lags considerably behind the east coast.

A pioneering project in Gansu Province is used as a case study in this paper to examine what factors are essential to the reform of basic education in poor rural parts of China. It is argued that: rural education reform needs to be addressed on multiple levels at the same time; that attention to participation, equity and processes of change are as essential as technical reforms; and that external support is a necessary factor in unfreezing outdated practices, stimulating change and creating new models of practice.

It is argued that in the current context of massively increased funding to basic education from central government that these lessons of successful reform are even more pertinent.

1. Introduction

1.1. Development of the Chinese education system

The story of the development of the Chinese basic education system since 1950 is a remarkable one. Near universal enrolment at primary level (99% NER 2005); approaching the same at junior middle school level (95% GER 2005) and higher education enrolments that have risen dramatically in the last decade (from 9% of cohort in 1999 to 21% in 2005[1]).

Nonetheless, like all aggregated figures the headlines tend to exaggerate the magnitude of the achievement and lead to a sense of complacency. Even if the government's figures are accepted at face value – and there is a lot of evidence to show they should not – at least 5 million children are not receiving a basic education in China. Allowing a 3% margin of error on data collection would double this number (more than the entire UK school population).

Further analysis reveals substantial variations between the eastern seaboard and the western interior. The poor western provinces, often suffering from weak infrastructure and inhospitable terrain, have a huge task to realise universal basic education by 2011. High labour mobility exacerbates the difficulties of trying to identify where support is needed most, since parents often take their children with them as they move to seek work.

This growing gap between East and West—first observed in economic terms and now widely recognised in educational terms has been exacerbated by the administrative and financial control of basic education. Since the 1980s basic education has been a provincial, not a national, responsibility. The centre has responsibility for setting policy and provides equalising grants to some of the poorest provinces, but the recurrent and capital costs of supporting basic education falls to provinces themselves. With very low tax revenues and limited economic growth compared to the more accessible eastern provinces, this has been a task beyond most.

Two further factors have increased the difficulty—the concern for social stability and the trickle-down nature of public funding in education. The concern for social stability in rural areas is such that employment (or underemployment) is prioritised above all else. Consequently, the proportion of funds spent on non-personnel costs (learning materials, books, games, science equipment, etc.) in rural areas is negligible, but the payroll increases inexorably every year. Local officials are either powerless to change these dynamics or collude because of political or personal benefits. The trickle-down nature of public funding is evident in the way in which urban projects are prioritised over rural (especially school building) and funding for key schools (usually in county towns) consumes disproportionate levels of resources.

The power to change these circumstances lies largely in the hands of a very few people in the centre. Although China has often in the past been characterised as a centrally controlled system, it

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[1] is Net Enrolment Rate; GER is Gross Enrolment Rate. Statistics from MoE Basic Education Department 2006.

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would be truer to say it is a deconcentrated system (Lyons, 1985). Policy remains the preserve of the centre, and is effective when properly funded. But, unfunded policy mandates are likely to get short shrift at the township level as evidenced by the popular saying: *shang mian you zheng ce, xia mian you dui ce = up there you have your policy, down here we have our way of dealing with it*.

Most change is initiated from the top down through campaigns (to eradicate illiteracy, to achieve Universal Primary or Basic Education, etc.) or through regular planning (the promotion of officials is to some extent dependent on whether they meet targets set by their superiors). Such campaigns can be highly effective in mobilising political and social resources, but in the long term are often unsustainable. After the campaigns are over the expanded service remains either hypothetically funded, poorly funded or unfunded.

1.2. Education reforms since 2000

Since the turn of the century there have been a number of reforms to Chinese basic education which are having a dramatic effect on both organisation and quality of the system. The most ambitious of these is the new national curriculum. This has been introduced gradually since 2000 and now covers the whole of the country's basic education system. It requires a radical change in teaching methods from the traditional prescriptive style, highly reliant on textbooks and teacher talk, to a new approach emphasising the individual learner. Learning through participation, not inculcation. It is still controversial and its implementation in the classroom is at best patchy.

Its key weakness has been the speed with which the reform has been introduced (to meet political objectives) and the lack of training available – especially to serving teachers – to change the habits collected in a lifetime. In rural western areas of China there are also physical barriers to the implementation of the curriculum—inadequate buildings and lack of teaching resources.

The other key area of reform is in the financing of basic education. Despite setting a target of 4% of GDP to be spent on education by the year 2000, the MoE failed to meet this by a wide margin (achieving 2.49%). The gap between eastern and western provinces has been acknowledged in the development of the free textbook policy which first made nationally prescribed textbooks available to all poor children in western provinces. In successive years this has been expanded to cover all poor children nationwide and has been expanded further to cover all children in western provinces in 2008. Nonetheless, there are still costs associated with the purchase of supplementary (but prescribed) materials produced at provincial or county levels.

Aside from textbooks, at primary level the largest cost to families of basic education has been miscellaneous charges—a euphemism for tuition fees. Since 2003 these have been essential to most rural schools as the collection and distribution of tax revenues was moved from the township level to the county level. But, they are also a considerable burden on poor parents. Since 2006 national policy has required provinces to abolish such miscellaneous charges—funding from the centre has been provided on a 75/25 basis with provinces to achieve this. In 2009 the policy is expected to be developed even further and provide a standard of 300 RMB per pupil at primary and 500 RMB per pupil at secondary level to cover school operating costs.

At the lower and senior secondary levels the cost of boarding has, until recently, been a prohibitive factor in the transition for poor children from primary school. Here again, because of the policy of school consolidation and boarding, government is stepping in to subsidise costs (largely food) and encourage children to board. Substantial funds are now being provided from the centre, with counterpart funds at provincial and county levels, to subsidise boarding costs. The implicit recognition in all the above is that if left to provincial/county funding alone the system would continue in its uneven development.

1.3. Donor support to Chinese education

Donors have been supporting the development of Chinese education since the early 1980s. The World Bank has had four projects, each regarded as highly successful, but since 2002 has not been able to lend money to China at commercial rates for education projects. UNDP, UNICEF and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) are still active and until recently. Ausaid also supported education development. The UK's Department for International Development (DFID) has been supporting Chinese education since the 1990s but principally in English language co-operations. Since 1997 and the advent of a poverty focused policy DFID has been much more active in China becoming the biggest donor in education in China[2] and sponsoring three of its own education projects (the Gansu Basic Education Project, £14m; the All-China Women's Federation Project, £3m and the Southwest Basic Education Project, £27m) and co-sponsoring several others (with the World Bank and UNDP).

Since the late 1990s the agenda for most donors supporting education in China has been similar: reduction of poverty. In the drive to meet the Millenium Development Goals numbers are the key criteria—a small effort in China can result in the reduction of large numbers of those in poverty. In the short term education cannot achieve this, or not in significant numbers, but in the long term – especially with a focus on girls' education – the expectation that the cycle of poverty can be broken by improved educational chances has a solid international consensus backed by empirical research.

Some donors, DFID included, are also quite open about their agenda to influence the government – or in this case the Ministry of Education and Provincial Departments of Education – in their thinking about how to reform the rural education system in a pro-poor way. The emphasis is on the provision of soft skills and training, not hardware. Donors regard this as part of the partnership agenda and believe such engagement has influence. DFID China, for example, now has a mandate to engage in dialogue with the Chinese government about its aid to Africa, working to try and ensure that the Chinese co-operate with other donors and use some of the same aid instruments and approaches. Of course, this is partly in recognition that donors find it increasingly difficult to justify giving aid to China—most agencies are scaling down or finishing their support to the education sector.

1.4. The Gansu Basic Education Project (GBEP)

The Gansu Basic Education Project started just as the reforms mentioned above were being implemented or drawn up. In many respects it could be seen as a forerunner of those reforms. Because it was concentrated in a small area, the project brought substantial new funding and new ideas and practices. In explicitly setting out to improve the basic education system through reform, the project could be seen as a microcosm of the larger national reforms now being implemented which have also been bringing in substantial new money and the requirement for improvement though reform.

The lessons of GBEP therefore, should be of direct interest to those who face the current daily hurdle of changing traditional

[2] Technically the World Bank is still the biggest donor in financial terms, but its latest project—Basic Education in Western Areas (BEWAP) could not have been possible without a USD 35m grant from DFID to soften the loan to make it attractive to the GoC to borrow.

practices and attitudes and helping historically neglected areas to reach national standards.

2. Case study—The Gansu Basic Education Project (GBEP)

2.1. Background

The Gansu Basic Education Project (1999–2006) was a 6 year pilot project aimed at reforming education services in poor areas and addressing the widening gap of inequality within the basic education sector. By 2006 it was probably the best known foreign funded education project in China and was certainly the best known internationally. Local people – the beneficiaries – praised the project as extremely effective compared to many other education projects. Several independent reviews reported very high degrees of confidence among local respondents in the sustainability of GBEP initiatives.

However, the situation in 1999, at the start of the project was very different.

2.2. The situation in 1999

The situation of schools in the four counties in 1999 is evident from pictures at the time—dilapidated buildings, often unsafe, housing dirty, cold children in cramped conditions were quite normal. Few teachers had received in-service training and the only resources in schools were a few textbooks and maybe the dog-eared remains of a donation of equipment or books by philanthropists. And yet, parents had to pay considerable sums of money – often as much as a quarter or their disposable income per child (Bray et al., 2002) – for the privilege of sending their children to "study". The most surprising aspect of this system was not that there were low rates of enrolment and high rates of drop-out, but that so many children attended at all.

But, perhaps more alarming than the physical conditions were the psychological conditions of those in charge of the education system, both educators and officials. Yes, the system was broken they admitted; yes, many remote schools were dangerous and understaffed; yes, they blatantly favoured county and centre schools when handing out limited resources. But, there was little they could do about it, they were powerless. There were not enough resources and anyway, who was going to change the system? Everyone knew change was needed, everyone knew the system was functioning well below par, but, no one had a plan for what to do about it. All denied responsibility – the system was to blame, and always nameless officials at higher levels – the overwhelming impression was one of paralysis.

Perhaps even more concerning though were the attempts to blame the poor for not sending their children to school. "They don't value education" was a familiar refrain which occasionally bordered on discrimination when it was used to explain differences between the Han and other minority groups. The arguments led to a vicious circle in which the failure of the poor to spend their own hard earned cash on this poor quality education became the justification for not allocating resources to improve the quality of education in minority areas. The officials who did not subscribe to these arguments were in a minority.

2.3. The project

The project was funded as a grant of £14.1m from DFID co-operating directly with the Gansu Provincial Education Department (PED). A small team of consultants worked with the PED to design the project in 1998/1999 as a pilot project that operated in the four poorest of Gansu Province's 84 counties: Dongxiang, Jishishan, Hezheng and Kangle.

The purpose of GBEP was:

> "To have more boys and girls entering and completing the primary and junior middle school cycles in Gansu, especially in the four target counties, and to reduce inequalities within the educational system."

The implementation of the project was under the leadership of the Project Management Office (PMO) set up for this purpose by the PED and drawing on staff from different divisions within the PED. On average about 6/7 part-time staff were involved.

Alongside the PED was the team of education consultants managed by Cambridge Education. This consisted of a management team of three (one international, two national) a core team of about 20 international and national consultants making an average of three consultancy visits each per year, and a further 20 consultants (mainly national) who made occasional or very specific inputs.

At the prefecture and county levels were PMOs with an average of five staff working part-time on the project. All four counties were in the same prefecture and geographically close to each other though they differed in economic and social conditions.

A Logframe, created during design, defined the scope of the interventions the project could make and was used as the reference point for each annual review. The annual reviews were conducted by DFID using some independent third parties.

2.4. Project outcomes

GBEP's achievements can be highlighted in several ways. Key targets, established after the baseline, were met and exceeded as follows:

Key figures:

- Average Net Enrolment Rate (NER) increased from 79% (1999) to 91% (2005).
- Girls net enrolment increased by as 26% in one county (the lowest was 17%).
- The biggest increases were at teaching points (primary schools in remote areas only going up to third or fourth grade) and among minority girls.
- Drop out rates less than 2% in Grade 1 from an average of 15% (1999).
- 170 schools (of 700) renovated, priority was given to remote schools.
- 6000+ teachers and 700 headteachers were trained.

But, perhaps more importantly than the figures were the changes in attitudes and practices apparent in the project counties. These are harder to record and demonstrate but are actually more important for sustainability.

Over the 6 years of the project, besides the improvement in the enrolment, drop-out, repetition and completion rates described above, key "soft" achievements include:

- many teachers had adopted and mastered a child-centred methodology of teaching to a degree equalling and often exceeding that of their peers in Beijing and Shanghai;
- headteachers had become inspectors of schools and introduced democratic management practices in schools despite conditions of resource scarcity;
- school development planning created connections for the first time between schools and community;
- locally developed materials put children's own lives in their learning;

- scholarships gave opportunity to thousands of children (especially girls and minorities) to complete a full cycle of primary education;
- pioneering education finance reform meant that schools were much better resourced than before and had autonomy over some of those resources;
- planning and management of the education system had improved through better data collection and consultation and understanding of the needs of the poorest and most disadvantaged children – and strategies to reach them – had been deepened and broadened.

For the purposes of this paper these reform strategies can be broadly divided into two categories:

- strategies targeting improved management of the education system (schools, County Education Bureaus, systems of operation and control) and,
- strategies aimed at improving quality, especially in teaching and learning.

2.5. Improved management strategies

2.5.1. Improved education management through school development planning

The most important of these strategies was the use of school development planning (SDP) as a vehicle for delivering multiple changes (see Fig. 1). The primary purpose of SDP was to bring schools and local communities together to create a unified approach to the school's development. It changed the relationship between the school and the County Education Bureau from a traditionally "top down" one to a more "bottom-up" one. It did this by giving schools more involvement in their own development. It also changed the relationship between schools and communities by bringing them closer together and focusing on some of the social development aspects of education that prevent children entering, staying and achieving in schools.

The effects of SDP have been very positive. It has introduced a level of real operational planning to schools and has shown County Education Bureau (CEB) staff how delegation of responsibility to schools and headteachers, while running the risk of abuse, does in most cases result in increased ownership of local issues—thereby reducing the demands on the (Seel, 2003).

SDP is now being promoted in at least 10 other provinces in China.

2.5.2. Experimental strategies to improve access especially for girls

GBEP piloted a number of different access strategies both small and large scale. Of these, the most important was the scholarships programme. This programme provided support to over 11,000 primary and 3000 junior middle school pupils. Each pupil received a scholarship for the duration of their time in school. Transparent selection criteria were developed locally that prioritised the poorest and most disadvantaged children such that 70% of the support went to girls and 70% to minority children. After the second year of the project all new scholarships were given to minority girls as these were clearly the most disadvantaged group. The results were much higher enrolments of children from very disadvantaged groups—especially minority girls whose enrolment rate increased the most of any group.

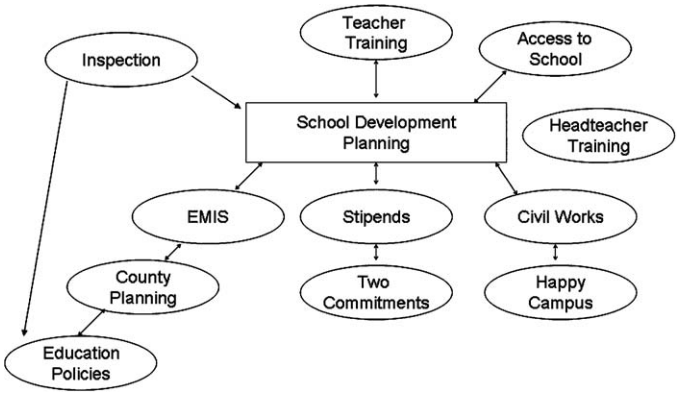

Fig. 1. SDP and interrelationships.

2.5.3. Greater school autonomy through headteacher training (HTT)

Support to improved headteacher training helped build management and leadership capacity substantially in the four target counties. Combined with training and interventions in SDP and inspection the headteacher training led to a noticeable improvement in schools' own ability to self-develop. The training did this by developing a set of short, practical training modules for all serving and newly appointed headteachers in the 671 primary schools and 47 secondary schools.

The training introduced a new sense of professionalism and changed headteachers' conception of themselves as administrators to that of leaders of learning in schools as well. A special programme aimed at potential female headteachers was also launched to help to raise the number of female heads from the position of less than 2% in 1999.

2.5.4. Stronger focus on standards and achievement through a new approach to inspection

Changing the way schools did development planning and taught the new national curriculum without changing the inspection system would have led to a mismatch whereby inspection was evaluating the wrong things. So, GBEP developed and implemented a new inspection system that focuses on children's achievement and asks how well teaching and learning and school management are contributing to this. Much of the evidence to answer these questions is gained through classroom observation, with the school development plan verifying the quality of management. The project supported the development of an Inspection Framework and an Inspection Guidance Manual both of which are available to schools as well as inspectors. Inspectors were drawn from project counties and non-project counties (to allow for independence of judgements) and also included some headteachers (who benefited from learning about other schools and were able to provide advice from their own experience).

By giving power to inspectors (to report, to propose changes, to propose support) the process of SDP was also enhanced and given prominence as an important process that set out school goals which could be measured by inspectors. Three years after the project ended inspection of schools is still taking place, managed and funded locally.

2.5.5. Increased funds for non-personnel spending through county education budget reform

GBEP also reformed the way in which County Education Bureaus budgeted for education. A commitment from each county to increase overall spending on education and increase the proportion of spending devoted to non-personnel costs was included as a condition in the project. At the end of the project, the counties have committed themselves to maintaining this level of funding thereby offering the prospect of sustained change. Distribution of funds to schools was developed through the use of a formula based on student numbers which gave more value to the students in the most disadvantaged schools. Despite being one of the most difficult elements of the project to enforce, the practice

has stood these counties in good stead as increasing sums of money are made available for basic education. In these areas there already exists a process for the fair and equitable distribution of funds between different types of schools that can avoid recreating the unbalanced development seen between the east and the west/rural urban in China.

2.6. Improved teaching and learning strategies

2.6.1. Implementation of the new national curriculum through participatory approaches to teaching

GBEP improved the way primary and junior middle school teachers are trained and focused especially on strengthening teachers' ways of teaching rather than content knowledge. It did this by introducing participatory approaches in training and analysis, by exposing trainers to new ideas, new materials and new ways of teaching and – most importantly – by focusing on the needs of the child. Emphasis was also placed on using locally available and low cost materials in all teaching, and on ensuring that disadvantaged groups of pupils (such as girls or slow learners) were given greater consideration by teachers. These new approaches reinforced and were reinforced by the interventions in Early Years Education (EYE), special education needs (SEN) and Supplementary Readers. They were also reinforced by the development of a Teaching Support System (TSS) which aimed to provide continuous in-service support to teachers and to draw on the results of inspections to target schools with particular weaknesses.

2.6.2. Strengthened retention through a focus on early years' education (EYE)

EYE concentrated attention on improving the ability of teachers to teach children in Grades 1 and 2 in order to provide a solid foundation and counter the tendency for high levels of drop out in Grade 3. Through these approaches children have more fun in learning at the beginning stage of schooling, increasing their motivation to attend and learn. GBEP achieved this by training teachers to use a more child-centred teaching methodology and to create a more child-friendly classroom environment. The project also provided half-hexagonal desks to students, encouraging group activities and participatory learning,[3] provided big books for whole class teaching often developed by local teachers and researchers using locally relevant content.

2.6.3. New approaches to children with special education needs (SEN)

Training and development of materials in SEN raised the awareness about children with special education needs among teachers, headteachers, education officials as well as community members. It also changed local peoples' attitudes and brought many disabled children into mainstream schools where previously, local wisdom said they should stay at home or go to special schools. It did this by developing SEN modules both for teacher training and headteacher training and by giving teachers and headteachers tools (such as personal profiling) and skills to identify and support children with special needs (including, for example, gifted children).

2.6.4. Improved resources for teachers and children through locally relevant Supplementary Readers (SR)

This innovation aimed to improve the language ability of students in poor and minority areas. It developed 24 pictures books that aimed to be helpful to language acquisition while also focusing attention on social issues such as gender and ethnic discrimination, disability and the environment. The development of these materials was influenced by the findings of a project in 2002 examining the representation of ethnic minorities and women in national textbooks.[4] This project received national attention for highlighting the limited representation of ethnic minorities and women in national textbooks. When they did appear it was in traditional and stereotyped roles and dress.

The Supplementary Readers were written by local people and aimed to serve the majority Muslim population. This development gave practical support to teachers in Grades 1–4 who were introducing participatory approaches and were accompanied by a teachers' guide with practical suggestions and exercises teachers could use.

2.7. Summary

The innovations and achievements listed above are not exhaustive. There were failures too. A more detailed examination of both successes and failures can be found in "Lessons Learned from the Gansu Basic Education Project".

What was important about these initiatives was that they were self-reinforcing and co-ordinated. Too often, for the sake of manageability, education reform concentrates on just one aspect of the education system e.g. teacher training or curriculum support but ignores others that can help or hinder its development (e.g. management support or reform of examinations). There is a Chinese saying "Yu Gong Yu Shan"—you can move a mountain stone by stone. This is what GBEP tried to do—moving many stones at the same time in order to move the mountain.

3. Creating the environment for sustained change

The roots of GBEP's successes are important for what they tell us about the reform of the education system as a whole in China—especially in rural areas. Given the context in 1999, given the difficulties inherent in implementing the new national curriculum in poor rural areas at that time and in improving school management, how was GBEP able to successfully create an environment for change in one of the poorest areas of China?

3.1. Principles

There are three key principles which can be identified as having an important impact on creating and promoting the environment for change:

- participation;
- equity;
- processes.

These principles were, in the initial stages of the project, given only lip service. In the abstract everyone can agree that treating everyone fairly, encouraging participation and paying attention to the process of achieving results, as well as the results themselves, are good things. But, in reality they were only accepted as part of the arrangements to receive project funds and, without external support and pressure from consultants and DFID, might not have been accepted at all.

In fact, these principles were alien to many people in this area. This was openly acknowledged more and more as the project went on and as people commented on the changes they had

[3] "Indeed, one of the most striking features of the use of semi-hexagonal desks relates to teacher movement. Teachers are far more likely to be seen moving around all areas of the classroom, helping children on an individual or small group basis—as compared to situations where traditional layouts are found. This is a very positive development." (Smawfield and Du, 2004, p. 35).

[4] "Gender analysis of the textbooks and teaching materials in K-9 schools and informal adults' literacy learning" funded by the Ford Foundation, 2000–2003.

experienced themselves or witnessed in others. They would refer to how they had understood things before – their role as a headteacher or why minority girls did not come to school – and how their perception of these things had changed through participation in the project.

From this, it would be easy to conclude that these principles were external ideas imposed through the attraction of project money—but this would be simplistic. In fact, these principles are universal, they are as applicable in rural China as they are in urban New York. But, in rural China, for cultural, historical and political reasons they have been subordinated to other concerns. Participation has been restricted in the interests of keeping social order and managing a very large population. Equity has emphasised satisfying group rather than individual priorities. Processes have been subordinated to the need to drive change through target setting.

But, just as in urban China, far reaching economic and social changes have influenced a new generation and created or revised cultural norms (emphasising consumer and human rights; tolerating greater sexual freedom; prioritising quality of environment over economic growth, etc.), so, in rural China, change also involves reassessing the cultural norms and principles of the past and working out how these are adapted to new times and new expectations.

Its not surprising therefore that it took at least a year before it could be said that a majority of project participants understood and accepted these principles. And the main reason it took so long is that principles like these cannot be disseminated—they have to be *demonstrated*.

3.1.1. Participation

In designing the project one of the key weaknesses identified by all parties was a lack of participation in the education system. Schools were often described as if they were spaceships sent by the government with no connection to the community except as a place where children went. Decision-making was described as being entirely top-down. Headteachers felt they were caretakers not managers of schools.

Thus, the key and underlying theme of almost all project activity from the very start was participation. This started from parents and children being involved in school development planning and extended to officials and county governors taking part in training and discussions about how best to change the education system. Special emphasis was put on the participation of women and girls and of ethnic minority groups.

In the context of a hierarchical system, introducing participation is a potentially subversive act. More so when one remembers that this is a Muslim dominated area. Many resisted, saying it was not the way things were done. But, those who embraced participation felt empowered and some officials realised that it could be a force for delegating the solution of problems rather than a threat to authority.

Nonetheless, there is a perennial problem of using participation to engender change since many of the people participating have a vested interest in the status quo. In particular, local officials, headteachers and those whom the system advantages see change as a threat to their positions fearing even that they may lose their jobs.

GBEP addressed this by training these local officials and headteachers and using them as facilitators for the training of others. By doing so the project effectively made them responsible for the success or failure of change. Consequently, whether project initiatives then succeeded or failed often bore a close connection with the degree of support from these officials and the degree to which they saw it as beneficial to them or to the communities they served (especially their superiors).

Some specific examples of how participation worked in practice included:

- All training was required to have a gender balance of participants (*without this the fact that men dominated the ranks of headteachers and officials would always be used as an excuse for poor participation by women. Requiring a gender balance* (*which did not mean exactly 50/50*) *forced women to be considered for training who would normally have been overlooked*).
- Teacher training writing teams were made up of ordinary teachers from rural schools, education officials and university professors (*in other projects only academics would be considered. Ordinary teachers would be considered unable to write and their practical experience ignored*).
- The SDP training materials emphasised community participation in making school plans as the core of the new approach (*previous school planning would ignore parents and children as stakeholders with any interest or ability to contribute*).

The impact of this emphasis on participation has been far reaching. In the classroom teachers have been transforming their relationships with pupils and their own understanding of teaching though the use of participatory teaching pedagogies; officials have been changing the way in which they make decisions and finding that participation makes for better policy making and parents. And children have been forming new and closer bonds with the schools serving them through their participation in the planning process.

> *The community members were saying that it was the first time they were consulted about school development issues. They began to participate more positively instead of with a passive attitude. The community members realised that they are the owners of the school and their contribution would attract more children coming to school.*
>
> **Northwest Normal University Case Study Team Report—Mid-term Review**

3.1.2. Equity

Equity underpinned all of the activities the project supported. The conception of equity the project supported lay at the heart of the innovation being introduced in Gansu and was, and probably still is, the most controversial aspect. In this area, as in many rural areas of China, the commonly accepted definition of equity would be characterised as a horizontal one—namely the equal treatment of unequal groups. To give a specific example: if there are 10 scholarships available to poor children in a remote school, the local conception of equity would suggest that roughly five boys and five girls should benefit. This is despite the fact that girls' enrolment is always lower than boys in remote schools and girls face cultural and economic barriers to attending school.

In fact, even this limited form of equity would not really be the norm especially in more remote areas where boy preference is common. In such a case, boys would be favoured because it would be argued that they had a better chance of using the scholarship i.e. they would not get married and waste the investment. Thus, out of the 10 scholarships, in remote areas eight or nine might go to boys. And in many cases this local interpretation of equity would be watered down further, since the boys most likely to benefit would be boys whose academic performance was better—again on the grounds that the investment would be better used in this way.

It was in this environment that the project introduced – or tried to introduce – a vertical conception of equity. Vertical equity is the unequal treatment of unequal groups. Using the specific example above, vertical equity would suggest that either all, or the vast majority, of the 10 scholarships should go to girls. The argument would be that, while boys were also disadvantaged, girls suffer from a historical legacy of disadvantage and discrimination (an unequal group) that justifies a disproportionate weighting towards them (unequal treatment). There is abundant quantitative and qualitative data to demonstrate this – and it's a worldwide phenomenon, not only a rural Chinese one.

This was a radical approach and one that caused much debate and disagreement. At first local administrators and educators were reluctant to accept this principle because it challenged the way in which resources were traditionally distributed (for example, in 1995, of 8 million RMB allocated to one county for secondary education, half was spent on the richest school in the county town). And the way resources were traditionally distributed was based on a cultural understanding of equity which was rooted in the welfare of the common good, of the group above all else—especially above the individual. Hence the principle observed was: if there are limited resources, give something to everyone.

The project's conception of equity is rooted in an understanding of equity as it relates to individual choice and opportunity. It is based on the understanding that to achieve equity in deeply inequitable circumstances requires righting historical disadvantages. Therefore some groups and some individuals need to be prioritised.

In fact, the distribution of scholarships in GBEP is a good example of how this worked in practice. In the first year of the project considerable time was spent debating the way in which scholarships would be distributed. A formula was agreed – after lengthy discussion – that prioritised the most disadvantaged children, but set minimum levels of 70% on the number of ethnic minority children and girls who could receive scholarships. Regular attempts during the first year were made by local officials to lower the proportions – always by arguing that boys were just as poor as girls in these areas. A review report at the end of the year found that some schools had fabricated their lists of students, giving girls names when the scholarships had actually gone to boys.

Nonetheless, at the end of the first year, after a review of the programme, all four participating counties agreed that all new scholarships should go exclusively to girls, and specifically to minority girls. This was a major change of thinking and was achieved by three factors: training courses in equity that all officials and educators had to attend during the first year which challenged their traditional views of equity; continuous interaction with national and international consultants who challenged local practices; and data from the baseline study which demonstrated starkly that minority girls were by far the most disadvantaged group in each county with an average Net Enrollment Rate of well below 50% and in some counties as low as 25%.

Some other examples of how equity has worked in practice include:

- All data collected in the project was disaggregated by gender and ethnicity (*prior to this it was sometimes impossible to quantify disadvantage, even though it could be observed*).
- Special training courses were set up for female headteachers and potential headteachers (*another example of vertical equity—designed to address the fact that less than 2% of headteachers in these counties are female. The project has helped to expand the pool of potential female candidates*).
- Project funds were distributed on a formula basis that prioritised poorer and ethnic minority dominated counties (*other projects might have simply divided the funds into four—the principle of vertical equity in GBEP meant that the project gave more to those who needed more*).

> *The girls in our village used to help their parents on the farm. They couldn't go to school and envied those pupils at school. Since the start of GBEP, they can go to school and study with the boys together.*
>
> **Ma Jinhua's letter to Tony Blair after meeting him in July 2003**

3.1.3. Processes

One of the mantras of the project in the first few years became "the process is as important as the results". That processes were as important (not more important) than results became an important principle and was frequently referenced. There were several reasons for this.

From the very start GBEP set out to experiment—it was described as a pilot project and that is why basing its efforts on only four very poor counties was seen as justified. The piloting of many different initiatives in teacher training, access, financial reform, education management, etc. was not just about the results but about the way in which those results were arrived at.

This meant that the project created an environment for experimentation; an environment where it was accepted that things could fail or where there could be flexibility if things did not seem to be working. *In GBEP failure meant change not rejection.*

It created an environment where decisions were taken to do things a longer way because it would improve capacity rather than a short way which would achieve quicker results that would not be as long lasting. Take materials development for example. In the first month of the project, teacher training consultants mapped out a proposed timetable for creating new in-service teacher training courses that envisaged a 9 month process from start to finish.

The Project Management Office teacher training counterparts responded by saying they thought it could be done in 3 months. They were right. It could be done in 3 months if one or two professors in NWNU were given the responsibility to write the materials. But, the results would be a set of quite academically focused materials, that had involved few people in their making and would be quite divorced from the reality of the classroom teaching situation in these poor minority counties. There are plenty of such materials available in the market.

GBEP's emphasis on process led to the creation of writing teams consisting of a couple of local teachers; a local normal school teachers and one or two university teachers—all guided by national and international consultants. The process took longer but the products were universally appreciated and those who took part in the process understood why quality takes longer to produce.

Of course, process is intimately linked to participation since this is one of the key processes in any kind of change—wider involvement in the process of change may initially slow down the speed of change, but in the long run it creates change whose roots are deeper and more substantial than change dictated by orders.

An emphasis on process is also essential if building long term capacity is an aim – and this is where the short, sharp approach of mass training in many national projects – for example some of the new national curriculum training—fails to really introduce change.

Capacity building needs mentoring and repeated chances to try new methods and approaches. It cannot be done in a single shot of

training. GBEP emphasised this by providing repeated training opportunities for teachers, headteachers and officials. Consultants working closely and regularly with development teams were able to gradually mentor educators and increase their capacity to develop materials or run training courses.

Some other examples of how this emphasis on processes has worked in practice include:

- Materials development teams in teacher training, inspection, headteacher training, special education needs, etc. were all required to act as master trainers and thereby find out how their materials are actually received (*often there is a separation between writers and trainers which leads to substandard materials that are too academic*).
- The development of new approaches e.g. the textbook revolving fund programme (which tried to reduce the costs of textbooks to poor students) and the school feeding programme (which tried to raise enrolment through providing a nutritious lunch) was done on a pilot basis with regular monitoring reports and independent reviews (*all experimentation was documented and the reasons for its failure or success captured. This allowed for lesson learning and dissemination to other interested parties*).
- Annual reviews of the project were done on a systematic basis with data collected to provide evidence for change. This was strengthened through the establishment of a student-based Education Management Information System (EMIS) (prior to this data was only collected and analysed on a school basis). Failures as well as successes were pinpointed (*typical local practice tended to be shallow and anecdotal without much data-based evidence*).

> *When I review the last six years' experience in school development planning, there is a mixture of sour, sweet, bitter and spicy. I felt deeply that the process was more important than the result. The process of these six years has been the development of ourselves, as well as our schools.*
> **Wang Guocai, SDP Coordinator in Jishishan County**

3.2. External support

The organisational philosopher Kurt Lewin said: "You cannot understand a system until you try to change it" (Lewin quoted in Schein, 1995). Most of the provincial and county officials involved in GBEP would probably agree with this statement even though they probably felt they "knew" the system well before GBEP started. The process of change throws up many surprises and challenges to those who manage it.

Lewin also proposed a three stage unfreeze-change-refreeze model of change that tries to explain the process that those who change practices need to go through and suggested that for external support to be effective it should be interventionist, not diagnostic.

The external support offered under GBEP broadly followed these principles. Firstly, through the combination of an external donor with a local recipient, secondly because the support offered by the donor was highly engaged, not a hands-off provision of funds and with only lip service paid to the aim of change in practice.

This model of support and engagement is quite different to the models more commonly known in China through donors such as the World Bank and UNICEF where external support is provided mainly at the design stage and in monitoring of progress and it is assumed by both donor and recipient that change will be a natural by-product of the support.

The DFID model of external support is quite different to that of other agencies working in China and of the MoE itself. Because DFID invests so heavily in the soft side of projects and seeks openly to foster change, they recognise that professional support is essential to stimulate the changes being initiated. Thus, a considerable proportion of the project funds were spent on consultancy support, the majority of this on national consultancy.

Just as in Lewin's model, the process of unfreezing traditional, long-standing practices, building an alternative model of practice and freezing that model of practice as the norm, all takes time and needs considerable support. In GBEP that support was provided through a combination of international and national consultants. This process of change is frequently painful, which is why having external support is helpful. With no vested interests, other than the professional execution of the work, but with the support of the donor, external consultancy support could also be used to challenge traditional views and beliefs, to help test new initiatives in a controlled and supported environment, and set standards of implementation higher than would be possible by local actors.

In GBEPs case the external support was both international and national, but the key to success lay in good national consultants. Those consultants built a bridge between international best practice and local practice; they helped international consultants to understand which part of international experience could be used in project areas, while at the same time helping local people understand the value of the international and national experience. Over time they became the key experts and international inputs were reduced or removed. National consultants were a pivotal factor in external support, but they themselves also benefitted from the external support from international consultants on good international practice and professional approaches to project work. It was this unique combination of international, national and local expertise which lay at the heart of much of the success of GBEP.

In the best examples, this model cascaded down to provincial, county, township and even school level. Through working jointly with international and national consultants some local officials and consultants became seen as experts in their own right in certain areas. They too were able to promote change partly because of the nature of the hierarchical authority system and partly because they were outsiders to the level below, without vested interests.

4. Conclusion

In focusing on a few areas that seem critical to the success of the GBEP, it should not be implied that these were the only factors that could be cited in the success of the project.

Nonetheless, although success cannot be guaranteed, the conditions that create it or nurture it can be identified. The key to GBEPs success lay in creating those conditions. As this essay has shown, those conditions rely heavily on creating a common and shared understanding about the aims of the project and the processes of achieving them. Setting out key and non-negotiable principles and providing training and examples to help make them widely understood were essential to having all parties facing in the same direction, even if they may have been going at different speeds.

External support also has a key role to play, especially in the early stages when moulds need to be broken and refashioned, and for supporting those who will become the local champions of change. External support can be used to support the difficult personal and institutional changes inherent in any systemic reform.

Good leadership is also essential—first, to tolerate and support experimentation, but, most importantly, to drive change by creating expectations of new standards of practice and giving support and encouragement to those in the vanguard.

In the context of the education reforms taking place in China, and the considerably increased funding available to basic education GBEP has several lessons to share.

Firstly, one of the reasons for GBEP's success was multiple reinforcing initiatives. Excellent, but separate initiatives to train teachers, or improve school management or develop new curricular materials are only half as effective as when these initiatives are combined under one umbrella and the promoters encouraged to work with each other. That can only be achieved through far-sighted management of the education system.

Secondly, in order to reach the poorest children, trickle-down theory is not enough. GBEP showed that it required a combination of additional targeted funding, better quality provision and greater equity training at school and classroom level (through SDP) to really address the reasons why the poorest children did not attend school. Multi-agency support and communication is also an essential ingredient in this mix and one that is very hard to foster.

Finally, simply increasing funding will not of itself improve quality or modernise practices. The danger then is that new money simply serves to ossify old practices. Setting aside some of the funds being provided for new initiatives to support change through improved education management would therefore be a wise investment.

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