Making Educational Reform Work: Stories of School Improvement in Urban China

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The latest national educational policy in the People's Republic of China calls for comprehensive educational reforms aimed at building the foundation for a modern learning society throughout China over the next 10 years. This research examines school leaders' efforts to implement school improvement initiatives that directly respond to the policy's focus on expanding school-level autonomy regarding leadership practices, curriculum development, student learning opportunities, parental involvement, and community relations. The goal of the research was to learn about the change management and leadership strategies that recent alumni from a graduate-level educational leadership program found to be most helpful in implementing new school-based initiatives relevant to educational reform. The study employed a photo narrative methodology to assist participants in expressing their perspectives about their experiences working as school administrators implementing educational reforms. Other data gathering methods included think-aloud protocols, free-writing sessions, school visits, and focus group discussions. Key themes related to the role of the principal in developing the conditions of success that lead to effective and meaningful policy implementation related to school improvement are reported. As well, the implications for the design of graduate-level leadership programs focusing on school improvement are explored.

Keywords: School improvement; change management and leadership; role of the principal in national educational reform; photo narratives.

"Practise what I believe, reflect on what I experience, achieve what I dream."

The above quote states the words of a young Chinese educational leader tasked, like so many of her school-based colleagues, with implementing substantive and complex nation-wide educational reforms in a dynamically changing system.

School leaders around the world, like the young administrator quoted above, play a key role in implementing educational policy (Hope & Pigford, 2001) and are ultimately responsible for putting most policies into effect in schools (Fowler, 2000). Implementing policy at the school level, however, is often a complex and difficult task for a school leader (Spillane, Reiser & Reimer, 2002). His or her perception of the policy plays a very significant role in determining how and to what extent a policy is implemented in a specific school (Torres, Zellner, & Erlandson, 2008; Evan, 1999). Furthermore, the source and complexity of the policy can affect the specific attributes and the success of the implementation process. As a result, a key challenge for school leaders is making sense and taking action on the various

and, often overwhelming, number of reform policies at the local, state/provincial and national levels (Hope & Pigford, 2001). In fact, Hope (2002) suggests that "Today, school districts and educators are continually broadsided with new policies to implement. Under policy siege, they struggle to find the wherewithal--time, resources, commitment, and motivation--to meet these demands" (p. 40). Despite this siege and despite the vast array of external, school-based, and individual factors that can affect the dynamics of policy implementation, leadership is still one of the key factors affecting the school's ability to successfully adopt a change innovation (Oterkil & Erstevag, 2012). As a result, more understanding is required of the impact that highly-significant policy reforms have on school leaders (Torres, Zellner, & Erlandson, 2008).

There is a growing body of work that has examined and analyzed the changing policy landscape pertaining directly to school improvement initiatives (Hopkins, Harris, Stoll, & Mackay, 2010; Harris & Chrispeels, 2006; Hopkins & Reynolds, 2001). For instance, Hopkins et al. (2010) have recently documented the shift over the last 40 years in the locus of such policies from individual, practitioner-oriented school improvement efforts to more comprehensive, system-wide thrusts at the district, state/provincial, and national levels. Furthermore, Harris and Chrispeels (2006) have observed the increase in broadly-based top-down policy initiatives, noting their intent to encourage change and reform in all types of schools and in all types of communities.

Similar to the situation in many other countries, recent school improvement-related policies in the People's Republic of China have become more comprehensive and wide-reaching. The current policy blueprint, Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020) is the first national policy blueprint developed in China in the 21st Century. It calls for comprehensive educational reforms aimed at building the foundation for a modern learning society throughout China over the next 10 years. The reform strategies, developed in consultation with key stakeholders over a two-year period, involve all levels of education, from pre-school to post-secondary, and recommend significant changes to the ways in which education is delivered, administered, and monitored in China. According to Ross, Cen and Zhou (2011), this reform policy has been the subject of significant analysis and scrutiny as a result of substantive government and public interest in enhancing the quality of education across China. More over, policy-makers in the Chinese Ministry of Education (2010a) have indicated that the latest educational reforms are very timely:

> In the face of unprecedented opportunities and challenges, we must stay level-headed about the fact that education in this nation is still lagging behind the requirements of national socioeconomic development and people's demand for fine education. Our concept of education and our teaching contents and methodology are relatively outdated, schoolwork burdens on primary and middle school students too heavy, the promotion of quality education arrested, our students weak in their adaptability to society, and innovative, practical and versatile professionals in acute shortage. Our education system and mechanisms are yet perfect. Schools lack vitality in their operations, and the structure and geographical distribution of education resources are yet to be put on an even keel. Impoverished and ethnic autonomous areas are trailing behind in education development, which is also uneven between urban and rural areas and between different regions. Education funding cannot keep up with demands, and education is yet to be accorded the strategic priority it deserves. To receive quality education is the outcry of the people, and to deepen education reform has been public's shared desire .(p.6)

In their analysis of 30 years of Chinese educational reforms, Zhao and Qui (2009) conclude that decentralization and marketization are the two consistent characteristics all of the government-supported policy initiatives and are fundamentally supported by an emphasis on improving quality and effectively managing educational resources. A closer examination of the most recent national policy blueprint, however, reveals a more multi-dimensional rationale: "The guiding policy for our education

work is 'prioritizing development, educating people, reform and innovation, promoting equality, improving quality'" (Ministry of Education for the People's Republic of China, 2010b. para. 2). Two themes, "putting people first" and "implementing a quality-oriented education" provide an overarching framework in the blueprint that emphasizes the primacy of moral education in the country's approach to socialism, the fundamental role of capacity building in student development, and the significant value placed on students' all-round development that includes moral, intellectual, physical, and aesthetic education. Several strategic goals are integral to the reform policy's main emphasis on promoting quality education such as accelerating educational development by prioritizing economic and social development planning, strategic educational funding, educational and human resource development and ensuring equality of access for children and citizens across the country. The reform policy also focuses on a learner-centred approach that promotes the overall growth of students and provides them with a better grounding in social responsibility, innovative learning, and problem-solving skills. To achieve this, the policy declares that innovations in educational and teaching reform must be encouraged and supported while at the same time paying close attention to the systemic design and timely implementation of progressive initiatives in key areas.

Regarding its specific connections to school improvement, a number of key recommendations in the policy blueprint are directly relevant to the role of schools in the educational reform process including the following aspects" expanding schools' decision making autonomy; developing more democratic leadership practices; improving the quality of teaching; determining the allocation of school resources; cultivating teacher development; engaging parents more directly in educational issues; developing better community relations; developing more school-based curriculum; and providing students with more diverse learning opportunities. The policy blueprint also focuses on the democratization of school leadership which is a topic that is particularly relevant to this study. To support this focus, the blueprint

calls for the establishment of school councils, parents associations, and other governance mechanisms that increase opportunities for community members and industry representatives to be more involved in school operations and curriculum development.

Cheng (2005) "three waves" typology is helpful in examining the policy blueprint in the context of school effectiveness and improvement priorities that have occurred over the last 30 years. According to Chen, the first wave, the "effective schools movement", emphasized the improvement of internal school processes such as school leadership and management, teacher professional development, curriculum development, and evaluation methods. The second wave of reform, "quality school movements", focused on what Cheng and Tam (2007) call "interface school effectiveness" (p.247) where policy efforts were directed more to improvements in satisfying external standards and measures of public accountability, quality assurance and stakeholder satisfaction. The third wave, "world-class school movements", currently focuses on the relevance of school-based education to the future needs of individuals and society. Within this most recent wave, Chen and Tam assert that the goals, design, and management of education is considered in the context of its relevance to the needs of a 21st Century paradigm of learning emphasizing global comparisons and world-class standards.

Applying Cheng's typology, China's policy blueprint is clearly supporting the second and third waves of educational reform. While many policy directives associated with the blueprint do focus on internal school processes consistent with the first wave of reform, their aims and goals to promote educational quality is consistent with the second wave and their emphasis on developing student potential and building social capacity is consistent with the third wave.

The policy blueprint directives heighten the role that educational leaders, and in particular, school administrators play in shepherding change in key facets of education reform emphasized in the policy blueprint. This policy focus is consistent with one of the conclusions reached by Feng (2007) in his historical analysis

of educational reform and school effectiveness in mainlined China: that, even though system-wide reform initiatives consistently follow a top-down approach (Zhao & Qiu, 2009), the impetus and main leverage points for school improvement lies primarily at the local site level rather than at the district or national level. To support local school reform consistent with Cheng's third wave of reform, the policy blueprint encourages local education authorities to be "bold in innovation and creative in carrying out this Outline" (Ministry of Education for the People's Republic of China, 2010a, p. 51) and it seems logical that school leaders have the opportunity to pilot test new initiatives that reinforce the kinds of school-based reforms lauded in the policy. The role of the school leader in developing innovative ways to implement these reforms is the subject of this research study.

Study Purpose

This research study focused on the links between the nationwide educational reform policy and the opportunities for enhanced school improvement that this new policy framework provides. More specifically, it examined school leaders' perceptions of the on-going impact of a series of school-based innovations being implemented by Chinese graduates of Royal Roads University's MA in Educational Leadership and Management (MAELM) program.

The goal of the research was to learn about what change management and leadership strategies are most helpful in implementing new school-based initiatives relevant to educational reform. As well, the role of the principal in developing the conditions of success that will lead to effective and meaningful policy implementation was explored. Two school districts in Beijing served as the research sites for the study. As a result, another goal was to help these two Chinese school districts determine helpful strategies in implementing recently-announced nation-wide educational reforms that call for more site-based autonomy and local control.

More specifically, the study examined the following questions:

1) What are some examples of promising practices currently being implemented by school leaders in implementing nation-wide educational reforms in China after graduating from their MA in Educational Leadership and Management program?
2) How did these "promising practices" support the implementation of the educational reform policies?
3) What skills and abilities of school leaders facilitated the effective implementation of the educational reform policies?

Method

The study used an appreciative approach adapted from the Discovery Phase of the Appreciate Inquiry (AI) methodology (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2003; Reed, 2007). The intent was to avoid having practitioners become overwhelmed with the problems and challenges of policy implementation and, instead, be motivated by building on their current leadership strengths in implementing effective school improvement practices. Consistent with an AI approach, the qualitative research methodology focused on the collection of stories which reflected participants' perspectives on promising reform initiatives and which could be analysed to determine the keys to the success achieved.

The study employed a photo narrative data gathering method to assist participants in expressing their beliefs and opinions about their experiences working as school administrators implementing educational reforms. This approach was consistent with an interpretive research methodology where the emphasis is on the understanding of participants' social construction of reality through the analysis of documents, tools, images, text, and other artifacts (Klein & Myers, 1999). The study employed a modified version of the visual storytelling method, "Photo-voice" (Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Hutchison, Bell, & Pestronk, 2004; Wang & Burris, 1997). In this particular project, participants created visual posters and shared narratives with the researcher and other participants with the assistance of photographs that they selected from a large photo-bank of images. The goal was to increase participant

engagement, creative reflection, self-expression, and authenticity in the research process (Brace-Govan, 2007; Warren, 2005). The combination of words, images, oral expression, and selected site visits was expected to provide a more comprehensive, richer and culturally-sensitive view of the school leaders' views of their practices – a perspective consistent with methodologies associated with visual ethnography (Pink, 2006; Banks, 2001). Finally, the focus on participant's creative expression of their leadership practices through the creation of the posters represents a form of arts-based research where the purpose is "to create an expressive form that will enable an individual to secure an empathic participation in the lives of others and in the situations studied" (Barone & Eisner, 2011, p. 9).

Data Collection Methods

The study involved six primary data collection methods:

1. Photographs selected by each participant from a large photo-bank (over 300 images) in response to the question: "What educational improvement strategy have you implemented, or been involved in implementing, since you graduated from the MAELM program that you are particularly proud of?"
2. Posters created by the participants to express the connection between their selected photos and the particular reform initiative they chose to discuss.
3. Video recordings of participant narratives elicited through the use of a think-aloud protocol (Bond, 2006) inviting participants to explain why they chose specific photos and what these photos meant to them.
4. Short written guided narratives or "freewrites" (Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Hutchison, Bell, & Pestronk, 2004) about the relationship between the photograph selected by each participant and the specific nature of their school improvement strategy.
5. A focus group discussion, serving as a wrap-up exploration of participants' perceptions of common themes explored in the photo-narratives and think-aloud sessions. A follow-up focus group six months later

enabled participants to reflect on their earlier perspectives as well as to provide an update on their respective educational reform initiatives.
6. Informal visits to a small sample of schools (n=4).

Participants

Participants in the study were 14 recent graduates (Spring 2010) of the MA in Educational Leadership and Management (MAELM) program based at Royal Roads University in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. The MAELM program is designed to help aspiring and existing administrators develop a critically reflective understanding of school improvement concepts and research and to apply practical tools and strategies to address issues, challenges, and opportunities related to supporting student achievement and growth. It uses an outcomes-oriented, cohort-based, and collaborative learning model that focuses on providing authentic learning experiences that bridge the gap between theory and practice.

The key objective of the program is to graduate school leaders who can:
- Facilitate the collaborative development and implementation of shared values, vision, mission, and goals to support learning and achievement for all students;
- Understand and use change and improvement processes to support student learning and achievement;
- Build positive and effective relationships between the school, families and the larger community;
- Integrate evidence-based decision making approaches into school leadership practices to support school growth and improvement;
- Engage in meaningful self-assessment and self-awareness to enhance leadership skills, positive relationships, and professional goals;
- Maximize opportunities for curricular, instructional, and assessment practices to have a positive impact on student learning and achievement;
- Apply systems thinking to strategically plan and manage the school environment to support student learning;

- Foster and sustain an inclusive culture and climate to support both student learning and professional growth;
- Implement authentic and meaningful strategies for supporting and supervising teachers' instructional capacities to maximize student learning and achievement; and
- Lead collaborative and systematic inquiry processes that support school improvement.

All of the participants had graduated from the 33-credit MAELM program that involved one-year of intensive full-time study beginning with a six-month residency in Beijing and concluding with a six-month residency in Victoria, British Columbia. The reform projects described by participants in this study have their genesis in research projects proposed in the program's capstone project, the Major Research Paper (MRP). The MRP prepares leaders to plan and implement school-wide or district-related, systematic inquiry processes that support school improvement. Students systematically and rigorously explore their chosen topic from the perspective of a practitioner-researcher who is leading a collaborative systematic inquiry process in an educational setting. The reform projects are described in the MRP paper due at the end of the program. In Part A of the paper, students are required to: (1) systematically determine a topic of study that is important to themselves as well as their school or work location; (2) describe the organizational context pertaining to the topic of inquiry; and (3) conduct a substantive analysis of the literature related to the topic. In Part B, students are required to describe the implications for leadership practice, including recommendations for implementing an educational reform strategy related to their chosen topics, a change management plan, and a mini-proposal for conducting collaborative action research reacted to the reform strategy.

The 14 participants were members of a 21-person cohort of principals, vice-principals, and directors from two school districts in Beijing. Data gathering and analysis began in April, 2012, 14 months after the students graduated from the MAELM program, and was completed in November, 2012.

Data Analysis

All data gathered in this qualitative study were subjected to a thematic analysis of their content by the researcher. Then, these analyses were compared and re-examined until a common set of overarching themes had been determined. These themes were used to code data from the transcripts and other sources using an inductive analytical approach described by Huberman and Miles (1994) and Mason (1996) and which is subsequently described below.

The analysis process began with the conversion of all of the data gathered, including the visual and auditory material, into an electronic form to facilitate categorical coding and cross-sectional indexing. Once imported, all files were read once to give the researcher a holistic, or as Mason (1996, p. 112) suggests, a more "measured" perspective on the complete data set. A second reading was conducted to generate the initial coding categories. A third review enabled the researcher to revise the coding categories based on a deeper level of familiarity with the data. After the third review, the coding categories were documented on paper and preliminary relationships between the categories were explored. Some coding categories were revised based on this exploration. Analytical notes were kept as annotations to the coding categories. These analytical notes or "memos", as suggested by Corbin & Strauss (1990), included phrases that described each of the particular coding categories. Next, the names of the coding categories were applied to the appropriate text and image segments and, then, reviewed to determine if the code label and its related analytical notations provided a best-fit analysis or explanation. This best-fit analysis also involved moving back and forth from the research data to the segmented codes to ensure that the categorizing process was appropriate and meaningful. Where the fit was determined to be suspect, alternative labels were considered and, when required, specifically applied. The best-fit review also enabled decisions to be made on whether any of the coding categories needed

to be combined with others or further subdivided.

At this point, a visual concept map featuring the various category codes was prepared on paper and connecting lines were drawn to represent possible relationships. This enabled the exploration of different relationships that are often challenging to see when reviewing text and coded segments (Mason, 1996; Huberman & Miles, 1994). Boolean searches based on various combinations of category codes were then performed to explore whether any of these relationships were meaningful. Sillitoe, Dixon, & Barr (2005, p.227) refer to this process as "querying" the database of coded data to test the researcher's emerging understanding and theories about the phenomenon being studied. The Boolean searches and the subsequent review of the retrieved data led to a clustering process in which different coding categories were grouped by common themes. These themes

became the basis for the findings described in the next section.

Results

Table 1 provides a list of the reform strategies and initiatives as described by the participants. There were some key themes addressed in the projects, such as: strengthening parent/teacher communication and enhancing parental engagement; increasing teacher participation in school-wide decision-making; modifying teaching strategies to be more application-oriented; enhancing school-wide teacher professional development using action-research and knowledge sharing strategies, creating a shared vision and a shared leadership model to support school improvement; increasing locally-based curriculum development; and applying systems thinking strategies to support better school decision making.

Table 1 Educational Reform Initiatives Described by Participants

1. Using participatory decision making (PDM) to improve teacher morale and job satisfaction.
2. Developing and improving a school planning database to support leaders making better decisions.
3. Using systems thinking to help teachers manage their administrative workload more effectively.
4. Building a "national model" school for vocational education.
5. Using information technology to improve distributed leadership in a high school.
6. Promoting collaboration among teachers of the same subject in the current competitive environment.
7. Establishing the goal of being approved as a district-sanctioned "exemplary" school and using the process to build a shared vision and promote teacher collaboration.
8. Setting up a parent's association to promote parental engagement in the school.
9. Developing effective strategies for creating a shared vision to become a "Learning School".
10. Introducing locally-developed courses with no examinations into the school curriculum.
11. Providing school leadership to support teacher research.
12. Implementing generic life skills training for helping students adapt to workplaces
13. Facilitating effective communication between teachers and parents for students' moral development.
14. Integrating theory and practice in teaching financial courses in a secondary vocational school.

The reform strategies and initiatives cited by the participants were compared to the four types of core educational leadership practices that are related to improving student learning as described by Leithwood (2007) and Leithwood and Riehl (2005) and summarized in Table 2.

Table 2 Core Leadership Practices in Support of Student Learning (Leithwood, 2007)

1. Setting Directions	• Identifying and articulating a vision • Creating shared meanings • Creating high performance expectations • Fostering the acceptance of group goals • Monitoring organisational performance • Communicating
2. Developing People	• Offering intellectual stimulation • Providing individualised support • Providing an appropriate model
3. Developing the Organization	• Strengthening school culture • Modifying organisational structure • Building collaborative processes • Managing the environment
4. Managing the Instructional Program	• Staffing the program • Providing instructional support • Monitoring school activity • Buffering staff from distractions to their work

On the surface, almost all of the reform strategies can be classified as efforts at "developing the organization" with their emphasis on promoting more collaborative and expanded decision making structures, enhancing professional learning, introducing new models of instruction, engaging parents and the community in the educational process, and promoting school-based curriculum development. Yet, further examination of the topics yields a strong association between the "developing the organization" and the "setting directions" categories of practices. This examination underscores the observation that the core set of leadership practices, inherent in each of this study's reform initiatives, are not totally discrete but function in a more inter-dependent manner. For example, one project was designed to establish a learning community in a new elementary school. To inform this process, the new principal in this school gathered data from teachers about their perspectives towards the value of a learning community and gleaned ideas on what kinds of professional learning issues mattered to them. Then he used these data to help develop a shared vision for the "learning school" as well as concrete strategies for engaging both teachers and parents in the on-going learning process. Reflecting on the links between this project and Leithwood's four sets of core leadership practices reveals a strong link to the third category, "developing the organization", and the first category, "setting directions". It could be further argued that embedding the concept of a learning organization into the school's philosophy and

structure also offers enhanced opportunities for teachers' intellectual stimulation which Leithwood describes as a key competency within the second core leadership practice, "developing people".

As well, the interdependency noted above extends to the fourth category of core leadership practices, "managing the instructional program". An overwhelming majority of the projects examined in this study were directly linked to the management-oriented practices represented in this fourth category. This observation helps to affirm the strong emphasis within these projects on the principal's role, not only in supporting instructional leadership, but also in the ongoing management of the core instructional enterprise within the school.

The analysis of the reform initiatives in this study confirms Leithwood's (2007) view that these core leadership practices are best considered to be a system of inter-connected actions that vary in importance and emphasis depending on the specific context in which they are applied. Leithwood (2007) states:

> So what is contingent about leadership, from this perspective, is not the basic practices but they way they are enacted. It is the enactment that must be sensitive to context, not the core practices themselves. The core practices provide a powerful source of guidance for practicing leaders, as well as a framework for the initial and continuing development of leaders. (p.58)

Furthermore, there was significant alignment between the reform strategies mentioned by the participants and their original projects proposed 14 months earlier before they graduated from the MAELM program. Ten of the 14 participants had implemented – or were working on the implementation – of a reform initiative that was directly aligned with the topic they had proposed for their Major Research Paper. The other four participants were not able to implement their original projects as a result of transfers to new school or district offices or personal circumstances such as maternity and infant care leaves that made it impossible to implement the projects as proposed.

Data from the participants' photos, posters, think-aloud sessions, free-writes and follow-up focus groups were organized into a series of project-specific narratives. An analysis of these narratives led to the identification of a number of key themes related to the role of the principal in developing the conditions of success supporting effective and meaningful policy implementation related to school improvement. As well, in exploring these themes, the analysis highlights specific skills and abilities school leaders found to be helpful in implementing the specific initiatives related to the national educational reform policies. These themes are described below.

1. **Having an Expanded View of Student Success**

All participants, either in their posters, think-aloud descriptions or follow-up free-writes made reference to supporting student learning as the main reason for their reform-minded initiatives. This was evident even if their project was perceived as having an indirect influence on student outcomes. Participants noted that a focus on student growth and achievement provided a clear purpose for staff members and made reform efforts less tiring and more rewarding. Increasing student achievement, measured principally in Chinese schools by national and district-level standardized tests, was not the only focus, however. Many participants viewed their reforms as providing an expanded view of what student success could look like, including preparing students for "healthy and happy lives" in adulthood and reducing students' current "burdens". Participating school leaders agreed that currently students of all ages are weighed down by too much homework, not enough exercise, and waning levels of motivation to learn beyond meeting parental, teacher and societal expectations to do well on the Gaokao – the national college entrance exam.

It was evident that, despite positive outlooks on the future, the school leaders felt these burdens as well. A number of the participants agreed that achieving balance between supporting high achievement of students on the national exams and educating a well-rounded member of society was the best strategy for moving forward with the reforms. Nevertheless,

several participants voiced concerns over the pressures associated with how to deal with the system of expectations that had developed over students' exam results and the possible effects of introducing reform initiatives on meeting these expectations. One participant commented:

> If you focus more on reducing homework and giving students more choice, there is a risk that student results on the national exams will decrease, especially in the short term as new practices are introduced and tested. The ways of assessing [students] haven't changed, yet students might have less preparation for the kinds of examinations they need to take. Gaokao provides a focus for everything, and puts pressure on all sides – leaders, parents, society – and high schools feel the pressure even more.

Another vice-principal mentioned that "Change was hard but necessary. I needed to keep reminding myself of its purpose." in order to deal with the pressures of meeting school-wide student achievement expectations. This observation was consistent with a common perspective held by many participants that school improvement was best defined as "purposeful change" that involved on-going cycles of "learning, practicing, applying, and then re-learning" in order to be effective and sustainable.

2. Being a Teacher First and a Leader Second

The concept of instructional leadership was deeply embedded in participants' narratives about their reform initiatives. Many described the importance of demonstrating leadership to their teachers by showing sincere interest in matters related to effective teaching, and by extension, effective learning. Talking as colleagues about teaching was viewed as one of the most important functions of a leader and that this was an effective way of earning teachers' cooperation and respect and, ultimately, creating a "harmonious" environment. Examples were shared that included: leading collegial discussions about teaching; seeking a better understanding of current instructional practices;

showing an interest in teachers' perspectives about teaching; supporting the sharing of expertise and good ideas; and modelling effective teaching themselves. One principal observed, based on the experience of implementing the selected reform, that leaders need to focus on the fact that they are also teachers and have much to share about effective teaching. Another commented that, as leaders, we need to demonstrate that "We are all on the same side: We need to take care of each other". Additionally, several participants commented on the value of having effective curriculum design, development, and evaluation skills that can be used to directly support the leaders' efforts to work closely with teachers to implement more school-based courses.

3. Honouring the Yin and Yang of Communication and Inquiry

Given that the MAELM program emphasizes the development of skills related to enhancing data-informed school improvement efforts, it is not surprising that many of the participants spoke specifically about the role that purposeful and structured data gathering processes played in supporting the implementation of their respective reform initiatives. Examples cited by participants included:

- surveying teachers before developing and implementing a "learning school" model;
- surveying parents to inform what and how to charge for student lunches;
- interviewing the school's leadership team to find out their views on collaboration before developing specific approaches to support teachers' collaborative planning;
- observing and surveying students to find out their interests before planning elective school-based courses;
- observing teachers and students to determine specific strategies for transitioning the school to a "model vocational school"; and
- examining student achievement data as a basis for developing a school self study, analyzing the strengths and weaknesses and then sharing their insights with other schools to help other administrators reflect on their schools' strengths.

At the same time, all of the participants confirmed the value of effective leaders possessing sophisticated and deeply-honed communication skills. The new national policy blueprint, consistent with other previous decentralization efforts, reinforces the value of heightened two-way communication that can facilitate the process of seeking input from an expanded group of stakeholders and creating more opportunities to learn from staff, parents, and students about existing challenges and opportunities.

Despite the importance placed on both communication and research skills, it was more illuminative to discover that participants viewed communication skills and data literacy skills as being truly complementary and symbiotic. According to participants, good research required effective communication strategies to be useful and relevant to the reform-minded leader. For instance, one vice-principal noted the importance of providing an evidence-based argument to obtain the principal's support for her reform initiative. She wanted to meet with him to obtain his permission to change the teacher bonus system to reward collaborative planning efforts among teachers but realized that her argument would be more compelling if she had a strong research base to support her conclusions. Another participant reflected on the value of engaging teachers in the data analysis process as a means of making communication processes more transparent between the school's administration and teaching staff. Furthermore, a participant noted that "two-way communication" between school leaders and teachers was still a new concept in many schools due to the former prevalence of more traditional autocratic styles of leadership. Engaging in collaborative processes of inquiry were helping to break down the barriers that helped define these conventional role expectations and promote more informal modes of productive conversation about teaching and learning.

4. Shifting the Locus of Decision Making through Distributed Leadership

A key theme in the new Chinese national policy blueprint is the introduction of more democratic forms of leadership into school operations. As demonstrated by both their reform initiatives and accompanying narratives, participants in the study recognized the importance of this policy thrust. Their reform initiatives, such as implementing teacher committees and parent councils, provided examples of ways to formally distribute decision making responsibility to better engage parties that are most directly affected by these decisions – teachers, students, and parents. Several participants shared perspectives that reinforced the importance of having a clearly understood vision that helps to guide more democratic decision-making efforts. Another participant felt that demonstrating the ability to listen to others and acknowledging their viewpoints also helped to support more distributed forms of leadership.

One key factor in supporting effective distributed leadership mentioned by a number of participants was the importance of assessing and valuing the tacit, informal leadership networks that were central to the organizational culture of the school. They commented on the importance of having influence on the school's informal leaders and that the best way to achieve this influence was to find ways to listen to their views and to seek out their perspectives and advice. Furthermore, recognizing the importance of these informal networks was an important capacity-building strategy because, in the words of one participant, the "leader needs to influence individuals so that they can have influence on others as well".

5. Making Structural Changes to Support and Encourage Collaboration

Descriptions of the reform initiatives provided by the participants reinforced the perspective that achieving new forms of collaboration also often required making changes to the ways that schools operate to provide more facilitative structures that encouraged working together. Participants cited examples of these kinds of structures such as changing bonus systems to support collaborative planning, changing the status of the school to an "exemplary" or "model" school, introducing the philosophy of a "learning school", integrating resources between different departments, and modifying the school schedule to support more school-based curriculum development.

Encouraging collaboration also involved matching teachers' skills and abilities to specific tasks. One participant described this as the process of putting "the right people on the right seat" to take advantage of different skillsets and capabilities. Supporting collaboration in this way also required an acknowledgement by the leader that other staff might be better at certain tasks. Participants noted that this was a significant change in an educational culture that had traditionally experienced a strong role differentiation. One participant stated that "it used to be that teachers teach and leaders manage" but noted that this view is changing rapidly.

Despite the importance of developing these structural changes, there was a predominant sentiment among the participants that one of the primary roles of the reform-minded school leader was helping staff members "get over the fear of change", noting that fear and anxiety about the reasons and implications of making these structural changes were pervasive forces in schools that often derail efforts to support collaboration if they are not addressed upfront through the exercise of such skills as effective communication and collaborative inquiry. Furthermore, participants reflected on the value of school leaders developing skills that enable them to "understand government policy in a deep way" to support teachers' efforts to innovate. These skills were helpful in determining ways to acknowledge and reward risk-taking efforts, such as implementing more active learning strategies in the classroom, because the pressures are so high for teachers to support students' achievement via high-stakes testing results.

6. Building Professional Capacity via a 'Whole School' Approach to Professional Development

It was clear from the narratives that many participants recognized that change, and ultimately, school improvement was best achieved when teachers' professional learning was guided by a strong focus, framed by a particular development strategy, and systematically implemented. Several different conceptual models were used by the participating school leaders to frame staff

professional development such as action research, the school as a learning organization, action learning, school-based curriculum development, and promoting active learning. According to participants, these kinds of models help achieve more coherence and focus in professional development to make training and learning opportunities more manageable and goal-oriented. At the same time, several participants noted, that within these coherent frameworks, it was still important to design differentiated professional learning strategies for different groups of teachers in order to maximize both relevance and impact. For instance, one participant conducted informal needs assessment of her staff members' professional development needs to help develop a coherent and school-wide training program related to her reform initiative. An analysis of the results confirmed that she needed to formally recognize within the training plan that new teachers have different needs compared to older, more experienced teachers.

One could argue that the above six themes are focused on the school leader's essential characteristic of providing effective guidance to others. The analysis of the narrative data, however, produced two themes that are related to another essential characteristic of effective leaders: enhancing self-awareness and self-understanding.

7. Reframing Negatives to Positives Through Reflecting Thinking

A pervasive theme represented in the participants' narratives related to their perceptions of successful qualities supporting their reform efforts was the ability to positively re-frame their outlook on their reform efforts. A majority of participants pointed to the role of systematic reflection in helping them become more self-aware of any negative attitudes or myopic thinking processes if these occurred. Participants described strategies such as taking time to reflect, via journaling, using dialectical thinking strategies, or just pausing to reconsider past actions. One participant observed that these tools helped her in "choosing my own pathway and changing myself". Another participant noted that these strategies encouraged more acceptance of responsibility for "understanding past

mistakes". A third participant acknowledged that the re-framing process enabled her to invoke more "active thinking strategies" that broadened important perspectives for her and induced more positive thinking.

According to several participants, reflection also helped turn knowledge into action. For instance, one participant described how the reflective process of journaling helped her tease out how she was going to implement more Western-influenced, active learning strategies in a Chinese context where more value was placed on more traditional didactic teaching methodologies. She observed that reflection "taught me how to own this process and adapt it to my own situation". Another participant noted that the process of individual reflection led her to develop strategies to promote more collective processes of reflection amongst members of her staff by engaging them in group-oriented analyses of data gathered on teaching practices in her school.

8. Using Cognitive Tools and Models to Make Processes More Efficient

Participants consistently mentioned that the work of educational leaders in China is complex and that the administrative workloads are very heavy. They described the many problems they faced as being messy, ill-structured and involving complex relationships. Throughout the exposition of narratives, participants regularly referred to the use of specific tools, such as systems thinking concepts, re-framing techniques, planning cycle diagrams, and rich picture analyses to help them break down these complex problems into workable strategies and plans. These kinds of cognitive tools helped the administrators "think out-of-the-box" and develop more creative solutions. It is interesting to note, however, that most participants agreed that they could benefit from using an even more expansive set of cognitive tools despite these current applications.

Participants admitted that the mot recent policy blueprint provided by the government is fairly abstract and not concrete and specific enough to school-level support planning and decision making. Therefore, a key skill of the school leader implementing reform efforts was to find ways to understand the policy "in a deep

way" and then make the policies both actionable and meaningful. The cognitive tools cited as examples by the participants helped them to achieve this purpose while they worked with district-level supports designed to assist in the implementation of the national reforms.

Furthermore, participants' use of conceptual models also provided a meta-cognitive frame for understanding their key functions of leadership. For instance, one participant described all the functions of her role as a school leader as "supporting a cyclic process of understanding and communicating purpose [from the district], plans, action, and reflection". This frame helped her to understand how the various functions of her leadership role were inter-connected.

Implications and Conclusions

School leaders' narratives in this study provided glimpses into a national educational system experiencing significant flux and dynamic change. The perspectives shared by participants underscored the role of the school leader in developing some of the conditions of success that lead to effective and meaningful policy implementation in this kind of environment. Facing the pressures of playing a key role in a top-down, system-wide educational reform environment can easily lead the harried school leader to feel, in Oshry's (1996, p.54) terms, like a "torn middle" caught between conflicting demands and not knowing how or when to take actions that will make a positive and sustainable difference. Nevertheless, despite the pressures of serving as the fulcrum point for school change, the school leaders participating in this study demonstrated that having a highly-focused, evidence-based reform strategy supported by superiors and clearly understood by the front-line enablers, i.e. teachers and parents, proved to be an encouraging means of launching policy-driven school-based reforms. It is too early to assess the outcomes that will be achieved but it is encouraging that the participating school leaders relied on having important support structures in place such as collaborative inquiry processes, change management strategies, on-going data gathering, 'whole-school' approaches to professional

development, the systematic analysis of problems and issues using conceptual models, individual and group-oriented reflective techniques, and a shared vision of student success.

Zhao and Qiu (2009) suggest, however, that in implementing system-wide educational reforms in China, it is easier to make structural changes, like the ones listed above, than deeply-rooted cultural changes such as "how teaching and learning occur and what students, parents, and teachers value" (p.359). As evident in the study narratives, school leaders are still struggling with the tensions inherent in making meaningful cultural changes. Notwithstanding the realities of these struggles, it is encouraging to note study participants' recognition of these challenges and the positive steps that they are taking to address them. Such strategies as doing a school cultural analysis, improving two-way communication between administrators and teachers, engaging teachers and parents in deeper conversations about learning and teaching, and engaging in collaborative inquiry processes appeared to give this sample of administrators more confidence in their efforts to implement complex policies.

Recent articles have pointed out the importance of having strong district-level supports to guide school-level improvement efforts (Marsh, 2002; Anderson, 2003; Clarke, West, & Ainscow, 2005; Harris & Chrispeels, 2006; Hopkins et al. 2010; Datnow & Park, 2010). Although there were some references by the participating school level leaders to the value of accessing district level resources and personnel to support their school improvement initiatives, it was a bit surprising that this was not a more significant theme that emerged from the analysis. Hopefully, follow-up research would be able to assess whether this observation is an artefact of this study's design or a finding that demands further exploration and analysis.

Beyond identifying helpful and effective leadership practices related to policy-driven school improvement initiatives, this study provided opportunities for school administrators to reflect on their practices; to reflect on their learning in the MAELM program; and to enhance their own professional expertise via the sharing of helpful strategies and experiences with other administrators.

As well, the implications for the design of graduate-level leadership programs focusing on school improvement are noteworthy. The findings from this research will have a direct impact on the curriculum delivered in the MA in Educational Leadership and Management program. Data gathered will provide program faculty with: (1) a better understanding of the leadership development needs of the school districts who provide students to the MAELM program: (2) better informed opportunities to adjust the curriculum to respond to these local needs; and (3) expanded use of local scenarios, examples, and cases based on the research findings to increase relevance of the curriculum.

Author Bio

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