

Principal Leadership: Transforming School Capitals for Education Reform in China

Shun-Wing NG

Abstract— China has launched a series of reforms on curriculum, teaching methodology and school management under the name of “quality education” in the basic education sector in the past decade. In 2001, the national curriculum reform was initiated. Therefore school principals have played a significant role to transform their teachers and their young generations to meet the challenges posed by domestic and global changes. To enrich existing understanding, this study aims to explore how school principals responded to education reforms in China with regard to transforming school capitals. The description is built on the data collected from individual interviews and focus group interviews with a group of primary school principals of a coastal city in Northeast of China. The study can help formulate professional development programs gearing to the aspiration of school principals to help meet the historical mission of education reforms in China.

Keywords—Capital, China, education reform, principal leadership.

I. INTRODUCTION

IN the era of globalization, there have been quantitative expansions in the education sectors and a series of reforms on curriculum, teaching methodology and school management under the name of “quality education” has been introduced in the basic education sector in the past decade [1]. With “quality education”, students are expected to become life-long learners with necessary competencies to address various social, political, economic, health and environmental issues at both domestic and global levels while having their own morality, intellect, physical health and aesthetic sense enhanced [2]. To build students into such life-long learners, school principals, teachers, parents and other stakeholders may need to reexamine the beliefs and assumptions undergirding their practices catering for an examination-oriented education that has existed and reinforced within the past several decades. In 2001, the Chinese National Council issued a document called “*The Decision on the Reform of Basic Education and Development*”. It promotes the implementation of quality education across the nation with four core points: actively promoting the curriculum reform; improving moral education; reforming the system of educational evaluation; strengthening the development of high quality teachers. The main task for teachers in the curriculum reform was to employ new teaching strategies and pedagogies in the classroom that focused on fostering the comprehensive learning ability of students instead of narrowly centering on

student achievement on the National Universities Entrance Examination [3]. Based on the policy text nowadays in times of globalization, Chinese school principals today have more responsibilities for teacher and school development. Yet, survey studies on the need for professional development among school principals reveal that many of them are bound by established values and norms in instituting changes to scaffold the learning and growth of teachers and students of their schools [4]. Whether being designated or self-proclaimed as leaders for transforming teachers, students and schools, Chinese school principals seem to have confronted many issues and dilemmas in their practice. So, the purpose of this paper is to report a study on how they responded to and positioned themselves in times of educational reforms in China.

II. BUREAUCRATIC EDUCATION SYSTEM IN CHINA

The education field in China is hierarchically stratified. Given the decentralization policy, decision-making power and fiscal responsibility have been trickled down from the Ministry of Education in Beijing to provincial educational departments or municipal education committee within the country and from the provincial educational department to district/county bureaus of education within each province [2]. With the Principal Responsibility System established in 1985, certain division of labor has been instituted within each school where the school secretary, a Communist Party member, ensures the school to follow the Party’s ideology along with recruiting teachers and students into the Party so as to strengthen the Party’s influence while the principal is responsible for school administration [4]. Under the principle of democratic administration, in exercising his/her duties, the principal needs to solicit the views of a congress of representatives of teachers, parents and students [5]. Respect for and faith in the Communist Party-led central government has been noted among school principals [4]. In most cases, to be appointed to the principalship, one needs to be a member of the Communist Party. In other words, party officials steer the career development of school principals as found out by Militello and Burger from a group of principals from North-West China [6]. In some schools, the principal is also the school-party secretary. It is within the tradition of the Communist Party and Chinese culture that their *habitus* is developed. *Habitus* is a system of dispositions acquired through one’s experiences in different social spaces, namely the family, schools, work places and the wider social, economic and political environment [7].

Shun-Wing Ng is with the Hong Kong Institute of Education, Tai Po, Hong Kong (Tel: 852-29487624; e-mail: swng@ied.edu.hk)

III. SCHOOL CAPITAL FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

The position and practice of school principals in education reform has been widely examined in the West and has led to some conceptual models on the characteristics of school principals as leaders and the structure of school leadership for successful reform [8]. In understanding the success of schools in China, Harris, Zhao and Caldwell found that a set of intellectual, financial, spiritual and social capitals are at work that helps transform the school to meet reform demands [9]. In practice, successful schools tend to support teachers' continued professional development as a form of intellectual capital; to strengthen relationships with parents and community organizations as social capital; and to improve spiritual capital by focusing on students' well-being. Although command is understood as a form of mutual-trust or team-building in China, this capability is commonly found among successful principals [4] [10]. Chinese school leaders have a specific view on the culture of leadership in relationship building (*guanxi*) [11]. Good *guanxi* with teachers and other stakeholders is a type of social capital that will help school leaders effectively position themselves in times of reform.

IV. RESEARCH METHOD

This study aims to explore of how school principals responded and positioned themselves in times of education reforms. The qualitative research that informs this paper is conceptualized within the interpretive paradigm since it aims at understanding the thoughts of these 24 principals in times of implementing education reforms [12]. In addition, document analysis regarding the hierarchical education system of China was also conducted for a thorough picture of the education context in China. The exploration is built on two sets of qualitative primary data: individual in-depth interviews with 23 primary school principals and a focus group interviews with 6 principals from the city of Dalian in China. Individual interviews with these 23 principals was conducted when they came to Hong Kong to attend a principal training program while the focus group interview was organized by the local district education bureau in Dalian when the investigator went there for some supplementary information regarding principals' response to the reform. All their names are pseudonymous. Among the 6 principals, 5 had participated in the training program. The length of their principalship ranges from 5 to 12 years. So totally there were 24 principals involved in the study. There were acknowledged as P1, P2, P3 to P 24 in the finding section. Questions asked in the individual interviews are open questions to find out (1) the specific reforms they are experiencing; (2) the tasks they need to do to meet reform demands; (3) their perception and practice as leaders; and (4) the challenges they face in meeting the historical mission of the education reform. The interview was audio-taped and transcribed verbatim.

Themes were identified and categorized from the transcription through the open and axial coding process.

V. INTERPRETIVE ANALYSIS

A. Hierarchical Education System: Influence of the Party

According to Bourdieu, a field is a structured social space in which some people dominate while others are being dominated [7]. The education field in China is hierarchically stratified. The tripartite framework of the principal-responsibility system in China provides a guideline for division of labor in school administration. The principals are responsible for administration, the school party secretary concentrates on ideological tasks and supports the principal in administration, and the congress of teachers is required to ensure democratic management and supervision over school leadership [13]. Since decision-making is top-down from the Ministry of Education in Beijing to provincial educational departments or from the provincial educational department to district/county bureaus of education, school principals are rank-and file civil servants (Cravens, Liu & Grogan, 2012). As commented by two principals, there is a lack of flexibility of the top-down policy: "*Many demands are top-down and they are not in line with the current reforming atmosphere*" (P18, Individual Interview), and "*There is more room for autonomy for the basic education to develop the capability and creativity of students*" (P12, Individual Interview). In the focus-group interview, all principals highlighted the curriculum reform as the major education reform that affected schools, teachers and students. However, three principals expressed that they needed more autonomy in terms of school-based strategies in the course offering, choosing teaching materials and teacher hiring. One of them remark:

We need to follow what the Party requests us. There is no flexibility at all in the curriculum reform. Sometimes we need some school-based space for us to enhance our teachers (P1, focus group)

Though parents, teachers and principals were regarded as stakeholders in achieving quality education during the reform, in practice, any major decision the principals made required the approval of party officials. It indicates that the hierarchy that stipulates the relative positions of different stakeholders in the reform process has not been restructured.

B. The Curriculum Reform: Change in Teachers' Practice

Many principals reiterated that the major reform is the curriculum reform since 2001. As P2 stressed, "*Beginning with the primary level, the reform has been in motion and trickled down to secondary level since then, it is a continuous process*" (Focus group). They highlighted two types of changes brought forth by the reform: (1) a change in teachers' conception and practice; and (2) a change in teacher-student relationship. Principal 13 provided an elaborated answer:

In the past, teachers talked and came up with conclusions. Now, in promoting quality education, teachers need to use different teaching methods and strategies to enable students to explore and think so as to come up with their own principles and conclusions" (Individual interview).

In the past, the main job of teachers had to teach and facilitate centralized teaching materials given by the Education Bureau. During the reform, they were then required to work on team

basis; they were a coach to motivate; a catalyst to induce and a guide to facilitate students to learn. As expressed by Principals 10 and 13, *“In the past, the school curriculum was 100% designed and constructed by the state, i.e., the national curriculum. Now, the national curriculum counts 70%; provincial curriculum 20% and school-based curriculum 10%. This 10% gives a broad space for school to exercise its autonomy”*. In this regard, the curriculum reform required teachers to raise their “quality and capability” as they were then given the opportunities to develop school-based curriculum. If they did not develop themselves and have their quality enhanced, they could fit not in the curriculum reform and societal development. P7 responded in such a way, *“For example, in the past, we did not require teachers to develop their own lesson plans. Now with school-based curriculum, they become curriculum developers. This poses a challenge to them”*. How teachers perceived the significance of education reform is one of the decisive factors in their motivation to change. However, principal as a role model in the reform process can facilitate teachers’ commitment to change.

C. Change in Teacher-Student Relationship

During the reform, there was improvement in teacher-student relationship. In addition, more communication was made parents. It highlighted that the emphasis on student centered approach led to change in teachers’ style of teaching and their education beliefs. Principal 18 elaborated:

“Before, teachers were the only authority when the door of the classroom closed and they now emphasize that student development builds on teacher development”. (P18)

Principal 4 supplemented:

“Now, teachers and students have established a good relationship as teachers take up the roles of service-provider, facilitator, organizer and participant in the classroom”. (P4)

Many principals expressed in the interviews that teachers and students were bound by a collaborative relationship in the reform process. They believed that students and teachers are now equal, concordant and harmonious. Conceptually, the majority of the principals interviewed agreed the rationale and vision of the reform. In reality, they came across some challenges such as in what way they could equip their teachers with necessary capacities to achieve the goals of reform and in what way they could adopt to the hierarchical context of the education system in China.

D. The Need to enhance Teachers’ Professional Development for the reform

The habitus of school principals is developed and nurtured within the culture of the Chinese Communist Party. Despite complaints expressed by some principals, there were some positive views on education reform, such as *“The direction of education reform is right and it is with specific objectives”* (P18) and *“The reform is comprehensive”* (P16). Nevertheless, in spite of their strong endorsement, they experienced discordances in meeting reform demands, such as more resources needed for students with special education needs; lack of connectedness between the curriculum reform and the

examination system; the need for a change in assessment contents; the need to raise the professional standard of teachers in all aspects through financial support from the government.

As a principal echoed:

Related policy changes are needed for the implementation of education reform. For example, students with special education needs, if without certification from the medical authority, cannot receive financial support from the government (P23).

To effectively facilitate the reform, attention would be paid to raising the professional quality of teachers, easing their pressure; team building in school and the sustainable professional development of teachers, as expressed by three of the interviewed principals. However, the concern for professional development and professional standard of teachers suggested that it was not that easy to raise teachers’ standard and professionalism to meet reform demands. Given the curriculum reform, Principal 14 saw an urgent need for teachers to learn new things and improve their professional skills. Principal 2 pointed out that to help teachers transform their professional habitus seemed to be the key challenge to school principals since many teachers found it hard to change what they were used to doing in the classroom. Principal 17 elaborated:

One objective of the curriculum reform is to decrease the burden of students. This poses a challenge to teachers as they have to ensure the whole-person development of the students on the one hand and, on the other, the quality of their learning at the same time. This requires very special capabilities and personal commitment of the teachers. Admittedly, our teachers, in terms of cognition and experience, are not ready as an individual or as a team.(P17)

In terms of the scope of challenges encountered, Principal 9 reported that they involved parents and felt that more work was needed to build connection with parents and the community for resources. All these experiences showed that principals nowadays need to scaffold the transformation of teachers’ habitus on the one hand and, on the other, learn how to work with stakeholders coming from different fields.

Skills in team-building were requested by some principals.. To meet all these challenges, principals had already participated in many professional training programs within and outside of their city and country as indicated by Principals 9 and 16. Yet, Comments made by P21 and P15 suggested that training was not enough. P21 said:

Therefore, for education reform to move forward, team-building is crucial and this requires a change in concept and a stronger sense of professionalism.(P21)

If knowledge and skills as human capital learned through professional training programs is not enough for principals to do their job, what else they need to implement the reform through the work of teachers and participation of other key stakeholders?

E. Transforming Capitals to Meet Reform Demands

As indicated before, Harris, Zhao and Caldwell (2009) found that a set of intellectual, financial, spiritual and social capitals are at work that helps transform the school to meet reform demands in China. In practice, successful schools tend to support teachers' continued professional development as a form of intellectual capital; to build financial capital through some entrepreneurial approaches; to strengthen relationships with parents and community organizations as social capital; and to improve spiritual capital by focusing on students' well-being. All these forms of capital can be accumulated for the benefit of school improvement and school development. Given the challenges teachers faced in enabling students to learn as an autonomous entity, all interviewed principals showed their empathy and understanding. So, in the focus-group interview, the principals were asked, "How you as leaders care for teachers in meeting the reform demands?" Principal 6 had this approach:

Teachers know that they can have their capabilities enhanced to meet reform demands through training. For those not so "receptive" teachers, we will encourage them, guide them to correct their own thinking and educate them through peer observation (P6).

With their empathy, the principals showed their care for teachers. Principal 10 said, "Sources of stress to teachers are many, such as parents and community".

In turning human capital into intellectual capital, Principal 3 supplemented:

Regarding teaching materials and assessment for development, if teachers could study the teaching materials, do some trial-runs, make adjustments, try them out again and make adjustments again, they could enhance themselves. If this is the case, they should not have much stress. (P3)

Care and encouragement demonstrated by the principals in times of reform could help reduce teachers' stress as many of them had obtained a certificate of the mental health training program. Principal 20 remarked:

We can guide them to make sense of the demands and expectations from parents and community. Also, we provide them with a lot of activities such as those competitions which are not meant to increase their stress rather they help lessen their stress as they can help develop in them a sense of achievement. (P20)

The strategies used by the interviewed principals demonstrated their embodied form of social capital, that is, a capability to help teachers transform their professional habitus by taking into account teachers' personal constraints as well social and cultural factors. Such capability different from making demands and commands was understood as a form of mutual-trust or team-building. This capability is commonly found among successful principals when they convert social capital, a good guanxi (relationship) with teachers, into human capital for the later. Yet such capability is not easy to develop when teachers' own habitus is strong. In making the conversion, financial support from the government is needed.

F. Carving Out Space for Leadership Practice

In Wang's study of a group of school principals in China, it was found that those principals who had developed more elaborated understanding about how leadership worked reported more changes in their practice afterwards [10] [14]. This shows certain transformation of their habitus since they can negotiate with the existing structure of the education field in putting what they have learned from the training program into practice. In the focus group interview, to position themselves in school in times of education reform, the principals found some leadership practices are of paramount importance. Principal 7 mentioned the importance of charismatic leadership:

Principals should have charisma and leadership skills. These skills are not just for teacher team-building but also for leading curriculum reform. In addition, they need to have implementation capacity that constitutes a competition edge which is unique to the school. They need to have a research capacity so as to do research at work and to work through research. (P7)

Making decision in a professional way is of paramount importance. Thus they expected a principal would have the leadership capacity in strategic planning taking into account the social and global trend. As Principals 11 and 5 said:

A principal needs to have a strong ability to observe and analyse societal trends. S/he needs to understand the intent of her/his superiors: knowing what they want you to do and what they think what you should do. (P11)

I think resources are important. Given variations in class size and learning need of students, the way the principal takes these variations into consideration and their decision-making ability are critical. (P5)

In addition, a professional belief or passion that makes other people follow the principal is of significance in times of reform.

Principals need to have a professional belief--what kind of person (principal) they want to become and what kind of school they want to establish. With this belief, s/he can stride forwards; s/he can make other people follow her/him. (P19)

VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Many school principals on the Mainland were trained as administrators rather than leaders [1]. School leaders need to deal with the contradictions inherent in real time action. With the habitus of following directives of party officials and of focusing their energy on day-to-day administration, some principals may lack a deposition in terms of both knowledge and capability to think outside of the box so as to develop long-term strategies for the professional development of the teachers and the school [4] [15]. Yet, it is also likely that principals do not have the room for leadership practice. The rhetoric of policy on principal accountability versus relatively unchanged hierarchy within the school field may become a blockage for education reform.

The lack of autonomy in course offering and teacher hiring may be a case in point. In addition, how school principals works with educational official, parents and related key stakeholders are of interest. What is more, under education reform, new tasks, such as continuous professional development for

principals and teachers, school administration under the different forms of capital may be required. In the interview, it is found that there is a need to provide teachers with professional development training in times of education reform, making use of the strategy of turning the social capital – relationship (*guanxi*) with teachers, into human capital. Nevertheless, it is unavoidable that there are some teachers resisting change due to certain inertia particularly in daily practice [16] and the unchanged structured of the education field may cause leadership lag.

Due to the logic of practice in the education field, the principals do not directly possess financial capital. While some principals have rich teaching experience, their intellectual capital accumulated before may not serve the demand of the current curricular reform. So it is not that easy for them to take up the curriculum leadership role to guide teachers to change their practice so as to transform their habitus. It is as well critical for them to build spiritual capital in teachers so as to ensure their identification with and commitment to education reform. This explains why they are so concerned with translating theory into practice for team-building. Yet, the habitus of the principals interviewed seem confining to their role as a brokerage in sorting out ways and means for teacher professional development. The school field subsumed within the wider political field stipulates specific tasks for principals to do. There is not much room left for creativity and innovation characterized leadership practice. Given increasing accountability but without substantive amount of capital for deployment, the principals seem unable to carve out their role as a catalyst who could convert quality education not just as intellectual but also symbolic capital valued by parents and students.

In sum, theoretically speaking, this study aims to locate individuals in the process of school transformation on which large societal changes take root while pragmatically it can help formulate professional development programs gearing to the aspiration of school principals to help meet the historical mission of education reform in China. However, the following limitations of the study need to be noted. The samples were small in number and they were from primary schools only. And principals were interviewed in the presence of party officials.

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