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Managing Secondary Schools in China

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Introduction: the structure of secondary education in China

The educational system in China is vast and complex (see Bush *et al.*, this issue, p. 197) and the structure of secondary education mirrors this complexity. There are two stages of secondary education, each lasting for three years (Qin, 1994). All children are expected to attend junior secondary schools (for children aged 12–15) but senior secondary education is not compulsory (Whiteside & Zhang, 1992). According to Lewin *et al.* (1994, p. 68), only 44% progress to the senior secondary system while the other youngsters move directly into employment.

The sheer scale of the secondary system is breathtaking, with 68,000 junior secondary schools in 1993, catering for 47.39 million students (Qin, 1994), compared with some 4000 secondary schools in England. The system is also characterised by diversity, with four different types of senior secondary school (see Fig. 1).

Half (51%) of all senior secondary students attend general schools while the remaining 49% are enrolled at vocational or specialised schools (see Lumby and Li, 1998). Whiteside & Zhang (1992, p. 287) claim that the general senior secondary schools are 'most sought after by students' but there has been a shift towards vocational education in the 1980s and 1990s to meet the needs of local employment. As a result, the number

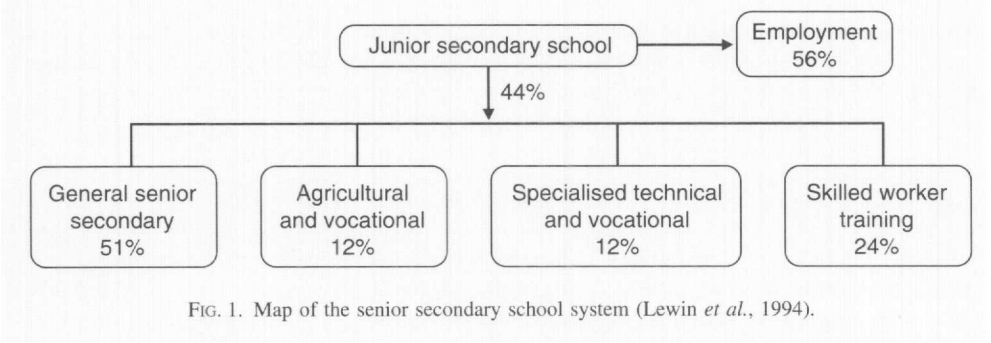

FIG. 1. Map of the senior secondary school system (Lewin *et al.*, 1994).

of general secondary schools declined from 64,903 in 1977 to 15,243 in 1991 as many were converted to vocational schools.

There is a lively, and highly political, debate about the structure of secondary education, including the balance between general (i.e. academic) and vocational education which echoes the different ideologies prevailing in Britain (Lofthouse, 1994). In China, there is also disagreement about whether academic quality should be emphasised at the expense of extending opportunities for senior secondary education to a higher proportion of young people:

> Although ... these arguments are couched in less ideological terms than formerly, nevertheless they are still highly political and the effects of the Cultural Revolution can be clearly detected in such issues as the priority which should be allotted to a high degree of academic achievement. Quality criteria are counterbalanced against arguments in favour of quantity, which of course raises questions about the provision of mass secondary education. (Gasper, 1989, p. 5)

The debate is at its sharpest in respect of the key schools which were re-introduced in 1978, following the Cultural Revolution. These key schools enrol about 4% of the secondary population nationally but are generally concentrated in the urban areas. They receive a more generous allocation of materials, equipment and teachers and are intended to be models for others to follow. By 1981, there were 4016 key secondary schools in China, including 115 in the Shaanxi province (Lewin *et al.*, 1994). These schools raise important issues about selection (see p. 193, this issue) which echoes the debate in Britain about grant-maintained schools (Bush *et al.*, 1993).

Another aspect of differentiation in China relates to urban and rural schools. Rosen (1984) refers to continuous 'inequalities', with urban children likely to benefit from educational expenditure four times greater than those in rural areas:

> The differences can be traced to poorer salaries, facilities and educational materials in the countryside. (Rosen, 1984, p. 86)

While education is seen largely as a means of serving the local economy, brighter students often hope that it will lead to an 'escape from the countryside' (Rosen, 1984, p. 87).

The Case Study Schools

Research in the Shaanxi province was conducted primarily through case studies at three very different secondary schools. The authors acknowledge that this is a small sample but opted to study a limited number of schools in greater depth rather than attempt a broader but more superficial treatment. The findings are not readily generalisable to other schools in Xi'an but serve to illuminate many significant aspects of management. Vocational schools are not included in this sample, but see Lumby & Li (1998).

School 98 in Xi'an

This is a district junior secondary school which was previously a key school and still retains prestige associated with its former status. It has 1141 students (600 boys and 541 girls) who come from varied social backgrounds, including skilled and technical workers

(32%), cadres (civil servants) (17%), teachers (10%) and peasants (36%). There is competition for places at the school, leading to a measure of selection (see p. 193).

There are 72 teachers, giving a pupil–teacher ratio of 15.8, rather better than the average for English middle schools. All Saints Middle School, Northampton, the research team's English case study middle school, had a pupil–teacher ratio of 20.4 in September 1996. There are also 27 other staff at School 98, including 17 clerks, three teaching assistants, three manual staff and two doctors. The school is organized into 21 classes, seven for each of the three year groups, or grades. Despite the favourable pupil–teacher ratio, class sizes average 54. The discrepancy is explained by the relatively low percentage of class contact time. Teachers typically teach for 10 lessons of 45 minutes while the children have 30 taught lessons. This approach is fundamentally different from that in Britain. The average class size at All Saints is 26. We examine this issue in more detail on page 192.

The principal completed an initial questionnaire which formed the basis for subsequent interviews with the principal and other staff. The staff interviewed were the principal, two teaching deans (broadly analogous to heads of department), a grade group leader (year head) and two English teachers. The researcher also attended a staff meeting attended by 45 teachers and consulted several documents from the school's substantial archive.

Qian Ling Junior Secondary School

This is a small rural general school with a rapidly rising roll. It had 249 pupils when seen by one of the research team in May 1996 but 345 (205 boys, 140 girls) when the authors visited in September 1997. The children come from the villages surrounding the school and their parents are predominantly peasants, many of whom work in the apple orchards which are the main sources of employment in the area. There are 150 children in the first grade but only 85 in the third year, a difference attributed in part to the transfer of some students to city schools.

There are 21 teachers at Qian Ling, giving a pupil teacher ratio of 16.45. This favourable ratio is not reflected in small classes because the average class size is 57.5. In grade 1, the two classes each have 75 pupils, the largest witnessed during the research.

Data were collected through a group interview with the principal, a teaching Dean and an English teacher in 1996 and a joint interview with the director of logistics and an English teacher in 1997 (this approach was adopted because of the difficulty of finding a private room in such a small school and because of staff interest in the research).

School 26 in Xi'an

This school is unusual in being a combined junior and senior secondary school. It has 970 pupils in the junior school and 600 in the senior school. As we noted earlier, senior secondary education is not compulsory and approximately one-third of youngsters progress from the junior school. Pupils also enter School 26 from other junior secondary schools on the basis of city-wide examinations. There are 99 teachers, giving a pupil–teacher ratio of 15.9 The pupils are arranged in 29 classes, giving an average class size of 54.

Data were collected through individual interviews with the principal, the dean of the school office and five teachers. There was also a group interview with four staff. As with

the interviews at other schools, questions and responses were translated by members of the Shaanxi research team.

School Structure

The administrative structure of secondary schools follows the pattern set out by Lewin *et al.* (1994) and noted in the introductory article (Bush & Qiang, 1998, p. 137–138):

- the principal's office;
- the teaching affairs section, responsible for the organisation of teaching;
- the general affairs section, responsible for infrastructure; and
- school factories or farms.

There are also teaching and research groups (*jiaoyanzu*) which are usually organized by subjects. Paine & Ma (1993, p. 676) suggest that the jiaoyanzu are predicated on the 'assumption that teachers would work together in virtually every aspect of their work' while Si (1993, p. 28) says that they discuss the course schedule, teaching materials, pedagogy and subject knowledge. This collaboration appears to be collegial but may not be democratic because of the hierarchical structure prevailing in schools:

> The differentiation among teachers points to hierarchical relations: between ordinary teachers and heads of jiaoyanzu, class directors, model and special-rank teachers and so on ... the tendency in many schools [is] for hierarchies to be based largely on seniority and for younger teachers to be stifled by conformist pressures of the group. (Paine & Ma, 1993, p. 693)

Despite the substantial non-contact time, our case study data suggest that jiaoyanzu meet formally for only one period each week. This is the case at Qian Ling and, according to the principal, at School 26 although one English teacher claimed that his subject group met fortnightly.

The management of schools rests with the Committee of School Management (CSM) which comprises the principal (chair), the vice-principal, teaching deans, the director of the general affairs section, teacher representatives and the secretary of the school branch of the Communist party. Si (1993) claims that, following the 1985 reforms, the principal 'is in charge of all matters inside the school and represents the school' to external bodies, but other writers (Washington, 1991; Lewin *et al.*, 1994) say that the principal's powers remain limited. The party secretary and school branch exist 'to make sure that educational policy follows the party's direction and provides political education to faculty and students' (Si, 1993, p. 29).

There is also an Administrative Committee, subordinate to the CSM, which comprises the principal, vice principal, deans and support services, to deal with routine matters.

School 98 has a principal, vice principal, three deans and 11 heads of department. The CSM has eight members; the principal, vice principal, the three deans and three representatives of teachers. The principal is also the Party secretary.

Qian Ling has a principal, a teaching dean who is also the ideological director, and a director of logistics. These three senior staff and two staff representatives comprise the CSM. Unusually, there is no Party secretary or Party branch at this school. The relative lack of hierarchy suggests that a flat structure may be appropriate for smaller schools.

School 26 is much larger and has a CSM of 11, comprising the principal, three vice principals and seven directors. The CSM meets weekly for about four hours. The agenda

may include the school's examination performance and the evaluation reports of teachers, grade leaders and subject leaders.

The Role of the Principal

According to Lewin *et al.* (1994), qualifications for principalship are not clearly specified. Before 1985, political attributes were considered to be more important than educational expertise. The general rule was 'laymen lead experts' (Lewin *et al.*, 1994, p. 205) and many principals had no teaching experience. Since 1985, it has become more common to invite applications and to appoint from within the teaching profession. Most secondary principals are men (see Coleman *et al.*, this issue, p. 141).

The 1985 reforms located more power with the principal but, in practice, it remains circumscribed. Two factors limit the power of the principal. The first relates to the centralisation of educational decision-making:

> The scope within which decisions can be made by schools remains very limited. National policies for education are established centrally and there is a long administrative chain down to the school level ... The powers of the principal are concentrated on teaching affairs and he has to make sure that stated educational objectives will be reached. But he is in a very difficult position. (Lewin *et al.*, 1994, p. 206)

Lewin *et al.* (1994) refer to the following specific limitations on the principals' powers:

- they do not select the textbooks;
- they do not select their own teachers;
- they do not determine teachers' salaries; and
- they may not spend any significant sum without the approval of the education authority.

Some of these assertions are supported by the case study data but there is also some contradictory evidence. The respondents confirm that textbooks are prescribed by the centre. Teachers' salaries and major items of spending are determined by the education authority but may be supplemented by the school from its entrepreneurial income. This is a major source of differentiation between schools and amongst individual teachers for whom supplementary income is dependent on their evaluations (see p. 192). Staff selection appears to vary from school to school. While the director of logistics at Qian Ling states that all teachers are appointed by the Education Bureau, the principals of both the Xi'an schools claim to have appointed many of their teachers, usually direct from university. This difference may be because new teachers are keen to work in city schools while there are recruitment difficulties in rural areas.

Empirical research by Washington (1991) suggests that principals have a very limited role in curriculum decision-making:

> All of the interviewees indicated that Chinese principals are not involved in curriculum decision-making. They noted that the curriculum is determined by the provincial bureau of education and that once it is set it cannot be changed or modified ... the principal's role is limited to implementation of the curriculum. (Washington, 1991, p. 4)

The second set of limitations on the power of the principal relates to internal school factors. Each school has a post of branch secretary of the Communist Party. This person

wields substantial authority which, at times, has matched or exceeded the power of the principal. The 1985 reforms ceded responsibility for school management to the principal but, in practice, ambiguity remains:

> This shift will not be achieved rapidly ... The tendency for Party organisations to intervene in daily management decisions remains common. (Lewin *et al.*, 1994, p. 211)

The case study evidence does not confirm Lewin *et al.*'s findings. Qian Ling has no Party secretary or branch while the principals of the two Xi'an schools are also the Party secretaries. The Party is clearly an important and omnipresent feature of the education system, as elsewhere in society, but its influence is not overt in the case study schools and none of the principals appear to have been unduly constrained by its presence.

The teachers also exercise a limitation on the power of principals. The jiaoyanzu form powerful interest groups with specialist knowledge and principals have to negotiate with the teaching deans who lead these groups. In extreme circumstances, teachers may be able to secure the dismissal of principals if there is significant opposition to their plans.

The principal of School 98 is clear about the location of power:

> A committee represents teachers chosen by election. Policy is made by the teachers' committee and implemented by the principal. The principal must carry out decisions and policy made by the committee. (interview May 1996)

This view is confirmed by one of the teaching deans who comments that 'the principal carries out the policies decided by the committee'. This apparent weakness has implications for all aspects of school management, as we shall see in subsequent sections of this article.

School Decision-making: collegial or bureaucratic?

The many external levels, and the complex internal structures in larger schools, suggest a highly bureaucratic management structure with twin accountability to education officials and the party hierarchy. However, certain aspects of school decision-making appear to have some collegial features. Paine & Ma (1993) refer to 'the assumption that teachers would work together in virtually every aspect of their work' and explain how the jiaoyanzu works:

> Many decisions about curriculum and instruction are made jointly through the jiaoyanzu ... teachers have a structured time to work together ... Teachers ... work together ... in an office that belongs to their jiaoyanzu. (Paine & Ma, 1993, p. 679)

The head of the jiaoyanzu is usually a senior experienced teacher who has a significant role in the hierarchy. There is a tension between the collegial norms of these groups and the leadership of the teaching deans whose authority arises from their formal role and from their expertise as senior teachers. Paine and Ma's dialectic article (1993) captures the dilemma. Ma emphasises the collectivist aspects of the jiaoyanzu while Paine refers to the enduring significance of the hierarchy.

The tension referred to by Paine & Ma (1993) is evident in the case study schools. The English teacher at Qian Ling values the work of the English jiaoyanzu which operates collegially to discuss teaching materials, provide demonstration lessons and observe and comment on other's lessons. However, the teaching dean's overall responsibility for

jiaoyanzu was emphasised by the Director of Logistics. At school 26, there are similar activities but the English teacher stated that 'the agenda for jiaoyanzu meetings is determined by the group leader who in turn is appointed by the principal'. This suggests a hierarchical dimension to the operation of jiaoyanzu.

The working of jiaoyanzu has certain parallels with collegiality which is the dominant normative model of management in English secondary schools. Teachers are exhorted to work collectively to develop their schools but Hargreaves (1994) alleges that collegiality is 'contrived' to ensure the implementation of policies determined by government or school managers. Like the jiaoyanzu, the operation of collegiality is constrained by national and school policies.

Curriculum Management

Chinese secondary schools work to a national curriculum expressed in subjects. For junior secondary schools, the curriculum comprises ideology and moral education, Chinese language, mathematics, foreign languages (usually English), history, geography, physics, chemistry, biology, physical education, music, fine arts and labour technology (Lewin *et al.*, 1994). In key senior secondary schools, there may be specialisation in liberal arts or in science. Gasper (1989, p. 12) emphasises that 'local variations to this format are slight' but Lei (1980) records that 'basic farming knowledge' forms part of the curriculum in rural secondary schools.

The principal of School 98 says that the aim of the school curriculum is to carry out national policy while the principal of Qian Ling junior secondary school confirms the limited discretion available to schools:

> The main approach to teaching is to carry out the syllabus decided by the government and teachers have little right to change the curriculum.

Students at Qian Ling are particularly interested in learning English because of the increase in tourism in the Shaanxi province but this appears to have little impact on the structure of the curriculum.

The emphasis on preparation for examinations, and the large classes, both reinforce the formal mode of teaching. Whole class teaching predominates, using 'the traditional modes of learning, recitation and review' (Gasper, 1989, p. 11). Both the principal and the teaching dean at School 98 confirm that the main approach to pedagogy is teaching or 'lecturing' the whole class and this was evident in the authors' observations of practice in all three case study schools.

The large classes and formal approaches do not appear to be inimical to high standards of achievement. The results of an international survey of standards in mathematics at age 13 show that China is the most successful country with students scoring 80%. English students could manage only 61% on the same test (Reynolds & Farrell, 1996). These authors give several reasons for differences in achievement between students in England and those in 'Pacific rim' countries. Three factors seem particularly relevant for China (Reynolds & Farrell, 1996, pp. 54–55):

- Chinese children spend more time on homework: 37% of 13 year olds in China report spending at least four hours each week on mathematics homework while only 6% of English pupils do so;
- the cultural emphasis, reflecting Confucian beliefs, on the importance of individuals working hard; and

- collaborative working by teachers (the jiaoyanzu), facilitated by significant non-contact time.

In the case study schools, homework appears to be given a high priority. Two hours per evening is the norm for Qian Ling while one and a half hours is expected at School 26 where the stress is on Chinese, mathematics and English. The strong emphasis on examination performance as the determinant of progression to senior secondary schools and, subsequently, to university, helps to sustain motivation. The evident respect for teachers, and the educational process, amongst both pupils and parents also helps to secure high standards despite large classes and the often limited facilities.

Curriculum management is a product of the complex relationship between the CSM, the jiaoyanzu and senior staff. At school 26, the group interviewees appeared to agree that the vice principal responsible for teaching affairs has the most influence. He and the principal 'give indications through the jiaoyanzu' about curriculum management.

Human Resource Management

The principal's ability to manage staff is compromised by the enduring powers of the education bureau. In almost every area of human resource management, the school has to operate in accordance with rules set by the external authorities. In certain important respects, the decisions are made by the bureau and imposed on the school.

Staff Selection

A critical issue in determining the quality of education is the capability of the teaching force. In England, power to select staff rests with the school governing body and is often devolved to the headteacher. In China, the allocation of staff to schools is usually made by the education authority. Washington's (1991, p. 4) research suggests that 'principals have no role to play in deciding who gets hired or fired'. The 1985 reforms indicated that the principal would have the right to appoint staff but, in practice, the power of selection 'still effectively resides with the education authority or the county government' (Lewin *et al.*, 1994, p. 207).

The case study data produce contradictory evidence on this issue. The School 98 principal confirms that staff appointments are made by the education authority but, at School 26, the principal claims to have appointed 60% of his staff, as we noted earlier.

Whiteside & Zhang (1992, p. 289) refer to 'continuing problems with the quality of the teaching force', in rural areas. This reinforces Rosen's (1984) view, noted earlier, that there is inequality between urban and rural schools. Staff at Qian Ling, a rural school, confirm that the county education bureau decides teacher appointments but did not comment on the issue of teacher quality.

Staff Promotions

Because teachers typically spend their whole career in one school, and cannot make a personal decision to move, internal promotion is the major vehicle for career development. The process involves the principal, an internal committee of teachers and the education bureau. The committee nominates a candidate for a vacant post. If the principal accepts the nomination, it is put forward to the education bureau for the final decision. The principal confirms that this is the process at School 26.

This process was illustrated by interviews at Senior Secondary School number 6 in Chang'an county, visited by the authors although not one of the case study schools. The principal was asked why there were no women members of the CSM and responded that such promoted posts were decided by the education bureau. He subsequently admitted that he had not nominated any women for promotion (see Coleman *et al.*, 1998).

Staff Development and Mentoring

China's education system places considerable emphasis on upgrading the qualifications of staff to create 'a mighty contingent of teachers' (Lewin *et al.*, 1994, p. 111). This is regarded as essential to service a rapidly growing education system which, in turn, is designed to support a fast developing economy. In-service training gives a high priority to research and development work, often involving university staff as advisers on curriculum and pedagogy.

At School 98, staff development takes two forms. Teachers attend courses or take them by distance learning. Experienced teachers also provide training for younger colleagues, using the extensive non-contact time for this purpose. Several Qian Ling teachers are also upgrading their qualifications by distance learning.

The existence of the jiaoyanzu, and the generous allocation of non-contact time, serve to facilitate the induction and mentoring of new teachers. Paine and Ma explain the process:

> When a new teacher comes to work in a school, s/he will be assigned to a master teacher. They make a 'master–apprentice bond'. The apprentice and the master work in the same teaching research group and teach the same subject to the same grade ... They observe each other's classes and discuss their teaching. (Paine & Ma, 1993, p. 683)

This mutual observation is seen as an important aspect of staff development, leading to the acquisition of expertise or 'connoisseurship'. Paine & Ma (1993) refer to this as a narrow concept of mentoring but it does appear to have greater centrality than in Britain where heavy teaching loads often limit its effectiveness, despite the good intentions of mentors (Bush *et al.*, 1996).

Teacher Evaluation and Appraisal

The internal staff development and mentoring lead to a complex process of teacher evaluation:

> Given frequent peer observation and joint preparation, Chinese teachers are well informed about the teaching quality of their colleagues in the whole school and able to make comments on colleagues' teaching style, subject knowledge level, capacity for managing class discipline, strength and weakness in teaching, and reputation among students. (Paine & Ma, 1993, p. 682)

As a result of this familiarity, teachers are evaluated by a committee of their peers as well as by the principal (Washington, 1991). This process is frequent and iterative rather than occasional and 'top-down' as in the UK appraisal model.

At Qian Ling, teacher evaluation depends on several criteria: attendance, teaching quality, students' examination performance and students' records. The evaluation is informed by observations conducted by the teaching dean or, more rarely, the principal.

These individual evaluations are increasingly linked to salaries and benefits (Paine & Ma, 1993), a process similar to the concept of performance-related pay advocated for English schools but rarely implemented. Income from factories and farms (see below) is often used to reward teachers who receive good evaluations. At School 26, a monthly premium of 500 yuan (about £40) may be payable for very good teachers from the school's shop rental income. This might be as much as 60% of total salary and is likely to be a powerful motivator for ambitious teachers. Rewards are much smaller at Qian Ling, reinforcing the disparity between rural and some urban schools.

Staff Deployment and Non-contact Time

A remarkable feature of Chinese secondary education is the co-existence of favourable pupil–teacher ratios and large class sizes. Lewin *et al.* (1994) suggest that ratios average about 13:1 in senior secondary schools while classes typically have 50 children. These figures are similar to those in our case study schools, although Qian Ling has two classes with 75 children (see p. 185). Class sizes in England are much smaller despite somewhat less favourable ratios.

The differences in class sizes in the two countries arise from fundamentally different approaches to teacher deployment. In Britain, reducing class sizes when resources allow has been a major aim in order to allow teachers to understand their students as individuals. In China, much higher priority has been given to preparation for teaching during the school day when it can be done on a collective basis. The World Bank (1983) says that Chinese teachers have 'a light, inefficient teaching load' (quoted in Paine & Ma, 1993, p. 685) but the Chinese approach raises important questions about the most appropriate balance between class size and non-contact time. We noted earlier Reynolds & Farrell's (1996) view that collaborative working, facilitated by substantial non-contact time, is an important contributor to high achievement in Pacific rim countries.

The deployment of staff in China is constrained by regulations that limit the number of lessons for each teacher. In Qian Ling, the director of logistics says that the maximum teaching load is 12 lessons per week while the English teacher has 10 lessons. At School 26 and School 98, the typical teaching load is also 10 lessons. During their non-contact time, teachers prepare lessons, mark work, give support to children who may require extra help and attend meetings of jiaoyanzu.

Finance and Resource Management

Schools are funded by the Board of Education Commission which provides both capital finance, for new buildings and maintenance, and recurrent funding allocated on a per capita basis. Secondary schools receive more money than those in the primary sector.

The principal has limited scope to determine the deployment of this income. Teachers' salaries are fixed, materials and equipment are purchased centrally and the approval of the education authority is required for any significant spending. This approach contrasts with the financial autonomy accorded to schools in England and Wales through Local Management of Schools (LMS). The only significant discretion available to Chinese principals arises from income generated by school factories and farms. Lewin *et al.* (1994) refer to a primary school which was able to generate a surplus of 60,000 yuan (£5000), a significant sum in China.

School 98 receives substantial extra income from letting school buildings, including a restaurant. School 26 owns several shops in the adjacent street which are let to raise

income, yielding a significant addition to the school budget. Qian Ling acquires money from the school's apple orchard but this yields only about 5000 yuan, just 2% of annual income. Such disparities serve to reinforce rural disadvantage because the two city principals have scope to deploy their additional income to reward good teachers and purchase additional equipment while Qian Ling has little more than the basic allocation from the education bureau.

Admissions and Selection

We noted earlier (p. 183) that only 44% of junior secondary students progress to senior schools. The key schools are the most 'hierarchical and competitive' (Rosen, 1984, p. 71) and places are highly sought after by parents. Admission is the prerogative of principals, arguably their main area of discretion, and depends ostensibly on academic criteria, notably on the basis of examinations. However, Lewin *et al.* (1994) show that the reality is more complex. They point to a contradiction between the apparent centrality of examination scores and the actual practice in most key schools:

> Since key-point secondary schools have had a much higher university admission rate, parents try in a hundred and one ways to send their children to these schools. The 'back door' cannot be completely closed. Officially a policy of 'every student is equal before the examination score' is adopted. However, when key-point secondary schools enrol their students they are under pressure to provide 'exceptional' admissions. (Lewin *et al.*, 1994, p. 95)

Gasper (1989) claims that these exceptional admissions provide a route to the best schools for children of senior party and army officials, professionals and intellectuals. These family connections remain important despite the apparent meritocracy of the examination system:

> The selection process operates in a highly elitist manner and a professional or intellectual background still remains necessary to gain admission to the key school system ... Family connections and influences have always been an important way of getting things done in China. It is just unfortunate for those who do not have any. (Gasper, 1989, p. 14)

Key schools have been phased out at junior secondary school level but School 98 retains some of the prestige associated with its former status. It operates a dual system for admissions. The principal is obliged to admit those within the catchment area which is fixed by the district education authority. According to the principal, children outside this area are 'selected on the basis of academic ability'. The teaching dean says that admission is based on tests while the principal refers to both examination results and information from the previous school.

Selection is not confined to the key schools. As we have seen, entry to School 26's senior grades depends on city-wide examinations.

There are certain parallels between the Chinese system and the overt and covert selection operating in Britain, notably in the grant maintained and voluntary sectors. Research on the first 100 grant maintained schools showed that 30% of 'comprehensive' schools were operating backdoor selection, using pupil interviews or tests (Bush *et al.*, 1993).

The key schools appear to be elitist and this has caused understandable controversy in a society ostensibly committed to equality of opportunity. The rationale was that key

schools would become models for others to follow, an argument also advanced in the early years of the grant maintained system. Gasper (1989) provides a powerful critique of this argument:

> This pattern of inequality of opportunity has been strongly lamented within China ... The keypoint system has not been used to raise standards throughout the whole country. Its elitism has proved self-perpetuating. It has developed well only in existing centres of excellence. Its privileged funding has not led to its easy use as a model for the rest of the country. Its competitiveness acts against its wider dissemination. (Gasper, 1989, p. 15)

Such arguments have led to the abolition of the distinction between key and ordinary schools at junior secondary level, although many former key schools retain much of their former prestige. Key schools continue to be a significant feature of senior education.

Conclusion

The management of Chinese secondary schools differs markedly from that of their English equivalents. The many levels of decision-making outside the school constrain principals' ability to manage the school in accordance with their professional judgement about the needs of their pupils. This is particularly evident in the tight control over staff appointments and contact time, and in the requirement to seek external approval for spending government income. However, principals do have substantial discretion to deploy entrepreneurial funding. This is a vehicle for performance-related pay in some schools but also a source of inequality because many rural schools, in particular, have little income from this source.

There are certain similarities with English secondary schools. Both countries operate a national curriculum leading to public examinations, although China also prescribes textbooks. Both countries have diverse systems with several different types of secondary school. There is also competition for admission to the most favoured schools, leading to an element of overt or covert selection, in both countries.

While there are both differences and similarities, it is clear that the issues facing school managers in China would be very familiar to their equivalents in England. The strength of comparative research is that it provides powerful insights into how universal problems are tackled and resolved in very different contexts.

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