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Tears, fears and cheers: responses to the post-disaster school relocation policy in China

Guat Tin Ng Assistant Professor, Department of Applied Social Sciences, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong

This paper reports on the results of a qualitative study on the responses of Chinese school children in one junior middle school and their parents to China's post-disaster school relocation policy. The sample comprised 22 pairs of parent–child dyads and two pupils whose parents could not be contacted. The study results were reported using Chambers and Wedel's (2009) conceptual framework, which delineates the fundamental elements of a policy. Content analysis was used to generate themes related to policy elements, such as goals, benefits and services. Both repetitive themes and idiosyncratic perspectives were reported so as to present a diversity of views. Despite adjustment difficulties and administrative problems reported by the study participants, the policy attention given to the rapid restoration of formal schooling for children was generally appreciated. The move back to the new school was greeted with cheer.

Keywords: China, Chinese schoolchildren, post-disaster recovery, restoration of education, school relocation policy, Wenchuan earthquake

Introduction

The Wenchuan earthquake—also referred to as the 'Great Sichuan Earthquake' or the '512 Earthquake'—took place on 12 May 2008. Reaching a magnitude of 8.0 on the Richter scale, it devastated Wenchuan county in Sichuan province and also seriously damaged the nearby counties. It claimed close to 90,000 lives and injured 375,000 people (IFRC, 2008). Official news channels reported that the earthquake damaged about 14,000 schools in Sichuan province (Xinhua, 2008b).

The Chinese government speedily developed many post-disaster recovery policies, including the resumption of schooling for its schoolchildren (GOSC, 2008a; 2008b). On 1 September 2008, the start of the new school year, about 3.4 million primary and middle school students in Sichuan province returned to school; 33.0% returned to school buildings that were intact, 38.0% to quake-affected schools that were restored, and 28.4% to prefabricated classrooms (Xinhua, 2008a). The remaining 0.6%, or nearly 20,000 students, left their hometowns to continue their schooling elsewhere, within and outside of Sichuan province (Xinhua, 2008a).

The mass movement of schoolchildren and teachers to different locations was the result of a new post-disaster education policy, initiated in response to the damage done to school buildings by the earthquake. It was referred to as *yì-dì-fù-kè* in Chinese,

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which could be translated as 'resumption of schooling in a different location' (GOSC, 2008a; MoE, 2008). The school relocation policy essentially required schools to move to a temporary location, until such time when the construction of new school buildings was completed and they could move back. The initial goal of the central government was to finish the reconstruction of 3,002 schools (inclusive of elementary and vocational schools) in Sichuan in a time span of three years, but this was later reduced to two years so as to expedite disaster recovery. By July 2010, about 88% of the reconstruction was completed (IRP, 2010).

One of the schools, hereafter referred to as school Z, was selected for this study. The school, the town in which it was originally located and nearby villages suffered serious damage (Zeng, 2010). None of the teachers or pupils in school Z perished, although some of them suffered the loss of relatives. However, the school buildings were deemed unsafe and a new school had to be built. For the interim period, the whole school relocated to a city, hereafter referred to as X, in a different county in Sichuan province, about 300 km away, in August 2008. The host school, which was a small vocational school with only 100 pupils, offered the use of its buildings and premises to school Z, under the earthquake counterpart assistance (*duì-kǒu-yuán-zhù*) policy. Counterpart assistance was initiated by the central government, which paired up richer provinces and municipalities with the worst quake-affected areas to provide financial, technical, logistical, material and other assistance (Ng, 2011). The financial responsibility for school Z, in terms of payment for daily meals and the costs of renovation and furnishing of the host school, which was quite old, was borne by school Z's local government. The provision of local government funding seems generous, especially when viewed against the inadequate funding of rural boarding schools reported in the literature (Ding, 2008; Luo et al., 2009; Zhao, 2011).

The choice of school Z for study was based on availability as the research co-investigator was already engaged in establishing the Expanded School Mental Health Network, which developed four social work stations, including one in school Z in February 2009 (Sim, 2009). Before the project began, the future co-investigator and Chinese collaborator both reported that some pupils were experiencing difficulties in adjusting to a different environment and being separated from their family members; this feedback led to the development of this research project. A site visit was made in March 2009 to discuss the study with the school principal, who was kind enough to allow the research team permission to contact the pupils through the school social work station.

The research project intends to answer the question: 'How do students, teachers and parents respond and adapt to the official policy of school relocation in the aftermath of an earthquake?' The project included quantitative and qualitative studies but only the results of the qualitative study on the perceptions and experiences of the schoolchildren and their parents are presented in this paper.

Background and literature review

While China had done very well in attending to the psychosocial well-being of school-children since the Wenchuan earthquake by quickly re-establishing school routines (which included organising summer activities prior to the start of the new semester), the policy of moving schools to other sites introduced an additional stressor of re-location for those affected by the move. The capacity to cope with disaster-related stressors is closely linked to an individual's available social support, which includes parents, friends and teachers (Hale, 2007). When children are separated from their families, they become particularly vulnerable (Shrubsole, 1999). Hence, experts advocate 'keeping families together as a means of minimising psychological distress' (Morris et al., 2007). These Western conceptualisations of what is good mental health may cast a shadow over the *yì-dì-fù-kè* policy, which seemed to have been modelled after the relocation of ethnic minority primary school graduates from Tibet to junior middle schools in the Chinese hinterland (*nèidì*), beginning in the 1980s. Between 1985 and 2005, 25,000 pupils left home to attend boarding schools in 20 provinces and municipalities (Postiglione, 2009).

Nonetheless, the *yì-dì-fù-kè* policy can be considered innovative in its whole school approach, as the alternative would be to allow parents to find schools for their own children, which would mean breaking up existing school ties and adjusting to new schools, though these could be nearer to home. Children may resist going to new schools and having to make new friends as it is often difficult to break into existing groups. However, in China's relocation policy, the loss of friendship ties and starting new relationships may not be issues since the policy provides for classmates to move together. Furthermore, the resumption of schooling may assist children in post-disaster recovery, as it potentially provides security, stability and normalcy (Fothergill and Peek, 2006; Hale, 2007).

A review of the disaster literature shows that most disaster research, including research conducted in China after the Wenchuan earthquake, is focused on post-traumatic stress disorder or other mental health issues. Research studies on temporary school relocation following a disaster could not be found, yet one journal article reviews the literature on physical and mental health effects of post-disaster relocation among displaced populations (Uscher-Pines, 2009). Though the review is not specifically about children, it raises some interesting questions about whether relocation, though potentially disruptive, might also serve a protective function (that is, being removed from a disastrous situation and moving to a healthier place) and whether local versus distant relocation produces different health outcomes. Research on children evacuated during World War II in England, however, suggests that they were more distressed than those who stayed with their parents and were exposed to the bombings and destruction in London (Morris et al., 2007).

Given the paucity of research on this topic, this study aims to examine empirically the policy idea of moving schools temporarily to provide ongoing education for

children affected by disasters, notably by drawing on the perceptions of policy beneficiaries. It also seeks to answer the question of whether the adoption of this policy was generally favourable. The findings could serve as policy feedback to school administrators and planners of earthquake recovery and reconstruction.

Methodology

This section provides descriptions of the study instrument, sample, interview procedures, and data analysis used in this research. It also reviews the study's limitations.

Study instrument

Separate standardised interview guides were used for parents, schoolchildren and teachers. In developing and pilot testing the interview guide, the research team tapped the cultural understanding of the Chinese research assistants and their work as educators in a teachers' training college. For example, the team paid particular attention to language, being mindful of the lower educational level of many rural interviewees, language differences between *Pǔtōnghuà* (Mandarin) and the Sichuanese dialect, and local normative behaviour (such as apprehension about signing the research participant consent form, since potential interviewees were unfamiliar with such research protocol).

As most of the research participants were most comfortable speaking Sichuanese, and given that the principal investigator and co-investigator's ability to speak and understand Sichuanese was limited, the interviews were conducted by research assistants. As a result, the questions were standardised. Notwithstanding the use of a standardised interview guide, the open-ended questions allowed scope for individual responses, particularly to broad questions such as on their views of the school relocation policy and on difficulties.

Sample

In June 2009 school Z's enrolment stood at 593. One of the social workers in the school social work station was tasked with selecting 24 children from varied home backgrounds (town or village). They were informed that participation was voluntary and that it was necessary to secure permission from their parents for interviews to be conducted. Explicit consent was sought through the use of a consent form for parents and an assent form for children. Ethical approval for research procedures was obtained from the investigators' university, which provided the research grant.

Procedures

Interviews with parents took place between 29 April and 4 May 2009; the average time taken was 100 minutes. On the last day, the investigators held a debriefing meeting to identify issues that needed to be addressed in the next phase of the study, which

was the interviewing of school pupils and teachers. Subsequently, in May–June 2009, the research team's Chinese collaborator and four other research assistants interviewed the schoolchildren and 18 teachers individually, in private, on the school grounds. The average time taken for the pupil interviews was 55 minutes. There were 22 pairs of parent–child dyads and two pupils whose parents could not be contacted during the field trip. The scope of analysis for this paper was restricted to the pupils, who were the primary beneficiaries of the relocation policy, and their parents.

The transcription of interviews (in Chinese) by the respective interviewers took much longer than expected, from June 2009 to March 2010. The coding of qualitative data was carried out using NVivo software, a team approach and several rounds of cross-checking to facilitate consistency of coding.

Content analysis

Content analysis led to the generation of many themes, such as the children's coping strategies and social support, teachers as disaster survivors, school discipline and services of the school social work station. The focus of this paper, however, is to identify themes according to the fundamental elements of a policy or programme, using the framework prescribed by Chambers and Wedel (2009): (i) goals and objectives; (ii) benefits and services; (iii) eligibility benefits; (iv) administration and service delivery; and (v) finances. Chambers and Wedel's framework was chosen mainly because it is a perspective developed for social work and human service practitioners, whose work often requires them to judge the adequacy of a policy or programme for their service users, individually and as a social group.

In addition, interactions among the different policy elements were discussed. Certain recurring themes emerged, which might reflect a social construction by parents and their children of the policy's impact on their lives. However, there were also idiosyncratic perspectives, which reflected individual interpretations of the policy and often a more nuanced perception of what was happening. To encompass a diversity of views, the discussion below also presents these more unusual views.

Limitations

The study draws on the policy beneficiaries' perspective, rather than the perspectives of policy-makers and administrators implementing the policy. Hence, this paper does not claim to provide a comprehensive study of the school relocation policy.

Future research should aim to address the other limitations of this study, and particularly the cross-sectional design. The original intention was to do a longitudinal study, with follow-up interviews in 2010. But the pupils returned home in July 2009 as the new school building was ready for the next academic year. As a result, the findings reflect the perceptions of children and their parents at the end of the second semester, when they seemed better adjusted and knew that they would be going home soon.

Another limitation was the small sample size. Since the purpose of this qualitative study was not to generalise but to explore in depth the experience of school relocation,

this was not a serious setback. It is important to note, however, that the student body experienced attrition (school enrolment dropped from 848 in August 2008 to 662 in February 2009), and that those who stayed behind might be different from those who left. The sample that was selected was biased towards those who stayed, whether of their own volition or because of pressure from their parents. A related limitation was the lack of a comparison group. The study would have been more informative if a comparison group of those who left had also been interviewed. Nevertheless, the richness of data provided by parents and children is a contribution to the knowledge gap on the impact of such an innovative policy, offering feedback on what could have helped them to adjust better in the school relocation.

Results and discussion

This section comprises two parts: first, a profile of the interviewees and, second, thematic reports presented according to the policy features described above.

Interviewee profiles

Table 1 presents socio-demographic information on pupils and their parents. In some cases, information was not obtained, as interviewers did not ask questions consistently for all interviewees. Of the 24 pupils interviewed, a majority (62.5%) were girls. Thirteen of the pupils were in junior level 1 and 11 in junior level 2. The age range was between 13 and 16 years. The ethnic distribution was as follows: 11 Tibetans, 10 Han Chinese, 2 Qiang, and 1 unclassified. The pupils had 0–4 siblings, with a majority (75%) having one sibling. Most of their parents were in their thirties, with a few in their early forties. Most of the fathers had attained higher education levels than their mothers, which was consistent with the finding of the quantitative study. The number of visits made by parents ranged between 0 and 5 (modal or most frequent value=1).

Policy elements

In this sub-section the findings are discussed according to themes that emerged for each policy element.

Policy goal. A manifest goal of the post-Wenchuan earthquake restoration and reconstruction policy was to resume the schooling of children whose schools were damaged by the quake by moving them temporarily to host schools. Interviews revealed four main types of reactions to the policy goal. Two of these reflected the parents' mixed feelings, as their positive response towards schooling was accompanied by unease about sending their children away. One father's (P20) expression aptly described the parents' emotional state—happy and worried: happy because there would be schooling for their children, and worried because the children were so young and had never been far away from home on their own. The other two reactions were

Table 1. Socio-demographic information on pupils and their parents

Student no.	Parent no.	Child's sex/age	Child's ethnicity	Father's age/education	Mother's age/education	No. of siblings	No. of visits made by parents
S2	P5	M/13	Tibetan	36/Junior high		0	1
S3	P10	M/14	Han		37/Primary	1	1
S4	P9	M/15	Han		36/Primary	1*	1
S5	P17	F/13	Qiang	36/Primary	>30/Primary	1	5
S6	Not surveyed	F/14				1*	1
S7	P13	F/14	Han			2	1
S8	P22	F/13	Han		37/Primary	1	5
S9	P3	F/16	Tibetan		36/Primary	3	0
S10	P15	F/15	Tibetan	37/Junior high		1	0
S11	P14	F/14	Tibetan	39/Junior high		1*	0
S12	P23	F/15	Tibetan	38	38	1*	1
S13	P7	M/16	Tibetan	40/Primary		1	1
S14	P12	M/14	Tibetan	>30/Primary	35/Primary	1	2
S15	P20	M/14	Han	39/Primary	38	1	1
S16	Not surveyed	M/14	Han			1	1
S17	P21	F/16	Qiang	No education	No education	3*	2
S18	P6	F/13	Tibetan	37/Junior high	Primary	1*	1
S19	P4	F/14	Tibetan		37/Primary	3	1
S20	P2	M/16	Han	43/Bachelor's	Senior high	2	3
S21	P8	F/16	Han	43/Junior high		1	0
S22	P24	F/16	Han		39/Primary	1	0
S23	P16	M/14	Tibetan	40/Junior high		2	0
S24	P11	F/14	Tibetan		38	1	1
S25	P1	F/14	Han		35/Primary	1	2

Notes: M=male; F=female; * Sibling also in school Z.

related to secondary effects of the policy, namely that it dovetailed with parental aspirations for their children's educational attainment, since many of them considered themselves to be poorly educated, and that it promoted the development of independence and self-care.

Positive response towards schooling. Some parents (P2, P6, P10, P16, P24) and two pupils (S15, S22) expressed their appreciation of the country, the Chinese government or the Communist Party of China for looking into the educational needs of schoolchildren who were affected by the quake. It is unclear whether the respondents were genuinely appreciative or providing socially desirable answers. The responses could be a reflection of the success of the State Council Information Office, which aims to instil 'positive thinking in the popular mind' through media coverage of top leaders addressing disaster survivors with care and compassion (Chen, 2009). The parents pointed out that between 12 May and August 2008 their children had not attended school and P17 noted concern about 'a delay (*dān-ge*) in their studies'. S11 said that 'schooling is better than having no school to go to'.

Unease about sending children away. Many parents said they had felt worried about sending their children to a distant place. For them, an important factor allowing their children to relocate to the new school site was familiarity with the teachers and classmates. One father (P17) said that although he was worried about his young daughter going so far away and feeling homesick, with so many pupils 'over there' he was less worried. In some cases, it was the express wish of the children to go to the new location, as they were familiar with their classmates and teachers. P1 said that she asked her daughter (S25) to go to an aunt's place, closer to home, to study, but the girl refused, saying she would be more 'at ease (*ān-yì*)' with her male cousin, classmates, and teachers in the same school, rather than at a school where she did not know anyone. However, for S22, being together with many classmates was not enough to help her feel at ease; she still thought that the new location was 'not as cozy as at home (*méi-yǒu-jiā-lǐ-ān-yì*)'.

Parental aspirations for their children's education. Many of the children, especially the girls (S8, S18, S24, S25), said they cried and cried during the initial period after relocation. They cried after talking to their parents or they cried at night. They also said that they wanted to go home and were homesick. Some (S2, S3) said they were unable to concentrate on their studies. In view of the initial adjustment difficulties of the children, the parents exhorted them to press on, for the sake of getting an education. P12 said that on the second day of her son's (S14) arrival, he called to tell her he wanted to go home and that life over there was no good; she asked him to 'persevere (*jiān-chí*)' and impressed upon him that he was there to study, and not 'for a vacation tour (*gǎo-lǚ-yóu*)'. P16 said that as parents they would like their child (S23) to 'overcome (*kè-fú*)' his dislike of the food served in the canteen, for the sake of learning. S17 said that her parents wanted her to study well and go on to university.

Endurance (*rěn*) is one of the values cherished in Chinese culture (Kulich and Zhang, 2010). While it is also a coping strategy (Leong and Lee, 2008), enduring

hardships actually serves a higher purpose: getting an education. Achievement is another value endorsed by the Chinese; for Chinese parents, it is defined primarily as academic success (Bond, 1991; Wang and Chang, 2010; Kulich and Zhang, 2010). The marks suggest that there is high parental pressure on children to remain in school and excel, even under post-disaster conditions.

Development of independence and self-care. In addition to placing value on education, parents (P6, P7, P12, P20, P23) reframed the relocation and separation as 'toughening up (*duàn-liàn*)' or 'chastening (*mó-liàn*)' so as to develop independence and self-care. P5 said that she cried looking at the conditions of the place but thought to herself: 'I should allow him to toughen up; after all, children whose family conditions were much better than ours were also here.' The pupils (S2, S4, S6, S8, S12, S13, S15, S22, S23, and S25) similarly imbibed the virtue of being 'independent (*zì-lì/dú-lì*)' or 'self-reliant (*zì-qiáng*)'. S8's rationalisation was: 'Later, as you grow up, you have to leave your parents. This is a time of toughening up (*duàn-liàn*).' It is quite common for high school graduates to leave the small towns or cities and go to more prominent cities for higher education or to seek better employment opportunities.

Numerous students commented on one particular aspect of self-care, namely that they had to wash their own clothes. For some children (S2, S4, S7, S8, S15, S21), having to do so was a new experience since their mothers had previously done the laundry. Yet some parents (P2, P3, P4) said that their children already knew how to wash their own clothes, cook, and do household chores. A related aspect of self-care was the necessity to buy personal care products such as shampoo, soap and clothes for themselves.

Forms of benefits and services. Besides schooling, one other tangible benefit of the relocation policy was the provision of a boarding facility. The placement of school-children in boarding schools was not a new phenomenon in China's education policy. China already had in place a rural boarding school policy to optimise resources and to attain balanced education between rural and urban regions (Cheng and Mo, 2010; Zhao, 2011). By 2008, the number of children receiving living accommodation in primary and junior high schools was 30 million (Luo et al., 2009). For the eight children in this study who already had boarding school experience, attending a school away from home was thus familiar. A major difference, however, was that they had previously been able to go home during the weekends, since their schools were not so far away from their homes, even if they were up in the mountains.

One major theme related to the policy of boarding school was its effect on parenting. A related theme was that the care responsibility shifted to the teachers, who had to become surrogate parents. Two other themes were related to the children's major adjustments to life in a boarding school: dissatisfaction with the meals served and with the cramped dormitory space.

Chinese parenting. Several parents (P5, P8, P9, P15, P16) said that they found it difficult to care personally for their relocated children: they were unable to supervise them in doing homework and going out to play, and they were especially worried

about their children going to Internet bars. They noted that they did not know what was going on in the lives of their children, who did not tell them everything about their study progress or other developments. They also mentioned that they were unable to take care of their children when they fell ill or injured themselves. According to Wang and Chang (2010, p. 57), Chinese parents 'train (*guǎn*)' or discipline their children through 'close monitoring, firm directives, and high demands' so that the youngsters will function well in society, particularly by excelling in their studies. A physical separation of parents and children may thus be seen as interfering with the Chinese ideology of parenting.

For some of the children, being away from their parents did indeed mean being beyond their control. S11 said she was very happy in the first few days of the first semester, as her parents were too strict and were now too far away to control her. Such a happy state was short-lived, however; after about two to three months, she began to think of home and started to count the days when she could go back. S21 also said that at home her parents controlled her but in the new location she felt freer and could do what she liked.

Surrogate parents. In addition to their regular teaching duties, the schoolteachers, especially the form teachers, served as surrogate parents. The lack of auxiliary staff, such as matrons and housekeepers, is common in rural boarding schools and teachers are often asked to take on extra work (Zhao, 2011). As parents were fearful that their children would lose the pocket money given to them, the sums were often in the custody of form teachers and handed out to the children when required. According to S8, one of her teachers told the students: 'Here, I am your parent. You have to relate to me as your elder.' S2 said that in the past, when she encountered difficulties, she would look for her parents but 'over here' she could only look for her teachers. Meanwhile, S8 suggested that teachers should reach out to the students who were alone or isolated and help them to 'blend into our big family (*róng-rù-wǒ-men-de-dà-jiā-tíng-zhòng*)'. The child's comment is remarkable, given that Chinese students generally do not openly criticise their teachers (Bond, 1991).

Parents recognised that child supervision was not easy for the teachers. P9 said that teachers had many children to manage and that it was not possible to ask them to take special note of her child. P1 observed that parents appreciated that teachers had taken on additional responsibilities. P2 commented that although rural residents did not express appreciation directly to the teachers, they felt it in their hearts.

Dissatisfaction with meals. The meals served to the children generated a significant amount of discontent and added to their adjustment problems. Almost all children said that they had great difficulties adjusting to the food served in the school canteen. The children said that the food was different from what they were used to back home. Moreover, they found 'fat meat with hair still on it' (S6) and 'worms and hair' (S11) in the food served to them. S11 elaborated further: they were dissatisfied with the food supplier because of poor hygiene in food handling, that is, food servers did not cover their mouths with masks or their heads with scarves. The only pupil who said that the food in the relocated school was better than back home was

S10. S7 suggested that getting used to the food was probably harder for children who came from financially better off families. S7's mother (P13) said of her, 'There were some children who refused to eat food that was not to their taste or they simply did not like certain food, but not our child; she ate everything.'

The children's objections to the meals echoed findings of a recent study that highlights a serious problem of inadequate and poor standards in canteen facilities as well as limited knowledge of basic nutrition and food safety in rural boarding schools in Shaanxi province (Luo et al., 2009). Dissatisfaction with the meals was so great that the older pupils at junior levels two and three organised a canteen strike in the first semester. They stopped the younger children in level one from going to the canteen and to classes.

Crowded dormitory space. Due to a lack of space, between 12 and 25 children shared a dormitory room. As there was no room for individual lockers, the children's belongings were kept in small bags that they had brought from home. Consequently, belongings could be stolen easily; for example, P4 said that all of her daughter's clothes were stolen and she had to borrow clothes from others. S20 said that her dormitory was too noisy and disorderly, with too many people, and that she had difficulties sleeping at night; as a result, she would fall asleep in class. In view of other reports on inadequate dormitory space, the sharing of beds and the effect on getting a good night's sleep, the finding is not surprising (Ding, 2008; Luo et al., 2009; Zhao, 2011).

Eligibility to attend school. In addition to those who were in junior levels two and three, pupils graduating from different primary schools in quake-affected areas were eligible to join middle school Z in moving to the temporary site. Two issues emerged in relation to the eligibility to attend school Z: dropping out and the presence of siblings and relatives in the same school.

Dropping out. S4 said that there were conflicts between students in junior levels two and three and that some of his friends took their school bags and left. He said the teachers were not able to stop them from leaving and said he felt sad to see them go. Later, some of those who had left returned to school, but others went out to work. P10 said that his child (S3) told him that his classmates returned home after getting into trouble in school.

Presence of relatives in the same school. A positive feature of the eligibility rules was that siblings and, in some cases, relatives (an aunt and cousins) moved together. For some, the effects seem to have been beneficial, but some siblings did not take advantage of the opportunity for sibling support. S4 said that his younger sister helped him to wash his clothes as she did a better job of it than he did. S6 said that besides her primary school classmates, she also had an aunt in the same class as her and they looked out for each other. She said her older sister (in level two) helped her only once, by washing clothes for her. S7 said she seldom got together with her older sister (both were in junior level one but in different classes and stayed in different dormitories). Similarly, S17 said she seldom talked to her younger sister and S11 said she often fought with her older sister.

Administration and service delivery. The choice of the transitional site was key to implementing the relocation policy. Interviews mentioned two concerns in relation to the site's physical characteristics: its physical environment and its accessibility. Two further issues revolved around the site's implications for social relationships: parent–child communication and parent–teacher communication. The children's safety was another factor for all concerned. P20 offered a unique perspective of the psychological aspect of city X, noting that it was free of earthquakes and aftershocks; he suggested that not having to experience aftershocks might have helped the children to 'slowly calm down (*màn-màn-píng-xī-xia-lai*)'. He explained that in the three months that the children stayed at home after the quake, they experienced frequent aftershocks, some of which measured 5 and 6 on the Richter scale, and that the children had been frightened by the experience.

Physical environment. S14 told his parents that there were pig farms and chicken farms nearby and that these were smelly and unhygienic. P23 said that it was not as bad as what his children (both in school Z) had told him and that many other parents had visited and expressed satisfaction with the place. P6 said that although the school buildings were not in good condition, the children should not be arrogant in criticising the place since it provided a 'setting (*huán-jìng*)' for study. In contrast, P22, who visited her daughter five times, had a poor impression, saying that the living conditions were poor, the classrooms did not look like classrooms (jiāo-shì-bù-xiàng-jiāo-shì) and that the dormitory was too crowded.

Despite the negative reviews of the school site, several children (S5, S8, S14, S16, S23) said that they found the physical environment to be better than back home: the air was fresher; there was much greenery in the school compound; and the city was a scenic tourist spot. Back home, there were a lot of factories and more pollution. Nonetheless, other children (S17, S18, S19, S23) complained about the mosquitoes, which kept them awake at night. They were not allowed to burn incense to keep the mosquitoes away, lest they cause a fire.

Accessibility of the school site. The site was not easily accessible, mainly because of the long distance and travel time required. To get to city X, parents had to travel from their village to a nearby town to catch a long-distance public transport bus. The more enterprising parents pooled their money together to hire a mini-van to visit their children in a group. Most would only stay for one to three hours as they had to get back home before it turned dark, since they did not want to spend money staying overnight in a hotel. Hence, the amount of time parents and children spent together was comparatively short as more time was spent travelling on the road. In addition, as the children had never travelled long distances on their own before, some parents did not feel at ease asking them to travel home and back on their own.

Parent–child communication. Parental visits were the most desirable form of contact, as far as the children were concerned. In addition to parental visits, an important means of parent–child communication was through the telephone. Modern technology, such as mobile phones, made parent–child communication easier. S24 said she called

her mother every day in the first semester and on alternate days in the second. However, some families were too poor to afford a mobile phone. As a result, some children used public telephones to call their parents or, in some cases, borrowed a friend's mobile phone to call home. Yet communication remained problematic in the post-disaster conditions. S7 recounted hearsay that snowfall back home would cause a blockage of the area and that nobody would be able to go home for the Chinese New Year. She claimed that almost everyone in her class 'lay down on the desks and cried (*pā-zài-zhuō-zǐ-shang-kū*)'. That night telephone calls to parents could not get through, increasing their anxiety.

Parent–teacher communication. Parents generally reported minimal contact with teachers, varying from none to once only (P1, P9, P10, P16, P17, P20, P21, P24). Yet some parents pointed out that, even before the relocation, they had little contact with teachers. The few parents who said they made efforts to contact the teachers more frequently were P15 and P23. The latter said that in the past, whenever they felt unsure how their children were doing in school, it had been easier to get answers from the teachers, but now that their relationship with the teachers was 'very distant (*hěn-su-yuǎn*)', they usually did not call to make enquiries.

Safety of children. The safety of their children was uppermost in the minds of the parents. S8 reported that her parents were fearful for her, having heard of several incidents of 'extortion (*lè-suǒ*)' of younger pupils by some delinquent youths (*bù-liáng-shào-nián*) of a local school in city X. S11 said that her classmates had experienced extortion after exiting the school, but she herself had only met some 'local ruffians (*dì-pǐ-wú-lài*)'. S13 also said that 'the locals, they bullied us (*běn-dì-de, tā-mén-qī-fu-wǒ-men*)'. However, he said he did not experience bullying. Only S20 reported that he actually fought with the local people outside of school and that they had knives and accused pupils of school Z of taking their money.

Finances. There were unforeseen financial costs for school Z in moving to city X, such as expenses for renovations and the purchase of beds and other items. Initially, parents were asked to contribute to the food costs for their children. Consequently, they were relieved when the local government of county Z paid the monthly fee of CNY 300 (USD 45) for living expenses and reimbursed them the fees they had already paid. Interviews revealed two major themes related to financing: the financial burden on parents and voluntary contributions from well-wishers and volunteers.

Financial burden on parents. Many parents identified the financial burden posed on them by the boarding school as one of their top concerns. There were two aspects of the burden, one of which was the travel costs to city X. P11 said that they did not have the money to send their child to city X and that the cost was paid by the village. Furthermore, she borrowed money to travel together with other parents to see their children, which cost her CNY 700 (USD 110), including the purchase of a telephone card and other items for her child. P13 added that with the rebuilding of their house there was no money for a second trip.

The second aspect to the burden was the increase in pocket money given to the children. Almost all the parents indicated an increase in the amount of pocket money given. The financial burden varied, depending on whether parents were still working, the losses incurred as a result of the quake and the loans they had taken out to rebuild their houses. P11 said that it was especially difficult for her family as her health was poor and she required money for medication. Some families (P3, P10) had more than one child in boarding school and that meant an even greater financial burden; for example, P10 also had a son whose school relocated to Guangdong province, where the costs of living were higher still. The financial difficulties and hardships of parents were not lost on their children, whose thriftiness was appreciated by their parents (P4, P5, P8, P15).

Voluntary contributions from well-wishers and volunteers. Parents (P1, P6) and children (S6, S8, S15, S18, S22, S21, S24) expressed gratitude for the availability of the school site. They also said they were grateful for the kindness and warmth of local and other well-wishers, whom they often referred to as 'kind-hearted people (*hǎo-xīn-rén*)', and for help received from individual and group volunteers in cheering them up. The children also received gifts from individuals in spontaneous acts of kindness. One example was told by S8: 'When we went out to the stores here, the sales persons asked if we were from county Z and when I said 'yes' they gave us things for free.'

Policy implications

In analysing the post-disaster school relocation policy it is helpful to differentiate between the goal of the resumption of schooling on the one hand, and its administration, which requires review, on the other. Parents and children were generally appreciative of the opportunity to continue schooling and the resources provided by the Chinese government, well-wishers, the host school and the local community.

A major consequence of the policy was the physical separation of children from their parents and other family members, which subsequently affected parenting, teaching and studying. The extent to which the adjustment to an unfamiliar environment might have affected the children's studying is not clear, since some children (and their parents) indicated that their child's marks had improved, though others (especially the parents) were concerned that their children's marks got worse. Some children attributed their declining academic performance to the transition from the primary school curriculum to middle school, with more subjects to study and an increasing level of subject difficulty.

There was indirect support for the children's claim that transitioning was to blame for poor results; of the 186 who left the school between August 2008 and February 2009, 66% were in junior level one, 2% in junior level two and 32% in junior level three (SWS, 2009). A few blamed unsatisfactory results on poor concentration; some claimed they were not able to concentrate on their studies because of homesickness or because mosquitoes kept them awake at night, which caused them to fall asleep

in class. Yet others reasoned that class discipline was poor, affecting their studies. Reasons offered by parents were slightly different: homesickness, the effects of the earthquake and anxiety about their parents' financial situation.

A more objective assessment of the children's academic performance was not available, so it was not possible to determine whether the relocation experience had negative consequences. Most likely, prior academic performance played an important part; some parents said that their children had always been good students. A fall in academic performance is not surprising; a similar drop was documented among adolescents who were relocated to the state of Colorado owing to Hurricane Katrina, though the educational context was different (Peek, 2008; Peek and Richardson, 2010).

Apart from effects on marks, several other policy consequences and implications would have to be addressed if a similar policy were to be considered in the future. First, there appears to be a need to relocate closer to home so as to facilitate parental visits to the school as well as children's visits home. Brixi (2009) advises the Chinese central and local governments to explore options nearer to the children's homes and to consider appropriate transport arrangements. If it is not feasible to find so many host schools in nearby places to accommodate the children, then it is important to facilitate parental visits. The marks suggest that parental visits were helpful in easing both the separation of children from their parents and adjustment to the new environment. The children whose parents visited them expressed much joy and gratitude for the efforts made, given the costs and time required to make a trip. But the six children whose parents did not visit at all may have experienced emotional hardship, including those who said that they had not been close to their parents. One such pupil said that she wanted to cry and did not blame her parents, as the distance was too great, there were things to attend to at home, the transport fee was high, the travel time was long and they could only stay a few hours before going back. It should be noted that her father said he had no time to understand matters relating to his daughters (both in school Z). Did the geographical distance increase the emotional distance between these children and their parents, and how could the school have minimised the hazards of long-distance relationships?

Second, there appears to be a need to alleviate the additional financial costs of boarding school. Whereas families of children in boarding schools, in general, are also financially burdened (Cheng and Mo, 2010; Zhao, 2011), parents affected by the *yì-dì-fù-kè* policy faced the additional task of rebuilding houses that were destroyed by the quake. Though there were some monetary awards for pupils whose families were poor, these were limited to youths who did well in their examinations. Pupils from poor families, irrespective of examination results, should be offered financial assistance so that they can complete middle school. The school's social work station reported in October 2009 that some pupils had left school Z to go out to work or to switch to vocational schools so that they could acquire an employable skill and support their families financially. Policy-makers should monitor those who dropped out for financial reasons. One way to offer financial relief and keep children in school would be to fully implement the central government's 'two exemptions and one subsidy'

policy, which provides exemption from school fees and textbook expenses and subsidy for boarding school expenses; while it was initiated in 2006, the policy remains to be made available to all poor families in all provinces (Ding, 2008). Although this study did not investigate specifically the impact of the financial burden on children's academic performance, Picou and Marshall (2007) find that, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, financial strain experienced by parents had negative effects on their children's classroom behaviour, academic performance and attendance.

Third, it needs to be recognised that teachers were also among the disaster survivors; some of them lost family members and required psychosocial assistance with grief. Surveys have shown that many teachers who resume duties in post-quake situations are generally under tremendous emotional stress, face financial pressures and are physically fatigued (Liu et al., 2010). When teachers are distraught, they may not be able to offer security or care to children under their charge (Peek, 2008). In school Z, about half of the teachers were separated from their spouses or parents, who were still living in their hometown. The scheme utilising substitute teachers (organised by the social work station with support from a teachers' college through the counterpart assistance scheme), providing one week's leave for teachers to go home to see their family, seemed to be appreciated by some children who enjoyed the lessons the substitute teachers conducted. Policy-makers should develop a formal mechanism to relieve and support teachers who are on the frontline in implementing the resumption of schooling policy.

Fourth, parental support was of immense importance in the relocation process, as attested to by the children in this study. Despite the physical distance between them, the substitution of parental figures by teachers and the inherent difficulties in long-distance communication, an analysis of the data on sources of social support (ranked in order of importance) showed that for 11 children, one or both of their parents were ranked number one; another six children placed them at number two. In contrast, only four placed their teachers in top position; another five placed them in position number two. While teachers, relief volunteers and peers were not as important as parents, they played different roles in helping children recover from disaster (Fothergill and Peek, 2006).

Fifth, children appreciated the services provided by the social work station, which was not a provision of the policy. Parents, however, were mostly unfamiliar with the social workers; given the low public awareness of social work in China, this finding was not surprising (Sigley, 2011). The station worked on some of the issues that surfaced in the adjustment period; for example, it organised a 'small reporters (*xiǎo-jì-zhě*)' scheme, enlisting the pupils to report on school conditions and the home situation, so as to provide more accurate information to parents and pupils, who were concerned about what was happening in school and at home, respectively. Other services included the provision of an activity room to facilitate healthy play within the school compound and the recruitment of university students as volunteers in organising recreational activities. The school itself also arranged for other volunteer groups, such as Hua Dan (a non-profit organisation that runs theatre workshops), to work with the pupils.

Lastly, the shortening of the temporary relocation from three years to one year was perceived as commendable by the parents and children interviewed for this study. It was a great relief for the children. Although they seemed to have made better adjustment by the second semester—as indicated by the lower frequency of telephone calls per week—they said their utmost desire was to return home as soon as possible. One of the students revealed that when it was finally confirmed that the new school building was ready for occupation, a few female pupils were so excited that they broke down and cried.

Conclusion

In sum, the policy attention given to the rapid restoration of formal schooling for children within one year of the Wenchuan earthquake was praiseworthy, notwithstanding the psychosocial stress it created for schoolchildren and their family members. If such a policy is to be implemented again to meet future disaster needs, policymakers should seriously consider relocation as close to home as possible to facilitate parent–child visits and face-to-face contact; subsidies for parents to reduce the additional financial costs incurred in boarding schools and to prevent school dropouts by youths who want to seek employment to support their families; psychological support for teachers who are disaster victims; and the provision of a school social work to address the psychosocial needs of schoolchildren and teachers.

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Correspondence

Guat Tin Ng, Department of Applied Social Sciences, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hung Hom, Kowloon, Hong Kong.
Telephone: +852 2766 5736.
Fax: +852 2773 6558.
E-mail: ssngt@polyu.edu.hk.

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