

## **Culturally and situationally-appropriate professional development design for principals of ethnic elementary schools in Yunnan Province, PRC**

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This paper is part of a set of three papers that together consider a complex learning design case emerging in the People's Republic of China. The physical setting for this endeavor is the province of Yunnan in southwestern China, a province of some 48 million persons (Yunnan Government, 2019). Yunnan has the largest and most diverse concentration of ethnic groups in the nation.

We have been engaged in determining a suitable learning design for culturally and situationally-appropriate professional development for principals of elementary schools in Yunnan Province – including incorporating attention to the needs of ethnic minority students. Professional development of these principals is undertaken by Yunnan Normal University – the higher education institution in the Province of Yunnan charged with the task of preparing future teachers and administrators for schools and also for their ongoing professional development. Sitting principals are or will be undergoing a systematic program of professional development in light of recent changes to compulsory education. This program will take about six years to complete across the entire cohort of eligible administrative participants. Our work is intended to influence the topics and approaches of some of this professional development for these practicing elementary principals as well as adaptations for the programs preparing future elementary school administrators and teachers.

A majority (the exact number is presently unknown) of the 10,688 elementary schools in Yunnan are small, rural, ethnic minority-majority schools with 100 or fewer pupils of varying ethnicities and ages (Yunnan Provincial Education Department, 2021). These schools are spread across a geographic area roughly the size of California, two-thirds of which is mountainous and the other third of which lies 1000 feet or more above sea level in high plains and river valleys. Principals of these schools face new and unprecedented challenges requiring rethinking approaches to professional development and support both for themselves and the teachers they lead (Dai and Cheek, 2021).

### **A New Cultural Analysis Framework**

Due to a series of interlocking, complex issues that form the context in which professional development of elementary school principals in the province must occur, we have pioneered application of a new cultural analysis framework we have created tailored to this particular

learning design challenge. The starting point for the framework was inspired by the work of the French *Annales* School of historiography in its attempts to write *histoire totale* – a term that suggests that understanding the human past and present requires tools, techniques, and perspectives that go well beyond the usual historical considerations of people, places, and sociopolitical events placed within a fairly narrow compass of time. Our cultural analysis framework utilizes the following five key components we created inspired by the *Annales* approach: 1) geography & climate factors, 2) history & anthropology factors, 3) economy & society factors, 4) politics & education administration factors, and 5) management styles & learning factors (Dai and Cheek, in press). We believe, as this framework suggests, that the business of teaching and learning is always functioning within much wider contexts of politics, management, economics, society (both anthropologically and sociologically), climate, and geography. Some of these factors change rapidly, while others change quite slowly and almost imperceptibly within normal human perspectives. Yet all of these many factors influence what happens today and what will happen in future days.

Space considerations make it impossible to overview all of these cultural analysis components in this brief paper. Therefore, we have split the discussion of the factors across three papers with factors 1 and 2 discussed mainly in Dai and Cheek (in press), factors 3 and 4 discussed in Dai and Cheek (2021), and factors 4 and 5 discussed here – with factor 4 in this paper adding material not found in the prior papers. We anticipate writing a longer, more comprehensive article, combining substantial attention to all five factors of our cultural analysis framework at a future date when the whole picture is considerably clearer than it is at present.

One important component of our framework is politics and educational administration matters. Here we focus on national education law, the ways in which primary and secondary education is organized in China, and the implications these matters have for the many roles played by principals of elementary schools in Yunnan.

### **The Organization of Schools in China**

China's public education system has been influenced by four factors: 1) ancient cultural heritage and learning traditions (especially Confucian thought), 2) leadership literature from the West, 3) school management theory and practices from the former Soviet Union, and 4) "leadership tenets and principles of the Communist Party of China" (Feng, 2020, p. 3) A four-tiered system of educational administration was enacted by the Education Law of the PRC originally promulgated in 1995 and whose structural features (detailed in Articles 14 and 15) were left unchanged in its 2009 and 2015 revisions. At the top is the national Ministry of Education (MOE) in Beijing. Below the MOE are the 31 Provincial Education Departments (PEDs), or sometimes called Commissions. Below them are the 334 Prefecture-Level-City Education Bureaus (PLCEDs). (A prefecture in China is an administrative unit containing several counties; the large cities within them have their own educational bureaus.) Finally, underneath them are the 2,850 County Education Bureaus or CEBs (Feng, 2020; cf. OECD, 2016).

The MOE sets all national education policies. The PEDs can establish provincial education policies for local variable conditions but they must be congruent with the national education laws and policies. The PLCEDs promote and supervise implementation of the provincial education

policies. Finally, the CEBs handle the day-to-day operational aspects of local primary and lower secondary education. They have the most impact at local levels because they control the funds for the nine years of compulsory education and are also where the 253,736 or so primary and secondary schools get their support, supervision, and evaluation (Feng, 2020). It is important to note that these 250,000+ schools are not the only public schools in China. OECD (2016) reported about 514,000 schools below the university level across China including those in autonomous regions, special administrative regions, and those under other lines of authority within education; attendance in these schools, outside of the first nine years of schooling, are noncompulsory, i.e., the higher grade levels up through the end of high school or vocational school are not required under compulsory education law.

Schools throughout China have similar organizational structures which are standardized by national education law. Leadership within an individual school resides in four key sets of leaders: 1) the School Leadership Team (or School Affairs Committee) – comprised of the Principal (and VPs if applicable), the Party Secretary (and associate secretary if applicable), and the Chairperson of the School Trade Union; 2) Middle Managers are the Directors of the Office of Moral Education, Office for Curriculum and Instruction, and the Office for Scientific Research & Teacher Development as well as Ancillary Services; 3) Lower Managers are the Heads of Grade Units, Heads for Teaching-Study Groups, and Heads of Lesson Preparation Groups; and 4) the Communist Party at the School which is responsible for the work of the School Trade Union, Women’s Federation, Communist Youth League (if a secondary school) or the Young Pioneers (if a primary school). Since 2016, the Party representative also leads the moral education of the school and works closely with the school’s Director of the Office of Moral Education to ensure that the Party’s views are consistently promoted to all people within the school community (Feng, 2020).

These various designated leadership roles are, of course, difficult to both fill and fulfill in small rural schools – a problem not unlike those faced by rural schools around the world (e.g., Kinkley, 2019, for US issues and examples). Too few people wearing too many hats for long periods of time can be a recipe for declining morale and professional burnout. Many supportive resources that are needed in these isolated rural settings are simply not available or if they are made available are difficult to access due to the inevitable constraints of time, technology, lack of knowledge or skills, or competing demands. Rural schools worldwide pose considerable challenges for those responsible for ensuring that education in these schools is consistently of good quality and accessible to all who need it (Kong, Hannum, and Postiglione, 2021). Similar to many other nations with large numbers of very diverse schools, Chinese education policymakers have innovated in a continuing manner to try to address the many challenges faced by school leaders. We now describe a number of recent innovations in approaches to educational administration within the schools of China.

### **The Principal Responsibility System**

A new Principal Responsibility System (PRS) was initially created as part of the 1985 education reforms. For the first time, the principal was made responsible for school development planning. Given its complexities and the need to prepare principals for this extraordinary expansion in their responsibilities, the PRS was phased in over many years as part of a wider overall approach by

the government to improve the nation's schools (Feng, 2020). The PRS is comprised of several pillars. First there is the local education authority (county or district education board) who supervises the principal. The principal is responsible for leadership of local schools, is the legal representative of the school, and under Article 30 of the Education Law is "held responsible for teaching and learning activities and administration" (Feng, 2020, p. 27). (It is for this reason that we are concentrating our efforts on elementary principals as instructional leaders.) Finally, the School Leadership Team chaired by the Principal, is responsible for a wide range of activities including various plans, appointments and removals, annual budget, plans for large expenditures, appraisal of staff, graduation and enrollment policies, major infrastructure projects, etc. A recent change in Party organization at the school level, instituted in 2016, now allows the Principal (if a Party member) to simultaneously hold the positions of both Principal and Party Secretary; a situation which makes the principal the "paramount leader in his/her school." While all of this may sound very "top down" to those unfamiliar with the education system of China, it needs to be noted that across a variety of measures, Chinese schools have been viewed as roughly equally autonomous as local publicly-administered schools in Germany, England, and France (Feng, 2018, 2020).

Since 2001, primary and secondary schools in many regions have successively established school-based management systems that combine government coordination, social participation, and independent school management. During this time period, the Ministry of Education sought to move all schools away from a knowledge transmission model of learning to increased attention on student problem solving, lifelong learning, cooperative learning, and making the curriculum more relevant for local situations and contexts. It also incentivized teachers to move and remain in poor rural areas through special teacher allowances and subsidies for both primary (elementary) and secondary teachers (Kong et al., 2021). These developments have prompted changes in the preparation of principals to be instructional leaders as reflected in both textbooks for aspiring school administrators in China as well as increased research on the roles and responsibilities of principals in serving as instructional leaders (e.g., Wu & Zhou, 2008; Chen, 2010; Walker et al., 2012; and Walker & Qian, 2020).

In order to increase accessibility to education, a key component of China's economic development policies, a 2006 revision of China's compulsory education law (part of Article 2) states that "no tuition or miscellaneous fee may be charged in the implementation of compulsory education." Article 6 further clarified that "... the State Council and the local people's governments at the county level and above shall reasonably allocate the educational resources, promote balanced development of compulsory education, improve the conditions of weak schools, take measures to ensure implementation of the compulsory education policy in rural areas and areas inhabited by ethnic minority groups, and guarantee that school-aged children and adolescents from families with financial difficulties and disabled school-aged children and adolescents receive compulsory education." Article 44 further required in the event of family financial inadequacies that "... the people's governments at all levels shall provide them with gratis textbooks and give living cost subsidies to boarding students" (Kong, et al., 2021, p. xix).

While these provisions now clearly establish the government's priorities, there are clearly still many barriers that must be overcome throughout the more rural areas of China and elsewhere. One continuing problem, for example, is that children who drop out of compulsory education

generally are not pursued in any systematic and continuous manner by the educational system to return to school and to complete their studies (Wang, Y., 2014; Bilige & Fan, 2020). It is important to acknowledge that dropout problems are in no way unique to China but are a feature of educational systems worldwide (cf. OECD, 2021 for OECD countries and Irwin et al., 2021 for the US). As a consequence, many indicator systems (e.g., OECD) consider schools *fully* enrolled when only 90% or more of the eligible pupils are “enrolled.”

Since 2001, Chinese primary and secondary schools have tried many largely ineffective changes in the process of encouraging further development of their schools and deepening their impacts. The main reason for these failures is the lack of systematic thinking among school leaders, especially school principals; e.g., they have faced an ever-increasing set of leadership responsibilities over the past three decades and they may lack ability to think conceptually about the many complex problems that now confront them (Liu, 2013). We suspect that there are a multitude of reasons beyond just the lack of systematic thinking among school leaders, especially in semi-isolated and geographically challenging areas of China such as Yunnan (cf. Wu, 2020).

Five years ago, in an attempt to deepen reforms and improve results of primary and secondary schooling across China, the Organization Department of the CCCPC and the Ministry of Education (2017) promulgated new provisional “measures for the management of leaders of primary and secondary schools.” It complemented and further clarified some earlier guidance issued by the Ministry of Education (2013). The provisional measures deal with a series of matters including: 1) entry requirements and professional qualifications for principals and other administrators, 2) rules and procedures for selection, appointment, and service term setting (e.g., serving a maximum of 12 years as a principal in the same school), 3) accountability and performance appraisal, 4) establishment of a career path and motivation system, 5) supervision and restraint mechanisms (to appropriately limit principal’s powers), and 6) termination or dismissal mechanisms for school leaders. The promulgation of these rules simultaneously established the primacy of principals and also delineated for the first times the limits of their authority and powers.

### **Educational Administration Challenges in Yunnan**

About eighty percent of Yunnan elementary schools are found in rural areas where 25 formally-recognized ethnic groups are heavily concentrated. These groups move freely across large areas, including both adjacent countries and other regions of China. Schools in these regions are often ethnic minority-majority with 14+ indigenous languages spoken by children and their parents, in addition to parents and children speaking, reading, and writing Mandarin with varying degrees of fluency and proficiency (Chinese Rural Education Development Research Institute, 2017; Dai & Cheek, 2021). Most schools are small (about 100 students) as we have noted, and many are residential Monday-Friday due to sparse and widely dispersed populations across these mountainous regions (Lei & Zhang, 2014). The number of boarding schools is slowly but steadily increasing as authorities continue to systematically decrease the number of total schools due to overall declining numbers and the provision of subsidies for families to board their children at the schools. China’s efforts on consolidations appear to be decreasing the dropout rate as well; perhaps larger numbers both increase school activities and provide more opportunities for students to form friendships and inhibit their dropping out (Yu, 2013). Another new

phenomenon are children who remain at school through the weekends and thus board there throughout the school year. Often these are students whose parents are away working in the cities with no local relatives to care for them (Wang, Dong & Mao, 2017). Student populations in the vast rurality of Yunnan tend to vary across the year due to poverty, isolation, hazardous journeys to school, annual migratory patterns, parental need for their free labor, and health (Dai & Cheek, 2021).

The majority of teachers and administrators in these ethnic minority-majority schools are part of the ninety-two percent *Han* culture of the PRC; a group which generally agrees with the view frequently expressed that literacy in China refers to competencies in Mandarin, not in other dialects or languages (Yamada, 2021). There has been mixed success in China with approaches to fully bilingual or trilingual approaches to language learning and use (Tsung, 2009, 2014; Zhang, Y. J., 2013). Valuable programs include plenty of opportunities for immersion in a language, extensive discourse in the language that is related to the school's regular curriculum and highlighting practical uses and applications for the language in question. Many successful programs can be found in cities but in rural areas the many challenges that must be overcome often overwhelm well-intentioned efforts (Tsung, 2009, Sude and Dervin, 2020).

Recent national pronouncements and actions regarding unrest in the borderlands of China will undoubtedly result in changes to government policies regarding local ethnic language learning within the school curriculum and change how schools approach issues of citizenship development and holistic development of children (e.g., Xi, 2014, 2017). The exact nature of these changes is currently unknown.

The need for adaptive leadership has perhaps never been greater. Principals need to be instructional and institutional leaders who can engage in critical thinking about the socio-technical system called formal public education as it faces accelerated change and increasing demands (Blasé et al., 2010; Kinkley, 2019). Principals need to become more culturally attuned to the needs of their teachers, pupils, and communities in areas of the country where the school is vital to community-wide continuity, cohesion, and continuing social and economic development (Cherng et al., 2019; cf. Pasanchay, 2019). Principals need time and opportunity to identify, explore, and question their own beliefs and understandings about the children and families of local ethnic groups. This includes viewing the sociocultural dimensions of students as a resource strength for students' ongoing cognitive, social, emotional, and citizenship development within a holistic frame of reference (cf. Yang et al., 2021). At the same time, principals are responsible within their schools for achieving the government's priority for Mandarin to be the common language ("Putonghua") of the nation (Yamada, 2021).

There is much about our engagement we do not presently know (e.g., Amzat, 2019). Relevant research is meager regarding many relevant issues (Su et al., 2019). There are, however, interesting pointers from ongoing educational and psychological research across an array of fronts including: reducing socioeconomic disparities (Destin, 2020), honing reasoning ability (Bunge & Leib, 2020), improving children's multiple language skills (Hulme et al., 2020), the physical context of child development (Evans, 2021), taking social, emotional, and behavioral skills seriously (Soto et al., 2021), promoting student self-regulation and transfer (McDaniel & Einstein, 2020), addressing discrimination (e.g., Bettache, 2020), understanding

neurodevelopmental effects of childhood adversity (Smith and Pollak, 2021), and providing supportive environments that enhance teachers' self-efficacy (Lackey, 2019).

In addition to socio-technical systems thinking about the educational system as a whole (McWalters & Cheek, 2000), principals also need a formal, flexible, and relationship-focused way to apprehend the need for changes and ways to work through the worldviews, means, methods, and processes that will position their teachers, schools, and communities to successfully respond to emerging challenges. We suspect that Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) will be a useful tool to employ with principals as part of their own professional development and to develop comfort and skills using SSM with teachers and community leaders within their own respective school service areas (Jackson, 2019).

## Conclusion

The challenge is to create a working model of how to integrate various factors into a flexible approach that will place principals at the center of a systematic learning and action research program that will produce culturally and situationally appropriate and educationally effective changes to learning on the part of both rural children and the adults who work with them. Success at such a venture will greatly affect the future of these rural children as citizens of the People's Republic of China.

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