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SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS AND IMPROVEMENT IN MAINLAND CHINA

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Introduction

School effectiveness and improvement has long been an important educational issue for researchers and practitioners worldwide. According to Levine and Lezotte (1990), school effectiveness is "the production of a desired result or outcome." However, "school effectiveness is still a very vague concept, even though it is often used in the literature of school management and improvement" (Cheng, 1996, p. 7). The definition of school effectiveness may vary for individuals as well as for different countries. Relatively speaking, Mortimore has given a clearer meaning when he defines an effective school as "one in which students progress further than might be expected with respect to its intake" (Mortimore, 1998, p. 258). This definition suggests that an effective school should add value to the students' outcomes in comparison with other schools serving similar intakes (Sammons, 1999, p. 76). The author of this chapter agrees with Mortimore's definition and believes that the most convincing fruits of school effectiveness and improvement practices should be the improvement of quality in disadvantaged schools.[1] This point of view is not groundless but builds on China's unique history in school effectiveness and improvement. Thus, this chapter begins with a brief historical review of school effectiveness and improvement practices in China and then presents the general context of China's experiences. The second section of the chapter examines the role the Chinese government plays in promoting improvement in disadvantaged schools, by presenting and discussing the contribution of related initiatives and efforts at the system level. In the third section, the factors at the site level that contribute to improvement in disadvantaged school are identified, through studying a typical case of successful practice in improvement in disadvantaged schools. The fourth section provides researchers and practitioners in other countries with the implications and lessons drawn from China's best practices in improvement in disadvantaged schools.

Throughout this chapter, the author argues that the most valuable and convincing experiences of school effectiveness and improvement are not in traditional, high-performing

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schools but in disadvantaged schools. Also, the initiatives and efforts at system level can substantially promote and enhance the effectiveness and improvement of schools, particularly in disadvantaged schools. Yet, these initiatives and efforts do not work automatically. Rather, they work better if they are matched with the appropriate strategies at the site level. Finally, to develop effective strategies at the site level, an individual school has to fully consider the "status" of the students, based on information from the results of psychological tests, questionnaires, and surveys. Also, the author makes the assertion that school effectiveness and improvement may have a negative side; that is, the excessive expectations and workload in school improvement practices might weigh teachers down. Further, school leaders adopting leadership approaches or management strategies directly from other political and cultural contexts, without considering the appropriateness for their organizations, might do more harm than good.

School Effectiveness and Improvement Efforts in China

School effectiveness and improvement has been one of the priorities for China's education since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. However, by the end of the 1980s, China's efforts in this area were focused exclusively on a very small proportion of schools.

When confronted with immediate economic and technological problems in the early years, the newly established communist government in mainland China was eager to prepare qualified scientists and technicians within a short time. Thus, the government was unable to allocate enough resources to improve all schools in the country. Also, the country experienced a civil war from 1946 to 1949, and the per capita GDP was only US$14–19 in the first five years of the 1950s (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2003a, p. 666). Under these circumstances, the Chinese government decided to develop a policy that classified some schools as key schools and others as ordinary schools, in a top-down manner. In 1953, the central government named 194 schools "key schools." This was a very small percentage (4.4%) of the large number of schools in China (Li, 2003, p. 276).

In 1962, the National Congress of Education again emphasized the importance of key schools and called for accelerating the development of the key schools program. In 1978, the Ministry of Education formulated a new policy regarding the building of a key schools system. According to this policy, key schools were given further priority in funding, human resources, school facilities, and selection of students (Liu, 2005). These particular policies and efforts giving priority to the key schools had constantly improved the quality of these schools and prepared quite a few excellent graduates by 1980s. But these same policies and efforts, which benefited only the key schools, resulted in the problem of uneven development in China's education. The limited resources for education were allocated unevenly between the minority key schools and majority ordinary schools. Consequently, some of the ordinary schools gradually fell behind and became disadvantaged, whereas the key schools became privileged under such policies and efforts. The statistics in the mid-1980s showed that nearly 40% of China's elementary and middle schools were identified as disadvantaged (Zhang, 2004, p. 1).

As a result of the improvement of the national economy during the first five years of the 1980s, the nation's legislative body, the National People's Congress, decided to establish the system of nine years of compulsory education in China. Then, the Compulsory Education Act was passed and came into effect when the per capita GDP reached US$138 in 1986 (MOE, 2003a, p. 666). At this time, the Chinese government became aware of the problem of uneven development between key schools and ordinary schools and, in the late 1980s, began to reallocate the resources for education. In 1989, the problem of the effectiveness of ordinary schools, particularly in disadvantaged schools, was placed on the agenda of the Ministry of Education (Zhang, 2004, p. 3). This was seen as a turning point in China's educational priority, as the policy began to shift from key schools to ordinary schools. In November 1998, the Ministry of Education issued an important document titled *Reinforcing the development of disadvantaged schools and making every school work in large and medium cities*. This central government document put forward the initiatives and efforts aimed at improving the disadvantaged schools, by introducing changes in funding, governance, policy of enrolment, personnel distribution, and teacher development (MOE, 1998). Since this time, improving the quality of disadvantaged schools has been a focal issue at both system and site levels, because "no school should be left behind" is the essential requirement in the implementation of the Compulsory Education Act.

In the above historical account, it is evident that the government in mainland China has shifted its focus from key schools to disadvantaged schools. The purpose of the earlier focus was to breed a corp of élite students from the vast student population for the service of the country, and to make the key schools the benchmark of excellence. The purpose of the latter focus was to reverse the unfavorable conditions of schools suffering from a lack of resources and poor management. Now that the historical context for China's development has been presented, we turn out attention to the next section, which focuses on the recent practices in disadvantaged schools.

Initiatives and Efforts at System Level

Since 1998, the Chinese government has taken various initiatives and made efforts to improve disadvantaged schools. These initiatives and efforts were put into practice with special extra funding, by changing the policy of enrolment and the style of governance, approaching innovation in teacher development, and encouraging school leaders to move to disadvantaged schools.

Special Extra Funding

It is a universal consensus that increasing funding is one of the critical factors in improving the quality of disadvantaged schools. In the late 1980s, it was apparent that it would be impossible for the Chinese government to allocate necessary funding to assist these schools. However, things changed in the past decade, as China's economy has constantly and rapidly developed and improved. As mentioned, China's per capita GDP was US$19 in 1955 and US$138 in 1986. It reached US$1023 in 2002

(MOE, 2003a, p. 666). In some coastal cities, the per capita GDP was even higher. For example, in Shanghai, it was US$5642, according to statistics in 2003 (Wen Hui Daily, 2006a, p. 12). This improvement in economy provides the precondition for an increase in funding.

Both the central government and the local governments have established various special foundations for restoring the quality of disadvantaged schools in the last decade. The foundation established by the central government mainly aimed to support programs for rebuilding disadvantaged schools in less developed areas.[2] For instance, the central government established a special foundation for disadvantaged schools in inland China, where the economic level was low in 1995. By the year 2000, this foundation had provided disadvantaged schools in 852 less developed counties with approximately US$1.6 billion (Li, 2003, p. 251). In another development, the governments in coastal cities tended to establish special foundations themselves for local disadvantaged schools. The most developed coastal city in China, Shanghai, put US$1.1 billion extra funding into 194 local disadvantaged schools from 2002 to 2005 (Wen Hui Daily, 2006a, p. 12). These foundations are employed for building renovations, campus reconstruction, fitting classrooms and laboratories with necessary equipment, and covering expenses in teacher development in disadvantaged schools.

Changing the Enrolment Policy

Traditionally, elementary school graduates were required to take a formal entrance examination before they were promoted to middle school. The candidates that got high scores would enter key schools, but the rest had to go to ordinary or even disadvantaged schools. To emphasize equity in the nine-year compulsory education and to provide better support to disadvantaged schools, the Ministry of Education in the late 1980s established several pilot districts in four provinces, to explore the possibility of abolishing the middle school entrance examination and implementing a new policy. This policy stipulated that the key school system at the elementary level and middle education would be abolished. The elementary school graduates in these four pilot districts would be allocated to middle school close to their neighborhoods (MOE, 1993, pp. 10–11). This change of enrolment policy gradually spread to the other 26 provinces and autonomous regions of China, after receiving positive responses from those in the pilot districts. By the end of 2005, all schools in the country had adopted the new policy of enrolment; even the government of the Tibetan Autonomous Region claimed to have adopted the policy of "no entrance examination and going to a school nearby" (Dawarenci, 2005).

Changing the Approach of Support

In the past, both the Ministry of Education and the local educational authorities would govern schools in a bureaucratic manner by issuing top-down rules. Now-a-days, this approach is slowly being replaced by a client-centered one in the disadvantaged schools targeted for reform. Evidence of this approach is that the Ministry of Education has recently established a website for a consulting service to provide local

educational authorities and schools with professional advice (MOE, 2005a). Another example is the National Teacher Networking Program (NTNP) established by the Ministry of Education and supported by eight normal universities.[3] In September 2003, the ceremony to launch the NTNP was held in Beijing (MOE, 2003b). According to the news report, the NTNP runs as a supermarket of teacher development for all teachers nationwide. Teachers in any part of the country can select to learn any online course and have access to any presentation any time they wish, through the Internet. The online courses and presentations are prepared by the experts and professors in the field of teacher education in the eight most renowned normal universities. This is one of the solutions to the problem of teachers at disadvantaged schools in inland China having little chance for access to qualified and excellent teacher educators (Chen & Gong, 2004).

The changing approach in the support of the Ministry of Education has influenced the administrative behavior of local educational authorities. In Anhui, one of the inland provinces, three initiatives have recently been formulated by the provincial government, to help the leaders and officers at the system level who are concerned about disadvantaged schools. The first initiative is that individual officers at local educational authorities must keep in touch with several disadvantaged schools and assist these schools in addressing difficult problems. The second is that every superintendent of the local authorities must play the role of chief coordinator to organize or coordinate local resource personnel and research institutions of education to support local disadvantaged schools. The third initiative is to build up an accountability system for local educational authorities, related to the condition and extent of improvement in local disadvantaged schools (AEN, 2005).

Innovative Approaches in Teacher Development

Based on past experience, we know that teachers in disadvantaged schools are usually good at discipline in the classrooms but lack knowledge and skills in curriculum development and in giving instructions. A survey in 2000 revealed that 25% of the teachers at disadvantaged schools in less developed areas did not have rudimentary knowledge or minimum skills for classroom teaching (Xu, 2003).

As a result of the development of the rebuilding program for disadvantaged schools, the matter of professional development for teachers in disadvantaged schools becomes salient. Thus, teacher development in disadvantaged schools has been repeatedly emphasized as the infrastructure for improvement in these schools. Therefore, quite a few innovative approaches beyond the traditional training institute or ordinary workshops for teacher development have emerged in recent years. In addition to the NTNP stated above, the following innovative approaches for teacher development are widely accepted and employed.

"Big Name Teacher Studio" (BNTS) Approach

The BNTS is named after a local excellent and renowned teacher; for example, "Steve Teaching Studio," "Susan Teaching Studio," etc. The hosts of the studios are selected and named by the local educational authority. Usually, these studios cover all subjects

such as math, science, Chinese, English, etc. at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Each host signs a one- or two-year contract with the district. The local educational authority provides the studio with funds and other necessary resources, and each host delivers his or her subject knowledge by mentoring a group of promising young teachers from neighboring disadvantaged schools. It is also necessary for a host to have online presentations and online question-answer sessions for all teachers in the same district (Xinhua, 2004).

"Subject Highland" Approach

It is a universal phenomenon that the level of teaching and learning in different subjects gets uneven development in different schools in a district. Usually, a high-performing school[4] may get one or two strong subjects but not all. For example, high-performing school A is strong in math and science, whereas high-performing school B is strong in language and social studies. The local educational authorities have recently identified the distribution at the highest level of teaching and learning in different schools within a district and named such schools with the strongest subjects "Math Highland," "Science Highland," "Language Highland," etc. The individual schools with the name of subject highland must take up the responsibility of providing teachers who teach the same subject at disadvantaged schools within the same district with opportunity to join field trips, classroom observation, professional experience sharing sessions, and problem-centered workshops. Of course, these schools will receive extra funding from the local educational authority (Feng, 2002; Wen Hui Daily, 2006b, p. 11). Essentially, it is an inter-school but has a within-district supporting approach for teacher development at disadvantaged schools.

"Inter-District Supporting" Approach

Sometimes, it is impossible for a district that has few high-performing schools to employ the subject highland within-district supporting approach. Thus, the inter-district supporting approach is advocated and promoted by the local educational authorities to be in charge of more than one district.

In 2004, the Shanghai Education Commission (SEC) published its new action plan for educational development. As one of the strategic actions, SEC required its 19 districts to carry out the inter-district supporting approach for teacher development, in case the chances to improve the quality of teachers were unevenly distributed among different districts (Wang and Su, 2004). In implementing this requirement of SEC, several inter-district supporting approaches have been developed. These include inter-district partnership, inter-district internship, inter-district mentoring, and inter-district volunteering (Wen Hui Daily, 2006b, p. 11).

Inter-district partnership

An individual disadvantaged school in one district builds up a partnership with a high-performing school in another district, with the assistance of the local educational authority in charge of these two districts. Then, the two schools negotiate what and how the latter helps the former in a fixed period (e.g., one year or two years).

Inter-district internship
A disadvantaged school in one district selects a few promising young teachers to learn instructional skills and acquire other knowledge in practice for a period at a high-performing school located in another district. This is accomplished through the coordination of the local educational authority in charge of these two districts. These young teachers will go back to the disadvantaged school after one semester or one school year.

Inter-district mentoring
An experienced teacher at a high-performing school in one district meets and talks with a group of promising young teachers teaching the same subject from several disadvantaged schools in another district. These meetings occur once a week, and the teachers give guidance and advice on their teaching and their professional development, according to the expectations and objectives set by the local educational authority in charge of these two districts. The actual needs of these young teachers are also considered. Usually, the mentor will get a little extra pay from the local educational authority.

Inter-district volunteering
According to the rule of teacher promotion formulated by some local educational authorities, it is necessary for a candidate who is seeking a position of Senior Teacher working in a high-performing school to work at a disadvantaged school in another district located in a less developed town or rural area, for at least one school year. Consequently, many qualified teachers who want to be promoted to senior positions from high-performing schools become inter-district volunteers.

Encouraging School Leaders to Move to Disadvantaged Schools

Historically, high-performing schools pool excellent human resources in leadership, whereas disadvantaged schools lack qualified personnel in leadership. In recent years, a new system of performance-related pay for school principals has been developed in Shanghai, to encourage school leaders to move to disadvantaged schools (Wu, Feng, & Zhou, 2000, p. 193). According to this system, all serving principals in Shanghai are divided into 4 grades and 12 levels (see Table 1). The principals at Grade 1 Level 1 status will get the highest pay; the principals at Grade 4 Level 2 status will get the lowest.

Every principal has the right to apply for the grade and level he or she considers appropriate. However, a special committee will evaluate the performance of each

Table 1. The system promotion ladder for school principals

Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4
Level 1-1	Level 2-1	Level 3-1	Level 4-1
Level 1-2	Level 2-2	Level 3-2	Level 4-2
Level 1-3	Level 2-3		
Level 1-4	Level 2-4		

applicant and decide the appropriate professional status for him or her, using a newly developed evaluation system based on a set of indicators. The evidence of the performance of each principal is gathered in four ways: field observation, data-based review, interviews of stakeholders, and evidence-based task reporting by individual principals. This evaluation process ignores the school's historical achievements and does not care about the status of the school in which a principal is working at the moment. It mainly focuses on the current performance of the school and the evidence of school improvement after the candidate became principal. To encourage qualified leaders to move to disadvantaged schools, a principal will get extra marks in evaluation if he or she is working at a disadvantaged school. The allocation of the principals to a particular grade and level determines their income, as mentioned (Feng, 2003a; Feng & Tomlinson, 2002).

This system apparently provides not only performance-related pay mechanism but also an orientation of qualified human resources in leadership toward disadvantaged schools. This system of performance-related pay for school principals developed by the Shanghai Municipal Government was encouraged in 2001 by the central government (State Council, 2001). There is a distinct possibility that this system will be implemented in the whole country.

The Case of Shanghai Zabei No. 8 Middle School

Before and After Improvement of the School

Shanghai Zabei No. 8 Middle School is located in Zabei District, an inner-city, working-class community in Shanghai. Most of the students come from families of lower socio-economic status. The statistics and psychological tests conducted in 1986 and 1987 show that it was a typical disadvantaged school (Chen, 2003, p. 2; Wang, 1993, pp. 283–285; Xiong & Yu, 2005, pp. 749–750):

- The equipment and facilities for teaching and learning were out of date.
- The focal issue of school leadership was not the improvement of quality in learning but keeping order.
- Most of the teachers had little confidence in improving their students' learning.
- 20% of the teachers were identified as unqualified.
- Out of 35 middle schools in the district, the average score of students in this school in the entrance examination for middle school was at the bottom, but the ratio of criminal behavior was at the top.
- One-third of the students had the experience of repeating grades in elementary school.
- Only 22% of the graduates of this school passed the final standardized test.
- Only 14.9% of the students had the habit of preparing lessons before class.
- Only 16.2% of the students reviewed lessons after class.
- Only 11.1% of the students completed their homework without plagiarizing the work of others.

- Only 10% of the students had confidence that they would succeed in passing the final standardized test.
- More than 60% of the students had little motivation for learning.
- 10% of the students completely lost heart in learning and had little hope for their adult life.
- Only 10% of the students expressed satisfaction with the school.

Supported by the local educational authority, this school started its project in 1987, aimed at improving the effectiveness of teaching and the quality of learning. By the end of the 1980s, the positive outcome of the project was apparent. The following facts and data show that this school is no longer disadvantaged (Chen, 2003, pp. 4, 19; Xiong & Yu, 2005, pp. 761–762):

- Some of the equipment and facilities for teaching and learning have been replaced.
- The focal issue of school leadership has shifted from keeping school in order to the constant improvement in teaching and learning.
- Most of the teachers have confidence in improving their students' learning.
- Most of the teachers are qualified to teach.
- Out of 35 middle schools in the district, the average academic achievement went from the bottom (in 1987) to the middle range. Student criminal cases dropped from the top to zero.
- Of all ordinary schools in the district, the average performance of the students' conduct/behavior of this school is in first place.
- The students' proficiency in English listening comprehension, speed reading and comprehension, and oral expression is significantly higher than that of students from ordinary schools in the district.
- Almost 100% of the graduates of this school pass the final standardized examination.
- Students tend to have confidence in participating in various academic events and contests and for the first time won third place in an English contest with all ordinary and high-performing schools in the district.
- 74.3% of the students have the habit of preparing lessons before class.
- 86.5% of the students review lessons after class.
- 91.1% of the students complete their homework without plagiarizing the work of others.
- More than 90% of the students have confidence that they would succeed in passing the final standardized test.
- More than 90% of the students believe that they will have a promising future after graduation.
- More than 90% of the students expressed their satisfaction with the school.

Major Strategies for Improvement in the School

To restore the quality of Shanghai Zabei No. 8 Middle School, the school improvement project team was established in 1987, funded and organized by the local educational authority of Zabei District. The project team consisted of school leaders and a few professional researchers from the local research institution of education. The project

began with a series of psychological tests, questionnaires, surveys, and interviews with individual teachers and students. The results showed the following (Xiong & Yu, 2005, p. 750):

- The prime reason for students who have difficulty in learning is not intelligence but psychological factors.
- The prime reason for students with little motivation for learning and little confidence in learning is that they have too often experienced failure in learning.

Based on these two findings, the project team decided to regard helping students to regain their confidence as a fundamental effort, which provides students with opportunities of success in their learning experience. Later, this project was named "Successful Education."

In implementing the "Successful Education" project, six major strategies were developed in Shanghai Zabei No. 8 Middle School (Chen, 2003, pp. 33, 135–136; Liu, 2005, pp. 9–13; Xiong & Yu, 2005, pp. 756–760):

Building Guiding Values and Beliefs

The following guiding values and beliefs leading all members of the school in search of success were gradually built into the school by various data-based demonstrations and evidence-based presentations. There was also repeated two-way communication:

- The precise value of education is to help children pass through the fog in their life to find themselves.
- Success is not the exclusive privilege of one person or some people. Rather, it is something that belongs to everyone.
- It is essential for educators to believe that every student has the potential to be successful.
- One of the most important responsibilities for educators is to teach children "learning to learn" and "learning to strive for success."
- "Success" refers to a person's relative progress in comparison with his or her past.
- The core meaning of "success" is constant development and constant improvement.

Adjusting Expectations for Students

According to Liu Jing-hai (2005), head of the project team and the principal of Shanghai Zabei No. 8 Middle School, "Successful Education" is an education approach aimed at serving students with difficulties in learning. It does not try to create an élite for society. Rather, it aims to turn the "failures" into "successes" through the process of appropriate education, in order to avoid the educational tragedy of so many school graduates entering society and the labor force with the memory of failure and frustration (pp. 9–10). "Appropriate education" here refers to the education based on S = f (e. c. a), the formula of "Successful Education" developed by the project team. In this formula, "S" stands for "success in learning," "e" stands for "appropriate expectations

for students," "c" stands for "the chance to experience success by suitable pedagogy," and "a" stands for "encouraged appraisal." According to this formula, the expectations for the students at disadvantaged schools must be adjusted. In other words, the expectations for students in this school should be different from the expectations for students at high-performing or ordinary schools. Or, to be more precise, the expectation for most students at this school is just to PASS the final standardized test, not to pursue EXCELLENT achievement in that test. Thus, expectations should start from the current status of individual students rather than from the general requirements of the national curriculum standards. Keeping in mind the progress of individual students, the expectations for them will gradually approach the requirements of national curriculum standards. To accomplish this, a suitable pedagogy is needed.

LSMI Pedagogy

From 1987 to 1988, the project team developed a pedagogy with four characteristics in classroom teaching, to create chances of success and increase the experience of success for students. These four characteristics of this so-called "LSMI pedagogy" are "lower starting point," "slow pace," "many activities," and "instant feedback."

Lower starting point

A teacher gets to know and understand the status of individual students by interviewing them and their parents, checking students' previous homework, conducting quizzes before class, and conducting question and answer activities during class. The teacher will set proper starting points for individual students at the beginning of a semester. Given the status of the students at Shanghai Zabei No. 8 Middle School, the starting points are usually lower than the general requirements of national curriculum standards.

Slow pace

To minimize the chance of frustration and maximize the chance of success in classroom experience for students, teachers set a slow pace of learning for students with difficulty, in keeping pace with normal requirements. In this way, students with difficulty in learning will get more chance to see progress and success in learning.

Many varieties of activity

Usually, students having difficulty with learning become easily distracted if a teacher's presentation lasts for 15 minutes or more. Given such a fact, teachers shift the format of teaching and learning from time to time, by providing students with various interactive activities with other students.

Instant feedback

Teaching (by teacher), doing and practicing (by students), checking and correcting (by teacher), identifying problems and problem-solving (by teacher together with students) is a basic cycle in every lesson. Through this instant feedback, teachers or students can

identify problems in their teaching or their learning, respectively. This enables them to improve their work. Also, students can see progress day by day through instant feedback. This recognition is essential to rebuild confidence in learning over time.

Encouraged Appraisal

Encouraged appraisal is central to cultivate students' interest in learning and to provide students with positive reinforcement. In explaining the meaning of encouraged appraisal, Liu (2005, p. 13) argues that effective appraisal for students with difficulty in learning should include the following encouraging factors: Through the appraisal, (1) students will recognize the relation between their endeavors and improved learning outcomes; (2) students will learn to attribute failures in the learning process to their insufficient input, insufficient previous knowledge, or inappropriate methods rather than to their own intelligence; (3) students will learn how to identify problems, how to analyze the reasons for errors, and how to adjust the goals for further learning; and (4) students will learn to respect each other.

Innovative Approaches to Teacher Development

From the very beginning, the project team recognized that the quality of teachers was the precondition and assurance for carrying out the "Successful Education" project effectively. By the end of the 1980s, the project team had developed several useful approaches to school-based teacher development. Of these, "micro study with peers" and "co-authored script" were widely acknowledged.

Micro Study with Peers

The school videotapes a ten-minute portion of a teacher's teaching period, selected by the teacher, and shows it to the teacher and other teachers in the same department. The teachers discuss and analyze the advantages and disadvantages of the teacher's teaching mirrored by this ten-minute period and find ways for the teacher's further improvement through peer feedback (Chen, 2003, p. 6; Xiong & Yu, 2005, p. 760).

Co-Authored Script

The school encourages every teacher to show a selected lesson plan for a 45-minute class. This lesson plan will be presented to other teachers in the same department. Each teacher who receives the plan is required to revise or refine the original one based on his or her values, perspectives, and understanding for teaching and learning. The plan is revised and refined many times and then passed back to the original author weeks later. It is very helpful for the original author (particularly for a teacher at an early stage of his or her career) to read and understand the refined lesson plan in which the wisdom and experiences of other teachers are included. Later, the school will collect all of the co-authored plans as common materials to be shared (Wen Hui Daily, 2006b, p. 12).

Making Full Use of External Factors

During the process of implementing "Successful Education" in the late 1980s, the school consistently employed the strategy of "making full use of external factors." The school made full use of such government initiatives as inter-school supporting and special funding for rebuilding disadvantaged schools, which emerged in the late 1980s in Zabei District, to improve the quality of the teachers and renew the facilities and equipment for teaching and learning. Also, the school made full use of the forces from the local community and families to establish a parent council at the school level, a parent team at the grade level, and parent volunteers at the class level, to provide the school with various types of support for rebuilding a secure and supportive atmosphere within the school (Xiong & Yu, 2005, p. 760).

Contributory Factors at Site Level

The author chose the case of Shanghai Zabei No. 8 Middle School to identify the internal factors contributing to school improvement, because it is one of the best-known and most influential stories in the movement of restoring the quality of disadvantaged schools in China. As one of the few successful experiences in school improvement, it was strongly recommended by the Ministry of Education in the 1990s (Liu, 2005, p. 8). It has been influencing the movement of restoring the quality of disadvantaged schools in China since then, by conferences, symposiums, and publications on "Successful Education." Since 1995, a number of disadvantaged schools in different parts of China have used the strategies of Shanghai Zabei No. 8 Middle School to improve the quality of their schools and have achieved satisfactory results (Chen, 2003, pp. 19–21). For example, the Lanzhou No. 11 High School (in inland China where the economic level is less developed) was identified in 1996 as disadvantaged. By employing the school improvement strategies from Shanghai Zabei No. 8 Middle School, the Lanzhou school had greatly improved its quality by the year 2000 (Zhang, 2004).

Through the case of Shanghai Zabei No. 8 Middle School and other successful cases elsewhere in China (Chen, 2001; Chen, 2003; Liu, 2005; Qian, 2004; Xiong & Yu, 2005; Zhang, 2004), the contributory factors for effectiveness of disadvantaged schools at site level can be identified:

- Guiding values and beliefs is a set shared assumptions for learners and educators, learning and teaching, failure and success, and the essential purposes and functions of school and education, through which a school will be led to the vision of quality.
- Research-based leadership refers to the major decisions of leadership and changes of school policy, based on findings of research literature and the results of psychological tests, questionnaires, and surveys.
- Appropriate expectations for students means the expectations are adjusted according to the status of individual students in a certain school.
- Suitable pedagogy creates chances of success for students and provides students with the experience of success.

- Encouraged appraisal is central to cultivating students' interest in learning and to providing students with positive reinforcement.
- School-based teacher development is problem-centered teacher development within a school.
- Making full use of external factors requires a school to make full use of government initiatives and policies aimed at developing school strategies to match these initiatives and policies.

No doubt the initiatives and efforts at system level have substantially contributed to the improvement of Shanghai Zabei No. 8 Middle School. Yet, the extent or degree of improvement in quality may be different in another school under the same policy in the same system. In fact, some of the disadvantaged schools have been merged with other ordinary schools or high-performing schools since 1998, in the program of school redistribution, because little change has taken place in these disadvantaged schools for years (Li, 2003, p. 255). This fact convinced us that the initiatives and efforts at system level are only external forces and preconditions for the improvement of individual schools. When these initiatives and efforts reach an individual school, they do not work automatically. Rather, they work when they are matched with internal changes in an individual school. In this sense, the final extent or degree of quality improvement for an individual school largely depends on the effective strategies at site level.

Implications and Lessons to Learn

Many lessons and implications can be drawn from the school improvement experience in mainland China. Many of these lessons and implications are valid not only for disadvantaged schools but also for ordinary schools as well. First, the effectiveness of disadvantaged schools should be given necessary attention. According to the 1990 *World Declaration on Education for All*, all children, "shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their learning needs" and "an active commitment must be made to removing educational disparities" (UNESCO, 1990). The provision of quality education for poorly motivated students at disadvantaged schools is not only a focal issue in China's education, but it is also a big challenge in many countries. The experiences gained in China suggest that the most valuable and convincing experience of school improvement is not from traditional high-performing schools but from disadvantaged schools.

Second, the initiatives and efforts backed by fiscal policy at system level are indispensable for endeavors in school improvement, particularly in disadvantaged schools. Yet, these initiatives and efforts are only external factors. They will not work automatically if they are not matched with appropriate strategies at site level. In this sense, the leverage of school improvement still largely rests at site level rather than at system level.

Third, to develop effective strategies for school improvement at the site level, an individual school has to consider fully the current status of its students based on information from the results of psychological tests, questionnaires, and surveys. For example, in many international studies, "high expectations for students" has been identified

as one of the key factors in school effectiveness. However, based on the experience of "Successful Education," "high expectations for students" may not work when dealing with students who are having learning difficulties in disadvantaged schools.

Problems and Concerns

As an important part of China's educational development, improvement in China's disadvantaged schools has made apparent progress thus far. But a cluster of explicit and implicit problems is impeding the progress of China's effort in school improvement.

The document, *Reinforcing the development of disadvantaged schools and making every school work in large and medium cities*, issued in 1998 by the Ministry of Education, is seen as the beginning of China's effort in school improvement for disadvantaged schools. However, the scope of application is rather limited. Given policymakers' preoccupation with the challenges associated with urban schooling, school improvement for disadvantaged schools in small towns or rural settings has not been given priority, though there are several central government foundations for disadvantaged schools in inland China. Also, the local educational authorities in small towns or rural areas of inland China are unable to allocate extra funding for local disadvantaged schools, because of the less developed economic conditions. Hence, in solving the problem of uneven development between key schools and ordinary schools, a new problem of uneven development between the schools in coastal cities and those in small towns or rural areas of inland China is created (CPUA, 2005; Dong Fang Prospect, 2005; Liu, 2005). This is the first major problem of school improvement for disadvantaged schools in China.

The second problem is the workload of teachers. As a result of the implementation of such projects as "Successful Education," the requirements and expectations for a teacher are increasing. In Chinese culture, the primary responsibility of a teacher is not to teach students subject knowledge but to guide them towards socialization. Therefore, the term "educator" is quite different from "instructor" in the Chinese cultural context, because an "educator" is not only an "instructor" but also a "moral guide." If a teacher acts only as an "instructor," he or she will be seen as an underperforming teacher. In this sense, when the question "What is a performing teacher?" is raised, the traditional answer is very simple: a performing teacher is an educator. For a teacher who is implementing a school improvement project in a disadvantaged school, the answer has recently changed to "not only an educator but also a learner." Now, the answer is "an educator, learner, innovator, facilitator, researcher …" Consequently, the teacher's workload has increased because of the endless requirements and expectations of the role of a teacher (Feng, 2003b). What is the maximum workload for a teacher? Perhaps it is not in the job assignment but in the conscience of a teacher.

The third problem is the leadership dilemma. As the knowledge of school improvement in disadvantaged schools has been accumulated, the school leaders of these schools have begun to introduce such Western leadership and managerial approaches as Distributed Leadership and Total Quality Management (TQM) into their schools. However, these leadership and managerial approaches are based on the cultural

context of Western societies. Hence, there may be a conflict in values when Western leadership and managerial approaches are introduced into the schools. Basically, the traditional Chinese culture rooted in Confucianism is quite different from the Western Judeo-Christian culture (Walker & Quong, 1998). For example, in contrast to the "original sin" of Judeo-Christian religion, Confucianism believes that "man, by nature, is good." Given this fundamental assumption about people, a school leader's priority, according to the Confucian perspective of leadership, is not "supervision" but tapping the natural moral source from his or her subordinates and bringing every positive factor into being. This assumption about school leaders' priority is apparently contradictory to the assumption of school leaders' priority in TQM. Taking another example, to address the challenges from school improvement practices, a school principal is planning to apply the distributed leadership approach. But Confucius (1998), the founder of Confucianism, said 3,000 years ago in The Analects, "He who holds no rank in a State does not discuss its policies." In the light of this teaching, a true gentleman, even in his thoughts, never departs from what is appropriate to his rank. That is, leadership in a school is the principal's job and no one else's business. Thus, a school leader sometimes finds himself or herself in a cultural dilemma: To attain school improvement goals in the school, the school leader needs to introduce distributed leadership or other Western leadership and managerial approaches. But the leader will very likely encounter resistance from subordinates and other stakeholders. To be more exact, a school leader is likely to fail to lead the school to attain the planned school improvement goals if he or she does not apply some Western leadership and managerial approaches. However, the same leader will probably meet strong resistance and fail to achieve the goals of improvement at the school if he or she decides to implement Western leadership and managerial approaches based on Western culture (Feng, 2005).

Given the above problems, educators and policy-makers in other countries would draw the following conclusion:

First, like any effort at change, school effectiveness and improvement has both a positive and a negative side. Fullan and Miles (1992) remind us, "Changing is a learning process that is loaded with uncertainty. No one should ever be fooled into thinking that the change process works the way it is supposed to. 'Anxiety, difficulties, and uncertainty are intrinsic to all successful change' " (quoted in Hanson, 2003, p. 331). Educators and policy-makers thus should be ready to face new challenges when they enjoy the fruits of school improvement.

Second, it is necessary to bear in mind that a teacher is a person, not a machine. It is possible for teachers engaging in the improvement of their schools to be weighed down by the excessive expectations and a heavy workload. How to set priorities, what should be retained, and what should be abandoned is an enduring challenge for school leaders.

Last but not least, cultural conflicts inevitably exist when school leaders, in the practice of school effectiveness and improvement, employ leadership approaches or strategies rooted in other cultural contexts. How can we solve the problems resulting from cultural conflict and resulting in leadership dilemma? So far as the author knows, this is still a problem that awaits resolution in China.

Conclusion

In the last 8 years, the issue of disadvantaged schools has emerged as a focal issue in the education system in China, and the education community has witnessed unprecedented initiatives and efforts aiming to improve these schools. National and local policy-makers appear to realize that the most convincing evidence of school effectiveness should be the improvement in quality in disadvantaged schools rather than in key schools. This realization has led to significant changes of policies and priority given to disadvantaged schools. The initiatives and efforts for school improvement at system level, matched with appropriate strategies at site level, have produced positive outcomes in disadvantaged schools since 1998. However, the emerging problems in China's efforts to improve schools remain to be solved. These problems, from the perspective of the author, can be categorized as explicit and implicit. It is not very difficult for the Chinese government to recognize and to deal with the explicit problems. For example, in further promoting the even development in nine-year compulsory education, a document published by the Ministry of Education in May 2005, the government affirmed its position to give high priority to disadvantaged schools in small towns and rural areas in inland China. In this document, the Ministry of Education also called for local educational authorities in inland China to make further efforts and to develop effective strategies to combat problems in disadvantaged schools (MOE, 2005b). In another development, society has recently turned its attention to the problem of the excessive workload of teachers. The Shanghai teachers' union, for example, has been working for about 2 years on a project of setting an appropriate workload of teachers. The problem of the excessive workload of teachers is likely to be solved in the near future (Feng, 2005).

Comparatively speaking, both researchers and practitioners have not paid sufficient attention to such implicit problems as the cultural dilemma in school leadership thus far. Also, there is only a very small body of educational literature on the theme of cultural conflicts or cultural dilemma in school leadership of China. So far as the author knows, the reasons underlying the conflicts and the solution for the dilemma have not been carefully analyzed and explored (Feng, 2005). How to effectively resolve these implicit problems would be an important theme for researchers and practitioners to work on in the field of school effectiveness and improvement.

School improvement experiences in China presented in this chapter suggest that there is no easy path to successful school improvement, because success is accompanied by problems. Therefore, the author would like to close this chapter with the advice from Fullan and Miles (1992):

> "Problems along the journey should be embraced rather than avoided. Educational change is a problem-solving process; only by seeking out problems and resolving them through 'deep coping' can we confidently continue the journey." (Quoted in Hanson, 2003, p. 331)

Notes

1. In China, a disadvantaged school is the lowest performing school among ordinary schools, in which at least four major characteristics can be observed: (1) lack of sufficient funding and necessary equipment

for normal operation; (2) most students coming from working-class families and having lower motivation for learning; (3) most teachers having lower confidence in improving students' achievement and not being skillful in instruction; and (4) the focal point of school leadership not being improvement of quality in learning but keeping order.
2. The terms "developed" and "less developed" are for domestic comparisons and not international ones.
3. A *normal university* is a teacher education university.
4. After abolishing the key school system at the stage of elementary and middle education, educators and parents would like to call an ex-key school a "high-performing school" to make a distinction between ex-key schools and ordinary schools.

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