

Curriculum Reform and the Management of Change in Chinese Middle Schools from an Applied International Perspective

Author and Coordinator: Michael Wilson (2010–2012)

Key search terms:

Discipline: education.

Topics / themes: education (curriculum development, management, professional practice); governance (leadership, regulation); policy (development, implementation).

Units of comparison: cultural units (educational institutions, subject departments).

Concepts: culture (educational quality and change, curriculum innovation; school improvement); politics (attribution, best practice, leadership); values (collectivist culture).

Funding: non-governmental organisation (School of Education, University of Leeds pump-priming research grant).

Theoretical underpinnings: culturalism; grounded theory, interpretivism; social constructionism.

Methodological approaches: case study (embedded case studies); documentary searches (literature reviews); qualitative approaches (focus groups, participant observation, policy analysis, semi-structured interviews); quantitative approaches (statistical analysis); social surveys.

Methodological issues: bias avoidance; case selection; interpretation; measurement equivalence (of meaning and conceptual understanding); translation (and transcription); transparency; rigour.

Research context

The research project was funded by the School of Education, University of Leeds, as a means of pump-priming international research collaboration, producing high quality publications and laying the foundations for external research grant applications. The University's membership of the World University Network (WUN) facilitated partnership with staff of another WUN member, Zhejiang University. The coordinator had existing links with the Beijing Institute of Education (BIE) in the provision of head teacher training, so the BIE became a third partner. The project coordinator's interest stemmed from his teaching and research in international educational management at the University of Leeds, including course provision in Chinese higher education leadership (in partnership with the Tianjin Education Bureau), and Chinese school principal training (in partnership with the BIE and the British Council).

The research topic

The title and chosen theme of the research investigation was: 'Curriculum Innovation and the Management of Change in Chinese Middle Schools: school leader and teacher perspectives on the implementation of the New National Curriculum'. This topic was chosen for two main reasons. First, it addressed an issue of major national significance. The Chinese government launched an initiative for a fundamental educational reform from 2001, partly aimed at promoting 'quality education' (*suzhi jiaoyu*) through the introduction of more student-centred, progressive methods of teaching. By 2006, the reforms had been fully implemented across the two phases of post-primary education: junior middle schools (*chuzhong*) and senior middle schools (*gaozhong*). It was therefore timely to reflect on the extent to which schools had been coping with the management of change and the implementation of the new curriculum. Fresh evidence could help to inform educational policy and practice by encouraging further dialogue on current best practice and ways to tackle barriers to reform and school improvement. The second reason for the choice of topic was its appeal to all project participants, whose combined research interests and areas of expertise covered curriculum studies, school leadership and management. The project thus provided an opportunity to pool this expertise by integrating perspectives on educational policy, curriculum reform and the management of change at the institutional level.

Aims, objectives and research questions

The aim of the research was exploratory: to provide insights into the perceived facilitators of change and effective curricular innovation, and into barriers to policy implementation in schools. As few studies have been conducted on the perceptions of those entrusted with the responsibility for implementing educational reform in China, the research was designed to give voice to those operating in the frontline of the policy initiatives: the head teachers and their senior management teams, middle leaders and classroom teachers.

The project was underpinned by four research questions:

1. What are the perceived key facilitators of effective policy implementation, and how might these insights identify best innovative practice that can be disseminated to the benefit of both schools and policy makers?
2. What are the perceived barriers to effective implementation, and how might these be addressed?

3. What are the perspectives of school principals, senior leaders, middle leaders and teachers of the quality of both internal and external support in the implementation of the reforms?
4. How have the schools managed the reform process to meet the requirements of both external and internal agendas for school improvement and the needs and expectations of various stakeholders?

The research questions were not explicitly international or comparative. However, the research had an international dimension in that an international team was collaborating on an investigation specific to the Chinese educational context, providing an opportunity for investigator triangulation in sharing and comparing cross-cultural perspectives on China's educational reform. A comparative perspective was important to the research design in two ways: first, in comparing the reform process and its implementation in two provincial-level authorities, Beijing and Zhejiang; second, in comparing the six case study schools across the two phases of secondary education (junior middle and senior middle). As an exploratory study on a modest budget, insufficient time or funding were available for an international comparative study across two or more countries, but such an investigation was planned for the future.

Resources and governance

The bulk of the funding for the research came from the School of Education at the University of Leeds. The planning was assisted by the Research Support Officer, who advised on drawing up the budget, which came to £9,155 for the two-year project. Zhejiang University agreed to offer the coordinator research visitor status, including free accommodation and subsistence for up to three weeks, to help carry out fieldwork in partnership with their research team. The BIE meanwhile agreed to cover the costs of a conference for the dissemination of the research findings in June 2012.

A detailed budget was drawn up and agreed with the School of Education and the research partners. As the project was funded internally, and an allocation of time for research was already part of the salaried workload agreement, the inclusion of staff time in the overall costing was avoided. Similarly, logistical support was provided at no additional charge by the Research Support Officer in the budgeting of the project.

The School of Education required an interim progress report including a breakdown of expenditures and a full evaluation report at the end of the project, covering details of research grant applications and publications, either actual or planned, which had arisen from the project.

Management and coordination

The project was managed and coordinated with the support of a leader from each of the two Chinese teams. Initially support was also provided by two other members of the School of Education. The first was a senior member of staff, with extensive experience of teaching in China and publications in the management of educational change, who accepted an advisory role. The second was a Chinese PhD student from the province of Zhejiang, who agreed to assist, both as a translator / interpreter and as a co-investigator, because the focus was closely linked to her PhD investigation and partially located in her home province. However, the student withdrew from her studies prior to the inception of the project, leaving the Leeds team without an interpreter. In consequence, the coordinator was invited to join the Zhejiang research team to carry out the empirical research with local language support. This necessitated a reconfiguration of the project management structure to two, rather than three, research teams, each taking responsibility for three of the six school case studies.

The Chinese team from Zhejiang University Institute of Curriculum and Instruction comprised three staff (a professor and two lecturers) with combined expertise in instruction and discourse analysis in the curriculum; curriculum studies, curriculum transformation and action research; and curriculum policy, reform and implementation. The team from the BIE also comprised three staff (all associate professors) with teaching and research interests in school leadership and management. The project group therefore consisted of academics with complementary expertise in subject knowledge (covering both leadership and curriculum studies), research skills and experience.

The start-up meeting in Hangzhou (Zhejiang province) reached agreement on the research design and a timetable for project delivery, including the negotiation of access to the case study institutions, the timing of the data collection, the writing up of interim research reports by each team, time for translation and a provisional date for a dissemination conference. The project coordinator prepared a detailed discussion document covering all these aspects, along with a comprehensive review of the literature, for discussion and amendment at the meeting. The document was sent by email attachment to the participants several weeks in advance. Local knowledge proved invaluable in modifying the original proposals: for instance, in selecting dates for case study school visits and the final conference, to minimise inconvenience for the participating

schools. It was especially important to avoid school holidays and the exceptionally busy period at the time of the national examinations.

Given the exploratory nature of the investigation and the focus on case study research, a clear requirement was for expertise in qualitative research methods, particularly interviewing. This condition was acknowledged at the start-up meeting, although the BIE team expressed a desire to conduct an additional survey based on the distribution of a questionnaire to senior middle-school principals across Beijing. This approach reflected a Chinese bias towards quantitative social science research. It was therefore agreed to provide some funding in support of the Beijing survey (mainly to cover translation costs) on the grounds that it could be a useful study in its own right, with the prospect of triangulating the survey data with the school case study data to provide a more comprehensive analysis of the reform process in Beijing. Negotiations at the meeting also resulted in some rewording of the fourth research question, which had originally focused on how school principals practise moral leadership in building organisational trust and commitment in the change process. Chinese colleagues suggested that this terminology was very 'Western' in tone and perhaps insufficiently pragmatic to elicit meaningful responses from informants. The question was therefore rephrased to reflect a more direct focus on the practicalities of the management of change. Examples of these pragmatic concerns, which emerged from the fourth research question through the interview process, included school-based strategies related to teacher incentives, teacher in-service training provision, and closer engagement with parents and local communities to harness their support in the implementation of the new curriculum.

Frequent meetings of the whole project team for the purpose of monitoring the research were unfeasible; the distances involved meant that there was neither the time nor the resources to support such meetings. Much depended on regular communication by email and a delegation of responsibility to the respective team leaders in Zhejiang and Beijing to keep to the agreed agenda. It was crucial from the outset to plan for contingencies and unanticipated snags or delays to ensure that the conference could take place as planned.

Language was a key issue to be managed, both in respect to the data collection process and the writing up of the research findings. The coordinator's involvement in the interviewing process in the three case study schools in Zhejiang required the support of Chinese academic staff. The teams were responsible for writing up their own case studies and a comparative analysis of their allocation of three schools. The coordinator agreed to work on an initial draft of an overall comparative analysis of the six case studies in both Zhejiang and Beijing. Although plans were agreed to publish material in Chinese journals, priority was given to the preparation of papers for publication in prestigious English-language American and European 'centre' journals included in the Thomas Reuters journal citation reports. This was not only a requirement for the forthcoming Research Excellence Framework (REF) due to be applied in 2014 for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions, but also a significant criterion for promotion and career progression in Chinese research universities. The coordinator therefore agreed to help Chinese colleagues in the editing and redrafting of English language journal paper submissions.

Professional and ethical standards

The research proposal received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Leeds, and was drawn up in compliance with the ethical guidelines of both the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the British Educational Research Association (BERA). Four key ethical principles were agreed:

- To conduct the research with honesty and integrity, ensuring transparency, avoiding conscious bias and validating the findings through rigorous data analysis;
- To ensure confidentiality and anonymity of both individual informants and their institutions as a means of protecting from possible harm or embarrassment;
- To ensure that participation was voluntary and based on informed consent by outlining the purpose of the research and the expectations of the participants at the outset, with the understanding that they could withdraw at any stage;
- To provide the participating schools with an opportunity for feedback and debriefing, including a summary report of the key findings and the implications for professional practice.

Although the qualitative research planned was not perceived as particularly contentious, care was taken to avoid politically or socially sensitive issues and disapproval of the Chinese authorities (Heimer and Thøgersen, 2006). The Chinese partners also advised on matters of research protocol relating to the Chinese context. Their local knowledge proved invaluable in avoiding questions that could put informants 'on the spot', or create a sense of unease, for example by asking leading questions or questions directly inviting criticism of educational policy and practice. The safety and welfare of the respondents were a priority. As the case study schools were in many ways model institutions, one of the school principals, proud of his school's achievements, was happy for his school to be named. However, in compliance with standard Western ethical

research practice, to protect the staff participants (who had not been consulted on the issue of disclosure), and to ensure consistency of treatment with the other participating schools, we explained why anonymity was necessary. This argument was accepted.

From the perspective of Chinese ethics, strict protocol is very important in gaining access to potential case study institutions and in securing their support. It would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for an outsider to gain access without a 'go-between' (*zhongjian ren*). Indeed, the most senior member of the project team from Zhejiang University, a professor and Vice-Director of the Institute of Curriculum and Instruction, commented that she was only able to gain the collaboration of the three Zhejiang schools through the support of a more senior colleague able to act as a 'go-between' as a result of his extensive networking and in-service training provision for local schools on behalf of provincial government. Gaining school access was easier for the BIE staff because they were able to network directly with school principals who had attended their training courses, exploiting such contacts as a means of making yet more 'friends' (*zou pengyou*).

Ethical standards were discussed and agreed in respect to publishing potential papers, reports and monographs to give fair recognition to all members of the project team. This was an important concern for two key reasons: first, the concept of intellectual property is not so well established in China; and, second, Chinese academics are under pressure to publish in top-ranking Western journals, primarily as lead authors. The project team aspired to the highest professional standards at every stage of the research project to ensure both the validity and the reliability of the findings. The research proposal template, including a budget, specific objectives and anticipated outcomes / deliverables, made explicit the professional expectations of all participating parties and provided a management framework for keeping to agreed targets within the set budget. In this way, the project team ensured accountability to fellow team members, their own organisations, which in various ways had supported the project, and the participating schools.

Rationale for the research design

The research design was influenced by both theoretical and pragmatic considerations. A qualitative design achieved an in-depth 'insider' perspective of the curricular reform process and its implementation at the organisational level. As the study was exploratory, care was taken to avoid pre-conceptions and the allocation of data to 'ill-fitting *a priori* categories' (Gerring, 2001, p. 231). Instead, 'grounded theory' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was applied with emphasis on 'discovery rather than verification' (O'Brien, 2006, p. 28), and an understanding of the subjective experiences of the informants (Schwartz, 1996). Nevertheless, existing theory and *a priori* reasoning were useful in drawing up the initial research design and in formulating the research questions. In the words of Robert Emerson and colleagues (1995, p. 144) 'analysis is at once inductive and deductive'. It is a dynamic, iterative process requiring consideration of existing theory to help provide an initial focus, followed by adjustments based on new, emerging data to generate fresh theoretical insight.

The selection of the six case study schools was determined by a combination of convenience and purposive sampling. On the one hand, it was necessary to approach schools whose principals were willing to support the project and were already acquainted with the respective research teams in Beijing or Zhejiang, either directly or indirectly through a 'go-between'. On the other hand, the sample institutions had to serve the purpose of the research in providing a cross-sample of both junior middle (*chuzhong*) and senior middle (*gaozhong*) schools in different contexts in order to gain insights into the impact and implementation of curricular reform across both phases of state secondary education. The Zhejiang sample consisted of a senior middle school and two junior middle schools, although one of these was an experimental school (*shiyan xue*) incorporating both primary and junior secondary branches. The Beijing sample consisted of two senior middle schools and a junior middle school. An overall balance of three junior middle and three senior middle schools was therefore achieved. All six schools were regarded as highly successful and were not necessarily representative of schools in either Beijing or Zhejiang. They were certainly not representative of schools in the country as a whole. However, such 'extreme case' sampling was potentially useful on two counts: first, successful schools would be able to provide insight into institutional leadership, management and pedagogical best practice worthy of dissemination; second, by reason of extrapolation, if evidence from these schools indicated problems in the implementation of the new curriculum, then it could be safely hypothesised that the problems would be widespread and, in all probability, more serious in less well resourced and less successful schools. Any such findings would have significant educational policy implications.

Limited time and resources necessitated the option of an 'embedded' rather than a 'holistic' multiple case study design, focusing on specific units of analysis within the school organisations as a whole. The units of analysis chosen were the three core subjects of the Chinese national curriculum – Mandarin Chinese, English and Mathematics – based primarily on insights gained from interviews with informants at varying

levels of seniority in each school, including, the principal, senior managers, heads of department and frontline teachers, to provide evidence from a multiplicity of perspectives and experiences. For pragmatic reasons, the case study investigations combined the features of both a 'parallel' and a 'sequential' design. The design was parallel in the sense that the Beijing and Zhejiang case studies were to be researched simultaneously by the two teams, which was necessary to complete the data collection on time and to meet crucial deadlines. However, within each locality the three school case studies were to be investigated sequentially, thus deriving benefit from a process of concatenation, described by Robert Stebbins (2001, p. 49) as an 'exploratory-confirmatory chain', which facilitates a refinement of both investigative skills and comparative insights from the 'cumulative expertise' accrued in moving from one case to the next. Another pragmatic consideration was the desire of the BIE participants to conduct the quantitative survey in addition to their quota of school case studies. This preference was supported and accommodated on epistemological grounds: namely that the survey had the potential to produce an interesting Beijing-based study in its own right, utilising a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative methods from the survey and qualitative methods from the case studies.

Rationale for the research methods

Qualitative methods were used for the six school case studies. Semi-structured interview questions were designed to probe an 'insider' perspective of the impact and implementation of the national curriculum reform at the school level, a method of data collection fully consistent with finding answers to the research questions. Attendance at the start-up meeting in December 2010 in Zhejiang also provided an opportunity for an introductory visit to two of the three Zhejiang case study schools to discuss the purpose of the research with the school principals and a number of teaching staff. As a result of these initial insights the provisional interview schedules were modified prior to carrying out the research during the course on the coordinator's next visit to China in 2011.

With the commencement of fieldwork, two full-day visits to each school were arranged to interview the informants. Time was also set aside for a campus tour including a number of lesson observations, which were useful in gaining some insight into school facilities, teaching styles and the overall ethos or culture of each organisation. This contextual information was supplemented by access to a number of school documents, including school prospectuses.

The bulk of the data was generated from semi-structured interviews aligned to the general aims of the research and the four research questions. Individual face-to-face interviews were conducted with each of the six school principals, along with five sets of focus group interviews with members of the school senior management team, the heads of the three subject departments and three separate groups of classroom teachers representing each of the three departments. In all, 75 staff were interviewed across the three schools in Zhejiang, and 30 across the three schools in Beijing. Focus group interviews made possible the inclusion of a much larger number of respondents, but risked groupthink and social desirability bias, which undermine validity. However, these risks were minimised by good management, for instance, by ensuring that the groups comprised informants of roughly equal status, by establishing rapport, building trust and conducting careful probing of the responses. The technique paid off. Respondents not only answered questions openly and critically, but also engaged in dialogue with colleagues, sometimes corroborating their accounts and views; sometimes offering alternative perspectives.

Conceptual issues

Two major theoretical and conceptual issues were taken into consideration. The first was the use of *a priori* theory in providing an initial framework of analysis and hypothesis testing. Key theories specified in the protocol related to contrasting paradigms of the educational policy formulation and implementation process. On the one hand, consideration was given to theories based on an instrumental rationality viewing policy as a linear process, consisting of a number of sequential management stages, supported and enforced through regulation, which is a familiar way of thinking in centralised political systems such as that of China. On the other hand, consideration was given to theories based on non-rational models, which take account of a complex reality characterised by ambiguity, uncertainty and a policy implementation gap, perhaps more widely recognised in more democratic political systems such as those in most Western societies. However, such a dichotomous framework of analysis was viewed as one of universal application in reflecting on the reality of all educational systems and in problematising assumptions about educational reform and its implementation in schools. This is because schools operating in highly centralised education systems are not immune from ambiguities and irregularities in policy implementation, whereas schools operating in more democratic, flexible and decentralised education systems must also operate within a general, overarching, rationally planned policy framework. The two contrasting models of reality are therefore better understood in terms of placement along a continuum between two polar extremes or Weberian 'ideal types' than as mutually exclusive theoretical constructs.

The second issue was ontological in ensuring equivalence of meaning and understanding in the interpretation of fundamental concepts, not only by the researchers in the interpretation of data, but also by informants in interpreting interview questions. The research questions, for instance, either directly or indirectly raised a number of key concepts such as: 'leadership', which is understood differently in high-power (as opposed to low-power) distance cultures, and 'quality' (*suzhi jiaoyu*), 'school improvement' or 'best practice', which can be variously interpreted, either narrowly (for example in terms of school examination success), or very broadly (for instance the all-round development of the child). Questions relating to perceived facilitators and barriers to the reform process, along with perceptions of internal and external support for the implementation process in schools, raised the key psychological concept of 'attribution', and how this may be partially determined by culture, particularly an 'individualistic' culture (as in many Western societies) as opposed to a 'collectivist' culture (typical of Chinese societies).

Team awareness of these conceptual issues and the need to collaborate on the interpretation and meaning of the data were therefore important in ensuring rigour and consistency in the analysis.

Data collection and analysis

Each of the two research teams agreed to take responsibility for the data collection and analysis of the three case studies in each of the two localities, following an agreed thematic framework based on categories of respondent according to both seniority and subject discipline. Levels of analysis at this stage were therefore comparative between groups of informants within each school organisation and between the three case study schools. This was followed by an analysis of all six case study reports, based on the submissions from each team, as a means of comparing the evidence from the two localities.

As an active research member of the Zhejiang team, the coordinator was unable to participate in the data collection and analysis in Beijing because his time in China was limited. His direct experience was therefore confined to the data collection process and analysis in Zhejiang. Each interview involved four staff led by the coordinator, while a Chinese colleague interpreted the key points to enable the coordinator to probe and prompt through further questioning. She also asked follow-up questions of her own. Another colleague made notes of the proceedings on a laptop, while a research student provided technical assistance, recording the interviews on two voice recorders, with the permission of the informants. Personal notes, perceptions and initial interpretations of the day's interviews were then shared between all four staff at a follow-up meeting on return to the University. Two recordings were made so that one could be taken back to the UK by the coordinator for translation, transcription and more detailed analysis, while the other could be retained by the three Chinese colleagues for similar analysis. Comparison and discussion of the individual analyses could then be carried out subsequently. This had the advantages of, first, providing greater depth of interpretation from a comparison of the perspectives of the four researchers present at the interviews and, second, enhancing the reliability of the findings through a process of investigator triangulation, involving discussion, clarification and broad agreement on the interpretation of the interview data.

Systematic data analysis of the interview transcripts was undertaken by the three Chinese academics based on their own recordings, notes and team discussions. The coordinator also conducted an analysis of the interview data based on his own recordings, and translations and transcriptions by the former Leeds Chinese postgraduate student. She prioritised functional equivalence over literal equivalence in the translation and interpretation of data to capture greater accuracy or equivalence of meaning in the translation process (De Vaus, 2008, p. 261). The interview transcripts were then analysed initially through a deductive process of structural coding, based on linking codes initially to the specific research questions and the closely related interview questions (Saldaña, 2010, pp. 66–70). This analysis was combined with the induction method of re-examining, refining and recoding the initial categories of description on the basis of newly examined data in accordance with the principles of grounded theory. A painstaking, iterative process worked towards achieving a set of definitive codes as a means of finalising categories that faithfully represented the interviewees' lived experiences. Respondent, phenomenological validation was enhanced by inviting participant comment on researcher interpretations prior to finalising the research report. Reliability and descriptive validity were addressed through the use of 'low-inference descriptors', including researcher consistency between team members in the coding and categorisation process, and in ensuring transparency of data interpretation through the inclusion of data collection instruments (for example interview schedules) and verbatim quotations from the interviews in the final reports.

A problem in the data collection was the coordinator's inability to work as an active member of both research teams in the collection and initial analysis of data. The Beijing team was, therefore, supported through advice, as and when requested, rather than by any direct involvement in their research activities. Their first case study was conducted much in line with the agreed format of interviews, consisting of 16 respondents including the Principal, seven senior managers (including the heads of the three subject departments) and eight frontline teachers covering the three nominated subject departments. However, the two remaining case

studies were less complete in their coverage. In one of those schools, only four informants were interviewed by two members of staff who had replaced one of the original team members and had therefore not been present at the start-up meeting. The team was also probably overstretched in trying to complete the survey as well as three case studies. The problem was not reported as it arose and, as a result, one of the case studies was of limited value.

Interpretation and dissemination of findings

Accurate interpretation of interview data required an effective language strategy, and yet 'methodological reflections on the language issue are extremely rare in the China literature' (Thøgersen, 2006, p. 110). Some obvious barriers to effective communication and accurate interpretation in social research, such as the wide variety of dialects, were not a problem, as the interviews were conducted with educational professionals in standard Mandarin. Nevertheless, Stig Thøgersen (2006) makes an important distinction between two discourses or language codes relevant to interviewing in the Chinese context. The first is the official language of the 'cadres' (*ganbu*), the party-state representatives, such as government officials, who identify with government and are more likely to express official (as opposed to personal) views. Unlike their Western counterparts, school principals in China are regarded as cadres with expectations of fulfilling a 'moral' duty in support of the party-state apparatus. Meaningful interpretation of what might be regarded as 'official' responses to interview questions therefore requires an ability to 'read between the lines'. The second form of discourse is what has been described as the language of the 'ordinary people' (*laobaixing*). It takes many forms, ranging from the discourse of rural peasants to that of urban / urbane intellectuals – in our case frontline teachers – but in all cases clearly distinguishable from the discourse of the party-state in its authentic expression of personal views and feelings (Thøgersen, 2006, p. 113). The joint interviewing process with the help of a Chinese academic, who was well acquainted with these linguistic issues, facilitated meaningful dialogue and a deeper understanding of the perspectives of the informants.

The analysis of the data was organised through a division of labour, each member of each team taking responsibility for the analysis and writing up of an individual school case study, reviewed by other team members, acting as critical friends, before the drafts were finalised. The final stage was a comparative analysis of the three case studies in each geographical area and between the schools in the two areas. Interpretation was discussed and clarified between team members to arrive at shared understanding and agreement.

The research findings were disseminated through the preparation of publications, including summary reports in Chinese for the participating schools and local educational officials, with practical emphasis on sharing best practice and tackling key barriers on the basis of the evidence. In the interests of the project team members and the wider academic community, papers were submitted to leading educational research journals. The research findings were also presented at a number of conferences and seminars, including:

- A report of research in progress presented at a research seminar at the School of Education, University of Leeds, in February, 2012;
- A research conference in Beijing in June 2012, with contributions from both academics and school principals who had participated in the research project;
- A research paper at the British Educational Leadership and Management Society (BELMAS) international conference in July 2012.

These deliverables went some way towards satisfying the need for accountability to the Leeds School of Education. Equally important were plans to apply for external research grants to build on the foundations of the research project, including applications to the ESRC and the Leverhulme Trust. The coordinator also joined a BELMAS and University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) international collaborative research project on social justice leadership in schools to help sharpen the focus of the follow-up research and gain the support of an international network. These plans were discussed with the partners at the BIE and Zhejiang University, who were keen to continue the partnership and support any further international comparative research of this kind.

Lessons learned

Overall, the collaborative research process was interesting and professionally rewarding. It afforded an excellent opportunity to share expertise – in terms of local knowledge, research experience and language skills – and to achieve far more than would have been possible working independently through what Mette Thunø (2006, p. 255) describes as a 'synergy of diverse identities'.

Specific lessons learned from the joint project were the importance of:

- Assembling a team with complementary skills that covered local knowledge, research expertise and language capability;
- Building trust and rapport at the start-up meeting, and working through a carefully prepared agenda to reach agreement on an explicit strategy and timetable of action;
- Valuing diversity and respecting different cultural perspectives through a process of creative tension, positive dialogue, self-reflection and an openness to new ideas and interpretations;
- Working democratically, ensuring that all members of the team, including less experienced members, were supported, engaged and fully committed to the task;
- Fostering a willingness to be flexible and a preparedness to compromise in finding joint solutions to problems;
- Maintaining regular monitoring, feedback and effective channels of communication to ensure that the project was on target.

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