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Understanding Educational Leadership in Northwest China

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Understanding Educational Leadership in Northwest China

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to develop greater depth of understanding regarding educational leadership development in the five northwestern provinces (Shaanxi, Xinjiang, Gansu, Qinghai, and Ningxia) of the People's Republic of China. The researchers used a mixed method approach of surveys and focus group interviews to gather data regarding the current state of educational leadership training in this under-developed region of China. Findings indicate that most of the educational leaders included in this study have limited teaching experience and relatively low levels of formal education and few, if any, opportunities for training and professional development. However, the participants express great desire for more training to become knowledgeable about and skilled in western-oriented leadership approaches that could be used in conjunction with the Confucian-based approaches that have traditionally defined leadership in China.

Understanding educational leadership in Northwest China

Introduction

International interest in China is rapidly intensifying as China expands its economy and increases openness and interaction with the international community. Yet, there is much that is not well documented about China and most aspects of its complex society – including the educational system in this vast country. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to develop greater depth of understanding regarding one of the most important, yet under-developed aspects of regional educational development – educational leadership. More specifically, this report provides a more in-depth and clear understanding of the current state of and needs within the training of administrators in basic (primary and secondary) education in the five northwestern provinces (Shaanxi, Xinjiang, Gansu, Qinghai, and Ningxia) of the People's Republic of China. Specific research questions include:

- What is the current state of educational leadership training?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of current training approaches?
- What improvements need to be made in the content and delivery of educational leadership training?

As noted above, little research has been conducted in this area. One recent study has been recently published that focuses on how exposure to a western-oriented educational leadership program in Australia has influenced perceptions of leadership among participating educational leaders from China (Wang 2007). While this study provides some insight into current thinking about educational leadership from a small sample of Chinese educational administrators, it focuses more on their reaction to learning western theories of leadership than it

does on identifying current realities and needs regarding educational leadership and development in China. There are other studies about Chinese education in general (e.g. Wong 1998; Feng 2003; 2006); however, these are limited and do not specifically address educational leadership. Other studies (e.g. Dimmock and Walker 1998; Walker and Dimmock 2000; Wong 2001) do focus on educational administration and leadership in China. However, these studies are focused on the developed urban centers of eastern China; areas that are, as noted above, very different from the diverse socio-economic, cultural, political and social contexts found in other parts of China – including Northwest China. Therefore, this study builds upon these previous works by focusing on Chinese educational leaders in an under-studied part of China who have not yet been formally exposed to and trained in western leadership theory. This approach provides an understanding of the current state of perspectives on leadership among the majority of Chinese educational administrators in five provinces. Moreover, this study provides a better means for helping non-Chinese administrators and scholars to learn more about Chinese perspectives on this topic and serves as a starting point for fostering greater dialogue about how Chinese and non-Chinese perspectives can inform each other. Finally, this study provides a foundation for identifying specific needs and opportunities for developing strategies that can enhance educational leadership development in the northwestern provinces and perhaps elsewhere in China.

This study is informed by existing literature on Chinese leadership theory in general and studies specific to educational administration in China. This research is built on the assumption that Chinese leadership is shaped by the educational and leadership traditions, as well as the social, economical, and cultural contexts, in China (Wang 2007).

Context

China, the country with the third-largest land area in the world, has always had significant regional differences in geographical conditions, economic growth and cultural influences. This study focuses on the five northwestern provinces (Shaanxi, Xinjiang, Gansu, Qinghai, and Ningxia), and each of them has their own distinct mixture of ethnic customs and Chinese traditional culture. For example, one of them, Shaanxi, a province greatly influenced by Confucianism, is generally regarded as one of the most important cradles of ancient Chinese civilization, in which thirteen Chinese dynasties established their administrations such as Qin, Han and Tang. Xi'an (once called Chang'an) the capital city for several dynasties was the political, economic and cultural center in ancient China. The other four northwestern provinces are quite diverse; more than half of the inhabitants of Xinjiang and more than one-third of those in Qinghai and Ningxia are ethnic minorities. This diversity situates the region within a unique strategic position in the history of China; although the living conditions there can be severely harsh with an under-developed economy and infrastructure.

Historically, outside of Xi'an, this region, despite its strategic importance, has been under-developed and has not been an economic priority within the centrally controlled political economy of the People's Republic of China. However, the central government in China has more recently begun to give regional preferences to more evenly distribute resources to facilitate the growth potential of different regions (Wang and Hu 1998). Although in some cities such as Xi'an, higher education is well-developed with many well-known educational institutes, but generally, the level of education in this region is lower and the gap between urban and rural education remains significant.

However, during the Ninth National Peoples Committee (NPC) in March of 1999, Jiang Zemin, the former chairman of China, proposed the western development strategy as ‘great western development’ (*Xibu da kaifa*). At the June 1999 Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee Meeting he declared, ‘The time is ripe. . . . In continuing to accelerate the development of the eastern coastal region, we should lose no opportunities to speed up the development of the central and western regions (Du, et al. 2000: 27).

One of the central government’s priorities in the western development program is to improve funding and support for research facilities, technical training, and college education, as well as to introduce advanced and applied technology (Lai 2002). The increased emphasis on the development of education in Northwest China is also part of a larger nation-wide effort to reform education at all levels. China’s curricular reforms were initiated in three stages by the national Ministry of Education. First, in 1999 a new series of basic education curricular reforms initiated; then, in 2001 a Provisional Outline for Basic Education Curricular Reforms was announced; and in 2004 four provinces were targeted to implement the new nine-year compulsory education curricular reform experiment. However, implementation of the changes based on these reforms remains limited as the curricular reforms have only been piloted in a limited number of districts. Even in districts that have actually implemented the reforms, numerous problems have emerged; including a mismatch between the training and background of the leaders with the leadership expectations associated with the reform (Feng 2006). It is also important to note that very few administrators in China have even received any form of training relevant to the recent reforms.

This strategic initiative is creating great demand for knowledge on managing educational practices. There is a strong need for advanced training of a large pool of educational administrators in Northwest China - 47,000 administrators in basic education and a total of

almost 800,000 educators across these five provinces. Currently, these training needs are met primarily through one of six nationally-sponsored regional education training centers that provide short-term training for about only 5,000 individuals each year (Gong 2006).

While a great deal of effort and resources have been invested in facilities and teacher improvement; officials at all levels are realizing that these investments will be wasted unless there are strong administrators to lead the reforms and to maximize the improved facilities, curriculum and teachers (Ming 2005). There is clearly an urgent need to train local educational leaders and administrators to head this development by implementing and transforming advanced leadership theory in China's cultural settings. Yet, serious questions remain about how best to implement contemporary leadership theory, much of it developed in western societies, into existing training programs within China's distinct cultural settings.

However, education must be studied first in its historical context in order to understand how a particular practice was a solution to problems and tasks as perceived by historical actors (Wilbrink 1997). Current leadership theory in China is deeply rooted in a long and relatively isolated historical context. So, before further exploration of the current status of educational leadership in China, it is important to consider the impact of traditional Chinese culture, along with its inherent values and assumptions, on the concept of leadership in this particular societal context.

It is important to recognize that traditional Chinese cultural values have a significant impact on managerial and leadership practices; resulting in a Chinese managerial system that is, not surprisingly, quite distinct from that of the Western world (Redding 1982). More specifically, Confucianism plays a dominant role in Chinese culture and has a great impact on conceptions of leadership; therefore, any study of leadership in China must begin with an exploration of

Confucian philosophy. While a full discussion of Confucianism is not possible given the space limitations of this article, four key features are worthy of attention when considering the implications of this dominant philosophy on Chinese leadership; these include: (1) paternalistic authoritarianism, (2) morality in action and self-cultivation, (3) collectivism and inter-personal relationships, and (4) humanism (Wah 2003).

Authoritarianism builds on the Confucian ideal of five cardinal relationships; in particular, the father-son relationship that is always considered as superior over other social relations. Under Confucian ethics, a father has authority over his children and all other family members and he possesses absolute power and legitimacy (Cheng et al. 2000). This dichotomy of father-son relationship has been traditionally taken for granted with which the father's authority and his son's submissive obedience play an important part. Leadership has typically been viewed in a very paternalistic manner in Chinese society (Wah 2003).

Within China's hierarchically oriented society, this relationship involves a high degree power distance. A leader has authoritative control over subordinates without challenges or confrontations. Hofstede and Bond (1988) noted 'The ideal leader in a culture in which power distances are small would be a resourceful democrat; on the other hand, the ideal leader in a culture in which power distances are large is a benevolent autocrat or *good father*' (p. 14). This kind of authoritarian managerial behavior is well documented in contemporary China (Wah, 2003).

Farh and Cheng (2000) defined this type of paternalistic leadership within China's cultural context as a style that combines strong discipline and authority with fatherly benevolence and moral integrity. Furthermore, they assert that Paternalistic leadership consists of

three important elements: authoritarianism, benevolence and moral leadership. They further explicate these three subtypes as follows:

- 1) Authoritarianism refers to a leader's behavior that asserts absolute authority and control over subordinates and demands unquestionable obedience from subordinates and it's called as *li-wei* (inspiring awe or fear) in Chinese.
- 2) Benevolence means that the leader's behavior demonstrates individualized, holistic concern for subordinates' personal or familial well-being and it's named as *shi-en* (granting favors) in Chinese.
- 3) Moral leadership can be broadly depicted as a leader's behavior that demonstrates superior personal virtues, self-discipline and unselfishness and it's termed as *shuh-der* (setting a moral example) in Chinese. (p. 42-44)

These last two points relate to the following features (Morality in action and self-cultivation, collectivism and inter-personal relationships, and humanism) of Confucian-based leadership.

Confucius emphasized the importance of moral development for each individual as a collective as well as personal responsibility. He asserted that in one's behavior, one should not be motivated by the search for profit or fame or status but by seeking what is good and right (Loden 2006). The distinction between the noble man (*Junzi*) who pursues rightness and the small man (*Xiaoren*) who seeks profit or self-interest is central in the thought of Confucius. Sheh (2003) provided the major characteristics of a noble man as defined by Confucius:

- 1) Thinking of others and forgetting self and keeping a low profile are the primary characteristics of an enlightened leader;
- 2) The doctrine of filial piety to one's living parents, the deceased and remote ancestors becomes the driving force behind the Chinese moral beings. Leadership is built

on a foundation of moral character and exercised through virtuous example;

- 3) A righteous leader does not practice favoritism, and can distinguish what is right and wrong.

Wong (2001) purported that Confucianism focuses on moral values in action instead of in spirit, which is morality defined in terms of pragmatic actions and exemplary behaviors as model behavior for subordinates. As a result, a leader's behavior demonstrates superior personal virtues, self-cultivation and unselfishness.

The teachings of Confucius emphasized that the individual self is minimized, but interpersonal relationships are highly valued. In collective cultures, success will be achieved in the organizations and families, incentive will be given collectively and their distribution should be left up to the group (Hofstede and Bond 1998). In China as a collective society, loyal, trustworthy, and cohesive interpersonal relationships have always been encouraged and one can achieve success only if he or she makes efforts to help the others (Wah 2003).

Sheh (2003) asserted that Confucius focuses on the 'self' as a 'center of relationship', which constantly evolves into an ever-expanding network of relationships. Confucianism also emphasizes that faithfulness and trustworthiness in relationships strengthens networking. This type of inter-personal relationship system is commonly called as *Guanxi* in China. *Guanxi* is different from the performance-centered relationship in western countries that supposedly may establish a more secure working atmosphere. Those subordinates who have this kind of relationship with their superiors will be more likely to be promoted.

To Confucius, humanism is to love without discrimination and distinction. He believed to be good is to be truly human (Loden 2006). In the Analects, Confucius tells his disciple Tsu Zhang humanism is constituted of courtesy, generosity, good faith, diligence and kindness.

Confucianism further emphasizes using immoral means to obtain wealth and status should be avoided and taking advantage of the followers' weakness is shameful (Sheh 2003). Consequently, the leader might possibly generate genuine gratitude, personal obedience, and compliance from the subordinates who are willing to fulfill their leader's requests even beyond their normal roles (Yang 1957).

More recently, China has been interested in expanding and improving the practice of leadership in a wide variety of organizational settings, including schools (Wang 2007). However, while some studies have described Chinese leadership in business settings, less attention has been paid to educational leadership. Wang (2007) documented the response of Chinese educators to learning western theories, but did not directly address the current state of educational leadership or identify specific needs that might be addressed through the appropriate introduction of western leadership concepts into the training of educational leaders in China. Moreover, most other studies (e.g. Dimmock & Walker, 1998; Walker & Dimmock, 2000), focused on the urban eastern coast of China; ignoring other areas in this vast and diverse nation. Therefore, this study focuses on providing one of the first empirical examinations of Chinese leadership development for educators in Northwest China.

Method

This study represents a preliminary inquiry of the professional development training needs of administrators in basic education (K-12) institutions. The research team used a mixed methodological design to provide a more comprehensive approach for gathering data from educational administrators in the five northwest provinces of China (Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai, Shaanxi, and Xinjiang). The quantitative design focused on a survey of K-12 educators while the qualitative design included a series of focus group interviews. This exploratory design

allowed us to simultaneously understand the features of the current training programs, the future professional development needs of administrators and the balance of challenges and opportunities related to professional development for educational administrators. Additionally, this type of qualitative research is particularly appropriate for an in-depth analysis of a complex issue. Creswell (1998) stated that qualitative methodology follows in the 'traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes works, reports a detailed view of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting' (15).

Site selection and data collection

The data in this study was collected during site visits to each of the five northwest provinces of China as part of a larger research project that focused on both basic and higher education in these five provinces. The research team was composed of scholars from a Chinese university in the northwest region and scholars from an American university. Data used in this study were collected using written surveys and focus group interviews. These methods were used as they provided the best means for collecting descriptive data in a comprehensive and efficient manner.

Surveys were administered to principals, superintendents, and professional development trainers. The survey consisted of three main domains: (a) contextual and demographic characteristics about interviewees and their settings; (b) their individual perceptions of current professional training needs; and (c) the content and structure of future professional development training sessions. The survey design was informed by previous studies conducted at the Northwest Regional Educational Training Center.

The interview protocols focused on both the organizational features and individual needs of basic education in-service professional training for school principals. The main themes of the interview protocol included: (a) individual perceptions of current professional training needs, and (b) the content and structure of future professional development training sessions. The semi-structured design allowed for additional responses and follow-up questions.

Data analysis

The analysis of the data collected can be characterized by three distinct stages. To begin, the surveys were analyzed using basic descriptive and correlational statistical analysis to provide a broad overview of the training issues for basic education administrators in each of the five provinces. The analyses were conducted for within and between respondents from each of the five provinces. Next, the researchers analyzed the qualitative data sets to uncover themes and patterns. The researchers first examined the data as it was collected individually. Subsequently, themes and patterns were developed as individual findings were collectively shared and discussed. The confirming and disconfirming data were significant in the examination of patterns that were representative of administrators' needs. From the data sets, the researchers developed 'gestalts which pull many pieces of data together' (Miles and Huberman 1994: 246). Common themes surfaced in the inductive analysis (Wolcott 1994) that helped the researchers better understand the needs of the administrators in Northwest China.

Sample

The quantitative sample consisted of 241 surveys collected from the five provinces during visits to regional educational training centers during the summer of 2006. Table 1 summarizes the distribution of surveys across the five provinces.

[Insert table 1 about here]

The qualitative portion of the sample included 97 respondents who participated in 12 different focus groups at locations throughout the five provinces conducted over a three-week period in the summer of 2006.

Table 2 provides a summary of the demographic characteristics of the respondents to the survey. 84% of the respondents were male and the average age of the respondents was 41.56 (the mode and median age were both 42.0) with a range of 26 to 52. The group was also represented by a number of ethnic minority group members, as would be expected in this region of China. Approximately 76% were of the Han majority, slightly less than the national average of 82%. The remaining numbers were small for the other groups and they tended to be province specific – with the Uyghurs coming from Xinjiang, the Hui from Ningxia and Tibetans from Qinghai. Most of the respondents (76%) were either principals (58%) or vice-principals (18%); the remaining respondents were either trainers who were former principals or district-level officials. On average, each individual had served in their current position for six-and-one-half years; but the range was quite large varying from a minimum of six months to a maximum of 28 years. Additionally, 16% of self-identified respondents were from urban schools and the remaining 84% were from rural schools. About one-third of them were from elementary schools and 60% percent of them were leaders in secondary schools.

In terms of educational background, the majority of the respondents had either a bachelor's or associate's degree. Digging deeper within the data, 56% of the respondents had bachelor's degrees, followed by Associate's (35.3%); very few individuals reported any other type of degree - in fact, only 2% had an advanced degree. The major field of study for the highest degree varied greatly - but only 12 (about 5%) had earned their highest degree in some

type of education management related-field. Despite their positions as school leaders, only 52% of the respondents had previous teaching experience.

[Insert table 2 about here]

Limitations

Conducting research in foreign country can be difficult. Beyond the typical logistical issues that had to be addressed, finding a representative sample of educational administrators in the five provinces was problematic. While the researchers, in collaboration with their Chinese university hosts, created the study's participants the process was vetted by Party officials. Prior to data collection, the researchers had to meet with Community Party officials in each province. In the end, no participants were omitted or added to the study's design. However, while the Party officials were not present in the interviews and the surveys were anonymous, the Party served as an impediment to the team and may have contributed to how the participants responded.

Results

The results of this study are drawn from both the survey and focus group data. The results section begins with a description of the perceived training needs of the participants. It then describes in detail the kinds of development and style of delivery the participants' report they need. Finally, the section highlights two main factors that participants reported as inhibiting the professional development opportunities they want.

Current training needs

The participant sample in this study reflects a group of administrators who are young, have limited experience as school teachers, and lack an advanced degree especially in the field of educational management or leadership (see previously described Table 2 above). Additionally, new demands have been placed on basic education administrators (including principals, vice

principals, superintendents, and middle management teachers) as new national educational policies have been passed. For example, the aforementioned pressures to enact curricular reform have put greater demands on district and school level administrators. As a result, there is a clear demand for advanced training of basic education administrators in China. A participant stated, 'Principal training is more necessary now more than ever with the new curricula reforms... but there are no opportunities for such trainings' (Ningxia Superintendent). The lack of training opportunities was widely cited by participants in this study. While observing an in-service training session, a principal from Ningxia stated, 'I have been a principal for 10 years and this year is my first training' (Ningxia Principal).

Current in-service offerings and delivery

The content of training was another concern of the participants. The participants reported that training topics were sporadic. That is, a wide variety of training topics were always offered, but they had little congruence with what they needed to be trained or connections with current demands placed upon them. When asked for examples of offerings participants readily provided a smorgasbord of general topics. One participant stated, 'we choose things like the use of technology, educational finance, and school management' (Xinjiang Principal). Generally speaking, administrative in-service training was divided into two areas. The first was a Ministry of Education, provincial level, sponsored in-service. These in-service programs focused on issues of teaching and learning. For example, some administrators had the opportunity to attend professional development programs on topics that included: curricular reform, school management, and special topics in education. The provincial Communist Party sponsored the other in-service development opportunities for school administrators. The Communist Party development topics included: business English, harmony of society, World Trade Organization

information, importing and construction. Participants in the study were frustrated about having to pick between these two professional development opportunities. The participants understood the distinction between the two development systems this made selecting between them even more difficult.

The professional development opportunities for basic education administrators were off-site and long in duration. Typically, these in-service professional development programs were delivered over a long period of time at central locations, often far from the northwest provinces. Many participants described attending sessions for long periods of time. For example, a participant described attending a training session for 'three-months, all the way in Beijing right in the middle of the school year' (Gansu Principal). Beijing is more than 1400 kilometers from his home.

How the training sessions were being delivered and who delivered them was a major concern of the participants. The typical model of training included: lectures, independent study, and a practicum. The lectures were described as context-free 'stories' from former school administrators. Respondents reported that trainers were not well versed on the issues that were most important to their learning. A participant stated that you 'Can't train others if you do not know yourself' (Qinghai Principal). The respondents reported that in-service 'experts' were either retired school administrators or current administrators of a successful school-- as defined by the Ministry of Education. One participant echoed the sentiments of many of the participants interviewed: 'Most of the experts would just stand up and talk all morning about how they [did] things in their school' (Ningxia Principal). Another stated, 'a lot of trainers were [military] officers before principals. They would talk to us in that way' (Ningxia Principal). Moreover,

these experts often represented one type of school setting in the urban Eastern provinces of China. Again, the cities of Beijing and Shanghai were over-represented.

Additionally, the administrators described the practicum experience as informational, but rooted in the context of the training site, most often Beijing or Shanghai. This training context did not account for the uniqueness of Western China. For example, administrators from the Qinghai province indicated that they spent their two-month training session in Shanghai's Pudong schools. They attended lectures in the morning and in the afternoon they shadowed principals in Pudong. Principals that were involved in the Pudong training reported that they liked the experience. However, they stated that the training lacked specific context to their own schools. A Qinghai principal stated that the shadowing was superficial 'sightseeing' because of the lack of contextualized content.

The deputy superintendent of the Yinchuan Department of Education believed that some of the programs to assist principals have been successful. He specifically cited experiences for principals outside of the district. He asserted that an off-site practicum experiences helped principals obtain both direct and indirect knowledge that would be an 'eye opening experience.' He purported that the exchange of information with educational experts and other principals in different provinces was important. His concern was that this was not happening for enough principals in the Northwest China provinces. Moreover, participants in all five provinces indicated that they did not have an understanding of how administrators were selected to participate each year. Who was selected to attend trainings remained a mystery.

In the end, the current training system can be described as inaccessible and incongruent with the participants' needs. Next, we report on the type of professional development the participants reportedly want in Northwest China.

Training Preferences

While the main frustration of administrators in Northwest China revolved around not having enough professional development opportunities, the participants had a great deal to say about the content and delivery of future professional development. Table 3 summarizes the responses related to the perceived training needs for educational administrators. When asked about the need for more training, none of the respondents indicated that they did not need more training, 24.5% indicated that it was necessary and the remaining 75% indicated that it was very necessary. The respondents were also asked about preferences for training. Of those who responded to the item asking them to indicate what was most important in terms of training emphasis - knowledge, skills or approach (disposition), 30% of those who responded indicated knowledge emphasis was most important, 29% indicated that skill development was most desirable, and 49% indicated that an emphasis on dispositions was most beneficial.

[Insert table 3 about here]

The survey also generated data on what content participants wanted. Guiding team development (45%) was clearly identified as the top leadership responsibility, followed by developing and implementing formal policies (13%), developing interpersonal relationships (6%), and modeling self-improvement (5%), respectively. Principals noted that the current in-service training efforts failed to fully address the content areas of educational psychology, public speaking and professional writing, educational technology, school management skills, and goal based management. Participants also reported that they sought after new information, theories, and practices around general leadership philosophies. An example best exemplified these desires. Participants across the five provinces reported their struggle with the implementation of the new national curricular reforms. Participants described teacher resistance to enacting the reforms

because they believed they were getting the student achievement results required of them. As a result, principals wanted to better understand how to best help teachers learn about and become motivated to implement new school reforms while simultaneously achieving good test scores. Administrators in this study specifically mentioned the need to better understand learning and motivation theories, change theories, and specific elements of enacting reforms efforts.

The skill development they described was not always the search for particular, pragmatic ideas that would constitute the craft of practice. Rather, there was an espoused need to learn the ideals or philosophies of leadership. One participant stated, 'A good principal can create a good school... Good principals need to have beliefs, ideals, and ideas about what good schools look like and do' (Gansu Principal). A number of participants mentioned the need to learn more about Western theories of leadership. One participant indicated the resulting challenge was 'to balance USA inquiry based learning with China's indoctrination education... take on new things without stripping away our local identity' (Qinghai Principal). A Gansu principal added that there was a desire for Western educational theory, but there was also a need to better understand the government's intent and support to implement such reforms.

Administrators also reported that too many theories were being presented without enough practical strategies. A participant stated, 'We read books about theory and then get lectured to' (Gansu Principal). Another added, 'Most training programs teach advanced Western theories and some fancy domestic theory, neither helpful' (Ningxia Principal). Consequently there was no sense about making theory into practice. While administrators enjoyed training from fellow administrators, the training was not grounded in theory nor based in theory. In both cases, the theory and practice gap had not been bridged. A participant best summarized this: 'The most important thing in principal training is to learning more about practices instead of lots of talking

about theories. And, to handle problems well, one needs theories. So you need both' (Ningxia Superintendent).

Participants also reported that they wanted training that was specific to their local needs. A participant's statement was representative: 'we need training that [accounts] for our local situation... we have different needs from Beijing' (Gansu Principal). The translation and replication of training to their home institution was often rendered impotent because of this lack of local context. A number of the participants recommended that training session should be offered at local schools or regional centers as a way to make the training specific to their local needs.

What is stopping administrators from getting more training and the right kind of training?

A number of issues are inhibiting administrators from receiving professional development opportunities in Northwest China. Our research generated two specific areas: funding and a bifurcated training and promotion system.

A problem of funding

Funding for administrative in-service varies from province to province and session to session. However, in most cases administrators are required to pay for material or travel expenses. Many administrators report that training costs between 3,000 and 4,000 RMB for each participant. School leaders in Northwest China reported that their annual salary was 24,000 RMB. As a result, additional training that is not funded by the ministry or their local school is cost prohibited (1/6 of their annual salary). By law, schools must earmark 5% of their budget to professional staff development. Provinces have funneled this money to teacher professional development efforts. A Ningxia superintendent stated:

The 5% budget for professional development is not enough. Most of the money goes to physical facilities, but even if we have good physical facilities, we do not have the appropriate people [trained], this is a problem. Most money goes to key teacher training.

Without adequate funding for training, participants find their work to be even more difficult. A participant stated, 'Policy is only policy it's a piece of paper... nothing [if] we don't have money' (Gansu Superintendent). Another added: 'We can buy a car, but do not have money to buy gas' (Gansu Principal). Under the current in-service training structure, it is unfeasible to train all of the basic education principals let alone superintendents and middle managers. A Ningxia superintendent stated that, 'trainings [are] mandated, but not funded.' There are too many administrators and not enough resources.

Bifurcated system of training and promotion

A dual hierarchy exists in the professional development offerings to basic education administrators in China. As indicated in the previous results, the participants in this study have a clear idea of the content and context of professional development they need. This development is rooted in the policy implementation set forth by the Ministry of Education. However, a number of administrators are concerned about the political ramifications of not attending Party sponsored trainings. One participant represented the participants' dilemma: 'I need to learn how to implement reforms. I cannot get the teachers to [enact] the new reforms. But my promotion is [dependent] on the Party's trainings (Shaanxi Principal). As a result, involvement in non-educational training from the Communist Party was more important to the individual educator than a degree of advanced training certificate.

This bifurcated system also puts pressures on succession planning. Specifically, like administrators, teachers are conflicted between the two types of professional development opportunities. Both sets of educators are serving multiple masters, and few opportunities exist for joint training among teachers and administrators. As a result, there is no succession planning to identify, train, and develop teachers to become middle managers (e.g. department chairs), middle managers to become vice principals, and vice principals to become principals.

Summary

In the end, a Ningxia principal best summarized the needs of the study's participants: 'The current training is not relevant to our jobs.' Basic education administrators in NW China want more transparency in what is offered and why it is offered; They want alignment between the Communist Party and the Ministry of Education; They want content to focus on subject areas they needed help with; They want training that is local and specific to their school's unique needs. They want trainings that are interactive and engaging; they want informed and experienced experts to lead training sessions; they want to learn about both theory and practice. And, they want to learn from experts-local, national, and international (especially Western leadership theories).

Discussion

A number of issues, dilemmas, or paradoxes can be extracted from the findings of this research. To begin, educators (principals and teachers) resist change because of the mixed message of new reforms and old habit and design (much of which was successful). Specifically, educators continue to be judged on student exams while new curricular reforms seek to shift the pedagogical focus away from the exams. Additionally, new reforms seek to build better relationships between principals and teachers as well as teachers and students. However,

historically in the social context of China, hierarchical respect continues to be deeply imbued in the school structure. While it appears that there is a perception that many parents, members of the Communist Party, and educators want to continue a 'banking model' curriculum; the more recently governmentally-mandated curricular reforms seek to move towards a more holistic and collaborative approach that infuses western approaches into the more traditional Chinese curriculum.

Educators also receive mixed signals of issues of training and promotion. Principals want an advanced degree or at least a certificate in the area of teaching and learning so they can improve their job performance. However, because promotion is rooted in the Communist Party, educators are compelled to participate in Party led moral and ethical trainings. As a result, skill development for administrators is divided between teaching and learning and Party doctrine. Moreover, while policy mandates a new direction, the budget does not support the training and implementation of the policies. Even though 5% of a school's budget was targeted at professional development training, a majority of these funds went to teacher training. The Ministry of Education only mandated curricular reform training for teachers. Administrators were not targeted for advanced training. This is not a recent phenomenon. In many countries implementation is often expected without much detail to training the 'street-level' bureaucrats (Lipsky & Weatherly 1977). However, this may be more acute in a traditionally hierarchical setting such as China.

Chinese educators are torn between new Western educational ideas and their own deeply rooted educational ideals. The Chinese administrator we spoke with believes the USA, for example, is good at community learning, close relationships between students and teachers,

holistic, democratic education, and collaborative learning. They see China's strengths as respect for teachers, focus on basic education, and high national and international exam scores.

In-service training must be comprehensive and holistic. The next generation of administrative in-service will require attention to the content and design of training. Participants stated a strong desire to engage in a new type of in-service professional development. Beyond the selection, access and monetary constraints, the participants want training that will improve their professional practice. Specifically, administrators in our study wanted to have an impact on teachers in order to improve student achievement.

Participants in this study offered insightful strategies to better design in-service training for basic school administrators. Specifically, participants want training that is specific to their local context. They see case study design, including the development of their own problems of practice, as a means to focus in-services around their own needs. They also cited the need to have 'experts' mentor them in their own school settings. That is, rather than hear from experts about what they did in their school, experts can be used for strategic planning and reflection in their own setting. The participants believed that interactive learning like this could also be enhanced with an on-line learning component. Participants cautioned of the inadequate technological infrastructure in many rural setting, but thought a limited on-line learning community would be beneficial. Most importantly, administrators sought a balance of new ideas with school-based activities. The current in-service design requires school leaders to be away from their schools during the school year. One Ningxia Deputy Superintendent stated training must support and serve not just 'train.' In summary, a training program should be flexible, up-to-date, effective and relevant to real life, and contextualized so theory can be put into practice.

In the end, the basic education administrators that are represented in this study provide details of the current supply and demand of professional development in Northwest China. Living far from the policy centers of Beijing and Shanghai may further marginalize administrators in Northwest China. The good news resides in the articulated solutions that these participants highlighted through this study. While the targeted problems may remain in the eastern coast of China, the search for solutions resides within the local provinces.

Conclusion

China is in the midst of an era of unprecedented social and economic change, and education is no exception. Much of the emphasis in education reform has been focused on teaching training and facilities development; only very recently has attention shifted to educational leadership development as a strategic priority. Moreover, investment in education has been uneven, with the more highly developed urban east coast getting the most attention and resources from the central government. As greater attention is beginning to be given to the less well-developed areas of China, such as the northwestern provinces examined in this study, there is an increased desire for leadership development that is contextualized to the unique Western China setting. The findings from this study indicate a great need for educational leadership development in Northwest China. The findings from the survey indicate that most of the educational leaders included in this study have limited teaching experience and relatively low levels of formal education and training. However, they express great desire for more training to become knowledgeable about and skilled in new leadership approaches— particularly western-oriented approaches that could be used in conjunction with the Confucian-based approaches that have traditionally defined leadership in China.

This exploratory research also examined both the content and design of in-service training for basic education administrators. While these findings highlight specific ideas for a new, innovative approach to professional development, a number of obstacles remain including: financial support from the government, ability of individuals to pay for their own training, and poorly conceived and delivered in-service professional development opportunities. Nonetheless, the most valuable resource is something educational institutes in China already possess: highly committed educators. The Chinese Ministry of Education as well as the Communist Party would do well to honor their request to improve their practice, and ultimately improve student achievement. A great society rooted in the principles of Confucianism and engaged in an economic boom has the capacity and obligation to infuse educational administrators with the capacity to become great leaders.

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Tables

Table 1 – Survey Respondents by Province

Province	Number of Surveys	Percentage of Usable Surveys Comprising the Final Sample
Gansu	83	34.4%
Ningxia	37	15.4%
Qinghai	24	10.0%
Shaanxi	55	22.8%
Xinjiang	42	17.4%
Regional Total	241	100%

Table 2 – Summary of Key Demographic Descriptors

Variable	Mean*	Standard Deviation and Range (where Applicable)*
Age (Years)	41.56	5.28 (range = 26 to 52)
Gender	Male = 84% Female = 16%	NA
Ethnicity	Han = 76% Non-Han 24%	NA
Administrative Position	Principal = 58% Vice Principal = 18% Other = 24%	NA
Years in Current Position	6.51	4.89 (range = 6 months to 28 years)
School Type	Primary = 33% Secondary = 60% Other = 7%	NA
School Setting	Urban = 16% Rural = 84%	NA
Highest Degree Earned (1 = below associate; 2 = associate; 3 = bachelor's; 4 = master's; 5 = doctoral)	2.63	0.54
Previous Teaching Experience	No = 48% Yes = 52%	NA

Note: *only percentages are reported for dichotomous variables

Table 3 – Summary of Key Attitudes Regarding Educational Leadership and Training

Variable	Mean*	Standard Deviation*
Need for Additional Training (1-Not Necessary; 2-Necessary; 3-Very Necessary)	2.75	0.43
Knowledge as the most important training need	No = 70% Yes = 30%	NA
Skills as the most important training need	No = 71% Yes = 29%	NA
Dispositions as the most important training need	No = 51% Yes = 49%	NA
Developing Interpersonal Relationships as the top leadership responsibility	No = 94% Yes = 6%	NA
Guiding Team Development as the top leadership responsibility	No = 55% Yes = 45%	NA
Developing and Implementing Formal Policies as the top leadership responsibility	No = 87% Yes = 13%	NA
Modeling self-Improvement as the top leadership responsibility	No = 95% Yes = 5%	NA

Note: *only percentages are reported for dichotomous variables