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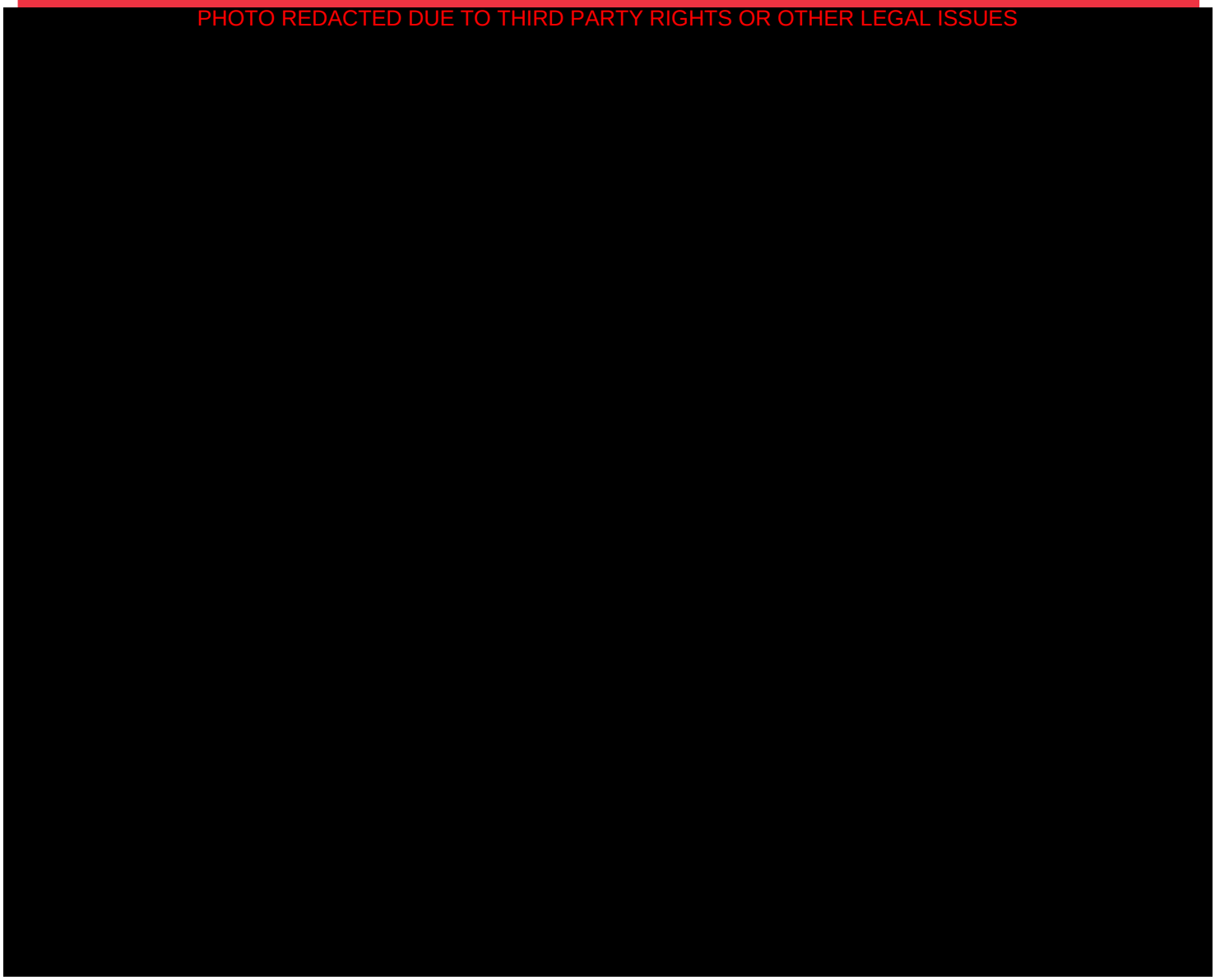
improving children's lives

Made in China: a creative dilemma

NCSL's Leadership Network learning internationally



Contents

Education is a meaningful business, a business that requires dedication. Education is a valuable endeavour, this endeavour really consists of research, study and effort. Education is an art, an art that includes creativity.

Heifei Changjiang
Road No 2 Primary School

Edited by **Karen Carter**

Introduction

Steven Connors, IPH Facilitator

NCSL's Leadership Network learning internationally

In partnership with the British Council, the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) offers a unique opportunity for headteachers to gain an international perspective on their work through the International Placements for Headteachers (IPH) programme. In 2006, a group of nine headteachers from NCSL's Leadership Network undertook an IPH study visit to Shanghai and Heifei, capital of the Anhui province in China.

During the placement programme, participating headteachers were given the opportunity to learn with and from their international colleagues and each other. A distinctive feature of the study visit was that this learning was undertaken on behalf of NCSL's Leadership Network. The network is committed to the principle that it is 'led by the voice of practice'. As a result, a core commitment of those involved in this IPH study visit was to bring back the learning about leadership from their experience of an international context and to share the thinking and practice of school leaders in the host country as well as their own.

The study visit group was made up of school leaders from across different regions in the network and from different phases of education including pre-school, primary, special and secondary schools. All of the group members and their schools were active participants in the Leadership Network's Developing a 21st century curriculum (D21CC) project – a joint research and development project initiated by NCSL and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) in 2005. The D21CC project brought together some of the most innovative school leaders from 50 schools across the country, providing a forum for national debate and a research-based approach to building evidence for reform. The project focused on the future of the curriculum and the implications for school leadership and leading curriculum innovation in particular.

The findings of the project (NCSL and QCA, 2007)[1] identified five components:

1 **developing a stimulus for innovation:** a question of values, vision and professional duty
2 **stimulating innovation:** a question of trust, values and vision
3 **developing strategy for innovation:** a question of capacity, sustainability and evaluation
4 **implementing innovation:** a question of vision into practice
5 **evaluating the impact of innovation:** a question of moral purpose.

The findings of the project and, in particular, the issues raised for school leaders about the dimensions of leading curriculum innovation in schools formed the central focus of the study visit to China. During their placement, those in the study visit group were keen to explore a framework of questions centred on the role of school leadership in system transformation and the themes of leadership learning, futures thinking and vision for the curriculum.

Made in China: a creative dilemma

The accounts presented in this booklet, together with the accompanying DVD, document the learning journey to China undertaken by those school leaders from the Leadership Network involved in the IPH study visit to Shanghai and Heifei. In reflecting upon the learning drawn from this international experience and with a view to sharing this learning more widely with Leadership Network members and other school leaders nationwide, the commentary that follows includes contributions from each of the participating headteachers.

Each of the contributions aims to present an account of the learning that was generated by and drawn from the placement experience and captured through a series of learning exchange seminars and learning journal sessions that were undertaken prior to, during and following the placement visit. Each article captures the reflections of the participants in sharing their experience of the thinking and practice of school leaders, teachers and other education professionals from the host schools visited. These included a wide variety of primary and secondary schools, an international school and an early years facility, similar to a children's centre in England, where support was given to families from soon after birth. During the school placements, the study visit group was involved in observing lessons, participating in teaching activities, engaging with the children and leading staff meetings. Reflections on these experiences are also drawn upon in presenting the accounts that follow.

Throughout the publication, perspectives are also shared from participation in a province-wide conference for school leaders entitled 'Curriculum reform in the future', from engagement with politicians, educational administrators, the Vice Mayor of Heifei (herself an ex-English teacher) and from cultural exchanges with other city and province officials. Each of these exchanges provided the opportunity to gain insights into Chinese life, traditions and customs, as well as the political direction of the education system in China. In sharing this learning, we hope that it will transcend the international context from which it came and provide some valuable insights into school leadership and the leadership of learning, which those interested in exploring an international dimension in their work will find useful in informing their thinking and practice as school leaders.

Acknowledgements

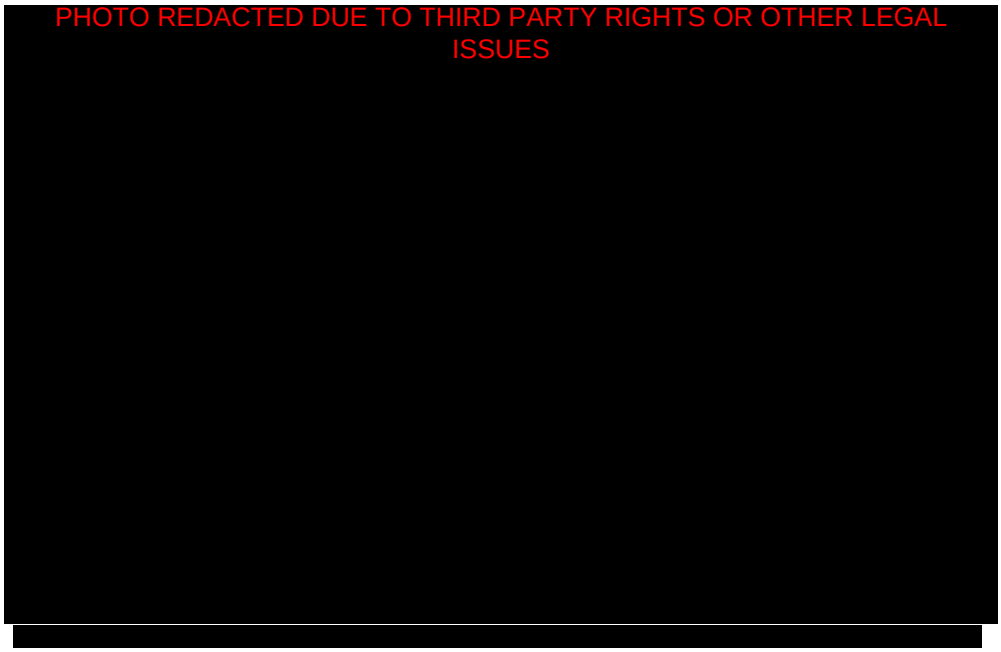
With thanks to our host colleagues in Shanghai and Heifei for their kind hospitality, extreme generosity of spirit and professionalism, in particular to the staff and pupils from:

- Heifei No 1 High School
- Heifei Nanmen Road Primary School
- Heifei Changjiang Road No 2 Primary School
- Attached School Of Heifei Normal School
- Heifei No 4 Middle School
- Baoshan Early Learning Centre, Shanghai
- Xiwai International School, Shanghai.

To apply for IPH please visit **www.ncsl.org.uk/programmes/iph**.

References

[1] NCSL and QCA, 2007, Leading curriculum innovation, Nottingham, National College for School Leadership

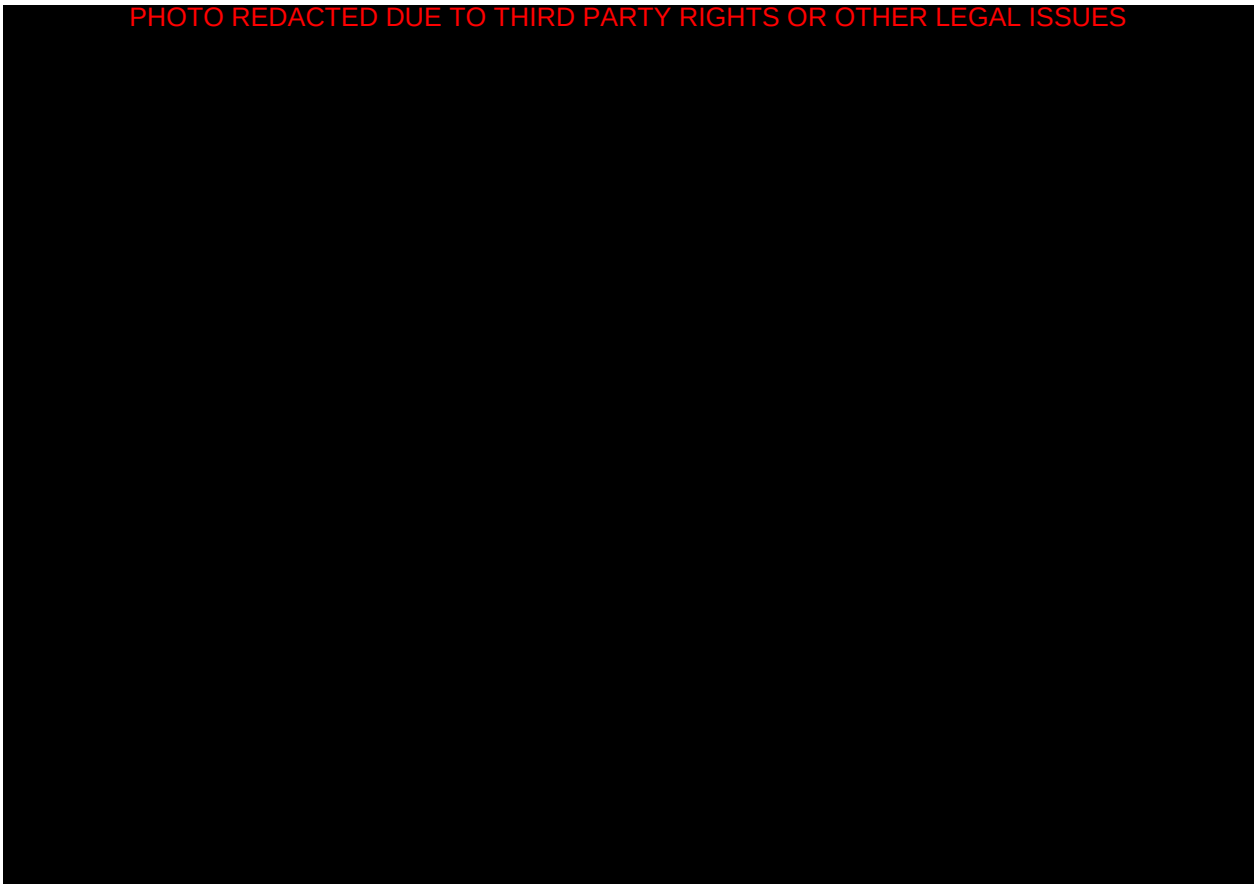


Made in China

Visions of China: past, present and future

Phil Rowbotham
Holmes Chapel Primary School

> “There is a need to address the diversity of cultures and beliefs which exist in the UK. The key to raising standards is to be found in personalising the system to suit the needs of the community served by schools. The next phase of educational reform is to be found within individual schools and local networks.”



The challenge of globalisation

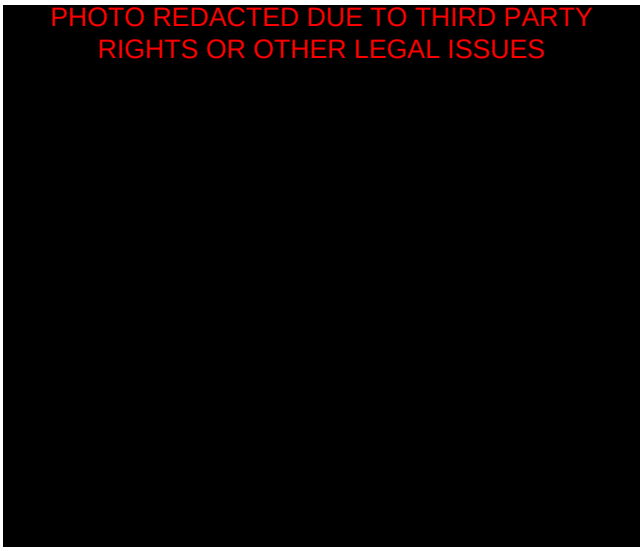
When President Mao died in 1976, there was little indication that China was about to embrace the dramatic transformation that now places the country on the precipice of economic global supremacy. Mao's successor, Deng Xiaoping, embraced materialism with the proclamation 'to get rich is glorious' and so China began an onslaught on the world markets and economies on a scale that has never been equalled. The road to capitalism gained momentum in 2001 when China joined the World Trade Organisation and there was no going back.

Old system – new challenge

It is against this backdrop of unprecedented economic and technological revolution, coupled with continued reluctance for political reform, that the education system in China is uneasily adjusting. While the old system produced compliant workers and managers whose main aim was to deliver quotas, the new economies require creative thinkers who have the ability to adapt and apply what they have learnt in new situations. China is acknowledging the need to prepare a new generation of entrepreneurs with the appropriate skills to operate in the world markets: this means challenging the philosophies of an education system that is currently geared to a 'one size fits all' approach.

From Shanghai to China

Every facet of modern day China can be found in Shanghai. The extremes of wealth, the sacred temples, the hustlers, the department stores, café society, the shantytown tenements, the majestic Bund, the state-of-the-art Pudong district and the endless building sites promising new futures. For me, Shanghai represents the paradox of China itself. It is a confusing conflict of values that hasn't yet come to terms with the uneasy marriage of global economies and the political and spiritual roots of the nation.



China: the people and family values

Only when I left Shanghai for the Province of Anhui did I begin to discover the real China. My school attachment provided a valuable opportunity, not only to gain an insight into the practical challenges facing the present education system, but also to come face-to-face with the people.

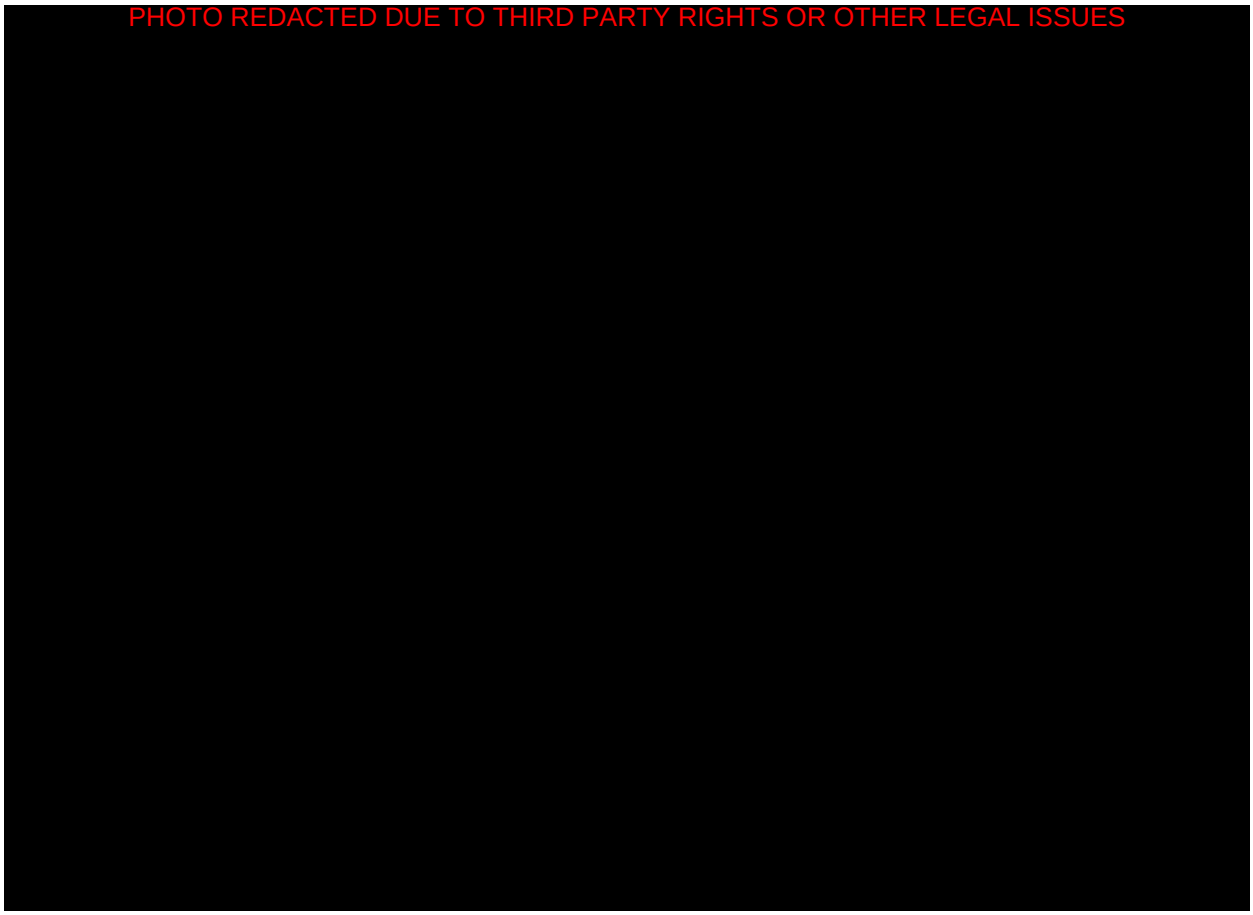
For me, no part of my whole visit to China was more poignant than my visit to lunch at the family home of one of the children. Sitting at the table in the dining room in a small family apartment in Heifei, I began to understand the value of what it means to be Chinese. It's about togetherness, perfectionism and a sense of national pride. It occurred to me that, in many ways, the Chinese have got it right. Here was an extended family working for each other with all the values you'd hope to find in any caring family in the UK and with an unwritten mission statement 'to achieve the very best possible, given the limited resources we have'.

Chicken feet for honoured guests

Here, in this basic five-roomed apartment, located up a few flights of stairs in a tenement building, lives 10-year-old Lisa with her mum, dad and grandma. This being a special occasion, with honoured guests from the UK invited for lunch, both of Lisa's grandmas have been drafted in to make the lunch. The lunch menu reflects the best available: fish soup, pork knuckle, soft dumplings, chicken feet and the famous hairy crab. The grandmas have obviously been preparing the food for some time, probably days judging by the way each one of the 60 or so dumplings has been individually moulded to exactly the same dimensions. This alone reflects the attention to detail that is endemic in the Chinese way of life and provides an example of the strive for perfection. I doubt that I would find two better cooks in China than Lisa's grandmas.

The chopstick challenge

Sitting down to eat, I am faced with a feeling of absolute guilt. Firstly, I am aware that even with the assistance of the other invited guests from the school, there is far too much food on the table to be consumed at one sitting. Secondly, at least three-quarters of what's available is unfamiliar and looks to be fairly inedible. This was confirmed by the sight of the fish heads in the soup, which insisted on looking back at me. It occurs to me, however, that the purchase of ingredients for this one lunch must represent a significant proportion of the monthly food budget for the family. Here, then, was a Chinese family offering the absolute best that money could afford and I know that I'm going to find it difficult to show my respect by doing justice to the meal. Add to this the challenge of chopsticks and you have a recipe for unease.



Humble unity

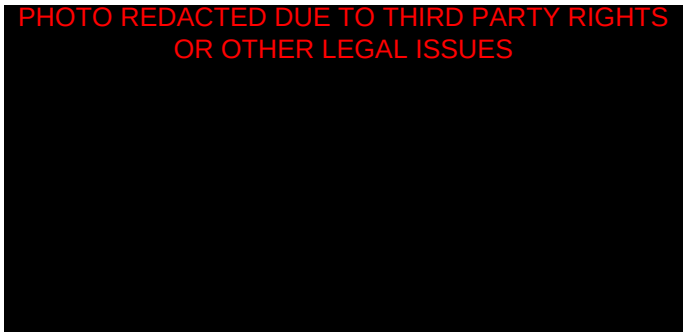
This feeling epitomises my general feeling of inadequacy throughout the visit. In every place we visited, we were treated to the very best hospitality possible and a level of courtesy seldom seen in the UK. It was a humbling experience. I reflected for a moment on those three attributes demonstrated by one family at that one meal time and considered how they were endemic in the Chinese culture and how they showed themselves in the schools. The sense of unity, the strive for perfectionism and national pride are evident throughout the system, from martial arts to ping-pong.

The schools: a common purpose

Once in school, the sense of national pride is evident in abundance. An early morning, flag-raising assembly involves the whole school participating in chanting, singing, exercising and military style saluting. The ceremony provides an opportunity for all pupils to pledge their allegiance to the cause. The Young Pioneers who lead the assembly are regarded highly among their peers. It soon becomes evident that here is a culture where individuals are willing to sacrifice their own ambitions in pursuit of the common cause. This sense of commitment continues into the classroom.

The classroom: no pain, no gain

Entering the classrooms, the first thing that strikes you is the lack of personal space. The overall picture is one of function rather than comfort. With 60 students in a class, it is difficult for individuals to gain identity. The curriculum is very knowledge-based and heavy on instruction, and rote learning is prevalent. Lessons tend to engage all pupils in the same activity and it is difficult for teachers to move away from the set text. Signs around the classroom state 'no pain, no gain'. Whereas, in the UK, this kind of pedagogy is thought to be demotivating to learners, the students in China appear to accept it because, for them, education is considered a privilege.



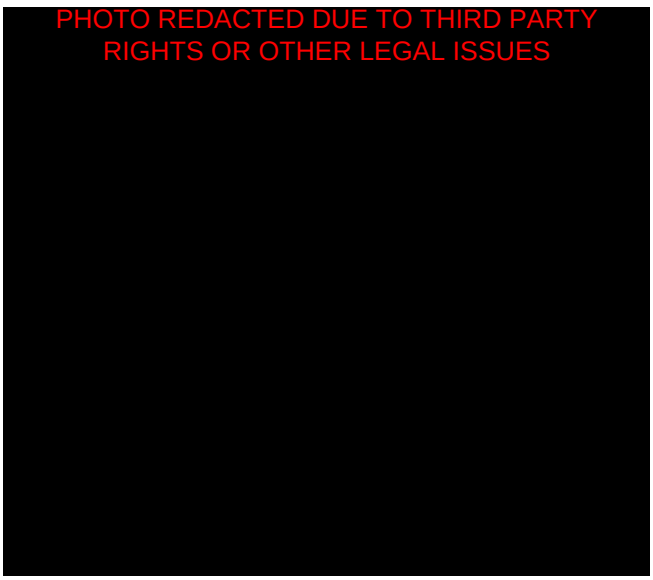
Rote, risk and quotas

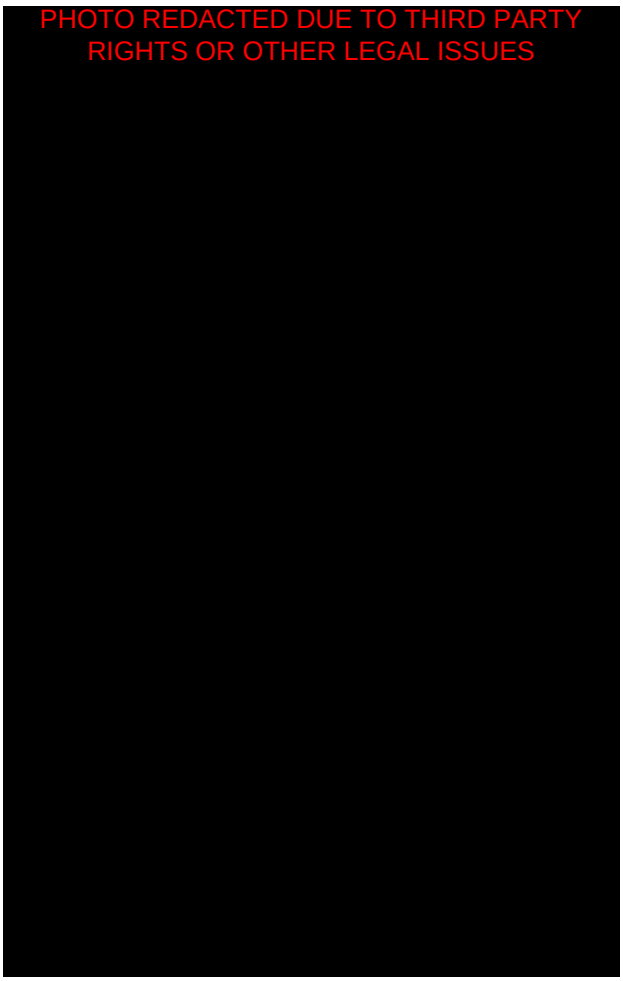
Here lies the dilemma. Striving for reform within the boundaries of a conventional system restricts the element of risk taking in the classroom that is necessary to bring about change. This, for me, is the point at which parallels can be drawn between the education systems in our respective countries. The vision is of a personalised education system that adapts itself to the needs of the individual and therefore enables learners to fulfil their potential within it. Prescribed strategies may be desirable for a system that craves for national control, but the approach reduces the opportunity for spontaneity, discourages creative thinking and restricts initiative. It's the difference between continuing to produce managers who can deliver quotas and enabling new generation of leaders who are entrepreneurs.

Excellence, enjoyment and ping-pong

In the UK, the concept of excellence and enjoyment encourages schools to take ownership of the curriculum. Personalised learning is high on the agenda and the embryo of some educational reforms can be found in network research activities focused on classroom practice. Project schools in China are responding to the personalised challenge by providing a more integrated approach to curriculum delivery. Classroom activities are set up, for example, to encourage students to explain the mathematical process behind their answers and to give feedback about a set text. The system also provides an extensive range of creative after-school activities, for example art, drama, calligraphy, hobby club, martial arts and ping-pong.

There is an understanding that, in the new economies that are developing, new ideas and putting them into practice is vital to economic competitiveness. As a result, there is a recognition that education must develop the capacity of learners to generate new ideas and innovate. There can be no doubt that the student's commitment to learning, the inherent belief in the value of education and the sense of national ambition will ensure that the future of China is safe in the hands of their children.





Lessons for school leadership

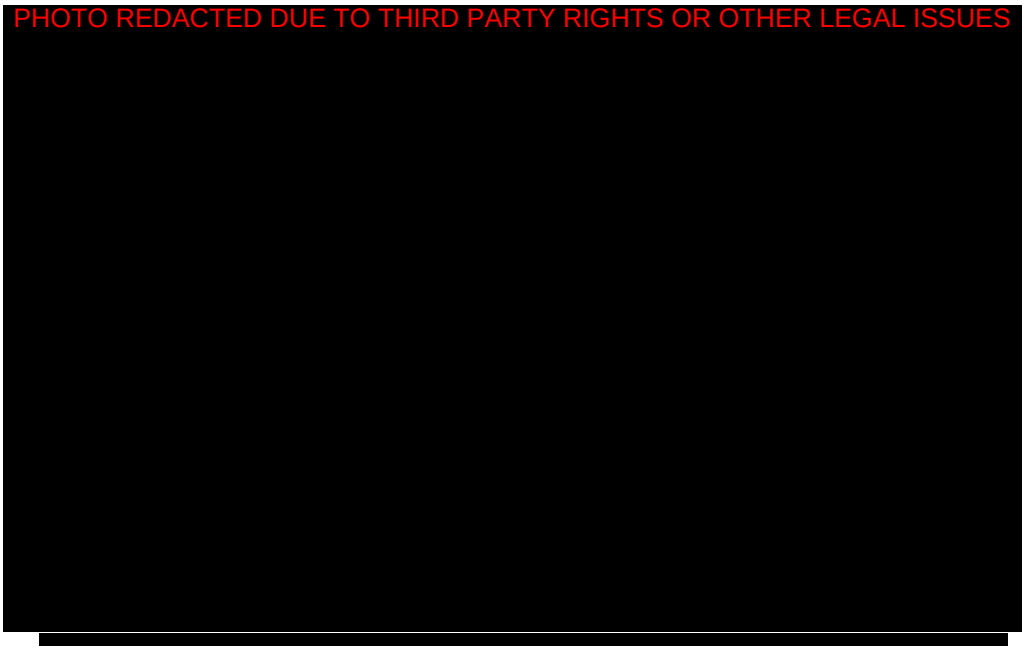
- Cultural differences between China and the UK present different challenges to educational leaders.
- China and its people have a clear sense of national identity. This instils a sense of common purpose that is evident throughout the system and lends itself to a national approach to teaching and learning.
- Appropriate national policies could provide a suitable framework from which to address the needs of educating for the new economies.

In contrast, the UK is a nation of significantly diverse cultures and beliefs. Individual schools and school networks need to take account of the values of the local community in which they operate. This requires autonomous school leaders who can adapt national policies to suit local needs.

It also raises the question of conflicting accountabilities: how do school leaders in the UK address the tension of allowing space for individuals within the boundaries of common expectations?

School leaders should consider the following issues.

- Recognise that there is a value to uniformity. Personalisation should not equal disparity. There is a need to establish in every school a concept of 'the way we do things around here'.
- Create an overall culture of common purpose: in simple terms, establish the mission statement. This is essential to achieving the ultimate aim.
- Engage with families. Support from home has a significant influence on a pupil's attitude to learning.
- Encourage risk taking. If we are to produce the entrepreneurs of the future, we need to facilitate learning environments where mistakes are seen as learning opportunities.
- Find local solutions to national issues.



Made in China

Learning China: leading with respect

Jan Buckland
Kingsholm Church of England Primary School

Sue Hyland
Houghton Kepier Sports College

> “Visit China with an open mind. Cast aside preconceptions and prepare to be challenged in your thinking. You will see students hungry to learn and dedicated teachers and leaders.”

Learning and leading in China

> “Leaders in the schools we visited were very clear about their priorities.”

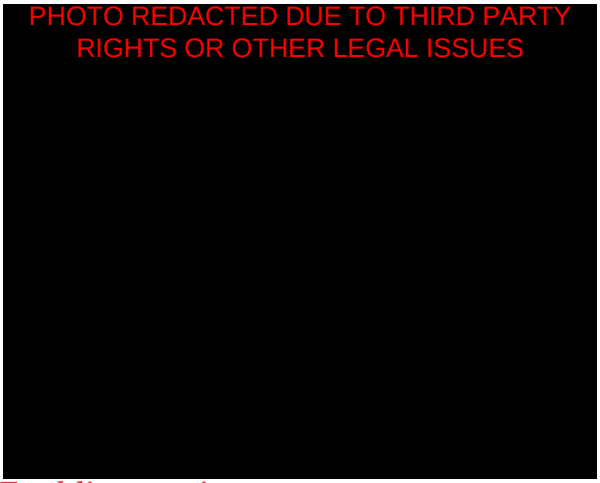
In general, we found the aims of school leaders in Heifei to be very similar to those in schools in the UK. Examples of common aims in both countries include learning how to learn, learning how to be a citizen and learning how to create. Leaders in the schools we visited were very clear about their priorities, which we found to be more succinctly expressed and different to those in the UK. Typically, schools told us their curriculum priorities were Chinese, English, information and communications technology (ICT) … and table tennis.

The school leaders that we spoke to had a determination to change the curriculum towards a more integrated and cross-curricular approach, with the specific aim of developing more flexible learners for the future. While the school leaders felt that learners had good subject knowledge, there was some concern that they did not develop the independence they see in schools in the UK. Educators wanted to use subjects as a vehicle to enrich the process of learning as well as achieving good outcomes.

Respect

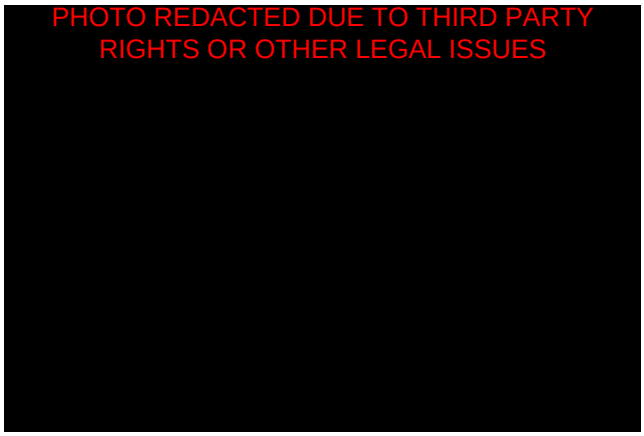
> “There was a universal respect for education.”

In all of the schools we visited, we recognised a universal respect for education by teachers, students and their families. We felt that the practice of students and staff returning to the family at lunchtime helped to reinforce social values. This respect is demonstrated by students’ attitudes and the relationship between them and with their teachers that was very positive. The students we observed can be both very orderly and relaxed at the same time. Another feature of the system in Heifei that we found interesting was the care and respect given to retired teachers, who are looked after in their retirement at the age of 60, with an entitlement to accommodation on the school campus.



Enabling environment

We found schools to be very ordered places, using music and routines to enable safe movement and activities. This set the tone for the universal sense of purpose and calm and for the provision of opportunities for reflective study. This was in spite of class sizes that typically totalled 60 students in a class and the absence of teaching assistants.



There was evidence of the use of subject specialists with young students and lessons being taught with similar ability groupings. Each of these factors has a significant impact on both what is taught and how it is taught.

In the primary school, we were interested to see that the curriculum is very knowledge-based and organised into specific subjects taught by subject specialists, more like the secondary model in the UK. Within these subjects, we found evidence of thematic work, for example work on the environment and on social manners. Sometimes schools have a themed week, for example a sports, science or English week, while others have afternoon activities which allow students to choose creative options.

Students and sleep

> “Students wanted a festival of sleep.”

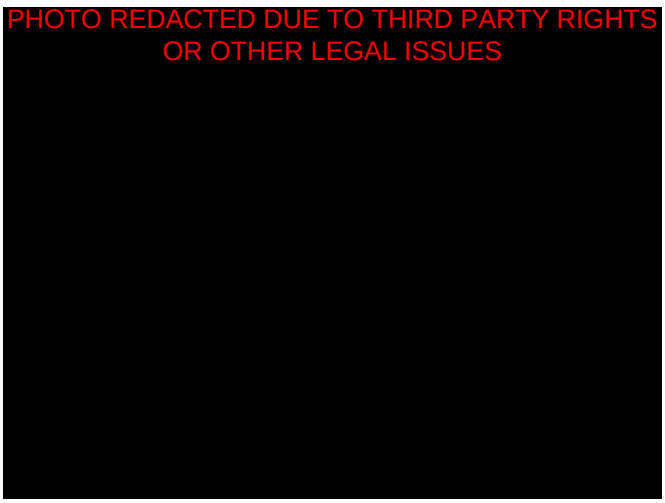
Secondary schools in Heifei follow a similar model to the UK, with the curriculum divided into specific subject areas. One difference we observed is that the students tend to have their own teaching room and the teachers are more peripatetic. This was similar in primary schools too.

The curriculum in both primary and secondary schools is supported by what we would consider to be great amounts of homework: typically five hours a night. Certainly, secondary school students work very long school days and then until late evening on their homework. When the students were studying festivals and were asked to invent their own, many of the students wanted a festival of sleep as they all expressed how hard they worked.

Performance, parents and praise

All students showed a great pride in their work. Teachers were quick to praise and students were also very keen to praise their peers. On many occasions, simultaneous clapping was observed.

Assessment appeared to be summative rather than formative. We saw no evidence of students assessing their own or the work of their peers in either secondary or primary classes, other than in lessons where students praised their peers. We did, however, see evidence of parental involvement in the assessment of students' learning in primary schools.



Other aids to assist performance that supported learning included school exercises and unheated classrooms with open windows. In one primary classroom, music was being played 'to keep students focused and calm' and, in the same school, students were encouraged to bring water bottles.

Engagement and expectations

> “Schools openly communicate their values and beliefs.”

In the schools that we visited, students' attitudes to and engagement in their learning were outstanding. All students seen were extremely hardworking and very well behaved, with even the youngest students showing great powers of concentration. They listened intently to their teachers and were excellent at following instructions. All students were extremely polite and showed great respect to adults and each other. The cultural impact of an education system that openly communicates values and beliefs through role modelling, expectations and education was clearly evident.

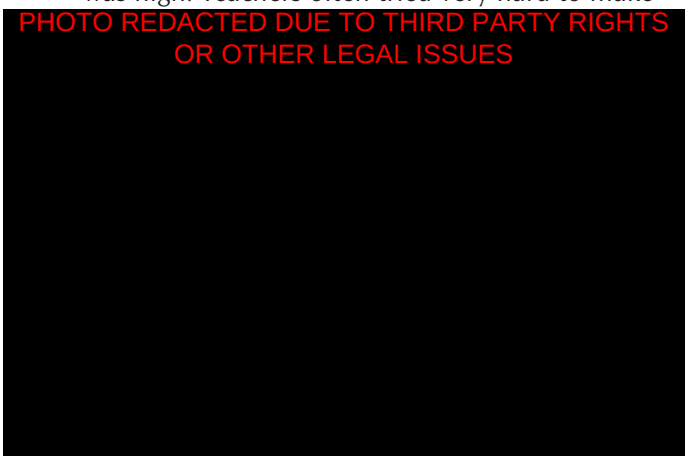
There was clear evidence of high standards in many subjects and areas. These included levels of knowledge and information, spoken English, mathematics, environmental education, calligraphy, fitness and ping-pong and citizenship. High standards were also evident in some pupil-led activities. When questioned, the students could clearly explain the knowledge that they had learnt.

We saw fewer examples of applied knowledge or the linking of knowledge from one area of learning with another. Although there were a few examples, our impression was that key knowledge, experiences and skills are very subject specific and not woven together in a way that makes it easy for greater pupil-directed, personalised learning.

Clear progression and continual determination

A significant majority of the teaching observed was delivered from the textbook, thus providing very clear progression of knowledge. Therefore the main teaching strategy was didactic, although there was evidence of, and discussion about, the

move towards more interactive teaching and learning styles. Typically, the teacher would instruct the class and then ask questions. Students were often heard chanting in unison, especially when reading in their Chinese and English lessons. We saw some very skilled teachers who tried to be innovative within very tight boundaries. They showed continual determination to deliver the best lessons. We saw many very good features of teaching: lessons observed were well planned and well paced; teachers had high expectations of their students; and teachers' subject knowledge was high. Teachers often tried very hard to make



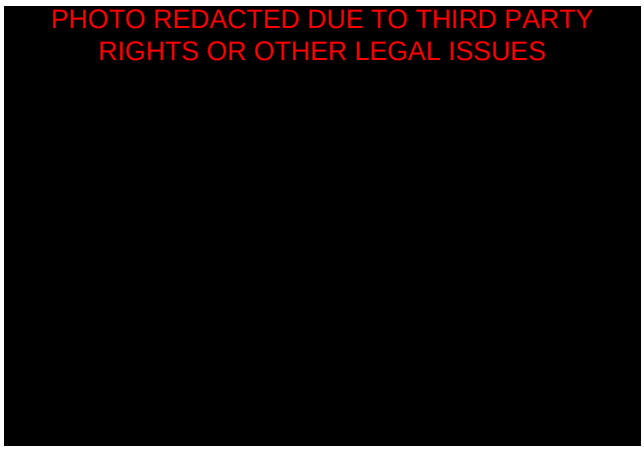
the lesson more relevant and interesting. An example of this included an interactive music lesson where students were asked to go out to the front and, as a group, either enact a drama based on the music or play an instrument.

Primary students were also often encouraged to talk as a group of four for just a few minutes to discuss an answer to a teacher's question. Opportunities for students to think for themselves were limited and so needed to be specifically planned into lessons in order to develop thinking and problem-solving skills.

Teaching and teachers

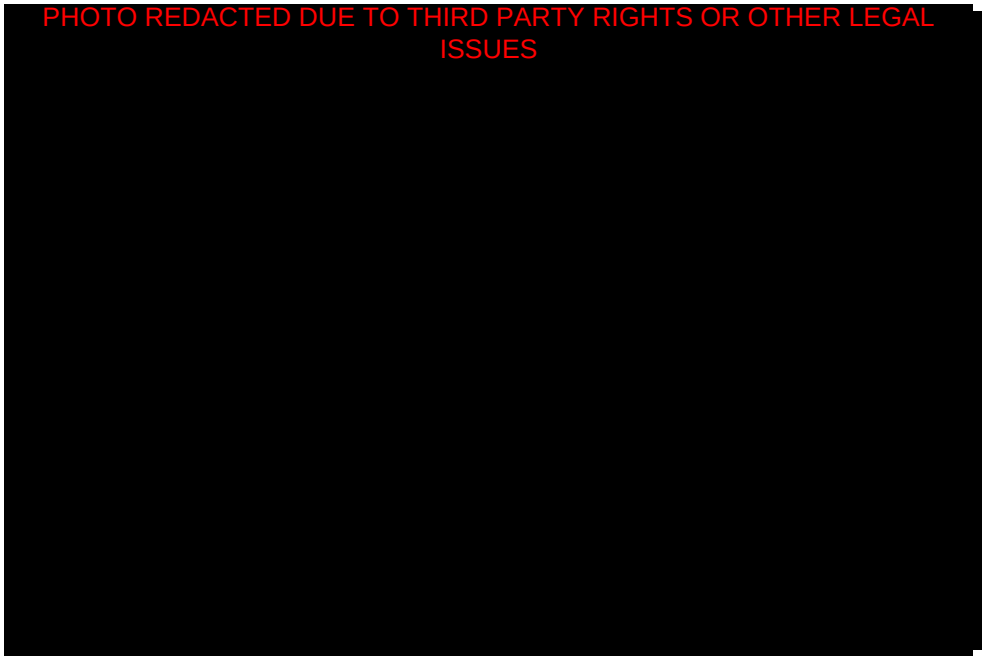
> "Teachers' professional development is taken very seriously by school leaders in China."

Teaching methods were often restricted because of the lack of space, the large numbers of students in a class and the range of resources in many subjects being too small. Class work involved completing the appropriate page of the appropriate book, making it hard to differentiate work other than by outcome or by providing additional support.
In the UK, classes generally receive three levels of differentiated work and those with special educational needs (SEN), in particular, have separate programmes. The only example of SEN teaching was seen in one school where extra money from parents had been provided for an SEN teacher and a part-time educational psychologist. SEN students were identified by their teachers and, if parents allowed, these students were given extra sessions twice a week for 90 minutes for 24 sessions. The majority of work



focused on improving students' spatial awareness, for example through copying patterns, finding the same as or odd one out, sequencing numbers and finding the way through mazes. All activities were timed and, each time, the expectation was that they got quicker. The ratio of adults to students was 1 to 2. In all of the other schools, students who were behind in their learning were given extra homework with the expectation that parents would help them to catch up with their learning at home.

Teachers' professional development is taken very seriously by school leaders in China. All teachers receive additional training during the summer with longer periods of training every few years. They are also given the opportunity to observe their peers teach in open lessons. Each teacher must do a certain number of open lessons per term, which other teachers in the school are invited to watch, similar to our peer observation in the UK. On average, teachers teach 10 to 15 lessons a week. The rest of the time is spent on department meetings, planning and marking.



Made in China

‘I’ in China, ‘we’ in the West

David Bateson
Ash Field School

> “Our respective pedagogies and curricula are moulded by, and reflect, key differences. The ‘I’ in China is busy processing towards a corporate end, while the ‘we’ in the West are busy in the process of individual means.”

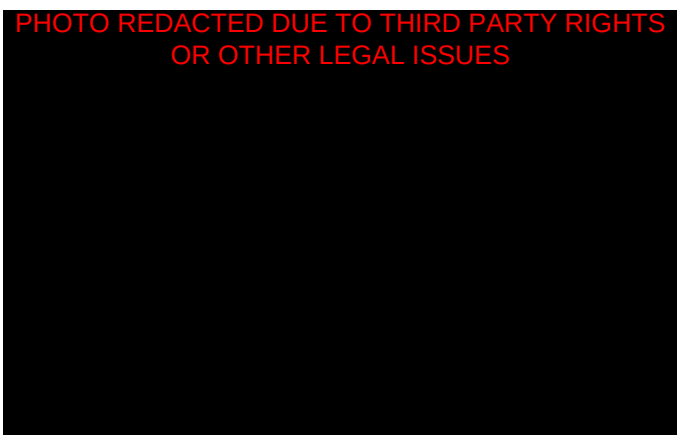
Message in a massage

Dr Lee's lecture preceded the physical. If there had been any doubts – and there were many in the haze of jet lag – that everything was connected, our collective shouting in response to the massage and the fingered acupuncture dispelled them. There we were, nine school leaders spread out in a Shanghai university medical school room, face down and pummelled for an hour: distributed leaders sharing their pain. We were wide awake and raring to go.

Dr Lee's manikin could have doubled as an illustration for the body politic. China is formidably connected and collaboratively competitive: individual achievement harnessed collectively and focused on common goals. Yet, as with the West, this doesn't prevent there being legless beggars outside Dolce and Gabbana. Nor does their concern for inner well-being and harmony with nature stop Tai Chi from being performed in the smog.

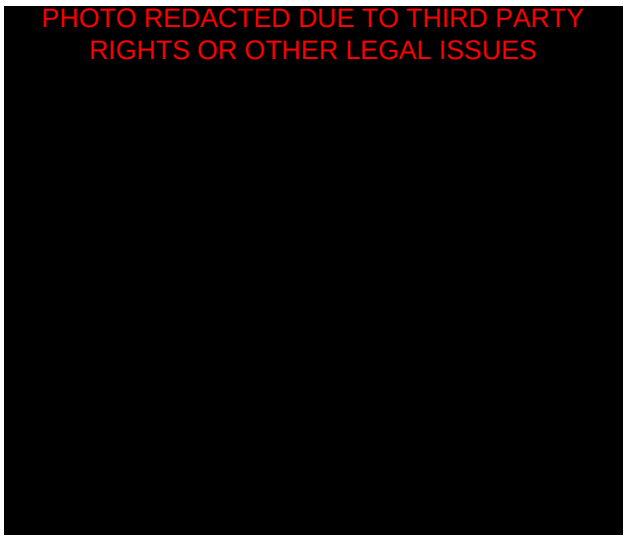
What do you mean, 'behaviour problems'?

Our first school visit in Heifei was a revelation, the ordered and serried ranks of the children sharply at odds with the frenzied free-for-all of the traffic outside. 3,500 primary students – all only young children – smiling and saluting their honoured guests at the morning's flag-waving ceremony. Friendly, welcoming, relaxed but orderly, their teachers had no need to reprimand or overtly control. Safe, secure, exuding well-being. Later, these thousands would perform their daily exercises in the same manner, no pushing or shoving, obedient and beaming: yes, and slim. Perhaps the Healthy Schools award got there ahead of us.



The right way to success

Inside the basic classrooms, not surprisingly, the same orderliness was in evidence for the 68 or more children packed snugly in their rows. Energetic, well-paced lessons full of recitation, repetition, literal questions and answers, and affirming teachers. Respectful, rigorous, knowledge-based education with that drive that comes from recognising it as a precious commodity: disaffection a luxury and an unthinkable one at that. Education at once directed towards the global rise of China and yet firmly rooted in its folk traditions. If the English were Chinese, Morris dancing would be in the core curriculum.

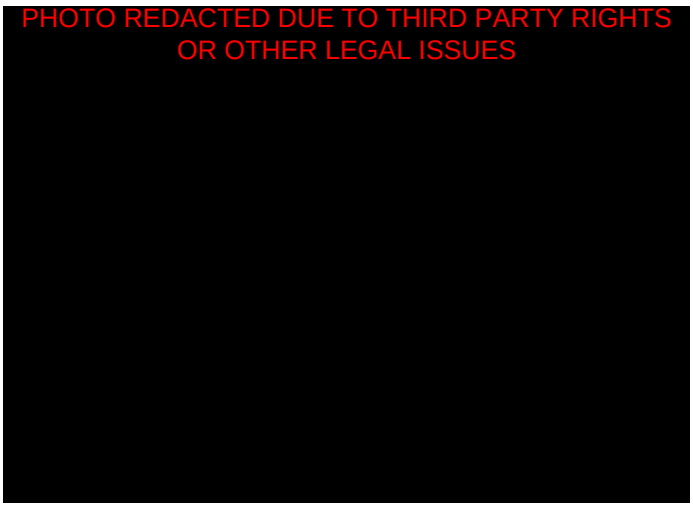


Me, me, me

Initially, we saw much of what we would dislike about our own system and the Chinese themselves were asking us for our views about a more integrated approach to learning. It would be easy to criticise the formality, the didactic approach, the set texts, the lack of differentiation and group work, the restricted opportunities for interaction and reasoning within class, the bare walls of the classrooms: but would it be any more than inflicting our own western values? Would it be the classic championing of the individual, the 'I', the 'me' culture, the romanticising of ourselves as dynamic, flexible, creative learners?

Secure beings

So how else could we portray what we saw? The classes were large, monocultural and, in effect, streamed partly through parents' ability to pay. Children were attentive, diligent, responsive, keen to please, smiling, well behaved and with a strong sense of cultural identity. They appeared respectful of each other, of adults and of their surroundings. They seemed hungry for learning and were encouraged in this by their families. Family life is incredibly important to the Chinese and the one child policy places a premium on the place of the child within that family. Families live typically in apartments that children return to at lunchtime and in which they do many hours of



homework in the evening. The effect appears to be that children only socialise with other children when they are at school and that adolescence, outside of school, is experienced in solitary study.

Norm, not criterion-referenced

This drive for learning and self-improvement results in very little personal time, with children often attending extra lessons after school or on Saturdays and Sundays, especially if they have 'fallen behind'. The identification of students who have 'fallen behind' is as close to an admission of the existence of SEN as we found. This work ethic extends to adults who seem to have very little holiday or free time. Ironically, this is not unlike the American work ethic. Also, like the Americans, neither do the Chinese seem to offer much of a welfare safety net for those who either make little of their education or fail to stay in employment.

The rise of the Chinese economy as a global force has been well documented and the range from poverty to extreme wealth is as marked, or even more marked, than in a capitalist country. Yet the aspirations are clear: to 'live in an English house and drive an American car', as one of our Chinese hosts put it to us.

Survival and social cohesion

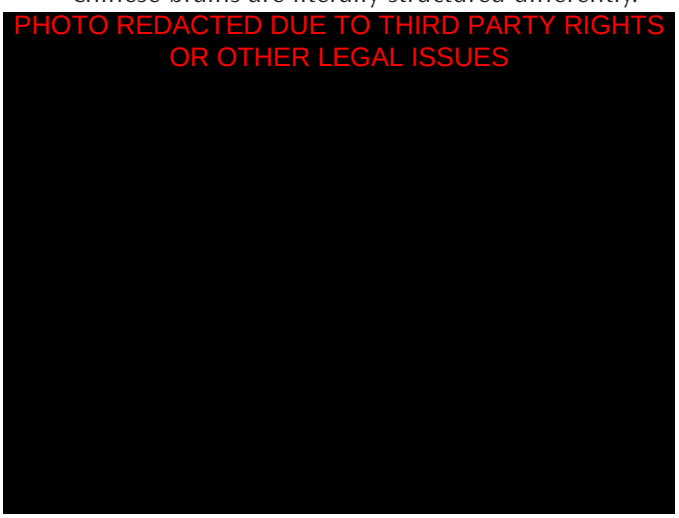
The 'I' in China is forged out of a collective drive and acceptance of the greater good. It is knowledge-based, traditional and inspired by a kind of survivalist mentality with no feat being too arduous and no sacrifice being too great. There is a collective attitude, one where thinking, feelings and behaviours all line up. It is a world seeking assonance, reconciling the cognitive, the affective and the connotative domains. Modern China is not naturally a critical culture of institutions or leaders and it would be a surprise if that conformity were not to be reflected in its schools. It would also be a surprise if the process of education, as evidenced in its outputs of economic growth, were to be lightly jettisoned, notwithstanding arguments that economic growth is based on relatively cheap labour and industrialisation.

Challenging creativity

The 'we' in the West is a messy multicultural mix of differing attitudes, where we celebrate the fact that our attitudes are misaligned and where our thinking can be at odds with our behaviours and our feelings. We come at things the other way on, forging the 'we' out of the many 'I's'. This manifests itself in a curriculum of many traditions and in classrooms of mixed abilities, working to and from personalisation, enquiry and interaction: not presenting the right answer but finding the right answer for one's own self. It is an altogether more relativistic and dynamic model, one geared, we believe, to the fast-changing world and its new models of knowledge and economic activity: the world of impermanence, fluidity and many different jobs rather than one career. This is the world of dissonance and those who struggle with the ambivalence of the cognitive and the connotative become the disaffected.

The wall

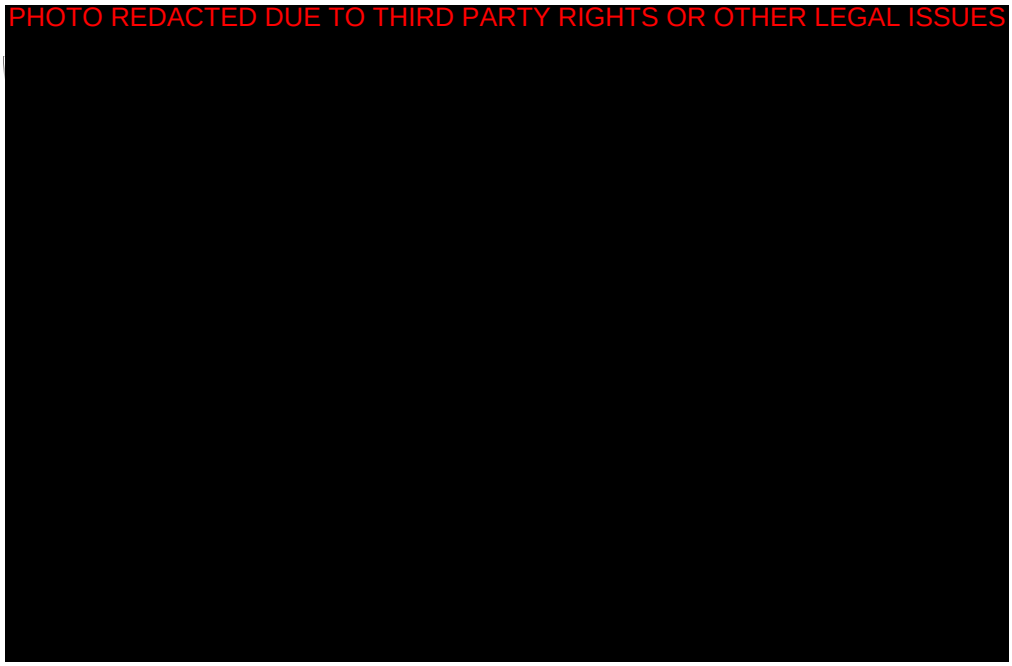
Can there ever be a meeting of minds given these different traditions and, more importantly maybe, different thought processes? The Mandarin language depends on the acquisition of thousands of pictograms and, if one subscribes even a little to the Vygotsky 'language is thought' approach, then this idiographic approach must impact on thinking. Interestingly, since our return, research of brain scans purports to show that Chinese brains are literally structured differently.



The language depends on fast and minute attention to visual and aural detail, the slightest stroke or change of intonation having a significant impact on meaning. The children hang on the teachers' words and actions with similar attention: conformity creating meaning. The West could be crudely characterised as the opposite: a world celebrating the nuance of double meaning, or establishing meaning through breaking the language conventions and satirising the established way. Our respective pedagogies and curricula are moulded by, and reflect, these differences. The 'I' in China is busy processing towards a corporate end, while the 'we' in the West are busy in the process of individual means.

Key points for leaders

- Such different cultures could and should not attempt to replicate each other's methodologies. China appears to be a country where people appreciate what they do have and are not angry about what they do not have.
- Order, respect and conformity can liberate learners, giving them the security to make mistakes.
- In China, there is a recognition of the need for change and a wish to inject creative thinking into the curriculum. We, in the UK, need to inject the shared expectations and common goals within which to set our approach to creativity.
- The positive impact of the family on learning and attitudes towards schooling is profound in China. If ever we needed convincing that early support and the agenda of Every Child Matters is crucial, then China is an excellent reference point.
- The leadership of education in England carries a very different responsibility: the creation of the future as well as the operational mandate of national policy.



Made in China

The Chinese way: culture, clapping and curriculum

Sue Blackburn
Helmdon Primary School

Hilary Craik
Stevenson Junior School

> “A knowledge-based curriculum may be the first step in providing education for all, but very quickly there is a realisation that a skills-based curriculum developing creative thinking is needed.”

Starting points: beginning the journey

We cannot wait for great visions from great people, for they are in short supply at the end of history. It's up to us to light our own small fires in the darkness!

Handy, 1995 [2]

The starting point for our study visit to China was rooted in our experiences of participation in the joint NCSL and QCA project, Developing a 21st century curriculum (D21CC), in which each of us had been involved in lighting our own 'small fires' of innovative practice in our schools. As a result, we were interested to explore what this might look like in an international context.

At Stevenson Junior School, we have been looking at how we can redesign the curriculum to make it fit for the 21st century. We have taken the areas of learning from the Foundation Stage to build a skills-based curriculum for Key Stage 2. When Ofsted visited in September 2006, they were most impressed and encouraged us to continue with the work we were doing. We link learning into themed units and use ideas from the children to feed into the term's work. All of our teachers are actively involved in classroom enquiry and carry out projects to test ideas: they gather evidence to help them evaluate how successful these ideas are and then share their findings with others. Our main challenges are to:

- design a curriculum to meet the needs of all children
- teach and learn in appropriate styles
- build evaluation into the design to minimise risk
- ensure that the outcomes of Every Child Matters are worked towards
- make learning fun for all, adults included
- maintain our high standards in core subjects

At Helmdon Primary School, we have been using the outcomes of the D21CC project to explore our own practice regarding the leadership of curriculum innovation. The findings from the 50 schools involved in the project outlined the following nine factors as significant in leading curriculum innovation successfully in schools:

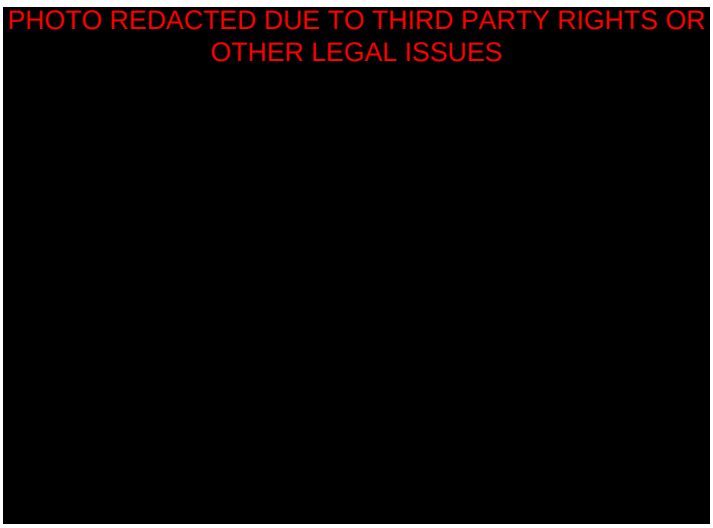
1. have a clear vision of what you want to achieve
2. focus on improving outcomes for pupils
3. engage and empower others
4. monitor and evaluate impact
5. root the innovation in a clear set of values
6. manage risk
7. communicate with stakeholders
8. be radical, think 'instead of' not 'extra to'
9. allow the innovation to grow from a creative process

It is against this background of practice in our schools and the findings of the research undertaken into leading curriculum innovation in other schools in NCSL's Leadership Network in England that we began our learning journey to China. With this in mind, our intention was to explore the leadership of education in China and in particular to look at the Chinese approach to curriculum reform.

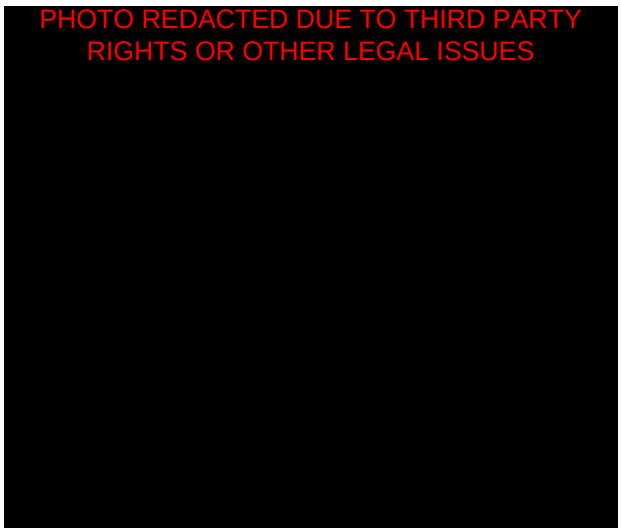
Culture

On arrival in China, we were struck by the generous hospitality of the people and by their eagerness to learn from us. Everyone wanted to know about our schools and our children. We became used to being treated like royalty. When 2,700 children were all lined up, saluting us and turning uniformly to face us as we walked past at the local martial arts school, we were truly humbled. Another humbling moment was each of us receiving a personalised photograph album on leaving Heifei. Our Chinese hosts went to so much trouble to make our study visit truly memorable.

The growth of the Chinese cities we visited was also a strong and lasting impression, although there was also evidence of extreme poverty, with beggars on most street corners, which presented a familiar paradox to that which we face in the UK. Everywhere you looked you could see evidence of new building work. We saw an exhibition of the vision for the future of Shanghai in the next 10 years, which captured the intended expansion of the city, incorporating numerous architectural designs drawn from both eastern and western traditions.



From our observations, it was noticeable that the single child policy in China seems to have contributed to a society where children are highly cherished and supported by their families. Education is highly valued. It is the centre of family life. Children can often be found in shop doorways of family businesses during the lunch break and after school, where school homework continues late into the evening. In the schools we visited, parents could also bring their children to school at the weekends for additional tutoring in curriculum subjects such as music and English. We were told by our Chinese hosts that the reason for this regime, particularly that involving the demands of homework, is because there is high competition for jobs, which means there is pressure on students to obtain good grades.



Clapping

We were given an opportunity to teach an English song to a class of children. One teacher found a guitar and the headteacher found a very willing class. After 20 minutes, a successful rendition of the song 'Magic Penny' could be heard ringing through the school. Just as we were about to finish, we were told that it was not yet the end of the lesson. Clapping rhythms, resulting in an impromptu version of 'Twist and Shout', was a quick solution.

Like English teachers, Chinese educators also highly value and praise students' achievements. A system of praise was used in the schools we visited, which rewarded achievement and effort both through open demonstrations of praise from peers and via special mention in school assemblies. Such examples of openly recognising and praising students were often accompanied, in true Chinese style, with rounds of co-ordinated clapping from staff and students alike.

Curriculum

China's approach to curriculum reform began in 1999. The Chinese approach to system level reform was mirrored in the practice of the schools we visited, with the implementation of a didactic, top-down model of structure and content delivered on a grand scale. However, there was also an evident emphasis on creating a curriculum that will meet the needs of future learners, a sentiment reflected in our own work in England for the D21CC project.

When we first went into schools with classes of 60 and saw very young children sitting in rows and all receiving the same teaching, we conjectured that the education system in China had nothing to teach us. We were soon proved wrong. Despite the fact that the classroom environments that we visited were very basic, often with bare walls, bare floors and very little equipment, we found numerous things which took us by surprise:

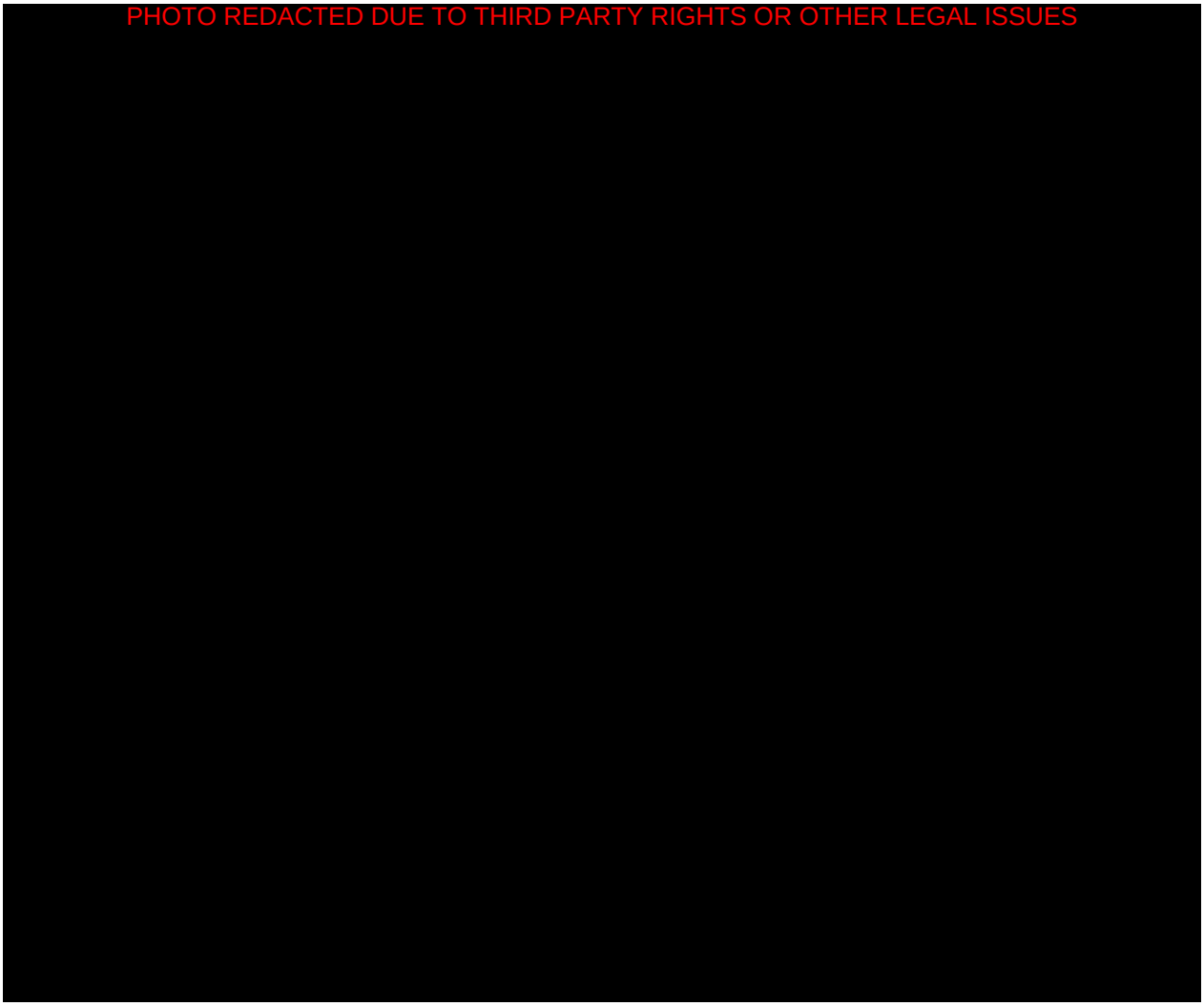
- happy children, all getting along with one another
- children willing to pay attention, even though the stimulation was not that great
- a feeling that, from a very young age, children valued education
- children who took responsibility for their own learning
- children who understood the need to learn
- expectations of school as a place to learn rather than be looked after and have fun
- children with a clear sense of parental expectations matched to teacher expectations
- parents' comments on homework
- teachers teaching for half of the week and preparing for the rest of the time
- partner work and talking in small groups
- all children going home for a long break at lunchtime with their families

We also saw teachers keen and eager to learn from one another. Peer observation is used widely. Each teacher has to carry out a certain number of open lessons that other teachers observe. What we didn't see, however, was:

- children behaving inappropriately
- a great deal of pastoral support
- teachers on playground duty
- continuing formative assessment
- differentiation
- children having ideas about how they would like to tackle problems

From our observations, schoolwork was made up of entries dictated in a book. Individual work written by children was all done at home. The book was not marked, however the hours of independent study and homework were. There was a lack of differentiation. Children who fell behind were given additional lessons and instructions to parents were issued.

In the schools we visited, the children were also often engaged in creative activities but were always directed to do so. We saw children in art lessons making clay pots, playing instruments as an enrichment activity, we saw a talent show and dancing, but there appeared to be limited room for free interpretation by the children. This was also evident in a science lesson we observed. The teacher had planned a practical lesson on gravity and acceleration. The pupils carried it out to the letter. When we asked a pupil, through an interpreter, if he could think of another way of gathering the same data, he looked puzzled and replied, "Why would you want to? This way works."



Our attendance at a provincial seminar was also eye-opening in considering the issue of the Chinese curriculum. There was open criticism among delegates of the Chinese education system and the type of learner that it produced. There was also a clarity relating to the aims of their curriculum reform, key elements of which included:

- more emphasis on speaking and listening
- increased use of ICT
- emphasis on increased interaction between pupils and between teachers and pupils
- examination results should be graded by a letter grading system, instead of using a percentage mark
- introduction to other cultures within new programmes for music and art

Thinking about the development of the new curriculum arose from research where increased practical activity and a decrease in traditional methods were seen to be the way forward. There was an emphasis on increased use of hands-on approaches. A recognition that children in America have a much greater self-confidence was also identified. A desire to develop this confidence in Chinese children was expressed. It was felt that children failed 'because they lack self-confidence'.

The Chinese way: reflections on the journey

Chinese children have good knowledge and a good fundamental education. They are dedicated learners who value education highly. The Chinese Education Bureau recognise the weaknesses in their system that develops learners whose scope, particularly in applying knowledge, is narrow. During the provincial curriculum reform conference that we attended, there was a realisation that our journey to curriculum reform needs to value highly our children's aptitude and ability to problem solve, debate, reason, challenge, question and think. These attributes are highly valued and recognised as being vital to the future success of our children both in the UK and China. We need to recognise the value of these attributes and ensure that they are a key element of the curriculum of the present and future.

As a result of our study visit, we are even more convinced that the children of the 21st century will need to be able to solve problems and think critically. Our curriculum must enable them to practice these skills. In doing so, our children will be more forthright and demanding and, as teachers and school leaders, we will have to manage that to the best of our ability: it is a side effect of encouraging independent, creative thinking. We recognise, however, that creativity and conformity are at opposite ends of the spectrum and that, in considering the development of an education system that will benefit from both, there is a difficult balance to achieve.

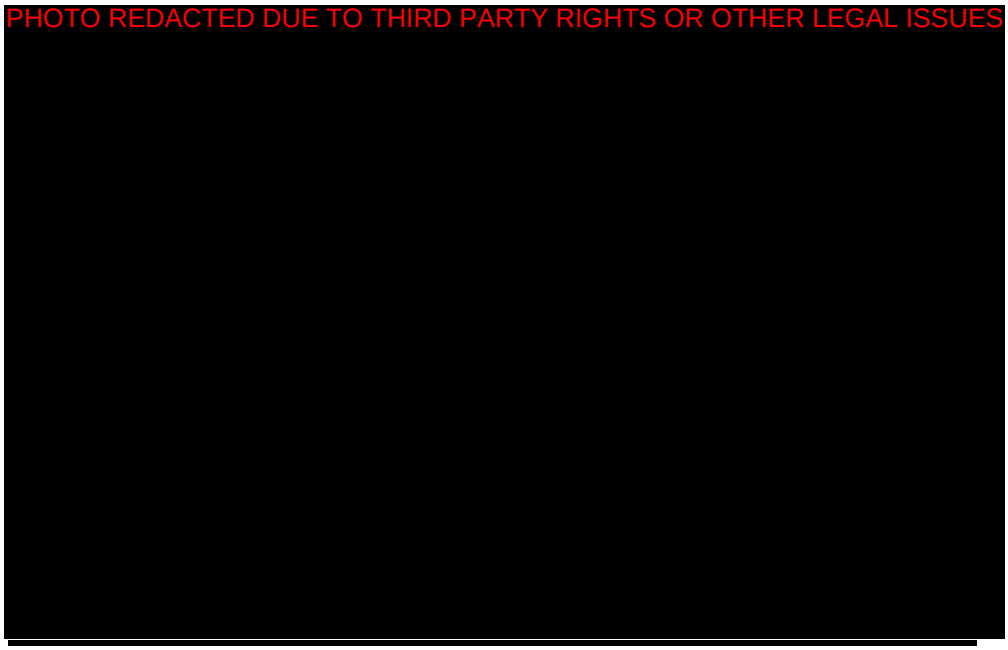
Questions for school leaders

- How we can develop, in our country, the clear expectations and boundaries which give Chinese children such security and include parents even more in their children's learning?
- Why is it that Chinese children learn, even when working from textbooks and with largely didactic teaching methods, yet our children in the UK often struggle, even when teaching and learning is more engaging and exciting?
- Is it possible to find a better balance between the needs of the individual and the needs of society than either country has at the moment?

In conclusion, we would want to say, in the light of our Chinese experience, that the challenge for our education system in England is to redevelop the culture of our nation so that education once more has a significant value to everyone. Then the challenge is for us to be clear about our expectations and our vision while holding on to a core commitment to creative thinking, both within the leadership of our curriculum design and within the learning experience of our students, now and into the future.

References

[2] Handy, 1995, The Empty Raincoat, Arrow Books Limited



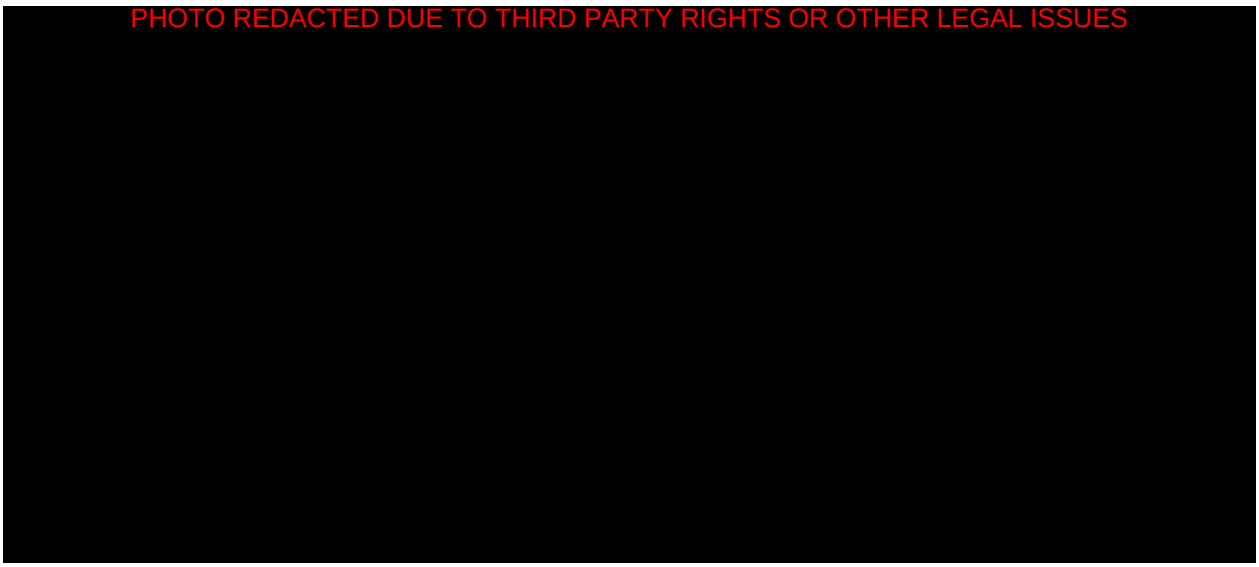
Made in China

Endnote: China in their hands

Richard Gerver
Grange Primary School

Ray Priest
The City Academy, Bristol

> “What a place, what a system. People passionate about learning and clear about how education will drive forward their future. We must develop that clear sense of purpose. We must continue to focus on the horizon.”



Key questions, key learning

One of our fascinations with the Chinese story is the nation's extraordinary rise as a global economic force and the effect of its development on our children and their futures. As leaders in education, the inevitable questions are: how has the education system influenced this revolution? And what must we do to learn from it?

The study visit has taught us many things. As a group, we arrived in China with preconceptions and opinions that needed to be explored in order to begin to understand the education system and how it appears to impact on the economic success that China currently enjoys.

For us, critical questions were, firstly, what is the effect of what is, reputedly, the world's largest educational reform programme as China meets the challenge of leadership within the global economy? Secondly, how do we need to develop our education system in England in the future in order to respond to that challenge? Perhaps the most significant issue to discuss is the perception that competition appears to be the key strategy to ensure that our economy and our children have a future in the global market place.

Education and the market economy

It might be argued that, in general terms, there appears to be a perception that it is as a result of China's high academic success that the competitive advantage once enjoyed by the West has been diminished. Such a view is often accompanied by the suggestion that, in the West, we must raise our game and increase our educational achievement in order to level the playing field.

China and India between them already account for 40 per cent of the world's workforce and China would appear to see its place in the global economy very clearly indeed. Interestingly, it does not demonstrate a desire to take on the established multinational organisations that are the cornerstones of western economies and neither does it seek to replace them. As a nation, China has found its 'gap in the market' and is exploiting it very efficiently by creating a workforce that can manufacture products cheaply and with consistent quality. It does not seek to replace western industries, but rather to service them.

China can, as it has proved, attract huge investment and income to ensure its financial growth. It does not want to replace Microsoft, for example: it wants to produce for it. This understanding puts the Chinese education system and its curriculum reform programme in a different context: one that might be considered to be far more optimistic for our children and their future as global citizens.

The needs of the economy, the needs of the individual

There is little doubt that the relentless drive to create the highly academic, mentally focused and intellectually efficient young people that typified our school visit experience in China was, in our eyes, narrow in its scope in terms of our values

and beliefs about education in our schools in England. In particular, our experiences of the Chinese education system at work, both in the classroom and the curriculum, appeared to be diametrically opposed to the focus on personalisation currently evident in the reform of the curriculum in the UK. That does not make the agenda for the development of the education system in China right or wrong, just different from that which exists in England.

What we saw during our study visit were happy learners who possessed great stamina when it came to study. Our interactions with many of the older students in the schools we visited demonstrated these attributes, but also exposed what we would consider to be weaknesses and were also recognised as such by our Chinese hosts in considering the future development of teaching and learning in their context. For example, students found it hard to discuss, to question, to evolve personal opinion or new thinking. This was seen to be partly as a result of the ethos of the education system in China, which promotes conformity: an ethos that expects the student to fit within the system rather than a system that is expected to evolve around the student.

The efficient workforce that China is creating reflects national priorities: an economy based on efficiency and high productivity with highly competitive labour costs. It is not only the education system that has a part to play in this but also the entire political and cultural ethos of this extraordinary country. Chinese educators are well aware that, currently, their system is not designed to develop innovators, creative thinkers or entrepreneurs. However, at present, this does not appear to be their way of seizing success in the global market place or filling the 'gap in the market'.

Exposing our 'gap in the market'

The experience leads us to consider our 'gap in the market' and indeed China's acceptance of that market. Our Chinese hosts shared with us their admiration for the West and for the creative and innovative cultures we have developed both within and beyond our education systems. There was also admiration for western business and the power of the global industries borne out of a spirit of adventure and risk. There was reinforcement, too, of the message that China does not want to develop an education system that produces a populace to compete: rather it has designed a system that can work in harmony.

As a result of our study visit experience, we have learnt that, as school leaders, we must celebrate the current vision within our system. We must look to strengthen further our focus on skills development, on the soft skills that create leadership, creativity, entrepreneurship and, most importantly, individuality, because it is these skills that will fill the gap in the global market place.

Have we found the secret of success?

Has China found the blueprint for success? As with the findings of our own project work on leading curriculum innovation in England, we have found that no such blueprint exists because context matters. In our view, it is rather the case that the Chinese education system has begun to find its own context.

To compare our education systems and look for which is better is not the way forward. What we have learned is that China is confidently playing to its strengths and its education system is successful because it is building on those strengths. The future of China is in its own hands. Our response should be to celebrate and build on the strengths of our own education system. Through our educational leadership we must develop the skills that are envied within our western freethinking culture. What is clear is that our so-called soft skills are hard currency in the 21st century.

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