

# *Competition — A Double-Edged Sword in Educational Change in Mainland China*

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*The need for continuous reform in education to meet the challenges in changes to society, to the economy and to different political situations is widely acknowledged. However, the issue of what the lever and change strategy should be remains unresolved. Education authorities in many places have resorted to accountability among schools as policy levers. Underlying the accountability movement is the belief that under a competitive system, schools will become more receptive to change and become more effective. Some academic researchers doubt the*

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*effectiveness of such a movement and warn of undesirable side effects such a movement may bring about. This paper reports the case of a junior secondary school in a large city in Mainland China where market forces and competition were adopted as the lever to build up the drive for change and achieve better results. In the case school, it was found that teachers responded to the pressure of market force and competition in adopting change and achieving the goals set. Students' performances in public examinations and inter-school extra-curricular activities were impressive which was seen as of prime importance by the school management and parents. However, behind this rosy picture was an absence of a collaborative culture among teaching staff, and the loss of moral purpose, both are essential for the long-term sustainable development of quality education.*

*Key words: education policy, China, education change*

## **Introduction**

Substantial educational reform has recently been taking place in many countries. This wave of reform movement can in part be regarded as a response to the challenges of globalization that many economists, sociologists and educators see as an irreversible trend (see, for example, Hargreaves, 2003; Jarvis, 2007). The rationale is that if schools and the education system in a given place do not change, students, as well as the whole economy, will lose out in terms of competitiveness in the globalized economy (see, for example, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1996)

To achieve this goal, many governments have adopted measures in line with new managerialism and principles of accountability. Behind this new managerialism and accountability is the basic assumption that competition will create the impetus essential to success in changes (Whitty, 2002). This paper addresses the question of whether a strategy of inducing a culture of competition in schools is effective in leading to school improvement?

## **Market Force as a Lever for Inducing School Improvement**

Apple (2001), in analyzing the current state of education reform in the United States, points out that one of the major driving forces behind educational reforms is the argument that public schools, like other public organizations, have been too conservative and slow in responding to the needs of the “client.” Cuban (2004) comes to a similar conclusion after examining the nature of educational reform:

... business leaders, jolted by global competition with Japan and Germany, mobilized civic and policy elites in another school reform movement. Once more, an alleged mismatch of skills between entry-level workers, especially those in cities, and the economy became reformers’ rationale for changing the schools. This time, the business-inspired reforms included giving parents more choice about which schools their children attended, installing a standardized curriculum in all schools, measuring students’ achievement by a panoply of tests, and enforcing steel-tempered rules making schools accountable for their students’ performance. (p. 159)

The advocates of managerialism have been successful not only in the United States, but also in other places. In England, for example, private schools are seen as a rational alternative to public schools (Ball, 1999). In Hong Kong, managerialism has crept into the core of educational policy. Though public schools still dominate the educational scene, the rapid increase of direct subsidized schools means that quasi-private schools are eating into the turf of primary and secondary schools. Indeed, the spread of such view has become so extensive that Apple (2001) writes:

Such policies almost never require justification any more. They have become the common-sense of an emerging international consensus. (p. 17)

Market forces and competition are the thrust of managerialism. As Cuban (2004) has noted: “In short, public schooling in the past three decades has become more and more like business” (p. 160). Schools are expected to be run as a business. They need to respond to the demands of the clients (i.e., students and parents). If schools fail to attract parents

and students, they will unavoidably face closure. Through competition, “successful” schools will be kept or even expanded. It has been argued that this will ensure the competitive power of the youngsters. Behind the basic market principle of competitiveness is accountability. Schools and teachers are held accountable for the performance of their clients. They are required to show to the fund providers, be they the government or the parents, how students have performed. In the United States and England, academic performances on standardized tests are used. In Hong Kong, students’ performance in public examinations is taken as a yardstick.

Grace (1995), Davis and Hentschke (1998), as cited in Barker (2005), succinctly summarizes how the mechanism works:

Parental choice, pupil-based funding and published information, including examination results and inspection reports, were designed to create an education market place where schools would sink or swim in the pursuit of pupils and budgets. Accountability and competition were supposed to stimulate teachers to improve effectiveness, add value and increase productivity. (p. 14)

## **Undesirable Effects of Managerialism, Accountability and Competition**

Though managerialism has swept through the education systems in many places, nevertheless, in academic circles, some researchers have cast doubt on the effectiveness of market force, accountability and competition as leverage for educational reform.

Robertson (2005), for example, warns:

While the marketplace has been an exceedingly effective mechanism to generate wealth, on the whole its success has been achieved because of, not despite, its lack of a moral core. This is not a character flaw but a characteristic. Markets are not moral; they are necessarily preoccupied with self-interest and advantage, and, as such, are unfit arbiters of what constitutes our collective well-being. (p. 117)

Apple (2001) further elaborates this problem. He argues that making schools operate according to market forces is a blow to the progressive movement. The disadvantaged, whether because of class, gender or race, for example, suffer. Social justice, one of the goals of mass education, is sacrificed. Schools have to “justify their existence in terms of how well it serves the for-profit sector” (Robertson, 2005, p. 117).

It is not only the minority races and underprivileged classes that suffer, many teachers have lost their sense of direction and are feeling frustrated. Fullan (2003) reports that in the United States:

In the 1980s, when accountability and standards were first introduced without much knowledge of how best to implement standards (knowledge-poor), leaders accomplished little other than alienating the better teachers with unhelpful intrusions. (p. 6)

The reliance on market forces and intense competition actually contradicts the notion of moral commitment of serving young people in schools. Pressed by the need to comply with accountability demands and to be able to survive in the face of fierce competition, school principals and teachers have had to abandon some of the moral purposes that they, as professionals, have treasured long (Fullan, 2003).

On the curriculum side, Whitty (2002) points out that:

The connection between performance and accountability within marketised education systems has tended to lead to the fragmentation and delineation of curriculum content and a reduction in teacher and learner autonomy. (pp. 99–100)

Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) also sum up previous research that marketization and competition have adverse effects on teachers’ professional motivation, feelings of fears, frustration, and lost effectiveness. Teachers in the States lost their classroom creativity.

As schools have to face keen competition and respond to accountability demands, it has inevitably brought about significant changes in the way schools are managed and how teachers interact with parents and students. It is not unreasonable to be worried about what values students learn implicitly in this kind of school life.

## **Competition in the Education System in Mainland China**

Some of the salient features of managerialism are not explicitly displayed in Mainland China. For one, public schools still dominate the educational scene. Private schools, mostly in the form of international schools in metropolitan areas or private schools in poor rural areas, only account for a very small proportion of the education services provided. However, this does not mean that managerialism, market forces and competition are not having an influence on schools and teachers.

Keen competition among students and the overriding importance placed on public examinations have been evident for a long time. Why has there been such keen competition among students? Public examinations at various levels serve the purposes of screening and selection. They determine who can proceed to reputable and well-equipped schools or universities. Success in public examinations can virtually guarantee students' advancement up the social ladder. The impetus to the pursuit of educational success not only involves economic benefits but also includes cultural elements as well. The urge for success in academic pursuit is a reflection of the Confucian culture that stresses the importance of education and the acquisition of academic qualification to testify to personal success and bring fame and glory to the family (Gu, 2000; Lam, Ho, & Wong, 2002; Lee, 1996).

On the other front, the introduction of the socialist market economy in 1984 marked the beginning of extensive use of market mechanisms in the administration, management, and development of educational institutions. Competition lies at the heart of the socialist market economy policy. For example, M. Y. Gu (1994), a renowned educator in Mainland China, wrote that "socialist market economy carries competitiveness. The development of market forces is through competition. The rule of market is fair competition, survival of the fittest" (p. 4).

Introducing market mechanism and competition into the education system was a means to improving the quality of education services. In 1988, He Dongchang, the Minister of Education at that time, publicly announced the necessity of introducing competitive mechanism into the administration of education as a reform strategy (Zhang, 1988).

A number of “marketization” measures have been adopted in the education system in Mainland China. The “principal responsibility system” is one of them. Under this system, school principals are granted a high level of autonomy to control and deploy resources in their schools, including the authority of staff appraisal, employment and sanction. Staff members, including teachers, are employed on contract basis (Zhang, 1988). The rationale behind such a policy is that teachers, when put under a competitive system which involved monetary return, will display initiative and diligence. Schools will also open up and become more responsive to the changes and demands of the society (Bi, 1988).

Since the implementation of the market economy principles, market forces have played an increasingly important role in school management. In the two case studies of primary schools in Sichuan and South China conducted by Yu (2005) and Zhao (2006) respectively, it was revealed that the management of primary schools considered competition among schools as a fact of life and strongly emphasized the public image of their schools as a high priority in the pursuit of success of the schools. It was not uncommon for school heads to persuade their teachers to participate in teaching award competitions at district, municipal, provincial, and national levels. Schools invested a considerable amount of effort on publicity.

The competitive culture has taken root not only in school management but also in the mentality of teachers. This is reflected in some of the papers published in professional journals and magazines contributed by frontline teachers. A case in point is a paper “Competition Lies at the Heart of Education” by H. Z. Zhu (2005), who wrote: “All the countries in the world are competing. We need competition in this era. There is competition in all the professions and fields in the society. Education is of no exception .... Survival of the fittest is the law of nature, as well as a rule of society. Competition brings about losses and pain. But failure and suffering can also be a resource of education” (p. 36).

Since the introduction of market forces and competition into schools, there has been heated debate on the merits of such a policy (Fan, 1995). The negative impacts brought about by such a policy are multifarious

(see, for example, Wang & Yang, 2002; Wong, 2008). The problems identified are mostly related to the insurmountable examination pressure on students, which subsequently distorts the purpose and process of education. Preparing for examination absorbs much of the students' energy. Teachers teach for the sake of examinations. The whole-person development of students is hampered (Wang, 2007). Teachers' professionalism was affected and they felt the intensification of work (Wong, 2008).

There has been undesirable fall-out from the introduction of competition among schools. Schools compete for high-caliber students as well as for more resources. The elite schools become more successful in attracting quality students and resources, leading to greater disparity among schools. In turn, this could be seen as creating an unfair education system (Wang & Yang, 2002).

Despite the huge volume of publications on socialist market economy policy, and on the use of market forces and competition as the means of improving education quality, there has been a dearth of empirical studies. There have not been many in-depth case studies of how these strategies affect the school management, teacher life, and students' learning.

In the light of this state of studies on competition in education in Mainland China, the present study was initiated to investigate the following questions: How have managerialism, marketization, and competition been introduced and implemented in schools in Mainland China? What effects do they have on the work and life of the teachers and students? Are there any negative impact on teachers, students, and schools?

## **Research Methodology**

The present study is an ethnographic study of a junior secondary school in northeast China. The decision to do a case study was based on our desire to reveal the intricacies of marketization and competition on school management, teachers and students. The case school, a junior secondary school, was in a well-developed city in northeast China. The fieldwork was started in September 2003 and lasted till January 2005,



during which one of the research team members stationed in the school to conduct interviews, collect archives and documents, and observe lessons and various other functions in the school. In order to have a general picture of teachers' views of the nature of the school culture, and parents' personal expectations of the school as well as their understanding of the school's vision and mission, two questionnaire surveys were conducted in the case school.

The interviews, both formal and informal, were conducted in Putonghua. A total of 30 interviews were conducted which included all the key players in the school (i.e., the school principal, the deputy heads and teachers of various subjects) were invited and attended the formal interview. Informal interviews were mostly in the form of casual chats and discussion. The formal interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis while the content of the informal interviews were recorded in the form of field notes. The focus of each of the formal and informal interviews might not be the same as each individual interviewee might have different things to contribute because of their position and experiences.

With the blessing of the school principal (the gatekeeper), the field researcher was allowed to observe lessons, staff meetings, parents' meetings and teachers' weekly lesson preparation sessions. Throughout the 16 months, the field researcher attended virtually all the major functions, such as school-parents meeting, opening ceremony of the academic year, staff meetings, classroom teaching and staff development functions.

The archives and documents included official documents such as internal administrative papers, instructions from the principal's office, statistics of students' examination results, as well as teachers' personal documents such as lesson plans, teaching materials, notes taken in classroom observations, and students' work.

The analysis of the information collected was started in the field as the research team adopted a progressive focusing strategy in the research process, with each piece of information collected helping the research team to decide what the next move should be. Therefore, by the end of the field work, the research team already had a rough idea of the findings. Basing on these, the research team carried out more detailed

and elaborate analysis of the documents collected, including the interview transcripts, field notes and classroom observation notes. The data were grouped and classified according to the rough ideas developed in the field work to check their trustworthiness and internal consistency. Tables, charts and flow diagrams were constructed to identify a picture of the characteristics of the school management and how these were related to managerialism and competition, the traits of the school culture, and the impact of school management on teachers and students' learning.

## Findings

### History of the Case School

*Chorus*, the case school, established in 1950s, was one of the most popular junior secondary schools in a well-off district in a large city in northeast China. Although in Mainland China, primary school students are assigned to junior secondary schools according to their addresses, parents can still apply to the schools which they liked. The schools would usually consider the students' academic ability. Parents would also need to donate a sum of money to the school if they were admitted through this channel. Through this, the school is able to ensure an intake of good students as well as securing extra funding. *Chorus*, being very popular in the district, had a very high intake of this type of students who paid for a place in the school. During the field work, *Chorus* had a student population of 1,700 organized into 33 classes.

In terms of popularity among parents, *Chorus* could be viewed as a successful school. Such success was not without its ups and downs. The principal, when interviewed, described part of the unforgotten history of the school:

*Chorus* was founded as a school for the staff of a university. In 1976, it began to be run by the district ... In 1988, it won fame by having the highest passing rate in the senior secondary place allocation examination in the whole city. The period between 1992 and 1995 was the most glorious period. Our school ranked first in passing rates, credit rates, and average mark in the whole province in the senior secondary place allocation examination. At that time, parents had to pay ¥12,000<sup>1</sup> to get into our

school ... In 1995, we had 18 classes of Junior Secondary 1. Without enough classrooms, we had to rent a building next to our premises. At that time, we had recruited too many students. We did not have enough facilities, not even enough labs. The management could not cope with it. Parents started to grumble. In 1996, we merged with another school [so as to have more classrooms to accommodate the students]. Our management could not cope with this merger. Our examination results, as well as our reputation declined ... Parents did not recognize us [as a good school] anymore. In 1998, we separated from the school with which we had previously merged. After the separation, we aimed at reviving the status of our school. The slogan we set was, "Building foundations in the first year, reaching quality standards in the second year, becoming first class in the third year." This was a three-year plan and we achieved it. By 2001, the end of our three-year plan, our school became the first among all the schools in the district in the senior secondary place allocation examination. We also won many prizes in the competitions.... Since 2001, we have been moving up. (School principal, interview)

This mission of reviving the status and rebuilding the reputation of the school was commonly seen by all teachers as the core task. In both formal and informal interviews, virtually all teachers coined the phrase "Rebuild our school's reputation" as the mission of the school authority.

## **Goals of the School and the Students**

From the above interview excerpt with the school principal, it can be seen that the passing rates, the credit rates and the average mark in the senior secondary place allocation examination were taken as representing the school's status and reputation. When the school's examination results ranked first in the province, it was seen as at its peak in its history.

Success in public examinations has been repeatedly stressed by the school principal on many occasions, including staff meetings and school-parents meetings during the field work period. The principal, in his address at one of the staff meetings, stated that the school's goals were divided into long-term and short-term ones. The long-term goal was "nurturing students who can meet the various needs of the modernized world." The short-term goal was "ensuring all our students can learn actively and be highly self-motivated; can significantly

improve the passing rates, credit rates, average mark, as well as the proportion of students who will further their studies in senior secondary level.”

In these formal occasions as well as in documents such as school plans, in addition to focusing on academic results, the principal also stressed that the school needed to adopt the spirit of the new curriculum reform and it was essential to build a harmonious environment in the school.

How did students see the aims of schooling? Did they take the long-term goals of developing competences and their potential, or were they more concerned about the short-term goal of achieving good examination results? Their views could be reflected in the display of a class of Year 8’s wishes and pledges in 2004. On their board display, every student in the class stated what their wishes were and what they pledged to do in the second school term. Below are some of them:

- In this term, I must be in the first five [in the class examination].
- I must improve my English result, get around 90 marks in the yearly examination; be in the top ten in mathematics.
- I must raise my average score.
- My results must improve steadily, not dropping to the bottom.
- I must work hard to secure excellent results in every examination; to be the best in the class.
- I must not give up; must encourage myself to try my best.

In this class, nearly all the students pledged for goals similar to the above example, with the exception of one, who wanted to “bring happiness to my friends, clear away all troubles and bring about fresh new days.”

This emphasis on academic results was very much in line with parents’ expectation and demands. In a school-wide survey of parents, students’ academic results were ranked as the most important concern by over 36% of the parents (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Parents' Expectation of Their Children**

Major concern	Percentage
Children's academic result	36.1%
Children's improvement in competence	27.8%
Children's moral qualities	20.8%
Children's physical and psychological well-being	15.3%

## The Place of Parents

Judging from a number of incidents and also the interviews with the principal and teachers, it was found that parents' demands and expectation were very much respected. Serious effort was put into meeting their demands as well as in pacifying their complaints. In interviews, teachers often referred to parents as "customers". The principal told teachers how he managed complaints from parents:

[When] parents complain, teachers will come to see me and explain. We all understand that we can explain our views and stances to the parents. But in reality, some [facts of the complaints], I know [are true] ... Does it mean that the principal does not trust you? Does the management not trust you? No! As the class has been assigned to you, we [the school management] trust you. It is the parents who are not happy ... When I ask you to explain what the problem is, it does not mean that I do not trust you [teachers]. It [the complaint] is from the parents. So, if there are any complaints [from the parents], you'd better not explain it to me. You need to explain it to the parents. If they accept [your explanation], you can continue with your teaching. (Field notes, March 24, 2004)

The principal explicitly stated his view on the importance of respecting parents' view in one of the staff meetings:

Parents are our customers. They determine the source of our new student intake. In many areas, we have to satisfy them. (Field notes, October 13, 2004)

## **Levers for School Improvement**

In interviews with the principal and the deputy principals, as well as in the official documents, it can be seen that the school management team adopted a number of strategies to achieve the goals set. These included improvement in hardware, streaming students, adopting new curriculum reform initiatives which stressed the use of student-centered teaching strategies, promoting educational research among teachers, and emphasizing teacher professional development. Since 1998, the school has invested a huge sum of money in procuring IT facilities.

The principal also required teachers to adopt the new curriculum initiatives of using student-centered teaching strategies (see Ministry of Education, 2001). The principal felt that by introducing and implementing the new curriculum initiatives, the status of the school as well as the quality of teaching could be enhanced.

The principal stressed the importance of teachers to the success of school. He repeatedly stated that “good schools need good teachers,” “parents demand good teachers.” To provide good teachers, the school management adopted some administrative measures to enhance teachers’ professional competence. All teachers were required to attend Masters courses at the best teacher training university in the city. A time slot was assigned for teachers to meet and work on professional development work once a fortnight. Furthermore, teachers were required to conduct two to three “open lessons” for them to be observed by other teachers and to learn from their comments.

As mentioned above, teachers were encouraged to participate in educational research projects. From 2001 to 2005, teachers in the school were involved in 11 large-scale educational studies. On average, each teacher took part in three studies over this period. Judging from this figure, one might have an impression that teachers were actively involved in educational studies.

The school also adopted an elaborate streaming system. The ablest students were assigned to Stream A classes which were smaller in size. The less able ones went to Stream C classes. The official policy in the school was to set different goals for students based on their ability and use different strategies to help them develop their potential to the fullest

extent. For example, in Stream A classes where the students were self-motivated with solid academic foundation, teachers were expected to adopt enquiry teaching methods to enhance the students' thinking skills and creativity.

Most of these strategies, with the exception of improving hardware and facilities and the streaming of students, were far from fully implemented. The variety of teaching methods and curriculum tailoring did not actually materialize. Teachers still adopted the traditional, didactic type of teaching approach for most of the time. In an interview, Mr. Song, a teacher who worked in *Chorus* since the mid-1990s, discussed this phenomenon:

Mr. Song: In reality, [the new curriculum] is implemented in a superficial manner. If students are taught in this [new curriculum] way, their academic result will not move up. Examinations in China do not test their competences ... we mainly assess how much they memorize.

...

Researcher: So now, teachers' teaching in the classroom ... (before the researcher finishes the question)

Mr. Song: It is still traditional. Traditional [didactic] way of teaching is the most effective means in improving students' examination scores.

Teachers were not serious about the educational studies projects. In interviews with the deputy head, senior teachers and the head of a major subject, they all admitted that they and their colleagues had not really carried out the research.

So how did the school management achieve the goal of rebuilding the school's reputation? The principal and the senior management fully understood that teachers played the pivotal role in the success of the school. Motivating teachers to invest their efforts and to focus their energy on achieving the school goals was an important task for the school management. In *Chorus*, the school operated a carrot-and-stick approach to motivate their teaching staff, which will now be elaborated upon.

One of the major management initiatives was a reward system for teachers. In an official school document on staff appraisal, it was stated

that the appraisal criteria for teaching staff would comprise four areas: teachers' ethics, competences, commitment, and outcomes. Teachers were assessed by school managers, students, parents, colleagues as well as self-evaluation by staff. The weighting of the evaluation by the school manager was the highest, accounting for 60%. The school management also reviewed teachers' lesson preparation work, lesson plans, quality of lessons delivered and student assignments to judge teachers' work.

These criteria and mechanisms were applied in the selection of "Star Teacher Award" launched in 2003. Each year, the three teachers who won this award would receive a bonus of ¥30,000. For the average teacher, this was a sizable award because the average yearly income of a teacher in *Chorus*, similar to teachers in other public schools in the city, was around ¥15,000 in 2003.

For most of the 150 teaching staff in the school, this Star Teacher Award was beyond their reach since only a fortunate few would have a chance. At *Chorus*, it, therefore, was described as the "Nobel Prize." To most teachers, another set of awards known as "Teacher Awards" was of much higher relevance. The details of the award were listed in a circular posted on the wall of the arts subject office. Below is part of the excerpt:

1. Classroom teaching: Subject teachers whose class(es) perform well in public examinations (namely, Year 9 in the Senior Secondary Place Allocation Examination, or Year 8 and 7 classes in district level standard tests) will be rewarded according to the table below:

		Grand prize (first in the district)	First prize (second in the district)	Second prize (third and fourth in the district)	Third prize (fifth and sixth in the district)
Stream A classes	Credit rate	¥300	¥240	¥180	¥120
	Pass rate	¥150	¥120	¥90	¥60
Stream B classes	Credit rate	¥225	¥180	¥135	¥90
	Pass rate	¥225	¥180	¥135	¥90
Stream C classes	Credit rate	¥150	¥120	¥90	¥60
	Pass rate	¥300	¥240	¥180	¥120



- 2a. For every single Stream A student, whose total score meets the benchmark entry requirement of the best senior secondary school (in the district), all teachers teaching that class will share ¥500. For students in Stream B classes, the award will be ¥1,000. In the case of Stream C students, the award will be ¥2,000.
- b. Similarly, for each Stream A student whose total score meets the entry benchmark of the second or third best senior secondary school in the city, all teachers in the class will share ¥400. In the case of Stream B and C students, the award will be ¥800 and ¥1,600 respectively.
3. On subject basis: If students' overall passing rate in a particular subject ranks first in city-level or district-level standardized tests, all subject teachers of that year will be awarded ¥300 each. If ranked second, the award will be ...

The above illustrates the elaborate nature of the award system. Indeed, the teacher award system was not restricted only to public examination results; teachers also received monetary award when their students won a prize in district, city, provincial, national and international competitions. Teachers would also be rewarded if they themselves won prizes in competitions as in district-level "Good Teacher Competition." When their research reports or academic papers won prizes, teachers would also be rewarded by the school. However, the amount was smaller when compared with the awards related to students' examination result.

Besides subject teachers, there were also award schemes for class teachers. When a teacher's class reached a certain standard, say 90% in the case of Stream A classes, the class teacher would receive ¥100. If students' credit rate exceeded a certain benchmark level, the class teacher would also be awarded.

After the results of the senior secondary place allocation examination were released, teachers would be given a score sheet detailing their classes' performance from which they could calculate the amount of reward they would receive. Table 2 shows an example of this score sheet.

**Table 2: The Result of the Subject Chinese Language of the Senior Secondary Place Allocation Examination 2004**

	Teacher A		Teacher B			Teacher C		
Class	1	total	2	7	total	6	5	total
No. of Students	55	/	57	41	98	46	46	92
Passing rate (%)	100	/	100	97.56	98.98	100	97.83	98.91
Rank	1	/	1	9	3	1	8	4
Credit rate (%)	52.3	/	45.6	14.63	32.65	32.51	19.57	26.09
Rank	2	/	3	11	4	5	10	6
Average mark	101.76	/	100.9	93.49	97.33	97.07	94.52	95.79
Rank	1	/	3	11	4	7	10	6
Highest mark	115	/	116	107	116	108	106	108
Rank	2	/	1	8	1	7	10	6
Lowest mark	81	/	78	69	69	82	60	60
Rank	3	/	5	8	3	2	10	5

Such an elaborate reward system for teachers' work reflected the importance placed on public examination results and also how the school management viewed the importance of success in competitions. Although teachers might be awarded for achievements in a number of areas including excellence in educational research output, the focus of the award scheme was on students' public examination result. The importance of this award system was not simply a monetary one. The honor behind the awards was also important as it was tied with teachers' status in the school.

In addition to the carrot, the school management also had a powerful stick to "dispose of" less able teachers. Since 2001, the school, following the city government's policy, has implemented an annual open recruitment mechanism. At *Chorus*, there were 150 teachers while the establishment had only 135 actual posts. This meant that the school had an oversupply of 15 teachers. The way to get rid of these redundant

teachers was through an open recruitment system. The following excerpt from the field notes recorded how this operated in 2004–2005:

This was the second day that teachers resumed work [after the summer holiday]. For the teachers, it was a frightening day because they had to attend the open recruitment exercise.

At 8:30 a.m., the meeting began. The senior teacher in charge of staff recruitment announced the recruitment regulations...

After that, teachers were required to complete a form in which they had to state their reasons for applying for the post, their subject, class, and future plans. Teachers then took turn to introduce themselves for one or two minutes. (After the meeting, a few teachers told me that this was just a formality. The school management had made their decisions already.)

After the presentation, the senior members of the school held a close door discussion. (Teachers told me that public examination result was not the sole consideration in the mind of the school management. However, those who had been successful in public examinations could definitely stay.)

At around 3 p.m., the school management released the results. Those who were unsuccessful could apply for the second round which included some administrative posts.

(Field notes, August 25, 2004)

The award and open recruitment system clearly reflects the school policy of creating a competitive mechanism to motivate teachers to be responsible, industrious and to deliver their best.

## **Success or Failure**

Judging from the students' examination results, reputation and popularity among the parents, it would not be too difficult to come to a conclusion that these measures have created the necessary momentum for the regeneration of the school and reinstating the school as one of the best, if not the best, in the district.

The management initiatives described above helped created a common goal to satisfy the parents (i.e., the customers), who have direct

and strong influence on the student intake as well as the school's financial state. The management made it very clear to all the stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and students that achieving academic excellence was the immediate target. With such a clear-cut objective, all parties involved focused their attention and channeled their energy to achieve the goals of the school. As a whole, teachers were very committed to their work. Lessons were very carefully planned and extra measures were taken by teachers to ensure that students grasped the curriculum content and were well prepared for the public examinations.

### **Excessive Pressure on Students**

Teachers, guided by the award systems and pressure created by the management, did their utmost to motivate students to achieve good academic results. It is natural that this pressure filtered down to their students. A well-respected teacher who had just returned from a study trip in the United Kingdom made the following comment:

Our children are different from those in other countries. The kids in other countries do not need to study at all; they don't have to face such intense examination pressure and competition. Their teachers do not have the power, nor the responsibility, to control the kids, not even when they are not attentive or simply sleep in the class. In our country, though, it is very different. We have examinations. We all have gone through these examinations. These examinations have a strong influence on our life. It determines what kind of future we have. But in other countries, it is not like that. (Interview, April 19, 2004)

Some of the students voiced their discontent, as can be seen from what a Secondary Two class had written in a weekly report:

Since entering junior secondary school, I started to lead a tough and hectic life. It seems that there is no more fun, joy, and no more happiness nor relaxed life.

I am [always] exhausted after the lessons in the morning. I have to drag my tired body on till the self-study period at night. I always dream that, "Wow,

it is really good that the self-study period will soon end and it is time to leave school.”

After hearing these voices from students, an outsider will definitely ask: “Is it really educationally meaningful to push students to that sort of state?” “Is this quality education that both the government and professional teacher have been promoting?” “Does this reflect success or failure of the school?”

### **Intensification of Teachers’ Work**

While teachers were pushing students hard, they themselves also suffered from an intensification of work. Ms. Luk was an extreme case but her personal experience could reflect the kind of pressure on the teaching staff. Ms. Luk was a subject head and very committed to her teaching. She designed and developed her own materials to help students prepare for their examinations. One day, she suddenly collapsed and died in her classroom when delivering a lesson. Her story was widely talked about among the teachers.

The class teacher’s workload was particularly heavy. When they did not have lessons, most of them would sit in lessons of their class to help the subject teachers manage their class. Through this, they would ensure that students were attentive in class. After school, they would attend students’ self-study sessions from 5 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. This meant that their formal working hours were from 7:20 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. In addition, after formal school hours, they would still need to do work on areas such as lesson preparation, marking, contacting parents if necessary, and so on.

### **Loss of Moral Purpose**

The shrinking of educational goals to preparing for public examinations, the intensification of work, and pressure on students, have demoralized some of the teachers who labeled themselves as examination machines rather than professional teachers. Mr. Sun, a teacher at *Chorus*, aired his grievances in the following interview:

Enhancing students' competences takes time. In some cases, students' competences and abilities can only be seen after they graduate. What lies in front of us is the demand to secure high marks [in examinations]. This is the short-term goal ... Some teachers concentrate their efforts on achieving this short-term goal and ignore the long-term developmental needs of the students. They succeed in pushing up students' examination results by drilling their students. In the past, I did not understand this hence I suffered a lot. Now, I learn that I must strike a balance because the school senior managers take it [examination results] so importantly. The senior secondary place allocation examination, the standardized test at the district and city level, the examination in school, are all linked with teachers' appraisal, bonus and awards! The school managers are only concerned about the marks. "It does not matter whether it is a black cat or a white cat; a cat which can catch rats is a good cat." <sup>2</sup> As long as you help students score high marks [in examinations], they don't care about the process [i.e., the way you teach].

Another teacher, Mr. Li, in an interview, also complained about his reluctance in pressing for good examination results:

Promoting students' life-long learning competences is one of the goals in our new curriculum reform. I think this is the most important goal. It, not the goal of achieving high scores in examination, should be the prime target in our work. ... But nearly all junior secondary teachers, every teacher, including me, face the constraint of having to perform well in the examinations.

## **Superficial Implementation of Curriculum Reform Initiatives**

Many teachers, in their interviews, expressed their dissatisfaction with the present overemphasis on examination-oriented work. But very few dared to follow through the new curriculum reform initiative of adopting student-centered strategies or school-based curriculum materials. The words of Mr. Wan represent the dilemma that many of his colleagues faced:

Actually, many colleagues are tired of the present way of teaching and would like to reform. But we don't have the courage. We are very busy, no

time at all. Implementing reform initiatives means having to take risks as we have to explore and try in the early stages of reform. The outcomes may not be positive, hence may affect the examination result. To teachers involved in reform, we have to give them three to five years before we can really assess them. But now, we are assessing teachers every year, every school term. Who dare to reform? It's better not to venture into it.

When teachers said that they did not implement the reform initiatives, it did not mean that they ignored them completely. As the school management had adopted the policy of implementing the new curriculum reform launched by the central government, teachers had adopted the new curriculum reforms at least in name. Such a cosmetic approach to reform is well-reflected in the incident involving a team of external experts coming to monitor the progress of school-based curriculum development in the school in 2004. In 2002, the school became involved in a school-based curriculum project initiated by a university. Following the requirements, the teachers prepared and wrote all the lesson plans and teaching materials. On paper, they had fully implemented this school-based curriculum development project. They, however, had not delivered the materials and lesson plans they designed in class as required. A day before the inspection, two teachers had the following conversation,

Teacher A: We should have had two school-based curriculum lessons a week. But we have not done so. What will happen if the inspection team asks our students about this?

Teacher B: You have to prepare for it. Tell the students that if they ask, they should answer yes.  
(Field notes, November 20, 2003)

## Discussion

It has not been our intention to put forward *Chorus* as a typical school in Mainland China. In a country like China which is large in size, divergent in level of economic development, and rich in ethnic diversity, there is no way to claim that any single case, not even if the cases were increased to 100, can represent the whole picture. The case of *Chorus*

does, however, reflect how some schools, especially those with a leading edge in the quasi-market competition, are managed.

An interesting finding of this study is that schools in Mainland China, like their counterparts in the United States and the United Kingdom, are facing the reality of marketization of education services. The introduction of quasi-market measures which allow parents to “buy” places in particular schools, has had a significant impact on the ecology of schools. Meeting parents’ expectations and demands become very important as schools taking in students through this quasi-market situation can benefit in two ways: they can select the abler students and also tap into considerable sums of extra funding. Part of this additional funding goes into the administrators and teachers’ pockets in the form of bonuses. The rest is used for improving hardware facilities, supporting staff development and any other ventures considered beneficial to the school. The amount parents are willing to pay for a place depends on how desperately they want their children to get into the school. As parents view students’ academic results as the single most important factor, schools with the best examination results will be able to command the highest fee. When schools fail to help their students achieve good examination results, their status will deteriorate as will their market value. The income of the school and teachers will shrink with the inability to attract parents and students. The decline in quality of the student intake will make classroom management more difficult to handle. *Chorus*, the case school, experienced this vicious cycle from 1995 to 1998. The principal and the teachers knew exactly how painful it would be if they failed in the competition for quality students who bring not only talent but also money to the school.

To succeed, schools need to ensure that teachers will commit and give their very best. A reward system based on merits in achieving good results as well as building up the school’s reputation can help drive teachers to achieve the goals set by the school.

Marketization and competition are double-edged swords, particularly in Mainland China where achieving excellence in public examinations is taken by most parents as the most single important, if not the only, educational goal. The case of *Chorus* confirms the speculation by Chinese education researchers (e.g., Jiang & Lin, 1999;



Wang & Yang, 2002) that it brings about undesirable effects, such as insurmountable pressure on students. The present study further reveals that there exist other undesirable effects, including the intensification of teachers' workload and the superficial implementation of curriculum reform. The loss of moral purposes among teachers may also demoralize teachers in the long run (Ho, 2005).

Even though competition can bring about short term improvement in students' academic performance (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009), a strongly competitive culture in schools will hinder the sustainable development of the schools. Researchers such as Fullan (2003), Little (1990) and Hargreaves (1992) have pointed out the important long-term benefit of a collaborative culture. The case of *Chorus* shows that using competition as a lever can motivate teachers and school administrators to achieve short-term targets. However, without collaborative culture, any improvement may not last and even if it could, it is worth asking how such a competitive culture will influence our students. Is this really what society wants? Some researchers in Mainland China have argued that competition and collaboration are not necessarily contradictory. In fact, it could be that they are complementary (see, for example, Guo & Wang, 2005; Tan, 2000). However, judging from the data collected in the present study, it seems that this is not the case.

The study also shows that students found the examination pressure insurmountable. Under the guidance of teachers and living in a school that cherished success and honor, the students have shown the classic fear of failure among students with a middle class background in England (Reay, 2001). The strong drive to avoid failure and the need to succeed meant long studying hours. Even though education authorities in Mainland China have repeatedly urged schools and teachers to cut down the students' loads (e.g., Chen, 2000; Xie, 2005), in *Chorus*, at least, such a policy initiative remained nothing but empty rhetoric. In the face of fierce competition, schools and teachers are afraid to lose. The best guarantee for success in examinations was to have high expectations of students and push them to work hard. It is only natural that students, under prolonged pressure and lengthy studying hours, expressed feelings of fatigue and dissatisfaction with examinations and

schooling. Seeing students with such negative feelings, we would raise the concern of what education is for.

Based on the findings, it is unavoidable to raise the issue whether schools should respond to the demands of the “customers” or the “fund provider.” The case of *Chorus* is very obvious. Very few educationalist would agree to narrow educational aims to preparing students for examination. With questions like “What is education for?” and “Should education and schooling help create a fair and just society as well as a flourishing economy?” in mind, it is not unreasonable to raise concern of what had been found at *Chorus*.

This ethnographic study helps to reveal what and how introducing competition and market force as leverage for change affect the ecology of a school and the life of both students and teachers. The side effects of these management strategies identified not only support what many Chinese education researchers have speculated (see, for example, Wang & Yang, 2002), but also show that they are very similar to the negative impacts as experienced in the United States and the United Kingdom (see, for example, Apple, 2001; Fullan, 2003; Whitty, 2002). These similarities may seem incompatible with a “socialist” state like Mainland China. However, if one delves into the essence of the socialist market economy principles (see Deng, 1984), and realize how the economic system in Mainland China has been running since the adoption of the socialist market economy policy, it is not surprising at all. Using market forces and competition has been widely accepted as effective means of ensuring efficiency and success (see, for example, Gu, 1994; Kang, 1999; Li, 1988). The Government has put forward a range of measures in line with the managerialism philosophy to enhance the quality and efficiency of education services. Requiring teachers to compete for jobs every year in schools is a case in point.

Facing these questions, one cannot help but be concerned about the effectiveness and suitability of using market force as the leverage for education reform. Should parents be seen as consumers of education services? Should they have an overriding say in how their children are taught and the way schools are managed? These questions await further study both in Mainland China and in the Western world.

## **Conclusion**

This case study has revealed that some, if not all, schools in Mainland China are experiencing the impact of the new managerialism approach. Marketization is in full swing in schools. The keen competition in schools created by marketization is a double-edged sword. It has energized both the management and the teaching staff through creating certain common goals and generating motivation to focus on how to achieve these goals. The parents generally accept that competition for a place in a better school is reasonable and public examination results are seen as a platform where every youngster can compete fairly. Those failing in public examinations will be diverted to the blue-collar job market while the successful ones will continue their climb up the social ladder. Teachers accept that their monetary return is based on their students' performance in examinations. The less capable teachers will be made redundant. Nevertheless the undesirable effects of such an intensification of teachers' workloads and loss of moral purpose among teachers will adversely affect the quality of education services to the young generation. The challenge to educational researchers, policy makers and school practitioners is to find an alternative to this accountability movement.

## **Notes**

1. ¥ (Yuan) is the sign of dollar in Mainland China.
2. This is a very famous saying by Deng Xiaoping and is widely quoted in Mainland China.

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