

The ripple effect

A review of the sustainability of the
Gansu Basic Education Project



“I think one of the strengths of the Gansu education project is the way it was created for the Gansu education context and suited local practice. Its sustainability lies with the people. The project philosophy has been internalised in the minds of local managers and educators, so it has been rooted deeply in the land of Gansu.”

**Bai Jizhong, Head of Gansu Provincial Education Department
(interviewed in 2010)**

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Thoughts from a review of the Gansu Basic Education Project ten years after completion

Very few reviews of projects take place more than one year after they end – most projects have a final review while they are still running or at best a year after they complete. Yet judgements are frequently made in final project reviews about the sustainability of interventions: judgements often based on limited evidence and heroic assumptions.

In May 2017, we reviewed the Gansu Basic Education Project (GBEP) a UK aid-funded pilot project that ran from 1999-2006. We, the authors of this review, were also the leaders of the project's consultancy management team from Cambridge Education.

GBEP piloted over 15 different interventions designed to address problems of poor access, high drop-out, low teaching quality and poor management. The project was 'A' rated throughout its life with numerous achievements including:

- **Over 14,000 scholarships given** to poor children in remote schools – **70% to girls**
- **197 schools built or refurbished** to a new stronger **earthquake-resilient design** which was brighter, warmer and safer
- **6,200 teachers and 700 head teachers** trained multiple times

There were many other innovations including school development planning, free lunches, textbook revolving funds, supplementary readers, posting of female teachers to remote schools, and a new inspection system. Moreover, GBEP influenced two larger scale projects implemented in poor areas of China.

Although not a rigorous piece of research, this review has been a fascinating, stimulating and thought-provoking experience. We think it offers some unique perspectives – a real test of the meaning of “sustainability” – and some thoughts on how projects could be better designed to achieve long-term impact.

Being China, our review offers an unparalleled and accelerated view of development – almost a compression of history in decades rather than centuries. No country in the world has seen poverty drop as dramatically as in China, no country has seen sustained growth as relentless as China's.

The subsequent surge in government funding to the education sector, after the end of the project, offers additional insights into sustainability – showing how some changes in the education system can be taken on quickly with new funding, while others fail to take root despite this substantial increase in resources.

As reviewers, we sought to assess which of the changes in the education system initiated by the project were still in evidence – including capacity built among key educators.

This review has been a fascinating, stimulating and thought-provoking experience.

Our conclusions are strongly positive, detailing impacts on individuals and the education system both broad and deep. But, we also see more clearly now – 17 years after the project started – the powerful influence exerted by institutional and organisational culture. Innovating, piloting, testing – these are easy wins in the short term of project timeframes.

However, long-term change – whether to organisational and individual behaviours or to education systems – requires a more profound analysis of the potential levers of change and windows of opportunity. Such ambition needs to be matched with realistic and pragmatic timeframes, political and financial flexibility, and reinforced by political will and genuine commitment from governments, educators and beneficiaries.

GBEP had the good fortune to be designed and managed in a way that took advantage of many of these levers and windows. It has had impacts that have "rippled" right across Gansu and far further than ever imagined.

This was not "aid" – it was development.

Andy Brock
Consultant Team Leader, GBEP

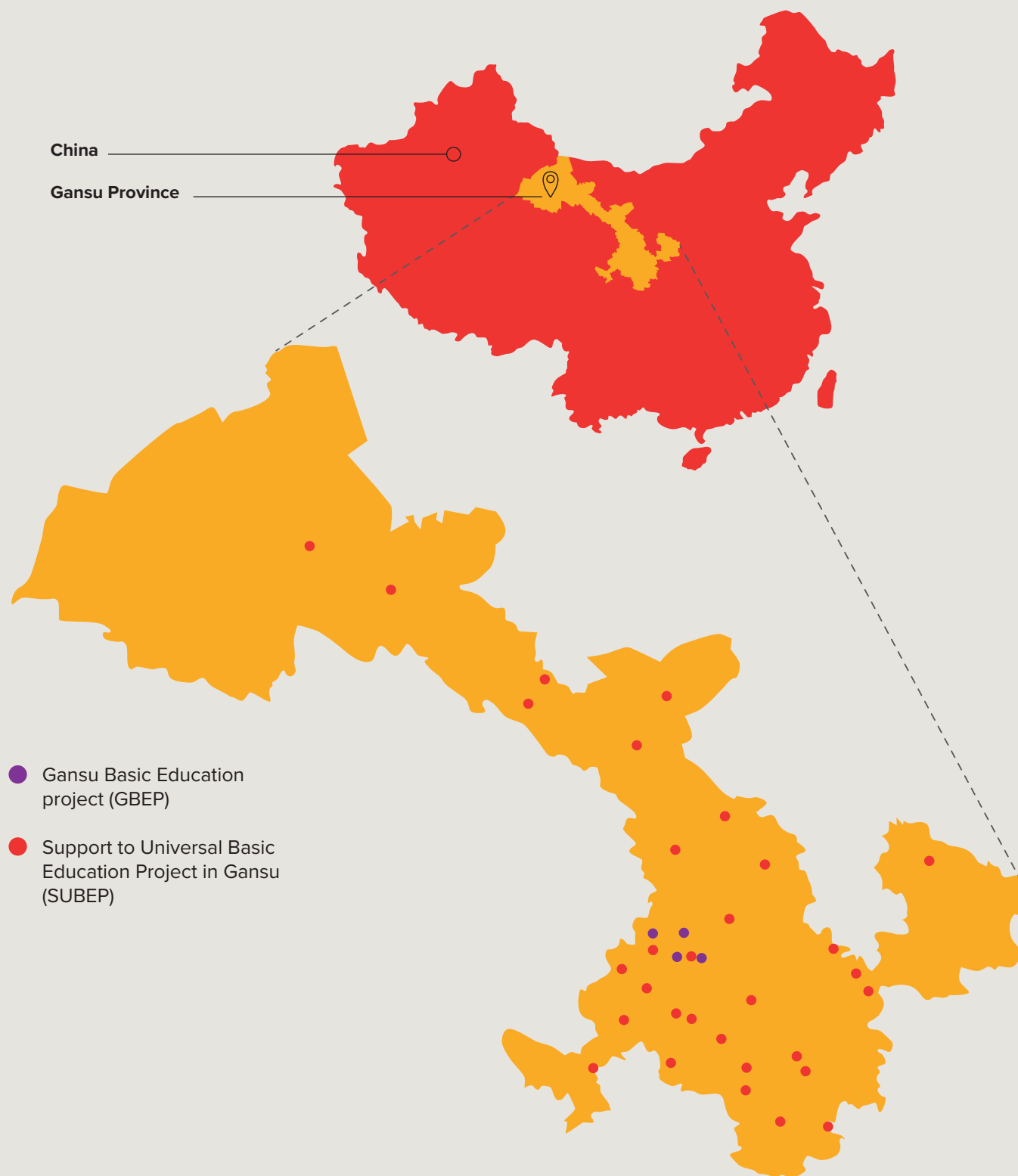
Hu Wenbin
Consultant Deputy Team Leader, GBEP

Zhao Jing
Consultant Deputy Team Leader, GBEP



Hu Wenbin, Andy Brock and Zhao Jing (L-R) meet with Ma Jinfang one of the 14,000 Gansu children to receive a GBEP scholarship

The project



Background

In 1997, the UK's newly elected Labour government, led by Tony Blair, appointed Clare Short as Secretary of State for the Department for International Development (DFID), signalling a new approach to the aid programme. Poverty alleviation was to become the driving rationale for all DFID-funded work – if it didn't impact poverty it shouldn't be funded.

In that year the percentage of people living in extreme poverty in China was 40% – a major share of world poverty. So, it was no surprise that one of Short's first visits was to China. She was invited to Gansu, one of the country's poorest provinces – whose long, narrow geography lies along the western escarpment of Tibet and finishes at the juncture between the infamous Taklamakan and Gobi deserts. Gansu's then population of 24 million reflects its history as a corridor for trade and cultural exchange with 54 of China's 56 minority groups represented – including significant numbers of both Tibetans and Muslims.

DFID chose to support an education project in four of Gansu's poorest counties – all of which had large Muslim populations – ranging from 50-90%. The project would pilot new ways of addressing education issues familiar in any poor rural area in the world – underrepresentation of girls, antiquated teaching techniques, dilapidated buildings and huge drop-out rates that would see Grade 1 mixed classes of 40 dwindle to only five or six boys by Grade 6. The project would show by demonstration what could be done to address poverty in very poor areas in China and beyond.

Project impact and expansion

Running from December 1999 to June 2006, the project was consistently 'A' rated by DFID. As a result of this success, key elements of GBEP were expanded to 35 of the 82 other counties in Gansu under a project called Support to Universal Basic Education Project (SUBEP). Then further afield in a new project called the Southwest Basic Education Project (SBEP) which covered four Western Provinces (Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan and Guangxi) and 27 poor counties – impacting more than eight million children.

What took hold most strongly in these subsequent projects were two elements that had been piloted in GBEP: school development planning – a way of devolving responsibility to schools for their own improvement (emerging from the New Zealand and English experiments with local management of schools); and participatory approaches to teaching (or child-centred learning) – a way of making the classroom experience more engaging, more child-centred and more enjoyable – leading to reduced attrition and better learning.

In SBEP a review of learning achievement found:

“the study has provided evidence to support the positive effects of the SBEP interventions on disadvantaged children in the poorest regions in China. Efficacy of such interventions in the education system appeared measurable by progress of students' achievement or learning ability”¹

Understandably, as China's development accelerated in the first decade of the new century, donors began to withdraw and at the same time the Chinese government started to massively invest in rural education. By 2011, there were only a handful of foreign supported projects in basic education and, of foreign donors supporting projects, DFID was not one. Now China itself is a major donor to countries in Africa and Asia.

¹ Southwest Basic Education Project (SBEP): Analysis of the impact of SBEP on student achievement, Cambridge Education, 2012

Not only the positives – our methodology

30 June 2016 marked the 10th anniversary of GBEP's completion. My fellow authors and I debated whether, if we revisited Gansu, we would see evidence of the project impact beyond the physical buildings and equipment provided. After all, ten years is a long time and China has been on a historically unprecedented growth spurt. Would we be able to identify the impact of GBEP separate from other influences?

We were concerned that our visit was likely to lead to courtesy bias – our local counterparts taking us to the best schools and telling us what they thought we wanted to hear. As a team, could we be critical and honest enough to admit disappointment or failure? GBEP had received 'A' ratings in all its reviews, might we be tempted to look only for the positives?

We considered sending an independent team to do a review or trying to use local researchers. But, neither of these ideas would have worked without a sizeable budget that we didn't have. Much would also have been lost in translation – as new researchers struggled to understand the scale and complexity of GBEP, before beginning to evaluate what remained.

The significant advantage of our trio undertaking the review was that we were the consultancy management team for the duration of the project. We knew what we had been trying to achieve with our Gansu counterparts, we knew all the individuals concerned and we knew the history of the struggles to implement the project. We felt we could evaluate achievements in their context and that we knew our counterparts well enough to know when they were being polite rather than truthful. As long as we were up front about our standpoint, readers of our report could judge the legitimacy of our findings for themselves.





Image © Adam Kerby

What and who did we review?

In the end, we decided on a light touch review that involved a visit to each of the four counties involved in GBEP. Our review was dovetailed with a film we were making – tracing four poor girls we had sent to Beijing in 2004 to meet the then UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair. These girls represented the project's focus on promoting equity and access for minority girls. We wanted to track them down and find out what difference receiving a GBEP scholarship had made to their lives.

Four of the ten schools we visited were the schools these girls had originally attended. We met headteachers and teachers and observed classes. We talked to some parents and children, and to the county officials in each county – and we visited the Linxia Prefecture Teacher Training Centre – the main focus for in-service teacher training.

At the Prefecture and Provincial levels, we met officials and consultants who had been involved in the programme – interviewing them to see what impact GBEP had made on their work. In Beijing, we brought ten national consultants together to share what we had found and learn more about the influence of the project beyond Gansu Province.

The conclusions drawn below are necessarily caveated by the light touch nature of the review and the potential biases mentioned. That said, we believe, even in the short time available, we have been able to triangulate information from a range of sources that allow us to form a view of the sustainability of GBEP.

What did we find?

Throughout the project life the consultant team and our counterparts used the terms, “hardware” and “software” to distinguish between the capital investment programmes such as school building and rehabilitation, and the capacity building, innovations and pilots that were trialled.

Scholarships could span both categories, but have been discussed under “hardware” below.

Gansu Basic Education Project



Hardware

The “hardware” of GBEP covered the capital investment programmes.



Software

The term “software” encapsulates the intangibility and difficulty of measuring attempts to change behaviour and practice.

The hardware

Scholarships

GBEP scholarships positively affected thousands of young lives and have had lasting, intergenerational impacts.

Perhaps the most important and significant aspect of GBEP was the scholarships. The project awarded 11,000 scholarships to primary children and 3,000 scholarships to junior middle school pupils, with an emphasis on out-of-school children and girls – 70% went to girls.

Scholarships were given for the duration of the primary or secondary cycle providing the pupil did not drop out. The project piloted a vertical equity approach (the unequal treatment of unequal groups e.g. favouring girls over boys) rather than the traditional horizontal approach to equity (giving everyone the same regardless of need). During the first year of the project this resulted in huge arguments over whether we were being fair to boys giving them only 30% of the scholarships.

One of the most surprising events of the project was when, in year two, the counties, without prompting, suggested that all scholarships should go to girls.

During this trip, we followed up on six of the children who received scholarships – their stories are an inspiration on their own, a testament to the power of education to break the cycle of inter-generational poverty (see the story of Kang Lanlan below). In almost all cases the lives these young adults now lead is, by their own testimony, considerably better than the lives they would have led without the financial support of GBEP.

It is a fair assumption that these six stories can be multiplied hundreds, even thousands of times – GBEP’s scholarships impacting positively the lives of some of the poorest children in this area, and potentially disrupting the inter-generational transmission of poverty to their own children. This legacy on its own would be justification for the project to claim to have created a sustainable impact. However, GBEP’s ambitions were greater as will be seen below.



School buildings

The buildings and renovation programme radically improved school conditions at the time, but is being superseded by newer and even more stringent safety measures.

The second most important aspect of GBEP – or the most important to most local officials at the time – was the rehabilitation and construction of schools. In 1999, the stock of about 700 schools across the four counties was very poor. Some schools were made principally of rammed earth. The buildings were freezing cold in winter, with leaking roofs, poor light and choking pollution from the single charcoal burning stoves (usually placed at the front near the teacher).

GBEP rehabilitated about 200 of these schools using a new design that took advantage of orientation to the sun, larger windows, false ceilings and more efficient stoves to improve warmth in the freezing winters. They were designed to last for 40 years and to be earthquake-resilient.

During the review, we found that many GBEP schools are now being demolished and replaced by three-storey buildings. At first sight, this appears a story of failure, with buildings used for only half their intended lives.

The story is in fact more positive. During the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake in Sichuan, a large number of schools collapsed killing many children. As a result, the Ministry of Education issued new standards for the safe construction of schools in earthquake zones. These are even more stringent than the ones used in GBEP and so, where necessary, counties are replacing the GBEP school buildings on safety grounds.

Case study

Kang Lanlan – the orphan girl who became a teacher



When GBEP began, Kang Lanlan was a thirteen year-old orphan from rural Gansu who could not afford to go to school. She received a scholarship that was guaranteed to her for the duration of her schooling.

It was a bright, sunny afternoon when we returned to meet Kang Lanlan in Suhe Primary School in Kangle, one of the four counties the project supported. It was an emotional meeting for us all – the young teenager had transformed into a woman, with two children of her own and a career as a teacher.

In 2011, she began her studies with Lanzhou University, graduating in 2014 with a bachelor degree in Chinese language. Her students' performance in her English class is the best in her school district and she has twice received a county Excellent Teacher Award. She attributes her success to the chance GBEP gave her 17 years ago to continue with her schooling – “without that, I would have had no opportunity”.

One of the most touching things about meeting Kang Lanlan again was seeing what a role model she has become to others. When we asked her to teach a demonstration class for us, she threw herself into the task with enthusiasm – engaging confidently with the children, doing activities with them, pushing and testing their learning as she went along. These were all the approaches GBEP had introduced during the project period: to make children the centre of the learning experience. Here was a girl who had benefited in the classroom from such approaches now becoming the type of teacher she had admired.

Image © Adam Kerby

The software

GBEP set out to pilot a great many new initiatives – to impact behaviour by adopting new ways of addressing old and intractable problems and to build individuals' capacity to improve the education system beyond the project lifetime.

“The project is a result of cooperation and innovation. Cooperation between people of different nationalities and ethnicities, different professional backgrounds and positions, people with different needs from different institutions. From these different opinions and sociocultural backgrounds grew new experiences, methods and knowledge.”

Professor Shi Jinghua, GBEP Teacher Training Consultant, Tsinghua University (interviewed in 2010)

It was these more ambitious, less tangible, less easily measurable characteristics of GBEP – the so-called “software” – that we were most interested to investigate and understand on our return to Gansu.

The overwhelming feedback we received from everyone who had been involved in GBEP was of genuine enthusiasm. Ten years on, many educators and officials described the way the project impacted them personally: their work, their ideas, their attitudes. These were not bland statements, nor were they elicited by leading the witness – they were heartfelt and at times passionate accounts of personally experienced change: “I would not be the me you see before you without this project,” we were told a number of times. “My whole approach to training was fundamentally changed by being involved in this project,” said one senior educator. One senior official in the prefecture commented: “The way I run meetings has totally changed – if I have to deliver a government document I read it out, otherwise I try to engage everyone actively in my meetings.”

Variations of these statements were repeated in every county, with officials at all levels (county, prefecture and province), with teachers and professors, with national and international consultants. Perhaps there was a degree of nostalgia involved, perhaps some courtesy bias, but the messages were consistently clear.

Participatory teaching

Participatory approaches to teaching are still widely applied – but in practice many teachers treat them as a set of techniques rather than an overall approach.

When GBEP began, teaching in Chinese schools was primarily by rote: rows of children would chant along with the teacher. GBEP sought to overhaul this classroom model – introducing participatory teaching and backing it up with extensive training for teachers and headteachers. The approach focuses on the child, encouraging them to ask questions and to explore answers themselves. The focus is not on the end result, but on helping students to learn from the process itself.

When we went to schools and asked about the participatory teaching approach introduced by GBEP we received enthusiastic responses: “we understand we need to put children at the centre”; “we think the participatory approach helps our children learn”; “we emphasise student participation in the classroom”. One headteacher was more reflective: “our results are not as good as others, but our students are noticeably better at presentations and social interactions – this is commented on frequently by others”.

However, when we observed lessons in the classroom we were a little disappointed. In many classrooms, there were positive signs of change such as the layout – children were no longer sitting in serried ranks and were often working in pairs or groups – and there were more non-textbook materials available. However, the teacher was usually still dominant: walking and reading from the textbook, occasionally asking a child or the class a question.

We saw a few cases of really good inclusive teaching – teaching that engaged, where the teacher was more facilitator than guide and used simple materials appropriately. Where we did see good teaching, it was often displayed across the whole school and reflected strong and directed leadership. But, the examples we found were in the minority.

Participatory teaching is an approach, a philosophy of how student engagement takes place in the classroom – didactic teaching, group Q&A, repetition and self-study have their place within this approach, as do pair work, group work, role play, discussions, debates etc.

In some classes, the impression we got was that the teacher saw participatory teaching as a set of techniques rather than an approach. For example, children would be put into groups but then not discuss anything or a

problem to be solved would be done individually by students placed in pairs.

Under GBEP there was a big focus on repeated training in participatory teaching. Now, ten years on, only 70% of teachers currently in schools were trained under GBEP. While some new teachers claimed that their pre-service training included participatory approaches, older teachers suggested that while the younger generation may be better qualified in these approaches they are not experienced at putting them into practice.

At the time of the project implementation, teachers who embraced this new approach did so in the knowledge that the new national curriculum, launched in 2000, advocated more personalised and participative teaching. But, this curricular approach was always contested, with some groups arguing that a more rigid and didactic approach was more culturally appropriate. Twenty years on that debate continues to rage with the more conservative view perhaps now gaining primacy. So, not only may the sustainability of participatory approaches be in question in Gansu, but the national legitimacy of participative teaching may also be in doubt.



Equity and disability

Commitment to equity overall is strong and positive, however practical attitudes to dealing with disability in the classroom seem to have faded.

GBEP put a lot of effort into encouraging disadvantaged children to go to school, in particular minority girls, disabled children and drop-out students. In our discussions with officials several commented that GBEP had laid the foundations for subsequent national and provincial practices rolled out as part of significant increases in basic education funding. “We didn’t really understand equity until we were involved in GBEP,” said one local official. “Now the government is promoting equitable education – we understand what it is and how to achieve it – we learnt that from GBEP.”

Equity under GBEP ranged from the example given earlier of the proportion of scholarships given to girls; to ensuring all teacher training courses had a gender balance; to piloting a programme sending female teachers to remote areas; to making sure gender and minority images were reflected in supplementary reading materials being supported by GBEP.

In 2002, GBEP piloted an approach to disability and special education needs in mainstream classrooms – the aim was to help teachers diagnose and then manage such children within the classroom rather than sending all children with special needs to a special school. The initiative came late in the programme and was not as widespread as we would have liked, but it did represent a significant change in understanding by teachers and headteachers about how special needs could be accommodated in regular schools. In one case, a headteacher who had never sent his own disabled child to school was inspired to do so.

In each of our school visits we asked about the numbers of disabled and special needs children. In most schools we were told there were either none or just one or two among a roll of hundreds. The new government policy (introduced in 2013) to have a special needs school in every county with a population above 330,000 was often cited as a reason there were no special needs children in school. In addition to these unusually low numbers of special needs children, no school seemed to have a copy of the diagnostic or training materials GBEP developed for mainstreaming disability in schools.

While it was disappointing that this initiative did not seem to have taken root perhaps it was not surprising. These are poor rural areas where attitudes to disability are still highly culturally determined and a three-year school-based initiative was not enough. In fact, the new policy on special schools, while showing a commendable infusion of resources and attention, may have worked against the mainstreaming of children with special needs in regular schools.

Judgement is not easy – one official described this as a “golden time” for children with physical disabilities, arguing that many more go to school (even if special schools) than ever before and that government funding has increased about 40 times.



Image © Adam Kerby

Case study

Ma Zhengqing – trying to reach the unreachable



Image © Adam Kerby

On this visit, we also traced Ma Zhengqing. Having suffered from polio as an infant, Ma Zhengqing was one of 200 disabled children who received a scholarship, enabling him to start school aged ten. He featured in two GBEP films showing how the scholarship and more enlightened approaches to disability helped him to attend school.

We find Ma Zhengqing, now 26, waiting for us at his old primary school. He shyly introduces us to his wife – the two recently married. She is also disabled.

Ma Zhengqing lacks confidence and speaks softly as he tells us repeatedly how life has not been easy. He dropped out after the first year of junior middle school as the facilities in the school were not accessible enough for him – for example there were too many

stairs in the building – and he lacked the additional learning support he needed.

He now looks after sheep and goats for his brother and dreams of opening a small store selling clothes in his township. He remains limited by his poor mobility. Still he is more fortunate than others – his father and brother are trying to help him build a house, which should be completed soon if he gets some financial support from the local government's special budget for the disabled.

He appreciates his limited education experience very much as GBEP gave him the chance to visit Beijing, and reading enables him to know the "big world outside". He wants to have a boy who will be able to help him to do things. Ma Zhengqing hopes his son will finish primary school so that one day he can realise his father's dream of opening a clothes shop.

Inspection

Limited observation suggests that the GBEP inspection model has been institutionalised, but also adapted in line with government requirements.

In 2000, school inspection in Gansu focused largely on compliance: were there enough trained teachers? Were the regulation books being used? Was the furniture well looked after? GBEP helped pilot a new inspection system (loosely based on the UK's OFSTED model but created and adapted by a local team) that focused on assessing teaching and learning instead of ticking boxes.

Officials interviewed were very positive about this. Several officials involved in SUBEP (which expanded GBEP's work) claimed that the current provincial inspection system had been developed incorporating GBEP ideas and practices. One stated: "[GBEP's inspection system] has been incorporated into our government inspection system and has been formally recognised". We had no time to review the provincial system and see how the GBEP approach had been adapted, but officials were enthusiastic about the changes. It certainly appeared that what began as a four-county pilot has had an impact far beyond the project scope and lifetime.

Several headteachers we met also told us they were part-time inspectors – this was another innovation of the GBEP inspection model, using experienced headteachers to review schools (usually in other counties). We didn't have the opportunity to observe a school inspection but were told that inspectors still spent a lot of time in classes reviewing teaching. This was repeated several times by different interviewees.

Nonetheless, in one school when we asked to see the latest inspection report we were shown a series of policies, not a review of the school. The GBEP model of inspection used the school development plan (see next section) as the central document to guide the inspection team's judgements about how well the school was performing against their own standards. So, it seems likely that the GBEP inspection model has been changed as government requirements of schools have changed. In some cases, it may be that inspection has slipped back to a more "compliance" type of model, while in others the focus on improvement in teaching and learning is still central.



Case study

Wang Guocai – the new inspector

Wang Guocai, from Jishishan County, was one of the first officials to be trained as a GBEP inspector and during the project life did much to bring inspection and school development planning together. Now as one of the key technical staff in the Jishishan Education Bureau, he is leading the county inspection team and sustaining the GBEP model.

When we meet with Wang Guocai, he comments that the GBEP “bottom-up” inspection style is much friendlier. The inspectors are not there to find issues in the schools, but to help headteachers and teachers to find solutions to any issues themselves. Inspectors spend at least 50% of their time observing classroom teaching (aiming to cover all teachers and most subjects) – the focus is on helping teachers rather than ticking compliance boxes. He believes that the GBEP inspection model is more effective as it acts as a partnership rather than top-down checking.

Wang Guocai tells us that GBEP changed him personally and professionally. Before GBEP, he was very shy and lacked confidence. Working alongside the project consultants, he began to understand that the process of doing things properly is as important as the final results. His self-confidence was built up gradually with GBEP’s capacity building activities. Today, he is very confident and feels comfortable sustaining GBEP initiatives without any further consultancy support.



School development planning

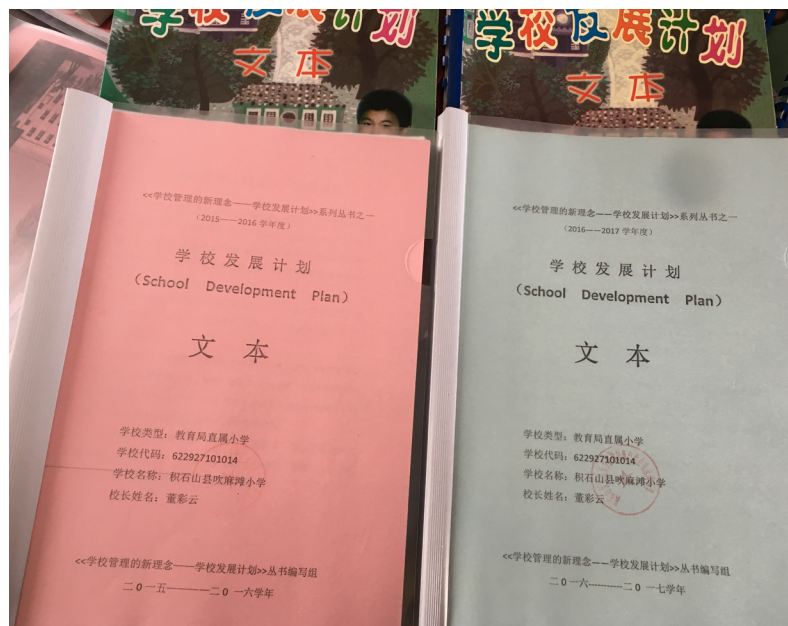
There is still strong evidence of school development planning in good schools, but also signs it is being replaced by more traditional top-down planning.

GBEP introduced school development planning (SDP) in nearly 700 schools as a new method of school management. The approach encouraged schools to take greater autonomy over their affairs – working with local communities to agree priorities, rather than relying on top-down plans set by government departments.

Naturally, in each school we visited we asked to see the School Development Plan. In some schools, we were told that they didn't do SDP anymore because there were so many planning requirements coming down from government and these could not be easily accommodated in the SDP format. In others, we saw up-to-date plans using the GBEP format and some of these had been clearly reviewed and annotated.

In the best example, a primary school in Jishishan was using SDP actively and had developed the process further, at the school's own initiative. Here the headteacher had required each teacher to develop detailed teaching plans with clear targets for student engagement – these were annexed to the SDP.

A significant element of SDP was to engage the community in supporting the school and holding the headteacher to account for the developments identified and agreed. Almost all schools said they still held community meetings, but some were probably referring to parent-teacher meetings. Given the huge rise in enrolments, it is not surprising that community meetings may have receded in importance – since a major focus of bringing the community together with the school was to address and solve the reasons why children were out of school.



Community consultation is not a popular practice in China and so may be an area where the forces of traditional Chinese culture prevail. For example, even in metropolitan areas, with sophisticated middle-class parents, schools tend to call meetings to lecture parents rather than engage with them on their ideas for school improvement. As resources have flooded into rural schools the incentive to engage the community to help with provision of locally made equipment, school building or substitute teachers has diminished and perhaps with it some of the incentive to engage communities.

Case study

He Long – the GBEP champion

When GBEP started, He Long was the headteacher of Xinja Primary School. He quickly became a champion of the changes being piloted by the project and his school became a model for others – receiving no less than 400 visits during the project life!

On this trip, we find He Long still enthusiastic about GBEP's influence on him personally and on the education system in Hezheng, his county, and Linxia, his prefecture.

He Long says GBEP has changed his way of thinking about education issues – looking at development hurdles and strategies from a different angle. Having embraced the concept of SDP from the beginning, he has continued the practice in his school even though the project closed 11 years ago. He observes that SDP has evolved from its original GBEP form, taking on more local relevance and characteristics.

Today, He Long continues to champion GBEP initiatives. As a local consultant, he provides technical assistance on SDP to schools and institutions in Linxia and beyond.

He has also been entrusted by Hezheng county education bureau to train all newly employed teachers in participatory approaches.

He believes that his training means Hezheng's new teachers have a much better understanding of participatory approaches, despite not undergoing GBEP training themselves.



Surprising “failures”

There were some initiatives we were sure would have disappeared as soon as the project finished since, even during the life of GBEP they were considered unsuccessful.

Free lunch

Free lunch is now a national policy in poor rural areas – with some counties choosing to provide breakfast instead.

GBEP piloted a free lunch programme to try to increase the enrolment of those children who had to walk long distances to school and could not make it home for lunch but were too poor to bring or buy food.

The pilot, though very small, was very successful – increasing enrolments in the pilot schools to above 90%. Unfortunately, it was

not expanded – the cost at that time was considered too high and there was ambivalence about a foreign-funded project providing food to children.

On our visits to schools, we were surprised to observe free school breakfasts for all children in all schools – an egg, a piece of bread and some milk. This was a local adaption of a centrally-funded national

policy introduced in 2011 to provide free school lunches in all poor rural areas in China.

Rather than resulting from GBEP's initiative, the new policy may have been stimulated by NGO reports of stunting in young children in rural areas – and by local government recognition of its potential effectiveness in attracting children to school.



Financial commitments

Pressure placed on counties to prioritise education spend and allocate a percentage to non-salary expenditure was painful at the time, but worth it.

An important but challenging GBEP initiative was called the “Two Commitments”. This asked each county government to: 1) allocate a percentage of funding to education and 2) allocate a percentage of that budget to non-salary expenditure, for example training.

From a sustainability point of view these commitments were felt to be an essential element in the continuation of project activities after project close. But, with funding tight at the time, it was a very hard promise for the counties to honestly make.

On returning to Gansu, we questioned whether it had been worth it to push these two commitments (there were many arguments and tears involved) since, after about 2009, the government started substantially increasing financial support to rural areas.

The response was positive – for two reasons: at the time of the project it put pressure on the county government to prioritise education (so helped education officials in their internal bargaining); and, when the money did start flowing, the case for non-salary expenditure was much easier to make and to demonstrate. Now, in all the counties 5% of all non-salary expenditure must be allocated to in-service training. A small sum – but one that is budgeted and spent every year.



Capacity building

Multiple examples of long lasting, wide-ranging personal and institutional impacts at all levels. GBEP's influence extends far beyond the project and individuals, both nationally and internationally.

Building capacity in teachers, headteachers, officials and trainers was one of the core objectives of GBEP's consultancy support. Working in tripartite arrangements with an international and national consultant and one or more local counterparts, the project took a team approach as standard – whether it was designing components, developing materials, training of trainers or monitoring.

This triumvirate was a key ingredient in the success observed. International consultants brought experience of other systems and other practices, national consultants brought their own broader experiences as well as the respect accorded high level academics in Chinese culture and the local counterparts ensured everything we did was grounded in local realities.

The importance of consultant support is crucial in that process of creating impact and stimulating multiplier effects. DFID projects are notable for the level of technical assistance they include – and it is no accident that DFID interventions are viewed as among the most effective in the development arena. Consultant support is also more expensive – about 20% of GBEP's total project funds were spent on technical assistance – but our review found the impacts were good value for money and longer lasting and wider ranging than ever anticipated.

In our interviews with provincial level officials and with provincial and national consultants we became aware of a large number of unintended and undocumented impacts of GBEP, including:

- Key officials in charge of GBEP's SDP initiative have used project materials in new SDP projects across the whole of Gansu
- Use of SDP materials in a project covering 11 provinces and 8,000 schools led by a provincial consultant
- Use of pre-service teacher training materials across a number of non-project supported institutions in Gansu
- Influence on the training of teachers in the new national curriculum – across the country – through the shared experiences of national consultants
- National consultants have used GBEP experience to help design interventions on other donor education programmes
- Learnings from GBEP have influenced the design of other international education projects (including Nigeria and Tanzania), both through the experiences of international consultants and Cambridge Education's institutional memory.

J.D. Spence in his book *To Change China* concludes that where Western "advisors" tried to impose their ideology as part of a package of expertise, they failed. There is no doubt GBEP came with an ideology, but it is debateable whether it was a "Western" one or was imposed. Certainly, it was initially contested by some local counterparts in the Gansu Provincial Education Department Management team – the role of consultants was not well understood or welcomed at first.

The GBEP ideology rested on two foundations: a focus on the weakest and most marginalised groups in the education system, and a belief that problems could be solved through participation and engagement. The extent that those two principles found resonance among the educators and officials of Gansu – whether due to their parallels in "Eastern" values or the extent to which they represent human values – is perhaps the measure of GBEP's sustainability.

The ripple effect

reflection and conclusions

Our overall conclusion about the impact of GBEP – and its longer-term sustainability – is very positive. There have been impacts at all levels: on thousands of individuals, on dozens of institutions and on myriad practices, policies, and ideas – so many that it is impossible to evaluate them all. Like throwing several stones in a pond, the ripples get bigger, but also overlap with each other in unusual and unexpected ways.

It is clear that GBEP did not end at the project level. Going beyond the four counties, it has markedly influenced education practices throughout Gansu province, and further afield through new projects in other provinces, at a national level, even internationally.

A multiplier effect has been at work. GBEP's impact on key individuals and institutions has generated fresh initiatives not sponsored by the project. The ripples may be uneven and unplanned, but the evidence is clear and abundant. These multiplier effects are rarely defined or captured in project logframes, but are perhaps one of the most sustainable legacies of GBEP – a lesson for donors and designers of future projects.

Some findings have been a little disappointing – where progress is not as hoped, or interventions have been considerably changed. This raises the question of what defines sustainability? If individuals feel they have

improved, if they point to influence and changes in their education system which represent progress to them, if they feel empowered to deal with and make change – is that more important than whether a specific initiative (e.g. inspection or teaching methodology) is being implemented in the way it was conceived during the project life, or if an outsider feels it has been diluted?

Of course, we would prefer there was no either/or choice and that both were possible. But one of the clear lessons from this visit has been the primacy of institutional culture to determine the sustainability of GBEP initiatives. Those working in development recognise the tendency of all systems to revert to their original state once project funding ends, hence the emphasis on trying to find levers to make permanent changes of direction – through shifts in behaviour or practice – seeking the elusive goal of “sustainability”.

Peter Drucker famously said: “culture eats strategy for breakfast”. We wholeheartedly agree. What we have found exciting in this review is the extent to which GBEP influenced the local education institutions – through the individuals who felt changed in thought and practice and who then applied those changes in culturally appropriate ways. Those changes have lasted ten years beyond the end of the project. In many respects they are part of a new culture, one that has assimilated the elements of GBEP that will last and continue to be part of the system.

This visit has also demonstrated to us that two other aspects are critical to long-term sustainable change: the support of the political structure at all levels (perhaps more emphatically pronounced in the Chinese context) and the need for reinforcement and critical mass to be built into sustainable practice.

Power and systems approach

To gain the support of the political structure (in this case the education administration from province to county levels), means that project design and implementation needs to take what Duncan Green calls a Power and Systems Approach² – analysing the political economy of a ministry or an institution to understand the key drivers of long-term change. Moreover, Green suggests that, to benefit fully from that analysis, there must be an ability to wait for the right place and right time to act, and to be prepared for those moments.

This is more than a theory of change – it is more a theory of action or a theory of opportunism. Suggesting the need not only for “adaptive approaches” to project programming, but also an ability to flex technical assistance and programme resources up and down according to demand. Such a degree of flexibility is a tall order in any politically-driven (donor) culture. In many respects, GBEP did come at the right time. As well as taking advantage of the doors to change that were beginning to open in China, the project also pushed hard to open them wider. That said, success during the project's life did not guarantee sustainability after it.

From a political environment point of view, sustained success required changes in the way institutions – and the individuals driving them – operated. GBEP achieved that – at least partially – but not always by design. For example, the prefecture level was not even included in the project design. Its status as an official layer of administration was somewhat ambivalent, and, in some quarters, not recognised. The decision to recruit prefecture officials as SDP trainers was due to the initiative's newness and the lack of local consultants who



could undertake training and support. The by-product was a local administration that intimately understood the reforms that were being attempted – since they had been thrown into the position of becoming the trainers, the persuaders, the enablers.

The need to actively include officials and influencers in the political administration in project delivery was a lesson drawn from GBEP and taken into account during the design of the Southwest Basic Education Project (SBEP). Under SBEP, all county and provincial officials were trained through a course specifically tailored for officials.

Our visit to Gansu deepened our understanding of the extent to which institutional culture drives and allows change – if project initiatives do not impact on that culture then their sustainability will be impossible.

² D Green, “How Change Happens” 2016 OUP

Reinforcement and critical mass

The need for reinforcement was one that had been taken into account in GBEP's design. For example, during the project, teachers received at least two and sometimes three or four training opportunities. However, once the project ended, the training budget dropped dramatically. Even now, with considerable additional resources in the education system, training accounts for only 5% of the non-salary budget or 1% of the total education budget. Without regular training over the years to reinforce new teaching approaches, the gains of change may be lost.

Reinforcement also needs critical mass – and we had gone to some lengths in the design of the teacher and headteacher training programmes to create that critical mass. We agreed with our counterparts that all teachers in a school be trained (not just one or two) and all headteachers too – in order to support teachers in implementing new practices. So, why had the new approaches to participatory teaching not taken firmer hold?

The answer we feel lies in the need for teachers and headteachers to receive reinforcement at all levels and on a regular basis. Both in teaching and in the county level leadership we became aware very quickly that new blood and impending retirements are having a marked impact on the sustainability of some of the GBEP initiatives.

Not one of the current county bureau chiefs was trained in GBEP. Consequently, the administrative imperative, which is still the dominant driving force in Chinese systems of administration, is being weakened since those who were in place at the time of the project were some of the greatest advocates – using their power to support and promote GBEP initiatives.

Now they are retired or have moved on and their successors have less personal understanding and stake in the GBEP changes.

The GBEP model of capacity development worked through action at three levels: the individuals, the institutions they worked in, and the enabling policy and resource environment. This layered approach helped buttress reforms, so that changes in personnel at any one level wouldn't necessarily signal the end of the improvement process. Nonetheless, leadership is critical and if strong signals of support from the top – including support for continued training – are not evident, sustainability can be threatened.

If we are really attempting long-term sustainable change, not just change within the four- or five-year cycle of a typical project, the implications of this need for reinforcement are that our project timeframes should be longer and more iterative, less linear.

A GBEP that was designed over a ten-year period with say five or six years of intensive input, followed by smaller annual or bi-annual inputs could be used to create longer-term sustainable impact. Real change – particularly in education with its annual cycles of terms and holidays – takes place over a longer period than is often acknowledged.

Such a change in timeframes would also require funding from within the recipient system – external funding can only ever be a stimulus not a panacea. A longer timeframe of support, as outlined above, with a clearly diminishing and targeted set of inputs allied to ongoing pressure to build such support into local and national budgets would have a greater chance of long-term success than the “big bang” nature of most projects.



Conclusion

Kurt Lewin said: “You can’t understand a system until you try to change it...”³ That is true for external actors like ourselves and equally true for internal actors – those who manage and deliver the services in the system. The GBEP process led all of those involved to understand the system better (though it never stands still).

This review has analysed many of the elements making up the long-lasting impact of GBEP: the considerable human resource, counterpart commitment, political commitment, consultancy support and donor support. Yet, despite all this and the massive additional financial resources later injected into the education system by the central government, it appears that while some gains have endured and flourished, some have been skin deep and still others seem in danger of being lost.

If a country developing as fast as China cannot sustain some of these gains, what does this tell us about other, more dysfunctional education systems? Are our ambitions for sustainability largely rhetoric and wishful thinking? Or should targets for sustainability at least be tempered?

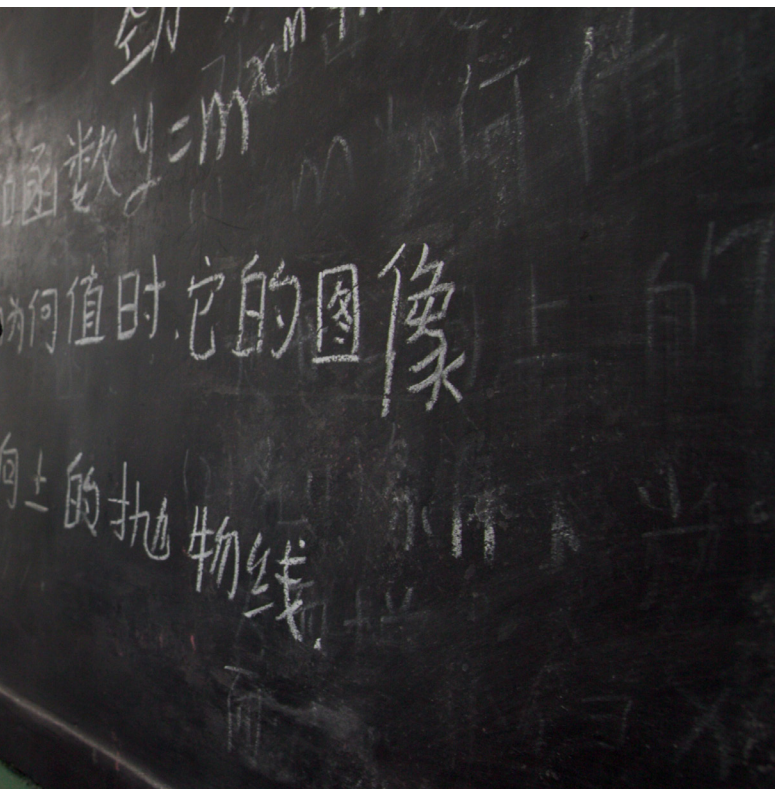
Certainly, our observations on the forces of institutional culture would indicate that project rhetoric on sustainability needs to be no more ambitious than the current political system of a country will allow. Unless donors start implementing long-term projects (ten years plus) with long-range evaluations, there needs to be more modesty in the ambition to effect lasting change in a typical five-year project cycle.

In fact, one of the reasons why GBEP was counted successful in its lifetime was because it was not hamstrung by ambitious targets to demonstrate improvement in exam scores (the usual proxy for learning outcomes) in impossibly short timeframes. GBEP focused squarely on what was achievable – improvements in leadership, improvements in teaching and improvements in access. Good leaders, leading good teachers, leading good learning.

Ultimately, all change takes place at an individual level. Sustainable change – in systems, in processes, in approaches – takes place when a sufficient mass of individuals embraces the same change and it then becomes part of the institutional culture. In reviewing GBEP ten years on, we encountered numerous instances of individual change. We have little doubt these will continue – even without support an individual can still tread a single path.

We also saw many instances of institutional change – where a critical mass of teachers in a school or officials in a department embraced (and adapted) the changes GBEP brought. Whether these changes will survive we are less sure.

As the generation of those who experienced, and were changed by GBEP, reaches retirement age, the real test of institutional change and sustainability reveals itself. Perhaps we will find the answer if we return in another ten years...



³ Schein, E.H., September 9, 2004. Kurt Lewin's Change Theory in the Field and in the Classroom: Notes Toward a Model of Managed Learning. http://www.a2zpsychology.com/articles/kurt_lewin's_change_theory.htm.

Opening opportunities with connected thinking.

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