DOI 10.3868/s110-003-014-0035-x

The implementation of inclusive education in Beijing: Exorcizing the haunting specter of meritocracy. Kai Yu. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014, 178 pp., (hardcopy), 80\$, ISBN: 978-0-7391-4698-9.

The question of how central policy and leadership can change local practice has intrigued political sociologists and flummoxed policymakers, whether they are in China or in the United States. This issue is particularly important to educational reform which (with reference to the United States), was aptly described as “tinkering towards utopia” by Tyack and Cuban¹, who noted that policy discourse does not connect with local implementation because reform does not penetrate the grammar of schooling, which shapes teaching and learning. The success of education reform depends upon the congruence of reform expectations and the capacity and motivation of local teachers and administrators as well their access to ongoing professional development and support to help them modify their practice in order to implement change. These factors are, in turn, affected by teacher and leader values, beliefs, relationships, skill sets, and role demands as well as the exigencies of local contexts.

Professor Kai Yu richly elucidates this matter in a qualitative study that focuses on the dynamics of school reform in modern Beijing. He effectively employs the conceptualization of the “street level bureaucrat” whose decisions affect what is and what is not realized. This conceptualization, which came out of examining the implementation of special education reform in one state in the United States over 40 years ago, proves to be equally useful in understanding why central goals for inclusive child-focused education in China and more specifically in Beijing have only been partially realized. While doing so, Professor Yu provides examples of how the “hardware” part of inclusive education implementation, such as class size and grading, has been changed while the “software” part of implementation—transformed instruction and student teacher interaction—did not change.

¹ D. Tyack & L. Cuban (1995). *Tinkering toward utopia: A century of public school reform.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

The books situates the case studies by first providing an informative examination of education reform strategies and debates in China and an equally informative review of literature on policy implementation. It then provides an interesting in-depth look at four schools, which are distinguishable both by their context and by the extent to which they realized the central school reform goals. Factors that affected implementation included the quality of leadership, also the extent to which it was stable and understood and embraced the logic of reform; the beliefs and skills of teachers; the ability of schools to control their destiny both by generating additional resources and by being free of political meddling that was unrelated to efforts to move from exam-oriented education towards inclusive education; and the nature of the student body served.

Consistent with recent literature on school transformation in the United States, the school that moved the most had a strong consistent leader who was admired by staff and who defined student support more broadly than her counterparts in the other three schools. She modeled commitment to students and helped staff, who appeared to believe in tracking, to develop practical strategies to integrate student support and academics. Although she benefited from a largely middle class student body that still did well in testing, she also generated resources to do inclusive work. While standardized test performance remained an essential driver even in this school, the school moved away from homogenous grouping and focused more effort on meeting the social, emotional, and academic needs of all students, so that they could all succeed. The other three schools did group students due to principal and teacher beliefs. They were less likely to develop other inclusive practices due to many factors that varied by school, but included weaker leaders, narrow definitions of student support, more intrusion from district authorities, and obsessive focus on test results.

While public policy changed expectations, it did not eliminate the “baton” of standardized tests (to quote one teacher), which appears to have driven parent, student, as well as educator behavior. Similarly, policy did not provide teachers and administrators with the ongoing support necessary to help them learn how to efficiently improve conditions for learning for all students in a manner that would contribute to better test performance in the long run. Without doing so, many teachers felt that that they were asked to do double duty and to employ pedagogical approaches with which they were not at ease. As a consequence, just as in the case of special educators in the United States 40 years earlier, they

functioned as street level bureaucrats and watered down inclusion while blunting the impact of reform.

Although this is only a study of four schools, it is an important book that nuances what we are learning about school change and deepens our understanding of how capacity, ideology, and local power limit the ability of central authorities to change schools. It both provides examples of how central education policy influences implementers' daily practice and provides examples of how behaviors by local implementer shape and delimit policy implementation.

David OSHER
American Institutes for Research
E-mail: dosher@air.org