

Gansu Basic Education Project: A Guiding Light

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Of the Silk Road...

Follow the camel trains of the earliest caravans and your journeys would invariably have led through Gansu province. Situated between the loose sands of the Mongol Gobi and the hard scabbled mountains of Tibet, the province has long played a key role in China's prosperity without claiming much for itself.

Since the heights of Silk Road trade, Chinese Governments have prospered from the province's natural location. The formidable local landscape meant it was always the only practical entry-exit point into China, around which there were few easy choices. Taxes were easy to collect and local oases became rich. But while the few prospered, the many suffered and in today's Gansu little has changed.

Of Today....

Today, arrival in Gansu on China's distant North West frontier is a far cry from the ambition and hope resonating from the country's free-ranging East coast. The province ranks as the second poorest in China with an average wage of less than US\$270 per year. Most people scrounge what little they can through agricultural excess and livestock rearing, but for many it's never enough.

Although, its fertile loess soils have the potential to feed the people, the area lacks life-giving water for its crops to drink. From a population of 26 million, a startling 2 million people live below the national poverty line on only US 21 cents *per day*. The province is typical of the country's poverty stricken Western region where the majority of its poor (and minorities) reside and though education has been proven to make a difference, it remains starkly under-invested.¹

Of the GBEP (Background)...

Prior to 1999, almost half of Gansu's 87 counties were designated as poor, or as deserving some form of special assistance. A World Bank basic education project helped relieve much of the province, but several counties were unable to raise the funds needed to match the Bank's loan and it was in four of these counties that the DFID chose to begin the Gansu Basic Education Project (GBEP).

In the counties of Dongxiang, Jishishan, Hezheng and Kangle, roughly half the local population were minorities and predominantly Muslim. Low income from taxes meant county governments were more eager to pass along education costs to the local population than prioritise their budgets. Education fees typically formed up to a third of all average family costs and local enrollments suffered badly.

Out of a school age population of 110,000 students, net enrollment sat around 79 percent before the project kicked off. Enrollment rates for girls were typically ten

percent lower than for boys, reaching as low as 48 percent in some cases. Drastic underinvestment also meant quality was weak and in all four counties, even if a family could afford to send their child to school, would it even be worthwhile?

In Kangle County, 1 in 4 classrooms were on the verge of collapse before the GBEP began. In a region dominated by minority populations, few parents saw the relevance in a school based curriculum written in Beijing. Locals were particularly sensitive to girl enrollments and where female teachers were few, so were girls in class. With a good majority of teachers unqualified, low quality was certain and in all four counties dropout rates averaged from 15-30 percent.

Of the Basics...

The Gansu Basic Education Project (GBEP) was a pilot operation working in four of Gansu's poorest counties from 1999 to mid-2006. Funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), the project aimed originally to ensure China achieves 9 years of basic compulsory education by 2010, and yet its effects have been far more reaching.

Over the course of six years, GBEP not only reinvented the blueprint of the traditional Chinese school but is steadily seeing its way today to implementing complete national change in education throughout the country.

By 2002, net enrollments had already increased to 84 percent in all four counties, with girls enrollments jumping 22 percent by 2004. However, enrollment figures alone, ignore the larger immeasurable advances in quality, learning and local attitudes that mark the real long-term success of the project. The potential to affect national policy was huge and GBEP went to great lengths to ensure that happened.

Of Change...

Working alongside established donors like the World Bank and EU, GBEP took pains from the start of the project to involve all the parties in local education, from provincial and village officials to parents and teachers, in a 12 month feasibility stage to plan out the six year programme.

Under the terms of a £11.5 million grant from DFID, international education consultants were brought in and the project was run through the local provincial education bureau, with project management offices set up in each county.

Why involve everybody from the start? Because then everybody is committed to its success. From year one to year six, an extremely connected series of 15 reforms were instigated across all four counties, of which School Development Plans (SDP) and Participatory teaching practices had the most sweeping effect.

To ensure continued funding for the new program, each county government made 'two commitments' to continually increase education budgets as well as the proportion of funding devoted to non-staff costs, such as schools and facilities.

“SDP provides an effective vehicle for the modernisation of rural education in a way not achieved by any other education initiative in China in recent history.”

Gansu Basic Education Project

School Development Plans (SDPs)

Amidst a climate of uncertainty and poverty, School Development Plans grant schools, and their communities, more power over their running and finances. By involving communities in the development of local schools, SDPs work to change the notion that the school is simply an instrument of the state, rather than one of the people.

This more bottom-up approach to school management, puts greater responsibilities on head-teachers, but also allows communities to better understand the limits and possibilities of the education process and see more value in its results. By concentrating money in the hands of parents and teachers, its use is prioritised better and budgets stretched further.

Backed up by training manuals and literature, head teachers and government trainers covering all 671 of the schools in the project, received 3 rounds of training in SDPs over the six year programme. Skills in better finance control and involving the community have helped greatly to increase enrollments and reduce dropout rates.

Participatory Approach to Teaching

In a world that traditionally focuses on teaching by rote, GBEP concentrated strongly on training teachers in a more child-centred model of teaching. Emphasis was placed on re-inventing the classroom environment to create a place that children would love to learn in, rather than one in which they're forced to.

Teachers were given a wide range of skills to cope with multi-grade classes and involve children less willing to participate, such as those with special needs and girls. Training was also provided in how to use low-cost teaching materials to create a fun environment and guidance manuals prepared to ensure every school had a source to refer to.²

Rethinking the Classroom:

Critical re-thinking of the traditional Chinese classroom has produced interesting innovations in the GBEP, but none as great as the pilot use of hexagonal desks. Researchers found that hexagonal desks had three major advantages over other types.

Firstly, when placed in pairs, they could easily sit six students in groups around the classroom, thus encouraging the type of participatory teaching styles the GBEP was trying to promote.

Second, four or even six desks could be arranged together to form larger working areas where up to 12 students could work together. Desks could also be placed easily in rows for team based activities.

Thirdly, the shape was also found to be conducive to exam conditions, when situated individually throughout the room with two students per table.

Whilst only used in Grades 1 to 3 classes at the start, the use of the desks has produced an overwhelmingly enthusiastic response from teachers across the four counties. Researchers reported that most teachers preferred to arrange the tables in pairs throughout their classrooms, and all stated a huge increase in interaction between their students.

Even in classrooms where the teacher had no formal training in child centred teaching practices, reporters found that the new layout encouraged new teachers to interact more with their class, producing higher teacher-class interaction.

The desks are now receiving wide-scale adoption across the four counties and researchers are beginning to push for their use in classes up to Grade 5. Although the cost of each desk is a little higher than traditional designs, the added value to classroom performance is manifold and individual costs will undoubtedly decrease through wide-scale use.

A number of other changes were also implemented:

Early Years Education (EYE) – Keeping early learners (i.e. Grades 1 and 2) active is the secret to successful learners, and GBEP pioneered several techniques to engage learners as much as possible. In particular the use of hexagonal desks, a more active curriculum and teaching methods all succeeded in involving children in every lesson and provided the best possible platform on which to continue their schooling.

Civil Works – Schools were adapted to local environments to keep costs low, buildings made more sustainable and facilities became more relevant to children. Creation of better toilets encouraged more girls to attend school. The building of play areas such as the GBEP 'Happy Campus,' proved that even the greening and construction of child-friendly play areas can be done at low cost.

Access Strategies – A number of schemes were developed from girl’s scholarships and boarding fee subsidies to free lunches and reduced exam fees. Innovative schemes were launched such as a revolving textbook programme to extend the life of books by up to three years, thus reducing the costs to rural families.

Inspections – Done correctly, constructive inspections can be a wonderful source of information available to a school on its strengths and weaknesses, yet in most of China few are carried out. Under training programmes run by the GBEP, a pool of “GBEP experts” was created, able to share their knowledge with schools and ensure feedback and support long after the GBEP is over.

Headteacher Training – Like any onsite manager, Head teachers are responsible for a school’s overall performance and relationship within the community. Training programs run by the GBEP, aimed to instil in Head teachers the skills and confidence to enable School Development Plans and support teachers currently undergoing teacher training under the GBEP.

Teacher Training – Fifteen courses were developed for teachers to continue to improve their development within the GBEP area. All were based around improving the learning experience for children. Since the programme was new, some teachers found it hard to replicate training programme results in their classrooms resulting in the development of a teacher support system, which included limited financial support and follow-up visits to schools by trained staff.

Of Results...

Education is not measured by short term enrollment figures but by long term results, and it may take decades to see the full effect that the GBEP has had on Southern Gansu. However by mid-2006 immediate results definitely seem to point to future success and given where the project started the figures are certainly compelling.

Casting a glance back over the last six years, the GBEP has rebuilt or renovated 200 schools, equipped and mobilised every school in its development area, trained 6000 teachers and 700 head teachers (many several times over) and given understanding and urgency to government officials and educators in the problems and possibilities of education in each county.

With a greater sense of ownership and control over their futures, hope now shines strongly on all the schools in the GBEP counties. With the support and strength of local (predominantly minority based) communities, average enrollments have increased 12 percent, dropout rates have declined and girl’s enrollments soared

By reducing the dropout and repetition rate in county schools, the efficiency of the system greatly increases as costs are not being replicated. This also means that the cost of education per pupil decreases and more funds can be invested elsewhere.

The long-term vision adopted by the project from the start has ensured that all four counties will continue their ‘two commitments’ funding to education until at least 2010, and there are few logical reasons to stop after that.

In 2006, DFID declared it was expanding its support for education across Gansu, and into an additional five adjoining provinces as well, in what will be one of the largest educational projects in the world.

From 2006-11, the South West Basic Education Project (SBEP) will cover 8000 schools, train 77,000 teachers and change the attitudes of thousands of educators nationwide in its bid to make 9 year compulsory education a reality for Chinese children by 2011.

Also See:

- History of the Silk Road
- Education in China: A Missing Potential
- History of Education in China
- Another Look at Poverty
- GBEP 'Before and After' - http://gbep.legend-net.cn/en/tuku.asp?news_id=425

References:

1. What is China's Western Region? Ten provinces make up the Western region of China: Shaanxi, Gansu, Qinghai, Ningxia, Xinjiang, Sichuan, Chongqing, Yunnan, Guizhou, and Xizang (Tibet). The region is larger than the EU 27 (2007) in size, dominates 56 percent of China's land area and has a population greater than America.
http://www.china-window.com/china_market/china_industry_reports/western-region-developmen.shtml
2. More reading materials, training manuals and resources can be found on the Gansu Basic Education Project's website under, 'Project Materials.'
<http://gbep.legend-net.cn/en/ziliao.asp>

Project Website:

Gansu Basic Education Project Website

- <http://gbep.legend-net.cn/en/index.asp>
- <http://www.gbep.org/index.htm?language=en> (*alternative*)

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<http://www.mottmac.com/projects/?id=5618>

British Consultancy support helps world's largest education project - Mott MacDonald
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An Independent Review of SDP in Gansu – Amanda Seel (Gansu Basic Education Project)

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An Independent Review of the Learning Environment of the GBEP – Dr. David Smawfield and Professor Yongfeng Du

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– <http://gbep.legend-net.cn/en/down/Building%20Children's%20Schools2.pdf>

Part of the PEC Submission for the Gansu Basic Education Project

<http://dfidweb.dfid.gov.uk/prismdocs/ARCHIVE/CHINA/550022p1.doc>