

Critical Factors in English Teachers' Professional Development in China – A Case Study

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Abstract

This case study is set in the context of globalisation, framing its analysis of issues relating to professional development of teachers of English language in China against the global background of English language teaching reform. In Asia generally, and particularly in China, where the focus of education in recent years has shifted from access to quality of teaching and learning, an existing plethora of underqualified teaching staff, mainly because of rapid higher education expansion, constitutes a major barrier to regular participation in professional development programs. Barriers identified as impacting on the provision of good quality teaching arose, largely, from the pressures due to the demands of curriculum reform and the often-changing expectations of university leadership, which highlighted tensions between a traditional reliance on the primacy of exam results and a newer demand for holistic development and lifelong learning. Following a review of the literature on aspects of teacher professional development, and a discussion of the current policy context in China, a range of findings will be used to illustrate common stakeholder expectations, as well as teacher beliefs and practice. The analysis of the narratives uncovers issues of identity and power, in the shaping of the participants' practice and professional trajectories. The analysis provides illustration of how limitation in professional participation can result in limitation of innovative practice. Concerns regarding barriers to further development are also highlighted. The study offers recommendations to promote innovative practice which can support more effective teaching and learning.

Keywords: Professional development, higher education, China, English

Introduction

The impact of globalisation on higher education has been widely discussed (see, for example, Xu, 2005; Hassi & Storti, 2012; Shahidi & Seyedi, 2012; Zajda & Rust, 2016). While Altbach (2004) and Vandermensbrugge (2002) caution of the inequality which globalisation may lead to in academia, others (Lo, 2011) note that non-Western countries may selectively adapt from the Anglo-American model what suits their needs when developing their national higher education systems.

Researchers such as Ngok & Guo (2008) have reported on China's approach of "kejiao xingguo" (i.e., revitalizing China through developing science and education) which led to the launch of the 211 project in 1995 and 985 project in 1998. Project 211 is a project by the Chinese Ministry of Education that aims to raise the research standards of universities and refine strategies for socio-economic development. Project 985 is a project to promote the development and reputation of the Chinese higher education system, through funding certain universities to build new research facilities, hold international conferences, attract world-renowned faculty, and help Chinese faculty attend conferences abroad. Until recently, professional development of teachers has not been deemed to be of primary importance in China.

In common with educational leaders and policy makers elsewhere, who have tended to operate a myriad of top-down teacher professional development programs, rather than an inclusive training program involving the active participation of teachers as co-designers (Hardy, 2012), China has also relied on a one-size-fits-all approach to professional development of teachers. However, there is the dawning of a recognition that this needs to change.

Central to the debate regarding professional development programs are questions about what constitutes good quality teaching, how to develop (and subsequently evaluate) the teaching workforce and how to place students at the centre (Viète & Peeler, 2007; Chen & Fang, 2013; Peng et al, 2014). This paper seeks to contribute to the burgeoning research on teacher quality and teacher development in Asia by drawing on selected findings from a case study conducted at a university in China.

With a high focus on research performance, teaching and learning are often perceived to be secondary in importance to research in universities worldwide, and particularly Chinese universities. For example, promotion and evaluation processes still value research performance more than teaching performance in the classroom. This research-oriented tradition is a well-worn obstacle to faculty professional development on teaching and learning.

Literature Review

Language teachers' professional development emerges from a process of restructuring teachers' existing knowledge, beliefs, practices and reflections rather than just simply imposing fresh language teaching theories, methodologies and teaching materials on teachers. Therefore, language teachers' professional learning is a complex process which requires knowledge in various disciplines, such as psychology, sociology and methodology. Strong motivation on the part of teachers and a willingness to embrace change are also needed for the process of professional development to be sustainably successful (Guan & Huang, 2013; Reynolds et al, 2015).

Massification of higher education in Asia

The massification movement of higher education across much of Asia is creating a challenge for government planners and higher education administrators in being able to offer high-quality instruction with an under-prepared faculty workforce. In many country contexts, faculty qualifications prevent them from being able to keep pace with the rising demands of higher education students (UNESCO, 2014). Increasing enrolments in most Asian contexts causes many higher education institutions to be preoccupied in meeting minimum academic provisions rather than being able to focus on the improvement of high-quality instruction and learning. Varying faculty member academic qualifications—such as inadequate English language-speaking abilities and practical expertise, or qualifications in the field—are key issues among many that prevent them from reaching higher academic standards.

In an effort to address these quality gaps, many Asian higher education institutions began to emphasize accountability and quality assurance procedures, with a special focus placed on teaching performance and research output (Hallinger, 2010). Rote learning has been increasingly recognized as inadequate and university faculty members are expected to play a larger role in inspiring reflective and innovative learning.

In many higher education institutions, professional development programs were established to help support various initiatives that promote effective teaching and research. These programs are still being conceptualized across many top Asian higher education institutions with varying degrees of success. Research findings suggest a number of barriers that these professional development programs are trying to overcome (Asian Development Bank, 2011).

First, the massification process of higher education often overloads faculty members with substantially more teaching responsibilities. The trend where faculty members are required to teach more classes continues, as does the requirement to become involved in many non-academic matters that concern student campus life and/or developmental issues. As a result, professional development programs are often viewed by many faculty members as a luxury; most faculty already have little to no "extra" time available for such personal skills development.

Second, salary structures in many Asian universities are based on the number of teaching hours faculty members complete each semester/term/quarter. For language teachers, remuneration is often lower than for those who teach other subjects. From a monetary perspective, this often puts professional development program initiatives in direct competition with actual teaching activities. The lack of a general incentives or rewards structure further exacerbates the situation, making it even more difficult to motivate participation in professional development initiatives.

Third, faculty professional development programs in Asia are underfunded and operate on lean discretionary budgets. Faculty members seeking academic/professional self-enrichment domestically or overseas have to resort to self-funding in many cases, which is another disincentive for participation in professional development programs in Asian higher education institutions.

Issues of identity

Varghese et al. (2005) have noted that there are three features of identity process. Identity is firstly understood as multiple, fluid and often conflicted in nature, and importantly includes the notion of agency to explain teacher choices and decisions. The second understanding is that identity is always related to social cultural and political contexts (Lave & Wenger 2002).

Finally, it is understood that identity is constructed and negotiated through language and ongoing interactions with others (Bucholtz & Hall 2004). Particular issues in studies of language teacher identity have included marginalisation, the position of non-native speaker teachers, and the nature of teacher knowledge.

Language teachers in particular position themselves both personally and professionally between two or more languages and cultures (Kanno 2003). These observations and issues have created a diverse research field but, as Varghese et al. (2005) note, do not constitute a coherent theoretical approach. While we acknowledge critique of its limitations in this context (Varghese et al. 2005), discussed below, we have chosen to use Wenger's (1998) framework of the dual process of identity formation. This is described as the result of two processes, identification and negotiation of meaning. Identification comes from engagement (investing ourselves in our practice, as well as in relations with others), imagination (seeing our experience as part of a broader context - "images of the world that transcend engagement" Wenger 1998: 17) and alignment (connection to others when our practice is in line with a broader enterprise, involving power). Negotiation of meaning involves ownership of making meaning of experience, power processes, and, if the participant's contribution is continually denied, results in marginalisation.

Narrative research has been recognised to be of particular significance in capturing language teacher development (Barkhuizen et al. 2013). It is understood that language teaching and learning focus not only on acquisition of a language, but on the interaction and development of a holistic and intercultural identity. Nevertheless, in individuals' stories, the tension between educational beliefs is noted, for example, between the models of teacher as authoritative source of knowledge and of the teacher as facilitator, helping the student to make their own discoveries in learning (Wilson 1996).

Educational technology

Educational technology is an important aspect of professional development initiatives in Asian higher education institutions, with a special emphasis placed on research and instruction with multi-media support ([Asian Development Bank, 2011](#); [Azhar & Shahid, 2014](#)). However, educational technology literacy among faculty—particularly embedding it into innovative curriculum design as well as transformative pedagogical practices—remains discouragingly at a low level and suffers inadequate attention from higher education administrators and government policymakers. Some faculty members, especially senior professors, remain educational technology adverse, and are often antagonistic to its strategic deployment at the institutional level. When it comes to language learning, there is often a significant lack of funding in educational technology, with the view that the textbook is the curriculum.

Top tier universities vs the rest

Geo-political and geo-economical diversities in Asia often make it difficult for professional development programs to establish unified standards and optimal training opportunities for all administrators, faculty and staff members, and students. The most robust professional development programs tend to exist within the top Asian universities, compared with lower-ranked institutions where professional development activities happen on a more *ad-hoc* and as-needs basis. Asian universities with the most salient faculty professional development programs have both centralized and decentralized measures adapted to best meet the needs of faculty research, teaching and learning.

Interestingly, there is a noticeable lack of rewards structures for innovative research, teaching and learning, even in the top ranked universities ([Chapman, 2009](#)). This is especially true for language learning. Incorporating professional development to faculty teaching and learning as a long-term strategy rather than a short-term resort has been a typical challenge in this region.

Qualifications and experience

In China, newly-hired higher education teachers often lack teaching experience due to limited teaching opportunities during their postgraduate studies (Wu et al, 2016). This has led to myriad teacher professional development programs in Chinese universities, with many deemed to have been unsuccessful, primarily because of the adoption of a one-day workshop approach to teacher development. Such an approach overlooks that learning and professional growth are life-long processes which build upon previous experiences, skills and knowledge. For native English speaker teachers, in many Asian contexts they still do not possess the qualifications necessary for employment in other parts of the world. There are encouraging signs that this is changing, but, due to the sheer numbers of students that need to be taught, it will take time. For both groups of teachers, it is clear there is a pressing need for meaningful professional development.

However, many researchers (Colbert, Brown, Choi & Thomas, 2008; Ryan & Cooper, 2010) have perceived such programs as something done to teachers rather than by them. In other words, they are often top-down programs that are planned and designed by higher education administrators whose aims and objectives have never been discussed or shared with teachers at the planning stage. Researchers such as Lee (2011) view the involvement of teachers in professional development at the planning stages as crucial to its success.

While it is not merely a matter of who is presenting in CPD seminars that makes the difference, the process of teacher learning can be enhanced by having teachers engage in professional sharing and critical reflection and by helping them connect knowledge to unique contexts. As teachers take a more active role in their CPD by engaging in professional sharing with their peers, they also build a collaborative culture and foster learning in professional learning communities.

Societal changes leading to possibilities and opportunities

Values can change in response to environmental possibilities (Littrell, 2005; Han, 2016). Social change in countries such as China and Korea, for example, including globalisation and neoliberalism, and their enthusiasm for high education are resulting in changes to ideas of good education and desirable teacher and student roles and identities. Their university culture is now said to be at the centre of a mixture of traditional values and current liberalism, individualism and equalitarianism. Lecturers seek to promote communication-based reciprocal teaching and learning, so their dominant teaching and learning theme is deemed to be constructivist (Han, 2007). Blended learning is being increasingly promoted, to increase feedback exchanges between the lecturers and the students. Given that all Asian societies are also changing under the influence of globalisation and modern ideas, their learners may share some similar values and expectations.

Policy changes leading to possibilities and opportunities

Masino and Niño-Zarazúa (2016) conducted a systematic review to identify policy interventions that improve education quality and student learning in developing countries. They highlighted three main drivers of change of education quality: (1) supply-side capability interventions that operate through the provision of physical and human resources, and learning materials; (2) policies that through incentives seek to influence behaviour and intertemporal preferences of teachers, households, and students; (3) bottom-up and top-down participatory and community management interventions, which operate through decentralisation reforms, knowledge diffusion, and increased community participation in the management of education systems. Overall, these findings suggest that interventions are more effective at improving student performance and learning when social norms and intertemporal choices are factored in the design of education policies, and when two or more drivers of change are combined. Thus, supply-side interventions alone are less effective than when complemented by community participation or incentives that shift preferences and behaviours.

Research context

China is at a critical juncture in education reform. One in every five of the world's college students is said to be in China (Zhao, 2016). The total number of college students in China in 2015 was 37 million, easily the world's largest student population. The number of colleges and universities in China in the same year, 2015, was at least 2,900, according to the Ministry of Education (Zhao, 2016), with the number growing every year. According to the World Economic Forum, in 2017, the number of graduates from Chinese universities stood at 8 million, more than double that of the US (Stapleton, 2017). This has placed considerable pressure on the system to reform its teaching practices.

The university in this study, established in 2012, is a public institution with a student cohort of approximately 4,000 students. Thus, the university is expanding quickly, thanks in no small part to generous government funding. Goals are clearly defined by the institution, and this, in tandem with a dynamic leadership, is why expansion is happening successfully. A university with research, innovation and entrepreneurship as its mission, it has a male-female student ratio of 3:1. Chemistry, Physics and Communications Engineering are the top three programs studied by students. In the regular curriculum, the chief characteristics of the university's undergraduate education are the high prevalence of small classes (twenty students or fewer), the expansion of English a medium of instruction, and the intensification of its math courses. The low student-professor ratio (1:10) provides students with abundant opportunities to interact with their professors and enhance their higher-order intellectual skills. Approximately eighty percent of the university's graduates undertake graduate studies abroad, primarily in the US.

The university plans to intensify English education and to conduct all courses in English, to further its aim of mentoring its students as global leaders. To this end, students in their first two years are required to take intensive English courses. Upon entering the university, freshmen must take a placement test for English. All of this serves to increase the burden of expectations placed upon the English teachers. English teachers were, until two years ago, mainly native Chinese speakers, but now native English speakers comprise approximately two thirds of the English teaching faculty, the result of a university push to satisfy the demands of parents and students. Half of the English native speaker teachers are employed directly by the university, and half have been supplied by an outside recruitment agency, which is what many universities in China do.

This study takes place in the context of frequently changing policies and requirements for English language instruction as a subject. How does this impact teachers' sense of professionalism?

Research question

This study addresses the following two research questions: (a) what are the opportunities and challenges for the professional development of teachers in a mainland Chinese university and (b) do Chinese and native speaker teachers of English face mainly similar, or different, opportunities and challenges in the field of professional development?

The first research question aims to explore the current situation on the professional development of teachers and what the opportunities of and challenges for the professional development of teacher educators are. The understanding of the responses to the first research question can be seen as a foundation for the understanding of the second research question.

Method

This study involved a longitudinal study for more than six months in a university in southern China, of five native English speaker teachers and five Chinese teachers of English language in the university. Observations, interviews with the teachers and with two trainers, in addition to document analysis, were employed to capture the teachers' thoughts, actions and especially group interactions in trying to understand and implement this new professional development practice. The practice involved mentoring (Chinese teachers mentoring non-Chinese teachers, long-serving teachers mentoring newly-hired teachers), as well as continuous professional development (workshops, seminars, group reflection etc.) throughout the six months of the study.

All of the above facilitated narrative enquiry. Narrative is a pathway to disclose "how we see ourselves and how we view ourselves with respect to others" (Vasquez, 2011: 543). In this sense, the interview was an appropriate method, enabling teachers to reflect on any changes they experienced. The participants' worldviews were disclosed and their experience and positioning with others and revealed the "evaluative and ideological" discourses embedded in their identities (Maybin, 2004:70).

Data analysis methods included: transcribing interview and observation data; writing analytical memos after each observation, interview and document analysis; keeping constant dialogue with the existing research findings and theories as well as the author's own personal experience and insights. Throughout this research, a social constructivist approach was taken of these teachers' responses to a top-down initiated reform practice. While keeping theoretical framework and concerns in mind, special attention was paid to these teachers' native concepts. These concepts were used as the codes and categories for data analysis, in addition to other related concepts and theories in the existing literature.

As for the validity of the research findings, triangulation of different data sources from different participants was used. Preliminary findings were fed back to the participating teachers for verification and falsification, and findings were revised accordingly. As China is a huge country with a lot of regional disparities in education, it is not claimed that the findings from teachers in the university in the study represent all teachers in all universities in China, although they may shed light on the phenomenon under study.

Results and discussion

The study found that despite some clear views on how professional development can help teachers be more effective, it was also evident from the interview responses that there were barriers to ensuring quality, equal treatment and the future development of teaching. This largely centred around issues of continuous professional development and differences between native and non-native speaker teachers, as well as between those employed directly by the university and those

on secondment to the university through an outside agency. Issues of intercultural communication are the first ones to arise.

Intercultural communication

Xu, a Chinese teacher, was at first sceptical about being asked to mentor Amy, as she felt she wouldn't be listened to. However, after two months, her attitude had changed completely:

'Collaborating with Amy is my first experience of working closely with a non-Chinese colleague on English teaching and learning. Through her, I have learned many useful skills and activities and most importantly, I understand how the two of us share some of the same ideas about English teaching. Of course, we think differently about some things. Her comments prompted me to rethink many things that I took for granted, and her caring personality makes me, an older teacher, feel respected and treated as a mentor. This is a fascinating experience of intercultural professional learning. I think I'd like to do some teacher training in the future. I didn't think it would work, but it has!'

Amy had a similarly positive experience with her mentor, Xu:

'Working with Xu has been important to me in a number of ways. Firstly, it shifted stereotypes I had held, such as "all Chinese teachers teach by standing in front of the class and lecturing", when clearly Xu didn't teach that way at all! Secondly, I learned how I need to adapt to the Chinese context. I love the personal challenge, knowing that I need to learn a lot about this incredible culture, and I am so fortunate Xu is helping me navigate it. We each understand so much more about the other's point of view.'

One of the positive results of this was that a renowned researcher in the field of intercultural communication was invited by one of the Chinese teachers to give a guest lecture to students at the university, as it was felt that students, just as much as teachers, could benefit from a greater awareness of intercultural issues.

Stakeholder expectations and the role of teachers

The University's strategy is to ensure that the learning experience of students is a relevant fit in an increasingly globalized world. In particular, the university leadership wants to ensure that students are prepared for academic migration upon graduation, to undertake doctoral studies in English-speaking countries, at some of the world's top universities. Students need to develop new knowledge, skills, and attributes which prepare them for this new world. This means, as Nick acknowledges, that they need to be taught in ways that are different from those traditionally associated with University education:

'First, the world is changing, and our teaching methodology needs to keep pace, especially when it comes to technology. Second, our students are changing, and we need to be constantly aware of their changing needs and expectations. I've appreciated the workshops which deal with the areas I need to develop in, and would suggest we have follow-up workshops, refreshers, on those areas next semester. My students have benefitted too, and it makes me feel part of the team, the Centre and the university.'

Nick, an agency teacher, was one of only two agency teachers to regularly attend professional development sessions. When asked why there was such a low take-up rate amongst his colleagues, he believed that:

'For so many agency teachers, not just here, but the ones I know in other universities, they won't be involved because of the time commitment. They will just go and find another teaching gig in that time, as salaries aren't that high in China. They know even if they don't have good teaching evaluations they will be employed again next semester, because there is a great demand. Also, nobody will recognise them or reward them, so they figure why should they?'

It is clear from this that not everyone wants to avail of the opportunities afforded by professional development. This highlights the need to link student assessment of teaching effectiveness to professional development continual improvement. But then the question arises do these assessments necessarily translate into teaching improvement? These questions will continue to knock on our doors as we witness progresses of faculty professional development experimentation in Chinese universities well into the future.

Yohet, a Chinese teacher, found professional development to be effective and noted how it changes her perception of her role as a teacher:

'Before, I just came to class, taught the class, and left. Like most teachers, I didn't always stay for office hours. However, I now realise that it's important to be more accessible to students, and I think PD has helped me understand my role as a teacher is also pastoral.'

Wanda, one of the international training providers, was somewhat frustrated by her experience with the teachers:

'What surprised me was that, generally, the Chinese teachers were more qualified in terms of degree level than the foreign teachers, but that everyone expected everything to be spoon-fed to them. There wasn't the same level of motivation that I have encountered with groups of teachers of all nationalities in other countries, and perhaps it is because English language teachers do not seem to be as valued here in China. They seem to be expected to just teach anything, like robots, and this is the first experience for most of them of real professional development. By the end of the course, I noticed a difference, as they could see how they had improved, and I will make myself available online for them. They were surprised by that.'

It is clear from what Wanda is saying, which was reiterated by the second trainer, that teachers need to feel valued, and that they also need career development opportunities provided to them, in order to be motivated in their work. However, opportunities for many teachers are few and far between, as shall be discussed below.

Lack of a level playing field

Career development is important for most people in their field of work, and this is no less true for teachers. However, what emerged over the course of this study is that there is a dichotomy between opportunities available for Chinese and non-Chinese teachers, as Rob explains:

'I want to do a good job, and I want to be acknowledged for it. However, there are absolutely no opportunities for promotion for me at this university. Only when the director of the language centre pointed out to university administration that it wasn't fair that the annual teaching competition wasn't open to non-Chinese teachers and argued for inclusion was this allowed to happen. Also, for English teachers, all the funding available for research, which isn't as much for language as it is for other subjects, is only available to Chinese teachers. How unfair is that?'

Flynn, a Chinese teacher, also bemoaned the dearth of opportunities for career advancement:

'Only because we have a language centre director who fights for our interests do we have a chance, but she encounters a lot of opposition. It is so difficult to move up the career ladder here, and I am ambitious, as are many Chinese teachers. However, we are just told to teach. There is a complete lack of understanding that teaching should go hand in hand with research, professional development and career opportunities. Because we are not mathematicians or chemists, it doesn't seem to be important. But they will see that their good teachers will leave. I know some who are already making plans, even to leave the teaching profession.'

It is clear from the above that career inducements are not forthcoming to language teachers. Additionally, non-Chinese teachers are mainly employed on one-year contracts, unlike their Chinese counterparts, who have standard three-year contracts, thereby making sustainability of teaching and learning initiatives a much more difficult proposition, as well as making the argument for devoting more time to greater professional development opportunities one that is more difficult to advocate for. All of this can have a knock-on impact on the quality of teaching and learning.

Perceived barriers to improving the quality of teaching and learning

In line with other investigations on teacher education and professional development of foreign language teachers in China, we can find that the university administration wants the methods adopted in teacher professional development to follow the traditional way which emphasises the impact of such professional development on teachers' pedagogical knowledge and teaching skill. This neglects the impact on the promotion for teachers' cognition, emotion, attitude and self-development, and, although the professional development in this university for English language teachers has endeavoured to address this, there is an uphill battle. This hinders the development of teachers to a certain extent. However, the many curriculum reforms being imposed by administration require teachers to renew teaching ideas, implement new curriculums creatively, update educational concepts, reset their roles and innovate in approaches of their professional development. All of this creates additional pressure on teachers who already feel overburdened.

Publish or perish pressure for Chinese faculty

To boost their research productivity, Chinese universities are putting great pressure on their faculty to publish in internationally indexed journals. However, the emerging publish-or-perish culture in China has been evolving differently for Chinese teachers of English, who, unlike their counterparts who teach other subjects, are not usually seen as either research track or tenure track, are expected to teach more classes than before, due to the increased number of hours of English language instruction for students, to greater numbers of students, and yet who are, in the words of three of the teachers in this study, viewed 'as second class citizens', expected to publish but rarely provided with the time or research grants their colleagues in other disciplines enjoy.

Consequently, the Chinese participants were reluctant to spend time on other academic activities, including professional development, as indicated by Eric:

'The course designed for us was a very good one, particularly as we had some input into what we wanted to learn. However, I had to drop out of the course after a few weeks, because I need to complete my research and publish. If I don't, I won't be considered for future projects. I want to develop professionally, but I just can't find the time. Research first.'

They also reported considerable work time devoted to writing, which resulted in fatigue and negatively affected family relations. The participants admitted that they had to rush to publish, and therefore were less likely to produce papers of better quality, as Jenny frankly states:

'I know that I'm not producing the best quality papers, but I'm determined to be promoted. It's so difficult for us English faculty, because we are not seen as tenure-track or research track, and yet we are evaluated every year on our research output as much as our teaching. I have no time for anything else in my life at work, so my students and my professional development are suffering, and my home life is suffering, trying to juggle it all.'

This serves to underscore Chinese universities' increasing use of the number of international publications as a major assessment and incentive measurement of their faculties' academic performance. Teaching and professional learning are still not receiving the recognition they deserve from administrators.

Recommendations

Improving university instruction and research quality is an area of growing concern for government policymakers and planners, higher education administrators, faculty members, students and the community at large. In this article we examined the global literature on this topic, with a specific focus on the professional development of teaching and research within universities. While many ideas can be learned from the university in this study, a few recommendations are highlighted that higher education administrators should consider when establishing or strengthening university-based professional development. Each of these recommendations is broad enough to apply to different country contexts as well as institutional types—regardless of whether the university is private or public.

It is no secret that teacher professional development is an essential element in the teaching and learning process and should have an effect on student performance. It is supposed to help teachers improve their skills, knowledge and teaching practices. Yet, most of the programs and courses planned for this purpose lack the engagement of teachers in the planning process and indeed, in other phases of the process also. What matters at the end is what teachers learn and acquire and the way they transfer this new knowledge into the classroom. One main aspect that policymakers have not probably well-considered in planning for educational reforms throughout the world in general and in China in particular is the lack of research studies in education, as research in science, engineering and mathematics has traditionally been more valued. Local studies based on real data in Chinese university contexts are essential if solutions for more promising outcomes are the ultimate goal of the reform.

Teacher professional development is planned and designed to help teachers improve their pedagogical knowledge and skills and then to translate their new understanding into classroom teaching and practices. Consequently, this improvement is expected to impact positively on students' learning outcomes. Therefore, it is of high importance to investigate teachers' existing knowledge and experiences and build on them at the planning phase of any professional growth program. Programs need to be customized to fit into the individual and subject-knowledge requirements. As it is the case with accommodating to students' learning styles, literature is also replete with research studies that emphasize the necessity to match one's teaching styles to his/her learning styles. Therefore, one size does not fit all when it comes to professional development.

Teachers' beliefs and attitudes are major factors in any educational reform. Therefore, it stands to reason that teachers need to be convinced of the reasons for the change imposed on them. They need to believe in the credibility of any designed training course in providing them with new opportunities for learning, recertification and salary increments, as well as individual growth. If there are no career inducements for teachers, it is unlikely that professional development programs will have a wide impact.

Policy makers and university administration should be aware that learning is a long-term process. Assuming immediate positive results of students' performance after a well-planned professional development program is by no means possible. Variables other than any specific program might have larger impact on students' academic performance such as parents' educational and social backgrounds, students' motivations and interests, students' learning styles or the classroom size. More importantly, the link between what teachers have learned and acquired in a certain professional development program does not necessarily have a direct impact on students' academic performance. Teachers might have developed and gained other skills and knowledge that would affect the classroom teaching and practices in a different aspect. As a result, a well-designed follow up strategy of teachers' development might provide a better understanding of what worked well in the training programs and highlight areas of concern to be tackled in the future.

It is more effective to have multiple professional development offerings rather than a single option. Multiple professional development approaches to improving teaching and research include individual counselling and mentoring services, online training seminars, podcasts, peer reviews; courses on optimal use of research and instructional best practices; access to the latest research and instructional software; and university wide training workshops. With the trend towards increasing teaching and research workloads of tenure-track and non-tenure-track faculty members, it is especially important that professional development reaches out, communicate, respond, and provide solutions, guidance and technical assistance. Professional development centres can help support all university personnel.

However, effective professional development requires top-level administrative support from the university, for example, a vice-chancellor or provost. This often helps secure the institutional and financial support needed to be able to outreach to the various schools, colleges and departments across large campuses. Regardless whether the institution is considered public or private, top-level administrative support is essential for long-term sustainable change and in ensuring that professional development is considered central to the university's mission. Without top-level administrative support, universities often consider professional development programmes as secondary to the central research and instructional focus of world-class universities.

Conclusion

Possessing expertise in education reforms provides no guarantee of having the capacities, attitudes, and cultural sensitivities needed to facilitate change across cultural contexts, which at the policy level seems largely assumed. Universities that value student exposure to native speaker teachers may not want or require a teacher with an ambitious change agenda. Conversely, universities that aim to implement specific reforms, such as standards-based assessment or English medium instruction, may benefit from native speaker teachers possessing such expertise and experience. However, there needs to be a more level playing field in terms of opportunities provided to both native speaker and non-native speaker teachers, be that in terms of promotions, salary increments or opportunities for conference attendance, research funding etc.

So, while recognising the limitations in the data discussed, and despite the limited scope and exploratory nature of these findings, it is argued that this paper can still provide greater understanding of the current situation of teaching in universities within mainland China. Structural and financial inequality was evident in the responses, and strategies for further professional development were being compromised in some areas. The findings also support the view from Reynolds et al. (2015) that teacher behaviour is influenced by their underlying attitudes and values, although more research is needed on the way in which the formation and expression of such values shapes, and is shaped by, the historical, social and political context, in which they work. It can be argued that this is especially needed in developing country contexts where little such research already exists.

What this study highlights is that successful professional development efforts are based on relationships. This is especially true in the Chinese context, where networking operates at a more intensive and pervasive level than elsewhere. Those managing professional development must have leadership style characteristics that are consultative and collaborative.

Professional development administrators need to be able to adapt to the many unique challenges that faculty members and departments from many different backgrounds face, and also know how to work collaboratively with faculty members.

Professional development also needs to be able to reach out and meet the needs of individual faculty members. This one-on-one faculty mentoring and guidance model is often the most sustainable. Faculty members' instructional and research needs are often so unique that they cannot be grouped into entire department-wide training seminars. Finding ways to best meet the various and disparate needs of so many faculty members is a constant challenge for professional development, yet, if viewed as an opportunity, long-term success can ensue.

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