A rose by any other name would smell as sweet: Professional Learning Communities in Chinese Senior Secondary Schools

1 ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings from a UK DfID/ESRC funded project “Improving Teacher Development and Educational Quality in China”. The research investigates the existence and relevance of professional learning communities (PLCs) to promote student outcomes and teacher development in Chinese senior secondary schools. Both quantitative and qualitative data have been analysed including interviews and focus groups with 90+ stakeholders and a survey of 17,000+ teachers in three regions. Evidence is presented from national policy makers and four detailed case study schools, selected on the basis of “value added effectiveness” and rural/urban location. The ways in which PLCs are evaluated and supported in Chinese schools are also discussed. The findings indicate that the “western” PLC concept is seen as highly relevant by stakeholders but needs to be adapted and sustainable for the Chinese and local contexts. Overall, the project seeks to provide quality data to enhance understanding of teacher development and learning and how these aspects relate to school effectiveness and improvement in China. The findings are discussed in terms of educational policy and practice in mainland China and internationally, focusing on the processes of learning, teaching and school improvement in different contexts, and the implications for the post 2015 education agenda.

2 INTRODUCTION

Given the evidence of the positive outcomes of schools operating as professional learning communities (Lomos et al, 2012; Thomas 2010), it is not surprising to find increasing interest in exploring the concept internationally, and specifically in China (Hannum et al, 2007; Sargent &
Hannum, 2009; Wong 2010a; 2010b). Since the introduction of a market-based economic system in the last quarter of the twentieth century, central government in China has linked achieving economic growth and a need for educational reform designed to meet the challenges of globalization. This has involved an accelerating series of reforms of curriculum and assessment. In 2010 the 17th National Congress reviewed progress and announced that the reforms were not moving fast enough in schools. The ten-year plan National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (CMOE, 2010) included the requirement to ‘renovate school operation and education administration, overhaul quality evaluation, [and] examinations... revamp teaching ... methods and approaches, and put a modern school system in place.’ Schools have been given greater autonomy and now have to design a school-based curriculum to accompany the National Curriculum. This is designed to allow schools to establish their own identities and unique values. All this in a huge country which has very uneven regional economic development and a de-centralised and devolved education system with varied funding and different needs. In this context could professional learning communities contribute to achieving the desired reforms and change?

This paper seeks to address this question and draws on a joint UK-China research project (Thomas & Peng, 2014) to investigate the existence, relevance and utility of professional learning communities (PLCs) in Chinese schools, and to enhance understanding of how teacher professional development relates to school effectiveness and improvement in China. Moreover, if PLCs exist in Chinese schools a key issue is whether these are observed as more “mature” PLCs in more effective schools, as suggested by previous research in UK (Bolam et al, 2005). In the following sections an account of the research questions, design and methods are followed by presentation of the data and discussion of the findings in relation to the literature.

2.1 Research Questions

Given the issues associated with ‘policy borrowing’ (Phillips and Ochs 2003, Raffe and Spours 2007) this was not a case of ‘the conscious adoption in one context of policy observed in another.’ The research questions (RQ) were focused on exploring understandings and considering the relevance and utility of PLCs in the Chinese context:

RQ1: What are the key features of teacher professional development in China?
RQ2: What are the views and experiences of key stakeholders regarding the existence, relevance and utility of the concept of professional learning communities in Chinese schools to improve teacher quality and student outcomes?

3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

3.1 Sample and Data Collection

This was a qualitative study of the perspectives of policy makers and practitioners, nationally and in two contrasting provinces (located within a large-scale longitudinal quantitative research project). One-to-one and focus group interviews were used as the main method of data collection, as well as follow up reports and telephone interviews. The range of participants was chosen to gain the perspectives of different groups in the school community, all responded to an invitation to contribute. Interviews were conducted with senior leaders (Head Teachers, Deputy Head Teachers, Heads of Subject or Year Groups, with lead responsibility for student attainment and teacher development); senior teachers with more than five years teaching experience; junior
teachers with five or fewer years teaching experience; staff not directly involved with teaching; students aged eighteen or above. In total there were 96 interviewees, including 4 national policy makers, 4 local policy makers, and in each of four case study schools between 16-23 staff and between 2-5 students. However, given the relative size of China, it is recognised that only a relatively small sample of schools and stakeholder interviewees were possible, and so these findings are intended to be exploratory and illustrative, rather than definitive.

3.2 Research Instruments

Four interview schedules were developed, each appropriate to the stakeholders involved: policy makers, senior leaders, teachers and non-teachers; students; but all had common themes. Information was sought about teacher professional development in general (statutory requirements, organization, provision, location, funding) as well as individual experiences and perceptions of this. Participants were also asked their views on the characteristic features and processes of professional learning communities in relation to the operation of their own school. Given the ‘fuzzy’ semantic history of the concept, it was necessary to agree a definition in order to discuss it with the participants.

“A professional learning community (PLC) is an inclusive group of people, motivated by a shared learning vision, who support and work with each other, finding ways, inside and outside their immediate community, to enquire on their practice and together learn new and better approaches that will enhance all students’ learning.”

This definition was taken from the source materials, for school leaders and other leaders of professional learning (Stoll et al, 2006), produced from UK government-funded research into creating and sustaining effective professional learning communities. (Bolam et al 2005). This 2005 project also identified eight characteristics of effective PLCs and four processes which promote and sustain them as follows:

Eight Characteristics of a PLC: Shared values and vision, Collective responsibility for students’ learning, Collaboration focused on learning, Group as well as individual professional learning, Reflective professional enquiry, Openness, networks and partnerships, Inclusive Membership, Mutual trust, respect and support.

Four Processes to develop a PLC: Optimising resources and structures to promote the PLC, Promoting professional learning, Evaluating and sustaining the PLC, Leading and managing to promote the PLC.

A key aim of the current study was to explore and test in the Chinese context the existence and stakeholder perceptions of this formulation of PLC characteristics and processes identified in UK. Thus the research instruments included open ended questions related to each PLC characteristic and process as well more general questions about PLCs and teachers professional development. The Bolam et al (2005) idea of stages of development in a PLC, based on these characteristics and processes was also used. Participants were asked to consider whether their school PLC could be described as ‘starting’, ‘developing’ and ‘mature’. 

Page 3
UKFIET 2015 Conference Paper
3.3 Procedure

Longitudinal data was collected over a 30 month period from October 2010 to March 2012. Initial interviews and focus groups took place in October and November 2010, generally lasted one hour, were tape recorded and conducted in Chinese. In the same period, after the initial interviews were completed, there were two-day PLC workshops in each region provided for the case study schools by the project team. Subsequently, additional data was collected from the case study schools, in the form of two follow-up reports and telephone interviews with designated PLC teachers on any PLC-related activity.

To provide national and regional perspectives and context, interviews were also conducted in October 2011 with four national policy makers (three from the Ministry of Education) and two local policy makers from the relevant LEA in each province. All participants were assured of confidentiality in the reporting of their contributions, and have been identified in code only according to the local authority where they were located, the institution in which they worked and the type of stakeholder they were: policymaker, head teacher, teacher or student.

3.4 The schools and their context

Criteria for selection of schools were related to location (East/west Region; urban or rural) and academic “value added” performance. Student scores in the 2009 Entrance Exam to Higher Education (EEHE) were analysed separately for one LEA (within each Province), controlling for prior attainment in the Senior High School Entrance exam taken in 2006. The scores were used to identify schools with (statistically significant) more/average or less relatively effective value added performance. From a list of schools who met the criteria, one urban and one rural SHS in each eastern and western LEA/Province were recruited through discussion with the LEA and all agreed to act as case study schools. The selected urban senior high schools were both large, comprising more than 3,000 SHS students, whereas the rural senior high schools were both combined with junior high schools and comprised less than 1,000 SHS students. Further contextual details of case study schools are as follows:

**Province A is in the north-east of China.** Schools A1 (urban; more/average effective value added performance) and A2 (rural; less effective value added performance). The schools are in a city which covers a very large metropolitan area, comprising three municipal districts, four county level cities and eighteen counties, and including five universities and twelve colleges. The city has a population of over 10 million people.

**Province B is in poorer the north-west central region of China.** Schools B1 (rural; more/average effective value added performance) and B2 (urban; less effective value added performance). The schools are in a city with nearly two million inhabitants. It comprises one central urban district, where half a million people live, and three counties. Much of the province is mountainous or plateaus, most at least 1,000 m above sea level. Agriculture, including organic farming, is a major economic activity.

In terms of raw mean unadjusted University Entrance examination scores it is pertinent to note that the less effective school (A2) in Province A obtained very similar results to the more effective school in Province B (B1). In comparison, the more/average effective school in Province A (A1) obtained around 60 points higher, and the less effective school in Province B (B2) obtained around 30 points lower, than this figure. In part this is due to the typically higher overall achievement of
students in eastern Chinese Provinces in comparison to economically poorer western Provinces. Chinese senior high schools provide three years of education beyond the nine years of compulsory education in China. Students are aged 15 or 16 when they begin this phase. Entry to an academic senior high school or a vocational high school is by a competitive entrance examination (zhongkao) taken at the end of junior high school and administered by the LEA. Students must achieve the baseline for entry. They may apply for entrance to a school of their choice but selection is dependent on rank order of success in the examination. Entry to some schools is very competitive and students are required to pay tuition. The tuition fees vary with regional conditions and typically there are reductions, exemptions, scholarships for low-income families. Overall more than 40% of students in this age-range are enrolled in post-compulsory education. Students in SHS follow a traditional subject-based curriculum. At the end of this phase students take the college entrance examination (gaokao) which determines entry to higher education, in particular the university or college where they will be selected to study.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 RQ1: What are the key features of teacher professional development in China?

Stakeholders typically reported that professional development for serving teachers in China is characteristically stratified according to the individual’s role or level of experience. For example, the focus for new or recently qualified teachers is in basic skills: language and presentation, subject knowledge, use of ICT. For senior teachers such as heads and deputies, subject leaders there is training in the new curriculum reforms; whoever in a school has been given the leadership responsibility will take the training. A focus may be on improving school efficiency or teaching quality. There is also a National Training Programme which takes many forms and which all teachers are required to be involved in for a specified number of hours in a given period (360 hours within each five year period).

The most evident school-based activity for all teachers is their participation in Teaching and Research Groups. This is a long-standing and deeply embedded feature of life as a teacher in China. Time is allocated for this every week. Membership most frequently relates to the subject taught though a group may be formed around teachers in a student Year Group. Activities undertaken in collaboration depend on the school and most commonly include lesson preparation, text book writing and resource creation, analysis of student test and exam outcomes to improve performance. Demonstration lessons and mentoring by a more experienced teacher in a master/apprentice model is also an established development activity. Teachers expect to see others teach and to have their lessons observed. They may also enter teaching competitions, give model class lessons/presentations or publish accounts of their research activity, locally or regionally.

The concept of the expert and the model is the basis for most provision. ‘Backbone’ teachers may demonstrate in schools, experts from universities may lecture in the province or region. The LEA has its own office for Teaching and Research and organises and provides activities and materials, for example for the National Training Programme. Teachers’ attendance at such events is recorded and Head Teachers are required to examine the teacher’s notes of the activity. Teachers may also access different sorts of provision via distance learning and the internet. For example schools may pay for access to specialist sites where teachers may download resources or past examination papers.
Professional development is linked to career advancement and teachers’ pay. Self-evaluation related to the results their students get is an important part of this as are interim and annual assessments by their head teacher. Progress through the designated levels eg from second rank teacher to first rank teacher is closely defined and regulated. Teachers may fund their own professional development, for example by post-graduate study at Masters or Doctoral level, but there are also funds available at regional or county level, and schools may cover a teacher’s expenses incurred in attending development events. However, there are considerable regional differences in the resources available for teachers professional development activities.

Given the above outline of stakeholder’s reports of professional development in China RQ2 addresses how these practices might relate to the notion of professional learning communities.

4.2 RQ2: What are the views and experiences of key stakeholders regarding the existence, relevance and utility of the concept of professional learning communities in Chinese schools to improve teacher quality and student outcomes?

Note that due to word restrictions only the perspectives of policy maker interviewees are summarised below.

All policy makers interviewed related professional learning communities to teachers’ membership of Teaching and Research Groups. A senior academic in teacher education who had lived in the USA was very clear that these already constituted a form of within school sub-PLC.

In my opinion the learning community of teachers, the professional community in China is relatively strong. I once managed five kinds of learning community - that is a lesson preparation group, a subject group, a year group, a teaching and research group and a research office; these were five professional learning communities. I don’t think there is any such system abroad. I believe there are no learning communities abroad as sound as the ones we have in China.

However an interviewee from the MoE was more guarded.

There are certainly regional differences. There are huge disparities between areas. This kind of collaborative learning, this professional development community is doing pretty well in some places but is not sound or rather loose in other places and needs to be strengthened.

He saw school controlled teaching and research groups as ‘the major form’ in relation to PLCs but went on to mention teachers taking an initiative and forming professional development communities based on a common interest which linked with their subject knowledge and teaching.

For example some teachers maybe interested in environmental protection and establish an environmental teaching and research group with Biology teachers, Geography teachers, Chemistry teachers and Maths teachers joined. They discuss and write a paper in school and carry out environmental monitoring after school.

He also pointed out that Chinese teachers naturally collaborate.

It is a very rare situation that teachers just work or achieve something on their own.
He gave other examples of things he thought fitted the project definition of a PLC. Teachers in rural areas who graduated from the same university formed a community to exchange opinions and ideas about professional development, helping each other to do research, write reports and publish papers. More formally, at national level, schools are being required to work together.

LEAS have to facilitate a twinning schools programme between good quality schools and disadvantaged schools. A few teachers from a good school and a few teachers from a disadvantaged school are grouped together for one to two years so they can grow together. There’s also shadow learning which sends teachers to good schools or schools in developed areas to follow and learn from the teachers there.

Policy makers on occasion differed in perceptions of the shared values and vision characteristic of a PLC. One thought that teachers shared a common vision about their school and their students and this coincided with the nationally advocated view that school culture should reflect the values of the head and teachers, namely that everyone should work hard to teach students well and to run a school well. However he saw this as a challenge that involved more than the display of ‘empty slogans’ around the school. In contrast was the view that although in general terms SHS teachers might share a value about the development of students, their individual values varied according to the Year group they taught.

For Year 3 teachers the value is all about improving students’ scores in the entrance examination. This is a negative situation. By rights teachers’ work should be about promoting the competence, thinking and ethics of the students, but it gives all these up and only serves the examination.

This variation in teacher priorities was mentioned by another policy maker as a source of tension.

A professional development community is easy to set up and can have impact where there is agreement between government requirements and teacher needs. It is not easy to establish a PLC when teacher’s demands and expectations do not agree with what government advocates.

Although interviewees agreed that group learning and collaborations focused on learning were evident in professional development of teachers in China there were reservations about how these were enacted. One had concerns about the mentoring system particularly in Senior High Schools.

The mentoring system is still there but the practice is poorer than before.

The process of reflective enquiry was perceived as important but it was often confined to students’ academic performance, mainly because this was a key indicator for evaluating teacher performance. One interviewer was not confident that teachers were equipped to reflect effectively on pedagogy.

I think this aspect is weak...Everyone in a lesson preparation group prepares lessons and analyses students collectively. Issues are raised by individual teachers who sit down together and discuss and analyse these issues and then decide how the next lesson is prepared. However, I do not think the approach to data collection and analysis is scientific. This is probably to do with lack of equipping teachers with the ability to do research while we are training and nurturing them as a teacher.
In relation to openness, networks and partnerships national policy makers noted some exchange and co-operation between schools in the same county or district, invariably initiated by LEAs in response to central requirements. However they were most concerned about the lack of communication between schools of all types and universities. This was seen as most problematic in rural areas. This perception reflected the policy makers view that the characteristics of a PLC were more frequently found in ‘eastern areas, developed areas and cities’. The internet, it was felt, might be a factor in reducing the disadvantages interviewees felt were experienced by rural schools. It was emphasised that the government/MOE intention was to use the potential of digital devices to support online communities and networks. One aim was to encourage all teachers in a province who were undertaking the National Training Programme to form an online learning community.

Discussion of Inclusiveness was seen as related to non-teaching staff. In general they were seen as irrelevant to a PLC.

They cannot join the teaching community; all they need to do is take care of their own job. Maybe librarians and clinic staff can be part of the community but they are marginalized and may feel like outsiders. This is related to our tradition. Clinic staff concern themselves about students’ health. They seldom interfere in education.

However, evidence of varied practice in schools was provided from one source.

Some principals may regard non-teaching staff as part of the school and bring them in. Others may divide them from the teaching faculty. It all depends on the principal. In some schools I have been in every teacher has a project including the non-teaching staff.

Comments about the mutual trust, respect and support characteristic included references to students and their families. It was felt that relationships between students and teachers were better. ‘Students respect teachers and teachers care for their students’. However the practice of teachers going to students’ homes to talk with parents about a student’s education was now problematic and less evident.

Factors that might help to implement the development of PLCs were seen as related to activity by educational administrative departments at all levels and closely involved with evaluation of teacher’s professional development.

5 POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

PLC concept appears to be relevant in Chinese schools, established sub-PLCs as well as whole school PLCs seem to exist and consistent evidence on 5 out of 8 characteristics, and 4 processes were found:

- Challenging PLC features/processes
  - inclusion (eg support staff)
  - reflective professional enquiry (hierarchy/lack of distributed leadership)
  - trust and respect (cultural context)
- Most developed PLC features/processes
  - shared value and visions
- collective responsibilities
- existing PD mechanism & strong support for mentoring

Developing whole school as a PLC: the concept as well as features may need to be adapted to the Chinese context given:

- Differences between rural and urban contexts
  - Perceived challenges for rural teachers and schools
  - Practical constraints
  - Parents’ understanding and support
- Sustainability
  - Takes time for implementation
  - Support of school leadership
  - External influences are required to promote PLC development: eg, better LEA regulations/support/inspection to promote CPD/PLC
- Community link
  - Difficult to involve parents in rural areas in PLC

Perceived impact of PLC training/materials:

- Improved professional development practices
- Potential use as evaluation framework
- Reported changes in teacher perceptions and school practices included:
  - Staff have a better developed understanding of PLC concepts such as understanding of “evaluations of PLC” and “reflective teaching practices”
  - Introduction of more effective strategies to promote and sustain the school as a PLC

6 REFERENCES


