Are trans-national Professional Development Programmes doomed to fail to influence student outcomes?

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Abstract

Trans-national education is increasing (Mahony, 2014) and with regard to professional development for teachers, is an important aspect of upskilling teachers to deliver high quality learning experiences for their pupils. This paper is concerned with Trans-national Professional Development delivered by one UK HEI and delivered to Chinese Teachers. In the Chinese context, the need for such professional development is rooted in the Ministry of Education's (2010) vision for developments, which will lead to a shift from an exam orientated education system to one that is quality orientated. The university has engaged with a number of different regions in China to deliver professional development for their teachers and head teachers in this vein. Although on the surface, positively received, participants identified a number of barriers that constrained the impact of the professional development. This article explores the pedagogical, cultural and investment barriers that led some participants to perceive that it was impossible to implement new strategies in their context. Insight of this nature can support institutions to tailor their international professional development programmes towards a model of input coupled with continued professional support to increase the

potential for training to have an impact on practice and children's educational experiences.

Introduction

Continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers is widely recognised as an essential element of a quality education system. During periods of rapid educational change, many governments embark on large scale Professional Development Programmes as a means of embedding change in a timely manner. This has led to an increasing number of trans-national CPD programmes as an increasing number of countries; for example, China, Egypt and Mexico turn to countries such as USA, UK and Australia for inspiration and support. The rationale for this rests often in the meta-narrative that suggests that increased teacher and teaching quality will lead to improved pupil attainment, which in turn will lead to a workforce able to increase national economic competitiveness. This is certainly the case in China, dating back to the 1980's when a "new era of reform and openness to the outside world" (Shi and Englert, 2008 p. 348) was established. More recently, the Ministry of Education's (2010) vision for educational change focusses on enabling pupils to become flexible, responsive and active thinkers, able to function competently in a rapidly changing world. This ambition can only be realised through developments leading to a shift from an exam orientated and rote learning focussed education system to one that is quality orientated and embraces a more experiential-based pedagogy (Chen and Day, 2015).

The University in this paper has a long history of delivering a combination of award bearing and non-award bearing CPD programmes to serving teachers and school leaders in the UK and abroad. In the main, the trans-national aspect of this involved delivering UK-based professional development programmes to school leaders from a number of different regions in China, ranging from rural regions such as Ningxia, provincial cities such as Guangzhou, provinces such as Shandong and the capital city Beijing. Latterly the University has been involved in the delivery of CPD in mainland China. Desimone's (2009) core features of effective professional development have influenced programmes, namely content focus, active learning, coherence, duration and collective participation. The softer skills of kinship and collegiality are also significant in partnership education programmes (Littlefair, Clifford Swan, and Hudson, 2019) and as such were key to the relationship building when designing the programme. This paper focusses on participant evaluations of programmes delivered in China to classroom teachers from primary and secondary schools.

Context

The University academic staff planned and delivered six, weeklong, non-accredited, programmes following the brief from the Chinese Provincial Education Department, to support the development of innovative pedagogy and curriculum in schools. In their planning the staff also drew on themes emerging from evaluations of the UK-based Professional Development Programmes to inform both content and process. The participant teachers, who were selected by the local authority, taught in differing age ranges relating to primary and secondary schooling. Each programme lasted for one week and consisted of between 25-30 participants teachers. Six lecturers from the institution were involved in team teaching two weekly slots, totalling six programmes. The programme introduced participant teachers to a range of teaching and learning styles used

in the education system in England. This included the exploration of concepts such as inclusion, values and ethos. Active participation and modelling featured, alongside pedagogical practices to promote active learning, such as discussion, group work, pairing, interactive activities, peer and self- assessment and target setting. Stimulants for learning were varied and chosen to be creative and innovative, including the use of 'a fish' and 'Lego blocks'. The introduction of research to support the approaches used accompanied all aspects of the programme.

Method

Through the analysis of participant evaluations of their programme the authors critically evaluate the potential of these, and similar CPD programmes, to support the Ministry of Education's aim is to transform the education of children in China.

When designing the evaluation questionnaires for the CPD programmes the delivery team drew on their experiences of evaluating previous UK-based trans-national CPD. These evaluations comprised of qualitative and quantitative questions that participants completed in English. While this had provided the delivery team with some meaningful and useful feedback in the broadest sense, many participants only engaged with the quantitative questions and often, qualitative responses comprised only of single words. As a result, the data gathered lacked depth and was of limited use from a developmental perspective. For this reason, the team decided to ask participants in the China-based CPD programme to make their narrative responses in Mandarin, in the hope that this would facilitate a greater number and greater depth of response. Because the overriding aim of each programme was to influence change in the everyday classroom practice of the practitioners engaged in the programmes, the majority of the questions focussed on the usefulness and appropriateness of the approaches explored during the programmes and the likelihood of the participants using these approaches in the near future. In total 159

participants responded to the evaluation questionnaire. The university employed a native Mandarin speaker to translate all of the questionnaire responses ready for analysis. Data from the qualitative responses was analysed on a question-by-question basis, using a Thematic Analysis; a method of systematically identifying, organising and offering insight into patterns of meaning, known as themes, across a qualitative data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Results

The results presented here focus on the responses to three specific questions within the evaluation questionnaire: (1) 'Has the programme made a difference to your thinking?

(2) 'What aspect of the programme will you implement first' and lastly,

(3) 'Which aspect of the programme are you least likely to implement and why?'

'Has the programme made a difference to your thinking?'

The responses to this question were overwhelmingly positive with only seven participants claiming that the CPD Programme has had 'some' or 'no' impact on their thinking. One participant commented, "A little bit, I try to be more open-minded" (Participant 53). Of those who used an adjective to indicate the strength of their agreement, seventy participants agreed 'yes' the programmes had made a difference to their thinking, while twelve called that difference either 'big' or 'huge' with a further two considered the change to be 'significant'. In their narrative comments, participants reflected on greater understanding of new approaches, of broadening of their perspectives and establishing new beliefs. Responses included,

"Yes, through this programme I have gained new understanding towards educational philosophy. By acceptance, absorbing and digesting I think I will be able to put what I have learned into practice." (Participant 109)

"It did make a difference, open-minded; being able to think outside the box has inspired me." (Participant 1)

"The training has inspired me to think actively and outside the box" (Participant 33). Others took a more tentative stance, for example, "I still need some time for reflection. Maybe something I find useless now will turn out to be very helpful in later days." (Participant 122)

"What aspect of the programme will you implement first?"

This question elicited positive narrative responses from all 159 participants. The responses fell into three distinct themes.

Theme	Sub-themes	Examples
Professional attributes	Being more critical in their thinking (17 responses); Becoming more reflective (12 responses)	"Deep thinking and reflection to ourselves" (Participant 158).
	Becoming more responsive in the classroom (17 responses) including	"Encouraging pupils to ask questions, and then according to their responses I can adjust my teaching style and depth" (Participant 74).
Practical teaching strategies	Sharing learning objectives (25 responses) introducing differentiated tasks (39 responses)	"A differentiated teaching approach, introduction of challenges" (Participant 73).
	Introducing an interactive strategy (95 participants)	"A visual demonstration that encourages pupils to develop their observation and the ability to learning independence and creativity." (Participant 86)
Formative assessment strategies	Introducing one or more strategies (58 responses)	"Question time before the class starts, for learners to reflect what they have learnt yesterday" (Participant 69).

Table 1: Themes emerging from responses to Question 2

It was notable that there were no instances of participants naming either peer or self-assessment in this section, however these both featured in responses to the third question focussing on approaches participant felt unlikely to implement.

"Which aspect of the programme are you least likely to implement and why?"

Five participants made no response to this question; a further sixty gave responses that indicated that they felt able to implement some or of the approaches in the programmes. In total ninety-four participants mentioned specific activities or approaches that they would not implement and gave a clear reason for this. These responses were the most significant for the delivery team, as it was here that participants began to give insights into their perceptions of the barriers they faced in beginning to change their practice.

Analysis of participants' reasons for not considering it possible to implement strategies revealed three over-arching barriers as shown below

Barriers identified	Examples from responses
Cultural	"Some programme may not suit our culture" (Participant 134) "Because we are from different countries we have different cultures…..we therefore have different educational philosophy" (Participant 71) "[Peer] Evaluation: it does not fit our Chinese culture" (Participant 102).
Pedagogical	"Interdisciplinary (cross curricular) teaching is not suitable for the requirements and educational system in my country" (Participant 94). "In China, lecture time is limited and precious; therefore, it is hard to give pupils too much time to interact" (Participant 4) "[The Diamond Nine activity] is not suitable in my classroom, my teaching time is limited" "Because it is hard to predict the result and may have some risks" (Participant 81).
Investment	"Every concept is helpful; however, there are some difficulties in creating a learning environment, due to limited funding, energy, area; as a result, this might not be achievable" (Participant 33) "I probably will not try the cross-curricular teaching at the moment. With limited resources, it cannot be done now" (Participant 146). "Creating an environment for learning. Because I think this one may take the teacher and pupils so much time, it is not so effective." (Participant 69)

Table 2: Themes emerging from responses to Question 3

Discussion

Guskey (2002) suggests that, in order to be successful, professional development must make an impact in three distinct domains: teachers' classroom practice, student outcomes and subsequently teachers' attitudes and beliefs. The evaluation evidence collected here indicates that the professional development programmes did have an impact on the participants' attitudes and beliefs as noted in their responses to question, "Has the programme made a difference to your thinking?" While a positive starting point, unless classroom practice changes the desired impact on student learning will not transpire. For this reason, the focus of this discussion centres on the perceived barriers to the implementation of approaches the Ministry of Education (2010) hope will influence

student's opportunities to become flexible, responsive and active thinkers, able to function competently in a rapidly changing world.

Many participants identified ***cultural barriers*** preventing the implementation of new idea and approaches. Literature is plentiful exploring the origins and influences that have shaped the Chinese education system. For example, Kennedy (2002) explores the roots of this from Confucian values including a reluctance to express opinion and the unquestioning acceptance of those more knowledgeable than ones-self. This is also set within Confucian codes of social conduct, advocating respect and obedience within social hierarchies. In the education context, this leads to the view of the teacher as the embodiment of wisdom and knowledge, and as demanding respect. Conversely, therefore, the pupil adopts the role of obedience within a system where individualism and self-assertion are discouraged. Hu (2002) highlights three cultural aspects of Chinese education that make the adoption of child-orientated approaches challenging. Firstly, education is revered – it is a serious business requiring considerable effort; secondly, education is about accumulated knowledge as opposed to the co-construction or application. Finally, education is both intellectual and moral underpinned by qualities of loyalty, modesty and conformity. With these thoughts in mind the tensions teachers face when adopting approaches that encouraged the development of creative expression, critical thinking, playful learning and problem solving are apparent. This context also makes clear why some forms of formative assessment would directly challenge traditional notions of the teacher-pupil relationship, as these approaches require self-assertion on the part of the pupils and can be viewed as challenging the wisdom and knowledge of the teacher.

The ***pedagogical barriers*** that emerged from the evaluation data revealed a lack of synergy between the teachers' views of pupils as learners and the pedagogical

assumptions underpinning many activities introduced in the programmes; namely children are confident learners who bring a wealth of knowledge, experiences and understanding to the learning process. Some participants revealed that, although there was an openness to consider new pedagogical approaches, there was not yet the belief, seen as a precursor by Desimone (2009) and Coe et al (2014) that these methods would be effective in achieving the goals that they needed to reach. The responses also indicated that when time was short and the curriculum packed, teachers were not willing to invest in new pedagogical methods but would rather rely on tried and tested approaches. Underlying this is the notion that if the teacher is not "delivering knowledge" then learning is not taking place; a stance that requires challenge if child-centred approaches are to be adopted.

Chen and Day (2015 p. 13) highlight that the "curriculum reform innovation imposed on Chinese teachers have forced them to try to change their philosophy and practices in a high-pressure system while existing structural elements and traditional cultures remain unchanged". The major 'structural element' (Chen and Day, 2015) refer to here is the focus on exams and their results. Many believe this to be the biggest barrier to educational change in China (Hu, 2002; Chen and Day, 2015), this was mentioned by participants and places teachers in a 'catch twenty-two' situation. Despite the desire to introduce new pedagogical approaches into their practice; the fact that schools continue to be evaluated and financed based on results (Williams 2012), means that many teachers feel unable to move away from their didactic, exam-orientated approach because of the pressure placed on them to ensure pupils achieve good exam results (Chen and Day 2015). One participant articulated the reality of the tensions involved in implementing new approaches in such a climate by noting that this approach had a number of risks, especially when 'results' of a new approach were hard to predict.

While the investment in Professional Development from the Chinese government at both national and provincial level is not in doubt, participants identified a range of *investment barriers* at school-level that impeded the implementation of change. Participants mentioned for example the numbers of pupils in each class as having a significant impact on the implementation of new approaches. With Chen and Day (2015) reporting class sizes commonly reaching between fifty and sixty pupils, it is easy to understand the practical and logistical challenges of using active learning and problem-solving strategies on top of the pedagogical issues outlined above. Some participants asserted that they experienced a lack of resources to the extent that would make all pupils engaging in a practical way impossible. They also reflected on the structure of the school day and the organisational systems of the school as a barrier. This was most evident when participants reflected on the notion of the classroom environment being 'the third teacher' (Malaguzzi 1993) with participants feeling that the time needed to create such learning environments would be a waste of time and effort, rather than a means of scaffolding learning.

The notion of energy mentioned by this participant was one of a number relating to the effort needed to implement change. Daugbjerg and Sillasen (2016) note that energy, in the form of personal investment, is crucial to the success of CPD. Their findings suggest that, where there is an alignment of the intentions and perspectives of the CPD between teachers and school leaders, CPD will be most successful. Participants spoke of the limitations of time and ability as further barriers to implementing changes to their practice. The delivery team acknowledged that this revealed missing elements from the programmes, for example a focus on building the professional resilience to implement change, particularly when that change conflicts with practitioners' professional identity. Chen and Day (2015p. 9) highlight this, concluding that the proposed changes in China have "tested teachers' professional confidence, practices and traditional educational

views". Tao (2006), who concluded that CPD programmes generally lacked a focus on supporting the transition from teacher-centred to pupil-centred teaching, supports the view that teachers need more than one off CPD. The absence of ongoing support to implement change is the reason why weeklong format CPD programmes fail to be 'transformative' according to Kennedy's (2004) 'modes of CPD'. In order to achieve transformation Kennedy (2014) claims that there is a need to move towards a model of CPD characterised by professional, collaborative inquiry, which increases teacher autonomy and engagement. She suggests that CPD should "include an element of collaborative problem solving and subsequent activity, where the subsequent activity involves inquiring into one's own practice, and understanding more about other practice, perhaps through engagement with research" (Kennedy 2014, page 693). Teng (2016) noted that teachers' willingness to change their approaches increased when supported within the context of ongoing professional support and critical reflection. Evidence of this can also be found in the work of Williams (2012), reflecting on her involvement in the Chaoyang English Project. She described the powerful transformation of teaching approaches as the result of her engagement in co-planning and co-teaching with Chinese teachers in their schools over an academic year. Chen and Day (2015) call for a strategic move to school-based change models, which engage teachers and enable them to sustain their sense of commitment, the stability of their professional identity and their capacity to be resilient.

Conclusion

Su et al (2018 p. 194) assert that to create effective professional development programmes 'we must understand the situations in which teachers are immersed, which can support or constrain professional growth'. Although on the surface the teachers gained some form of development of their thinking and practice, the constraints through cultural,

pedagogical and investment barriers limited the impact of the professional development programme. This is not necessarily a criticism of the programme; it is more a result of the process of delivery. Many of the barriers faced are surmountable with an understanding of the incumbent situation and through subsequent support for adaptation. However, in order to enable this immersive experience for both facilitator and participant teacher, the process of delivery needs to adapt to be a longitudinal model with ongoing support in a mentoring style situation. This extended model obviously has financial implications for the provider and partner institutions; however, it would provide a far more effective professional development experience for the participant teachers and equally, a richer learning opportunity for the provider. Investments in Continuing Professional Development Programmes lead to changes in pupil's learning, so it is critical that international CPD programmes are effective and have the necessary immersion, adaptation and longitudinal support to ensure they make a difference.

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