New Directions for Education in China

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From 'being' to 'becoming': Issues and suggestions for continuing professional development in a middle school in China

Tinghe Jin and Alex Moore

Drawing on original research, this chapter examines the experiences of, and attitudes to, continuing professional development (CPD) among a group of middle-school teachers in one province in China, where national curriculum reforms are currently being implemented. The chapter identifies a number of obstacles impeding effective professional development for practising teachers, and makes some suggestions regarding future CPD priorities in the context of Chinese public education. Interviews for the study were carried out with a sample of 18 teachers at one middle school, combined with data collected through a survey involving 114 teachers at the same school. All teachers were invited to take part in the research and the vast majority were happy to do so. Questionnaires were used to collect teachers' perspectives in relation to their experiences of CPD and to identify recurring issues. These issues were further explored with eighteen teachers who volunteered to be interviewed, of whom fifteen were teachers, two were teaching colleagues with administrative responsibilities related to teacher development, and one the headteacher. The headteacher was fully supportive of the research, and welcomed the findings and some of the suggested possibilities for future action.

The research approach

An important feature of the research was its in-depth, case-study nature. Much educational research in and about China still tends to be quantitative or statistical and broadly policy-based. Given the great variety that exists in China within national, provincial, and indeed district-level schooling systems, we wanted, instead, to conduct a small-scale study that could

provide more nuanced and extensive insights into issues that were specific, particular, and local.

In addition to the voluntary nature of involvement, the decision regarding which teachers to approach for interviews was based on a concern for balance in relation to gender, age, subjects taught, teaching experience, professional rank, and position in the school. The survey responses had suggested a strong connection between attitudes to CPD, subjects taught, and the amount of teaching experience, so these became particularly important criteria in the selection of interviewees. In the event, four categories of teaching experience (0–3 years, 4–7 years, 8–15 years, and 16–23 years), along with representation within the main teaching subjects (Chinese, mathematics, English, the sciences, and history) featured most strongly in our selection criteria. The majority of interviews lasted about 50 minutes, with alternative interview schedules designed for each main constituency. Thus, teachers were encouraged to provide personal perspectives and experiences of their own CPD, while the administrators and headteacher provided data on the management aspects of the school's CPD.

Research issues within the wider context

Before turning to our findings from the data, it is important to provide some of the wider social, political, and historical contexts within which the research was located. There were two especially important starting points with reference to this study: an understanding of changing demands within teacher CPD in China, arising from the rate and scale of institutional change that is taking place across the wider society; and the historically constructed nature of CPD as previously designed and experienced by practising teachers. While many countries around the globe are currently experiencing rapid development and social, economic and cultural change, with inevitable consequences in relation to the purposes of public education and the nature of teaching and learning, the rate and nature of change in China has been particularly marked. Previous problems regarding the lack of availability of schools and school places for Chinese students have, by and large, been addressed (MOEPRC, 2010). However, the very speed of expansion (essentially a *quantity* issue) has meant that a gap in teacher knowledge and expertise exists in several key aspects of compulsory education, for example in using IT for teaching, developing student assessment frameworks, implementing new school management styles, and accessing varied educational resources. While the present study examines one school located in a prosperous and developed province where the resources needed for an updated and improved CPD offer are more readily

available, the situation in many other parts of China remains precarious, particularly as young, qualified teachers seek to move from rural areas to urban centres. This migration often leaves rural schools struggling to find qualified staff so that issues connected with CPD become potentially far more problematic.

In relation to teachers' professional development, Zhu (2010) has argued that the current education system in China not only suffers from a lack of resourcing, but also still contains a majority of teachers who are imbued with a teaching style and philosophy embedded in, and more appropriate to, a socio-economic and cultural past. Zhu suggests that changing this cannot be achieved easily or quickly; indeed, change may require intensive reform not just in relation to CPD carried out in individual schools, but within teacher training institutions more widely. A related problem is that many of the *values* embedded within modern CPD programmes – for example an emphasis on developing expertise in collaborative teaching and learning, or in promoting reflective practice – conflict not just with teachers' entrenched views and practices, but also with the explicit and dominant pressures that shape their work and which themselves are often supported by other aspects of education policy development. The education system in China is still characterized by extreme degrees of competitiveness focused upon the all-important national examination scores that give students access to post-compulsory education. For a majority of teachers working under intense pressure, a focus on the specific needs of an individual school and its students that one might expect in CPD now is experienced as a distraction from their main task, which is to ensure that most students in their assigned class secure high grades in public examinations by working hard and exhibiting good behaviour.

In China, these externally driven pressures on schools and teachers have been exacerbated in the past decade by a parallel rise in commercial private tuition, also aimed at enhancing students' examination success. As several participants in our study suggested, more and more teachers are facing increasingly difficult-to-refuse demands to act as after-school supervisors. Meanwhile, parents increasingly demand test-score information from schools, placing further pressure upon teachers to keep weekly records tracking individual test marks. It will come as little surprise that our study uncovered aspects of resistance to CPD on the basis that it generally bore too little connection with teachers' current lived experiences. In addition to the task of helping students obtain high grades in public examinations, an enduring and preoccupying challenge for the teachers in our study was how to cope on a daily basis with classes of between 40 to 50 students. This is

a situation that makes it extremely difficult to implement any change from the traditional, front-of-class, teacher-and-textbook-led pedagogies of the past towards the more student-centred pedagogies now being promoted in CPD education policy.

The changing curriculum context in middle schools in China

Apart from the standard academic subjects, vocational subjects such as food technology and design technology are also now provided by some middle schools in China – an innovation that presents new and immediate challenges for teachers used to working in particular ways within particular subject-centred frameworks. However, the New Curriculum of Basic Education (NCBE), which was implemented in 2005, arguably presents teachers and CPD with even greater challenges (Zhu, 2010). This new curriculum calls for various innovative methods in relation to curriculum content as well as to how teaching and learning are understood and implemented. As Zhu (2010: 374) states, 'the NCBE advocates teacher–student interaction, teachers' guidance in sharing, student autonomy and inquiry study', thus placing demands on teachers to adapt to new educational goals, academic content, and pedagogy while still managing class sizes that would appear to work against such reforms. The dilemmas for teachers, schools, CPD, and education policy in China are illustrated in Ma *et al.*'s (2009: 425) account of how four provinces selected by the MOEPRC – Shandong, Guangdong, Hainan, and Ningxia – have responded to the government's new curriculum directives with a range of measures in their senior middle schools (for students aged mostly between 15 and 17). These directives comprise the following:

- a new three-level curriculum structure: learning fields, subjects, and modules
- an elective course and credit system whereby schools can seek accreditation for courses of their own designing
- giving students opportunities to choose courses
- promoting students' generic skills of independent inquiry, cooperation, communication, and problem-solving
- a continuous, formative-assessment system, tracking students' academic performance: the development of a growth portfolio
- a general increase in school-based curriculum development.

These changes, though commonplace in some countries, clearly pose particular challenges for Chinese teachers and schools if universally adopted. For example, schools would need to have the necessary range of teaching

staff capable of implementing the changes and suitably trained to teach the courses. Teachers would need to learn new academic content and explore new ways of teaching, moving away from the teacher-led pedagogies of the performance-output culture that is still promoted in public education policy, towards more student-centred pedagogies aimed at guiding and promoting students' personalized learning (Wang, 2009). However, Xue *et al.* (2010) have argued that, apart from the constraints imposed by the performance-output model, many teachers still lack an understanding of the new educational concepts and pedagogies that are appropriate to the changing curriculum, having been brought up to adopt traditional teaching styles and expectations and being unfamiliar with alternative approaches.

Including teachers in CPD planning: The need for a changed CPD culture

Day (1999: 4) has argued that teachers' professional development is a:

> process by which, alone and with others, teachers review, renew and extend their commitment as change agents to the moral purposes of teaching; and by which they acquire and develop critically the knowledge, skills, and emotional intelligence essential to good professional thinking, planning and practice with children, young people and colleagues *through each phase of their teaching lives* [emphasis added].

Importantly in relation to our own study, Day's analysis reminds us that in terms of their experience and related professional development needs, teachers will never be a homogenous group, but will have different needs and different developmental priorities according to such matters as their time in the profession and their experience of particular schools and classrooms. This was certainly reflected in our own study, in which teachers often expressed a sense of frustration that one-size-fits-all CPD sessions took little or no account of the specific needs of individual teachers and groups of teachers and did not try hard enough to find out from teachers themselves what those specific needs might be.

Another failure in many current CPD programmes in China is an ongoing emphasis on the instrumental or technical, an approach characterized by the teaching of specific tips and strategies for managing behaviour, planning and pacing lessons, and providing constructive written feedback. This is often at the expense of broader theoretical inputs and the promotion of individual and collaborative reflections on practice (Eleonora, 2003; Moore, 2012). Of particular interest in the Chinese context is Gu

and Wang's (2006) stress on the need for teachers to learn, via CPD, how to put educational theory into practice in an independent, creative way that encourages them to become innovators and educational leaders. The new curriculum reforms in China demand this of teachers too, initiating a requirement for them to continually improve their own practice (Gu and Wang, 2006). It is a development that has particularly important implications for CPD for teachers in Chinese senior-middle schools such as those taking part in our own study, where the pressures on staff working with Grade 3 students preparing for university entrance examinations to come up with the goods can be particularly severe. As Lu and Li (2009) argue, the new reforms and expectations pose a fundamental challenge to the top-down CPD and classroom approaches traditionally adopted in Chinese schools, which in the past have prevented many teachers from co-constructing their professional development pathways leading to their disengagement with their school's CPD offer. Lu and Li's research suggests that previous practices have left many experienced teachers finding themselves at a loss as to how to render their teaching more student-centred, as this has never previously been asked of them. Many young teachers, too, revealed that they had had little chance to enhance their teaching abilities since joining the profession, as opportunities for reflection-based CPD had been very hard to come by. Meanwhile, Zhong (2006) has argued for a radical shift of culture within schools, in which teachers are given a sense of ownership over what they do and the content of their CPD rather than simply being told (and perhaps expecting or accepting being told) what to do. Even when theory is prioritized within CPD, it is often done so in a way that offers little support and guidance in relation to its potential practical usefulness (Gu and Wang, 2006). As a result, teachers may find themselves struggling to develop educational theory and to put into practice 'ideas that are often conceptually and practically far removed from their classrooms' (Burbank and Kauchak, 2003: 500). In our own study, this 'far removed' world of practice included a preoccupation on the part of many teachers with issues of student behaviour that they felt should have a higher priority than at present within CPD programmes, and in response to which they felt they were being given too little useful support.

The 'passivity effect'

One result of the apparent mismatch between teachers' perceived needs and the combined demands of examination results, student behaviour, and a disarticulation in CPD between theory and practice, was that reflection on practice was often experienced as an unaffordable luxury by teachers. Indeed,

CPD itself, though essentially believed in and supported by teachers, came to be regarded in its current forms and in its current contexts with a degree of cynicism. Of the questionnaire respondents in our study, 43 (38 per cent) of the 112 who responded to the relevant question indicated that they had seldom taken part in CPD activities provided by the school in the previous two years. Although most teachers said that they were interested in CPD activities in principle, and expressed positive feelings towards the activities offered, a significant minority said that the activities provided by the school were either only a little effective (n=45, 40 per cent) or not effective at all (n=10, 9 per cent). The questionnaire further explored teachers' attitudes towards CPD activities they had attended (see Figure 7.1).
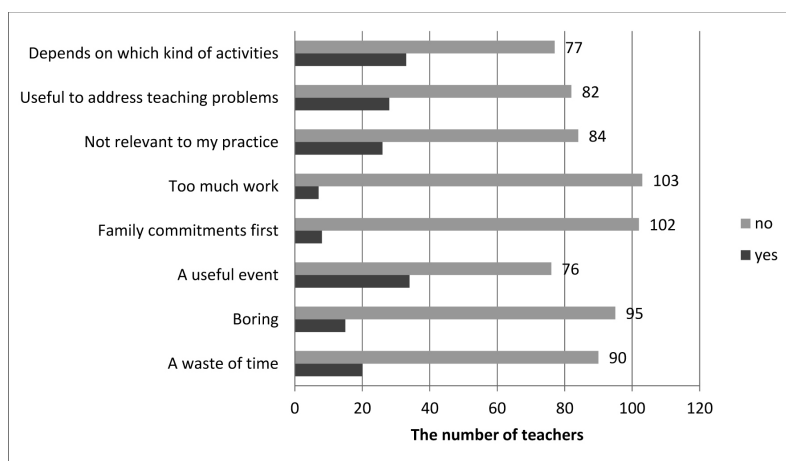
Figure 7.1: Teachers' feelings after being asked to attend CPD activities (110 teachers responded this question).

As we can see, a significant minority of teachers felt that CPD sessions were a waste of time (n=20), boring (n=15), and not relevant to their practice (n=26). In subsequent explorations in interviews to determine why teachers held these negative attitudes, one teacher suggested that some teachers had not recognized the importance of learning for themselves. Others considered CPD activities to be 'just tasks' that they must complete, and that the imposed, non-negotiated nature of the programmes placed them in a passive role with a passive mindset: what might be termed the 'passivity effect'. Feelings of 'being supervised', for instance, made some teachers feel uncomfortable and appeared to question their autonomy as trusted professionals. This was exacerbated by experiences such as when, after finishing a CPD subject meeting, they needed to wait, as one respondent put it, for an administrator to 'check whether they had actually conducted the activity'. Problems arising

from the perceived unequal pedagogic relationship in much CPD provision, essentially the master–novice model, was succinctly put by one interviewee:

> When the leadership evaluates teachers' lessons, they should consider … from the teachers' point of view why they designed lessons like this … The leadership's observation should be based on respecting and trusting teachers to provide feedback so that the teachers will be inclined to study and accept advice, and their enthusiasm will be increased.

The 'pull of the practical'

If passivity in relation to CPD represents a key difficulty in rendering CPD engaging and useful from the teachers' perspective, responses in our survey and interview data seemed to identify two principal causes for it: (1) the pressures of time and workload; (2) what we are calling the 'pull of the practical' (the focus on immediate practicalities such as getting children through exams rather than on lifelong development). A third cause, particularly among more experienced teachers, is the 'plateau effect', in which teachers simply feel that CPD has nothing more to teach them and should thus be discontinued, leaving them more time and energy to get on with the job in hand.

Reference has already been made to the pressure on schools and teachers to increase enrolment rates, and the manner in which this pressure affects both CPD content and teachers' responses to it. Given that both school enrolment and individual teachers' career opportunities are increasingly affected by students' examination successes, the focus on CPD is almost inevitably on teaching strategies and techniques aimed at improving such results, rather than on more general theoretical issues that may permeate teachers' practice and understandings over a period of years. CPD thus becomes associated more with the immediate problem of improving examination results than with the longer term project of becoming better at one's job across a much wider set of criteria. This constraint was evident in our study school, where an eye-catching banner across the front of the school displayed student enrolment rates and examination results rather than having anything to say about teachers' achievements and competence or indeed about the school's broader social and educational ethos.

Our study suggested a complex influence on CPD in relation to the demands on schools, teachers, and students for good public examination results. As Elwood (2001: 83–4) has argued in the context of public education in England, public examinations have a 'backwash effect' not only on what

is taught in classrooms in the years leading up to students sitting their exams, but also in the kinds of pedagogy promoted and how teachers 'construe their task'. It is unsurprising that teachers constrained by the immediate problem of getting students to learn what is required by exam syllabuses may be more inclined to favour CPD activities that help them 'teach to the test' than those which encourage creative and collaborative work, and favour development of transferable skills through lifelong learning. Additionally, we might expect an increasing focus on examination results, university entrance, and school enrolment to affect not just the content of CPD and the way it is valued by participants, but also the ways in which teachers' work and 'performance' are appraised, so that appraisal itself becomes a key factor in limiting CPD content and teachers' motivation towards it. In relation to this, no fewer than 84 of the 100 teachers who responded to the relevant survey question thought that the pressure of performance appraisal represented an obstacle to their positive engagement with CPD.

'Being' and 'becoming': The plateau effect

A central problem facing CPD, and not only in China, is its apparent inability to tailor its offer to the specific needs of individual teachers and groups of teachers, often taking little account of the different needs of teachers at different stages of their careers. This is arguably the case even in countries like England, where central government implies recognition of the need for differentiation by identifying the different levels or 'standards' required and expected of teachers as their career paths develop (TDA, 2007). In our own study, 82 per cent of teachers with teaching experience of less than 8 years (40 within a sub-set of 49) indicated that they were mainly interested in enhancing their professional knowledge and teaching skills, while 68 per cent of those with more than 15 years' teaching experience (26 within a sub-set of 38) said that they undertook CPD activities merely because it was a requirement of the job to do so.

One respondent suggested that teachers encounter difficulties in continuing to advance professionally after reaching a stage where they feel that they can get by without improving their practice or working harder. This is reminiscent of a stage in professional development sometimes referred to in Chinese literature as the *Gaoyuan* (高原) or 'plateau period' (Jia and Xie, 2009), during which many teachers feel they have reached a level beyond which they will never rise. At such a stage, teachers might feel satisfied, comfortable, at ease with their work, and reluctant to continue to challenge themselves and their existing assumptions about teaching and learning. We might suggest, after Britzman (1991), that such teachers have

embraced a state of 'being' (thinking, for example, 'I have achieved a level of performance beyond which there is no need, perhaps even no possibility, to improve or change: I am as good a teacher as I can be or wish to be, and no longer have a strong desire to be better'), rather than of 'becoming' ('I must continue to reflect critically on my work, perhaps seeking perfection but never believing I have achieved it'). For Britzman:

> Learning to teach – like teaching itself – is *always* the process of becoming: a time of formation and transformation, of scrutiny into what one is doing, what one can become.
>
> Britzman (1991: 8, emphasis added)

Certainly, the headteacher in our own study felt that motivating middle-stage teachers to promote their 'becoming' via CPD was more challenging than in the case of younger or newer colleagues. Interviews with these middle-stage teachers revealed that they tended to endorse this view, suggesting that *Gaoyuan*-related obstacles to effective engagement with CPD fell into four broad categories:

- having developed a fixed teaching style
- being satisfied with current professional status
- experiencing a loss of career motivation
- being distracted by other work or family commitments.

Acting in different ways, each of these factors appears to have reinforced and cemented for these teachers what Mezirow (1991: 49) has called 'meaning schemes' in relation to adult learning. These are sets of beliefs, understandings, and perspectives that protect the individual from the challenge of potentially contradictory experiences, and act as a mechanism through which new information and advice can be accommodated within an essentially unchanging philosophy.

If there was a tendency in some middle-stage teachers at the school to accept a 'state of being', and therefore a loss of interest in the project of 'becoming', the problem for younger teachers was somewhat different. For them, teaching appeared generally to be seen in terms of Britzman's endless 'formation and transformation', and there was consequently a much more favourable disposition toward CPD. However, the data suggested that their effective engagement with CPD activity was also undermined by three key factors:

- an apparent lack of understanding on the part of CPD providers regarding the teachers' actual needs, so that guidance on 'how to become' was felt to be largely unforthcoming
- a perceived lack of trust on the part of more senior colleagues, and perhaps of the larger schooling system, regarding younger teachers' abilities and capacities
- a planned restriction on younger teachers' professional experience that both undermined participation in CPD and rendered much of the available CPD redundant.

These last two obstacles seemed to be linked to the increasingly market-orientated culture within public education in China. In a situation where public examination results and competition for enrolment have such importance, younger teachers suggested there was a reluctance on the part of headteachers to give them the practical experience, such as teaching students in their final year before graduation, which might render CPD more relevant and offer them opportunities to develop pedagogical skills across the full range of classes. It is true that many CPD opportunities discussed by our research participants were designed specifically with younger teachers in mind. These included: the teachers' forum for rising stars (*Jiaotan xinxing*, 教坛新星); the indigo project, designed to encourage excellence in young teachers to the extent of surpassing the skills and knowledge of the lead teacher (*Qinglan gongchen*, 青兰工程); and the teachers' forum focusing on methods of passing on knowledge and exemplary behaviour to the next generation (*Jiaoshi dajiangtan*, 教师大讲坛). However, the contrasting lack of trust within which such initiatives were contextualized had clearly demotivated many of the young teachers they were intended to encourage. As one teacher put it: 'If the school does not believe enough in young teachers' abilities to entrust them with senior classes, how can they expect us to believe in *Jiaotan xinxing*?'

Workload issues: The CPD 'burden'

It was not only feelings of being, or frustrations in relation to becoming, which exerted a negative influence on teachers' participation in CPD at the case-study school, nor indeed the dominant influences of performativity and performance management. Even more powerfully, the pressures of time and the weight of workloads provided an almost insurmountable obstacle for all of the teachers interviewed and for most of those responding to the questionnaire survey.

Of the 102 teachers who responded to the relevant survey question, 92 (90 per cent) said that heavy workload was an obstacle to CPD involvement, and 96 (94 per cent) identified lack of time as a problem. Interviews with teachers corroborated these findings, the majority of teachers agreeing that heavy workload and resultant tiredness negatively influenced their engagement with CPD. If the pressures of teaching alone were not enough to demotivate teachers, it was often the case that the CPD activities themselves were experienced as overly time-consuming, so that a combination of the activities and the day-to-day workload made CPD feel like an additional chore – often of little immediate value – rather than an opportunity or a right. A particular concern for teachers in our study was the project-based research work involved in much of their CPD. This work not only generated feelings of being tested or examined, thereby accentuating the sense that many teachers had of not being trusted, it also took up a great deal of time. Interestingly, most teachers with four to seven years' experience said in the survey that project-based research, including case studies, was 'not effective' in relation to their CPD, a very disappointing finding given the value that commentators such as Eleonora (2003) have identified in such work. Interviewees also generally expressed concerns at too often being required to produce research work (e.g. teaching case studies), which took time away from other CPD activities. A particular concern was that the early years of CPD should focus more on teaching itself and on how to become a successful *banzhuren* (班主任), or teacher-director, a position and title carrying much responsibility in China as the professional who has overall tutorial charge of a particular class.

Individualism and collectivism: The school culture

Some commentators (Smyth, 1991; Watkins, 2005) have argued that the process of becoming that is potentially supported by CPD is best achieved not by individuals working exclusively on improving their own performance but by groups of professionals working together. This applies both generally in relation to CPD activities and also in specific collaborations involving action research projects and the development of whole-school policies (Moore, 2012). According to these commentators, in addition to responding to individual needs, CPD should also engage teachers and schools in an act of what we might call 'collective becoming'.

Without ignoring the limitations imposed on the development of such collaborative enterprises, Smyth *et al.* (1999) and à Campo (1993) highlight the key role of the headteacher in their implementation, and the impact

of headteachers and senior leadership teams in establishing an appropriate culture in which collaboration can take place.

Smyth and his colleagues (1999) at the Flinders Institute in Australia have summarized two kinds of school culture that are of relevance here: the 'stuck culture' and the 'collaborative culture'. In the stuck culture, teachers are constructed and perceive themselves essentially as technicians. School planning is highly bureaucratic and teachers are charged with implementing system imperatives and maintaining the status quo, in the process finding themselves immersed in an 'ethos of individualism'. Leadership in such cultures focuses on the 'two effs' of 'efficiency' and 'effectiveness', embedded within emphases on performance management, quality assurance, and upward accountability. If teacher reflection exists, it tends to be of the essentially technical kind, with a particular emphasis on maintaining classroom control. Student voice is constrained, marginalized, given lip-service, perhaps even feared as silence is equated with compliance. By contrast, in the collaborative school culture (à Campo, 1993; Waldron and McLeskey, 2010), teachers are constructed and perceive themselves as 'progressive', drawing creatively on available resources and ideas. School planning is process-orientated, emphasizing learning to learn (for both students and teachers) and inter-dependence. Leadership is more participatory and democratic, distributive and caring, and teacher reflection is more theoretical and practical, focusing on how better to enhance learning and provide more relevant curricula. Teachers are more inclined and, importantly, more empowered, to work together on the development of whole-school policies and cross-curricular activities, while student voice is welcomed and encouraged.

Responses to questionnares in our own study reveal how invasive elements of the 'stuck' school culture can be, potentially existing even within a school in which the headteacher is committed to CPD and to valuing and seeking out the opinions of the staff. Respondents in our study talked of the school as 'lacking an atmosphere of creative awareness'; of the local authority generally not promoting a collaborative CPD ethic; and of 'fierce competition making the school afraid to conduct creative activities' and 'not believing in young teachers'.

Key questions that emerged during wider analysis of the research underscored these cultural obstacles, not simply in relation to how individual teachers experience and respond to CPD, but to the nature and indeed the purposes of CPD itself:

• Who decides on CPD priorities, content and form?

- Who is educating whom?
- What does the widespread top-down approach to CPD tell us about how teachers' professionalism is viewed by central government and what is the impact of this on teachers' own sense of professionalism?
- Does CPD place too much emphasis on training and not enough on development and education?
- If teachers cannot experience learner-centred learning themselves, how far can they promote student-centred learning through their own teaching?
- How can CPD be tailored to local circumstances and issues raised by teachers, and to specific teaching problems, giving teachers greater autonomy in relation to identifying CPD activities alongside the need to prepare them for more generic imperatives such as meeting the demands of a revised national curriculum?

New directions? CPD in the Chinese context

These questions return us to an earlier point concerning the ways in which a teacher's CPD needs might change over time and in relation to their developing experience. Our own study suggested a belief among teachers that CPD needs do vary considerably in relation to the different stages of a teaching career. As Yi *et al.* (2007) have argued, teaching is a practical profession as well as one influenced by theory and experience, and teachers' development is a process that occurs over time: an ongoing, never-ending process of becoming.

We can say with some conviction that, across the age and experience range of our respondents, there was a persistent theme of teachers finding it hard to engage positively with CPD because they could not see its relevance either to their practice or to their professional growth. This appeared in no small part to be the effect of a widespread feeling that CPD was devised and delivered by 'others' in relation to externally selected priorities rather than being responsive to their own needs, thus placing teachers in the passive role referred to earlier. One related aspect of this difficulty was that much professional training was perceived by teachers as being distant from the everyday realities of their work. Another was that teachers often felt that the gap between theory and practice was too wide.

These responses from teachers suggest the need for a number of changes in CPD, certainly in the case of the middle-school teachers in the study, but arguably in Chinese teacher education more widely. We must stress that these are offered as possible priorities only; they are not a

blueprint for CPD generally in China and elsewhere. It is important to be wary when identifying tailored CPD for pre-identified groups of teachers not to oversimplify the situation. It is possible that even more-experienced teachers, such as those in the plateau stage in our study who tended to be most resistant to or cynical about participation in formalized CPD, might still desire and benefit from CPD that incorporates the wisdom and shared experiences of colleagues. Similarly, some younger teachers, such as those in our study who were most in favour of CPD participation, may be as equally resistant to engaging with CPD activities as some more experienced colleagues. Other more effective CPD models and practices may already be available within other educational sites in China. The changes we suggest are as follows:

- CPD activities should take more account of what we have tentatively called different stages of teaching and development. At least one precedent for this exists in Nanwu Middle School in China, where Feng and Ouyang (2010) have introduced successful CPD activities according to teachers' different teaching stages: 'experienced', 'middle stage', and 'young'. Effective CPD programmes might equally consider participant profiles and teachers' previous knowledge and experience (Pedder *et al.*, 2009).
- CPD activities should focus more than at present on specific teaching problems identified by schools and teachers. As Donovan and Townsend (2004) argue, CPD programmes are likely to fail without an investigation into what teachers actually feel they need.
- The teachers in our study generally preferred CPD opportunities that engaged them over an extended period of time and enabled them to make constructive connections with their developing practice. This tends to support Steyn's (2009) identification of the importance of the *duration* of CPD programmes and the suggestion of other researchers (Earley and Bubb, 2004; Pedder *et al.*, 2009) that teachers need time to consolidate and implement what they have learned, and to evaluate and improve their practice.
- Teachers need to be given greater autonomy in relation not just to the selection of CPD topics and programmes, but also to its nature and conduct. One specific recommendation to emerge from our own study concerns the role and potential value of teachers' maintaining professional development portfolios, an approach that has elsewhere been recommended by Ji (2006), focusing on its capacity for developing teachers' interests and confidence. This approach has already enjoyed

some success in China in its implementation in Nanwu Middle School, as observed by Feng and Ouyang (2010).

- We also argue in favour of schools and teachers engaging in their own action research projects as part of a wider project of developing 'communities of practice' (Bloom and Stein, 2004; Gu and Wang, 2006; Huang and Bao, 2006; McKay, 2006; McNiff and Whitehead, 2005) as a central approach to CPD. These projects would enable teachers to identify for themselves local issues that they feel need addressing, conducting their own investigations leading to changes in individual or collective practice. In our own analysis, we have linked such forms of professional development to projects and processes of becoming, and have stressed the importance of collaboration and collegiality in relation to individual and collective professional growth. The kinds of reflective practice demanded of such approaches are already promoted in many countries, including the UK (Moore, 2004). They do not generally have the same history of development in China, although reflective thinking has been identified as an important aspect of CPD not only by the teachers in our study but by teacher respondents in other studies (Qin, 2008; Qui, 2009). This suggests that a substantial appetite for such developments already exists.

Each of these developments requires that, as Zeichner (2002) pointed out, teachers and schools have sufficient time, skills development, resources, and support in order to be effectively implemented. At times when other, not necessarily complementary educational demands are increasing teacher workloads, teachers and schools will always struggle to access and achieve the kinds of CPD that we, and very often they, are arguing for. Teachers in our study had never heard the term 'learning community', and tended to have only a vague understanding of what action research might be, reminding us of the great cultural shift required for such CPD approaches in a nation whose historical preference for transmissive modes of pedagogy in compulsory schooling has been very much mirrored within the CPD offer for its teachers.

Reflection on the research

Although ours was a small-scale study, it is indicative of important developments in educational and social research in China that are moving away from a dominant, quantitative-based paradigm towards one that also embraces qualitative approaches. Such a change reflects and arises from wider changes in Chinese society, including well-documented attempts on

the part of central and local government to make schools and classrooms more democratic and to encourage local decision-making (Adams and Sargent, 2012; Zhu, 2010), a trend that is further explored in this book by Steven Cowan. Such developments not only affect the '*what*' of educational research, for example investigations into how school and education are experienced, rather than simply how successful they might be; we argue that they also influence the '*how*'. In order, for example, to access teachers' and students' experiences, richer, more in-depth data than can normally be provided by traditional survey methods or statistical analysis are required, providing the research with possibilities for generating 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973). Furthermore, within more democratic schools and classrooms, teachers and students are not only encouraged to express their views honestly and without fear of reprisal, they might eventually be expected to give greater value to their own views and opinions and their own assessments of their professional needs in response to the respect that is afforded them within the research process.

We have already acknowledged the key role of government and policy in relation to the success of the proposed changes in Chinese schools and to the development of the new kinds of CPD that we have identified as appropriate and important in relation to those changes. The extent to which such support is forthcoming remains to be seen. The evidence from our own study, however, suggests that teachers and headteachers are generally enthusiastic about the possibilities offered by a revised CPD offer, despite high levels of cynicism and reluctance in relation to current arrangements, which still seem to take far too little account either of their needs or of their views.

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