



School context and instructional capacity: A comparative study of professional learning communities in rural and urban schools in China



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the teaching gap between rural and urban schools in China from the perspective of teacher professional learning communities (PLCs). Drawing on in-depth interviews with 36 primary school teachers, the study finds striking disparities between rural and urban schools in the working of Teaching and Research Groups (TRGs). These disparities in TRGs result in divergent patterns of instructional capacity building in rural and urban schools. The evidence shows that teaching and teachers are strongly shaped by the school organizational context. It suggests that strengthening school-wide PLCs is an important way of narrowing the rural-urban teaching and learning gaps.

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1. Introduction

The learning gap between rural and urban schools is an entrenched problem in China (Hannum, 1999). Although the Chinese government has made remarkable progress in universalizing nine-year compulsory education in the countryside, the academic achievements of rural students still lag far behind those of their urban peers. The university entrance rate for rural students is 1%, compared with 14% for urban students (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2009). At the primary level, the pass rate in literacy was found to be 95.3% for urban second-grade students but a mere 56.7% for rural children in second grade (Wang and Li, 2008). Therefore, raising education quality is an imperative task in the current stage of rural education development.

Schools play a significant role in student achievement outcomes, although rural students are also disadvantaged by their family backgrounds (Adams, 2012; Burger, 2011; Lounkaew, 2013; Tayyaba, 2012). Much of the literature converges on the observation that the key school-level factor in divergent learning outcomes is the quality of classroom instruction (Ball and Cohen, 1999; Cohen and Hill, 2000; Corcoran et al., 1998). To a large extent, the learning

gap reflects a deep-seated gap in teaching (Stigler and Hiebert, 1999).

Scholars have debated two main approaches to narrowing the teaching gap. The first approach emphasizes personnel change and focuses on strategies to attract top talent into the teaching profession to replace less effective teachers (Kennedy, 2010; McKinsey and Company, 2010). However, this approach can hardly be effective on a systemic scale given the fact that in general the top candidates tend to choose high-paying professions such as business and law, and even when they do join the teaching profession, they are less likely to serve and stay in dysfunctional schools in high-poverty communities (Author, 2013; Johnson, 2012).

The second approach emphasizes building school capacity by directly improving teaching rather than teachers. It champions the idea of teachers working in professional communities to develop, share, update, and preserve teaching methods so as to build a professional knowledge base for sustained instructional advancement (Hiebert and Morris, 2012). This approach privileges collective endeavors over individual talent in promoting schools' instructional capacities. It further presupposes a school organizational structure that fosters collective responsibility for teaching and discourages individualism and isolation.

Inspired by the collective approach, this study attempts to examine the rural-urban teaching gap from the perspective of professional learning communities (PLCs). PLCs promote structured and ongoing collaboration among teachers to improve teaching in a school-wide professional collectivity (Darling-

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Hammond et al., 2009; Stoll et al., 2006). Research has repeatedly confirmed the positive impact of PLCs on teaching, which ultimately benefits student learning (Bolam et al., 2005; Bullough, 2007; Vescio et al., 2008). By contrast, working in isolation impedes teachers' ability to update their professional knowledge and skills, leading to stagnating or deteriorating teaching quality (Hargreaves and Dawe, 1990).

In Chinese schools, the corresponding structure of PLCs takes the form of Teaching and Research Groups (TRGs, *jiaoyan zu*; Paine and Ma, 1993). The current study compares TRG activities in rural and urban schools in China with the aim of illustrating the influence of PLCs on the instructional capacities of teachers and schools. It draws on in-depth interviews with 36 primary school teachers in ten rural schools and eight urban schools. Since systematic rural-urban comparison of TRGs has not been conducted previously, the purpose of the research is to explore whether and how the working of TRGs differs in rural versus urban schools and then to identify the causes of this difference (if any) and its impact on teaching. The study reveals how the school context influences teaching quality and teacher competence and sheds new light on possible ways of narrowing the rural-urban educational gap.

2. Literature review

2.1. Improving teachers or improving schools?

Scholarly debate on improving instruction has focused on two alternative approaches, namely, improving teachers and improving schools (Johnson, 2012). The first approach highlights the uneven distribution of quality teachers as the cause of learning gaps among schools (Rowan et al., 2002; Sanders, 1998). Therefore, the remedy lies in attracting top talent to the teaching profession and to needy schools and retaining it there (Kennedy, 2010; McKinsey and Company, 2010). The other approach identifies the school context as the reason for the variance in instructional quality (Jackson and Bruegmann, 2009). From this perspective, the key to improving teaching is to foster school-wide professional learning communities (PLCs) to support classroom instruction (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Stoll et al., 2006).

The teacher-focused approach has inspired programs such as *Teach for America* (TFA) in the United States, *Teach First* in Great Britain, *Teach for Australia*, and *Teach for China*. To upgrade the educational qualifications of rural teachers, the Chinese government also established the "special position program" (*te gang jiao shi*), the "free teacher education program" (*mian fei shi fan*), and the "volunteer teacher program" (*zhi jiao zhi du*) to encourage graduates from top-notch universities to serve in needy schools in rural areas for two or three years (Author, 2013; Wu and Qin, 2014).

In reality, however, the strategy of personnel redistribution has had limited effects on school improvement (Buddin and Zamarro, 2009; Goe, 2007). In China, students participating in the free teacher education program are resistant to serving in rural schools and rarely do so after graduation (Author, 2013). The special position program, in the decade since its inception in 2006, has recruited half a million university graduates to teach in rural schools, but these teachers represent only 7.7% of the 6.5 million rural teachers in the country (Guangming Daily, 2015; Wu & Qin, 2014, p. 213). Additionally, more than half (62%) of the special position teachers plan to transfer to urban schools after three years of service (Guangming Daily, 2015). When they leave, they take their best ideas and practices to other schools (Hiebert and Morris, 2012). The high turnover rates of the quality teachers defeat the purpose of these programs and fail to build sustainable capacity in rural schools.

The second approach, by contrast, turns attention from individuals to the school context and from teachers to teaching (Hiebert and Morris, 2012; Johnson, 2012; Lewis et al., 2012; Stigler and Thompson, 2009). The school-focused approach rejects the conception that school capacity is the simple sum of the capacities of individual teachers and strongly influenced by the characteristics of teacher composition. Rather, it conceives of teacher competence as malleable and shaped by the school organizational structure. In this light, schools should make efforts to develop and maximize the potential of their current teaching staff through professional learning communities (PLCs).

A teacher professional learning community (PLC) refers to "a school-wide culture that makes collaboration expected, inclusive, genuine, ongoing, and focused on critically examining practices to improve student outcomes" (Seashore et al., 2003, p. 3). A PLC provides an organizational environment in which teachers work together to improve instruction. As members of the professional community, teachers are charged with the responsibility to create, spread, refine, and preserve good instructional practices in the form of artifacts or products, such as lesson plans, instructional routines, and core practices, in order to advance teaching (Hiebert et al., 2002; Hiebert and Morris, 2012; Morris and Hiebert, 2011). In this way, good teaching practices can accumulate into a shared knowledge base that survives individual teachers and time (Morris and Hiebert, 2011; Stigler and Thompson, 2009). This strategy benefits schools in two ways. First, sharing professional knowledge and skills contributes to the professional growth of individual teachers. And second, struggling schools can overcome the challenge of teacher turnover by retaining good teachers' knowledge, rather than the good teachers themselves. Hence, improving schools also improves teachers, and strong PLCs help build the capacity of both individual teachers and their schools.

The literature on PLCs offers new insight on the disparities between rural and urban learning outcomes. The teaching gap may arise from different school contexts, particularly the functioning of PLCs. The next section discusses the features of PLCs in China, and it is followed by a comparative analysis of rural and urban schools.

2.2. Teaching and research groups: the Chinese version of PLC

PLCs have been in place in Chinese schools since the 1950s in the form of Teaching and Research Groups (TRGs, *jiao yan zu*; Wang, 2015; Yang, 2009). In 1957 the Chinese government required all secondary schools to establish TRGs in all subjects for the purpose of studying and improving instructional methods (Ministry of Education, 1957). The tradition has been continued for decades especially in high-performing schools, even without later government stipulation. TRGs are formal structures within schools that group teachers according to subject domains, at times further divided within each group by grade level. These TRGs are the basic units of teacher collaboration and are charged with organizing various collective professional learning activities, that is, TRG activities (*jiao yan huo dong*). TRG activities involve a wide array of programs, including joint lesson planning, lesson study, assessment design, lesson competitions, peer lesson observation and critique, mentorship or peer coaching, and short-term training by outside experts; all members of the TRG must participate in these activities (Paine, 1990; Paine and Fang, 2006; Paine and Ma, 1993; Wang, 2015; Yang, 2009).

TRGs differ from Lesson Study in Japan. The latter is a process in which a group of teachers in one subject, usually mathematics, work together over a number of months to design, test, and refine a lesson plan to best achieve a predetermined instructional goal (Arani et al., 2010; Doig and Groves, 2011; Fernandez and Yoshida, 2004). Lesson Study thus constitutes a special event, a show, to illustrate innovations. It is almost identical with *Keli*, "exemplary

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