Emerging perceptions of teacher quality and teacher development in China[☆],[☆☆]

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A R T I C L E I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This paper focuses on the work of senior high school teachers in three illustrative local authority regions of mainland China. It discusses interview and focus group data collected as part of ESRC/DfID-funded research which examined notions of quality as experienced by key stakeholders (national and local authority policy makers, teachers, head teachers and students). Building on previous international literature and current Chinese education policy, this paper examines aspects of teachers' work as experienced within the context of a fast developing emerging economy, which emphasises a clear link between individual and national development. Barriers identified as impacting on the provision of good quality teaching arose, largely, from the pressures due to changing societal patterns and the demands of far reaching curriculum reform, which highlighted tensions between a traditional reliance on the primacy of exam results and a newer demand for all round development and lifelong learning. In addition, there were common concerns with various structural and funding inequalities, both across different regions and between urban and rural schools, which could lead to differential student experience, shortages of specialised teachers, and a lack of opportunity for good quality professional development.

1. Introduction

The search for evidence to develop high quality, sustainable education systems continues to intensify as national economies seek to compete globally. The opening Foreword to the findings of a recent Teaching and Learning Survey (TALIS), which reported on the views of teachers and principals in 23 countries, explained the task in the following way:

> The challenges facing education systems and teachers continue to intensify. In modern knowledge-based economies, where the demand for high-level skills will continue to grow substantially, the task in many countries is to transform traditional models of schooling, which have been effective at distinguishing those

who are more academically talented from those who are less so, into customised learning systems that identify and develop the talents of all students. This will require the creation of 'knowledge-rich', evidence-based education systems, in which school leaders and teachers act as a professional community with the authority to act, the necessary information to do so wisely, and the access to effective support systems to assist them in implementing change. (OECD, 2009, p. 3)

Such concerns are not limited to economically developed economies but are also the focus of attention in those countries where economic development is less advanced, together with those newly emerging economies such as mainland China. International agreements, like the Millennium Development Goals (United Nations, 2002) incorporating the principles of relevance, equity and rights, also focus on the need to improve the quality of teaching and learning for all children (UNESCO, 2004). However, concepts of quality are recognised to be both complex and contested, especially in relation to disadvantaged communities. Previous work has drawn attention to the powerful discourses of human capital theory and a contrasting human rights approach, arguing for the importance of inclusivity (with regard to access and the achievement of desired outcomes for all), relevance (in relation to what is important for different individuals, communities and

nations) and democracy (in terms of who can define what constitutes quality) in education (Tikly, 2011; Tikly and Barrett, 2011). Central to such debates are questions about what constitutes good quality teaching, and how to evaluate and develop the teaching workforce (Anderson, 2004; Leu and Price-Rom, 2006; Mpokosa and Ndaruhutse, 2008). This paper seeks to contribute to the debate on teacher quality and development by drawing on selected findings from research conducted in collaboration with the China National Institute for Educational Research (now the National Institute of Education Sciences) in Beijing. While findings from the main studies have been extensively reported elsewhere (Thomas and Peng, 2011; Thomas et al., 2012, 2013), the purpose of this paper is discuss some relevant findings which help to contribute to debate on the work of teachers and their ability to provide conditions for good quality learning.

Following a short review of both Western and Chinese literature on aspects of teacher quality and effectiveness, and a discussion of the current policy context in China, a range of findings will be used to illustrate and discuss common stakeholder expectations, as well as teacher values, beliefs and practice. Concerns regarding barriers to further development are also highlighted and these are discussed in relation to current Chinese policy to redress disparities in educational provision, especially between urban and rural settings.

2. Concepts of quality and teacher effectiveness

2.1. Western context

Over the last 30 years, Western research has consistently identified differences in teacher behaviour at the classroom level, rather than differences at the school level, as ultimately more important in explaining variance in student outcomes (Scheerens and Bosker, 1997; Kyriakides et al., 2000; Muijs and Reynolds, 2010). For this reason, there is a growing body of literature which seeks to identify the dimensions of teachers' work that might be identified as being more likely to produce the desired outcomes for pupils. While limitations of space preclude a detailed summary such a large body of research, much of this work identifies three broad areas which have been the focus of more detailed study. For example, a recent survey of schools and teachers within the OECD (TALIS) focuses on *teacher professional competence and related beliefs and attitudes*; *teacher classroom practice and professional activities*; and *classroom and school level environment* (OECD, 2009). This has similarities with the three domains of *teacher background characteristics*, *teaching processes*, and *classroom ecology and climate* identified as teaching variables by Scheerens (2007, cited in OECD, 2010, p. 30) and the *professional characteristics*, *teaching skills* and *classroom climate* identified by Hay McBer (2000).

In a recent review of the literature discussing teaching skills and classroom practice, Creemers and Kyriakides (2012) draw on their own work and that of others (for example, Stallings, 1985; Brophy and Good, 1986; Creemers, 1994; Doyle, 1986; Galton, 1987; Muijs and Reynolds, 2000; Creemers and Reezigt, 1996; Creemers and Kyriakides, 2008) to explain those micro-behaviours which research has shown to be positively associated with student achievement. These include the quantity and pacing of instruction, providing work at an appropriate level for students to succeed, the smooth organisation and management of the classroom environment, systematic evaluation and reflective inquiry to improve practice, clarity of presentation and good communication with students, as well as the judicious use of asking questions and giving feedback to gauge understanding. Moreover, development of pedagogical content knowledge has also been identified as a dominant strand in effective teaching skills in TALIS survey and

this is closely linked with the collaborative activities that teachers engage in beyond their individual classrooms.

Research has also shown the importance of the classroom environment to good quality learning. The quality of teacher–student interaction, student–student interaction, students' treatment by the teacher, competition between students, and classroom disorder has all been identified as important (Creemers and Kyriakides, 2008; Kyriakides and Christoforou, 2011). For Scheerens, *classroom ecology and climate* also includes elements such as class size and composition, teacher expectation and the match of teachers' abilities with classes. For the TALIS framework it is closely linked to the school level environment and teacher–student relations. While for Hay McBer this category is described as 'the collective perceptions by pupils, of what it feels like to be a pupil in any particular teacher's classroom, where those perceptions influence every student's motivation to learn and perform to the best of his or her ability' (Hay McBer, 2000, p. 27). Sammons and Ko (2008) found similar evidence that effective teachers are more likely to demonstrate a supportive lesson climate, proactive lesson management, well organised lessons with clear objectives, and environmental and teacher support. There are also links to other research which has looked at the perceptions of students in relation to effective teachers (for example Rudduck and Flutter, 2000; McNess, 2006; Klieme, 2012). McNess and colleagues found that students in England, France and Denmark all identified *being fair*, *explaining things well*, and *making work interesting* as the three most important aspects of effective teachers.

The more generalised area of teacher beliefs and values has also been the focus of much research (Lortie, 1975; Nias, 1989; Menter et al., 1997; Acker, 1999; Hargreaves, 2001; Day et al., 2007). Such work emphasises the importance of the social, historical, cultural and policy context in which teachers work (Broadfoot et al., 1993; Alexander, 2000; Osborn et al., 2003; McNess, 2004, 2009), and draws attention to the need to look behind the more obvious aspects of teacher practice to seek an understanding of the underlying beliefs and values of society in defining policy and the working environment of teachers. This argues against a universal or fixed concept of teacher effectiveness, or what Campbell et al. (2003, p. 352) have referred to as a 'platonic ideal free of contextual realities'. This idea is taken further by some who call for an extension of the levels of analysis to include everything from the supranational to the individual (Bray and Thomas, 1995). Creemers and Kyriakides (2012) propose a 'Dynamic Model of Educational Effectiveness' which takes into account student, classroom, school and system, while Cheng et al. (2002) put forward a 'Framework of Total Teacher Effectiveness' where levels of effectiveness (individual, group, school) are linked to domains of effectiveness (behavioural, affective, cognitive).

Such models are helpful in identifying possible areas of effectiveness though, it can be argued, that none can capture the full complexity of teaching in all contexts. The qualitative data presented later in this paper do not claim to cover all the aspects of teachers' work identified above, nor are such models systematically applied. The authors recognise the limited nature of the data in both scale and scope, and so the intention is to reveal some common understandings and concerns that arose spontaneously in the interviews. But to help in contextualising these perceptions it is first necessary to discuss both current Chinese literature on the quality of teaching, and set this in the current Chinese policy context.

2.2. China context

Generally speaking, within the Chinese context, the term 'teacher quality' is used more broadly than in Western literature. It is used interchangeably with the concept of education quality but