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The Roles of Teacher Leadership in Shanghai Education Success

Abstract

Teacher leadership is generally accepted as having a critical role in supporting school improvement. However, most knowledge on teacher leadership comes from the West, the roles of teacher leadership in the East, particularly, the most populated country, China, remain largely unexplored. Shanghai students were ranked top in PISA 2009 and PISA 2012 and these successful experiences have set examples to the world. This paper aims to report why and how Shanghai schools have been successful from the perspective of teacher leadership. A qualitative study to explore the roles of teacher leadership in six Shanghai schools was conducted. The findings confirmed the critical contribution of teacher leadership with three specific roles of teacher leadership emerging from leadership practices to support school improvement. The findings from this study may contribute to the literature on how teacher leadership sustains school improvement.

Keywords: teacher leadership, school improvement, Shanghai, PISA

Introduction

In the era of globalization, the pressure on schools and educational systems to achieve excellence is greater than before (Pang & Wang, 2016). However, the onus to achieve excellence in school education is no longer the responsibility of the school principal but calls for concerted efforts by all individuals who have been involved in driving the missions of education (Murphy, 2005). One obvious reason of emphasizing teachers' leadership and collaboration is that teaching has been the core of school improvement and success (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Teachers are more closely connected to student learning with front line contacts than principals. Many research studies indicate that principals' leadership is the second most influential school-level factor that determines student learning achievement, right after the influence of teachers (Grissom, Kalogrides & Loeb, 2015). In that sense, teachers who have excellent skills in pedagogy and who have strong willingness to help other teachers are critical for school success. These teachers may offer alternative leadership forces in addition to the principal's leadership.

The concept of teacher leadership

Teacher leadership is now considered to be the catalyst of education reform. Many education systems have recognized the key contributions of teacher leaders and their positive influence on school improvement. This challenges the traditional pyramid power structure of principal leadership. Starting in America, in the 1980s teacher leaders and the concept of teacher leadership has become a core research focus and practice in educational leadership (York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

A universally accepted definition of teacher leadership has been absent in the literature (Murphy, 2005; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Teacher leadership is defined in different contexts and teacher leaders' roles and functions vary from school to school. It implies that the concept of teacher leadership needs further verification and empirical investigations. York-Barr and Duke's (2004) comprehensive review on teacher leadership has shed light on the understanding of the concept. One of York-Barr and Duke's major contributions to this area is that they re-define teacher leadership based on their comprehensive review of literature. Adapting from York-Barr and Duke's (2004) definition of teacher leadership and considering the tradition and characteristics of Chinese schools and educational context, the definition of teacher leadership in this study is defined as: '*Teacher leadership is a collaborative process which is initiated, organized, and led by teachers with the exclusive purpose to improve teaching practice and learning outcomes through involving all other teachers and stakeholders*'.

Education reforms in China

In June 2001, the Guideline of Compulsive Education Curriculum Reform (pilot version) (MoE, 2001) was formally approved by the State. Not only did the reform aim to address the problems in the national curriculum but also led to a systematic transformation of teaching and learning (Jin & Yin, 2008). Teachers, who were at the heart of the reform, were requested to change from the roles of knowledge transmitters to facilitators and advisors of student learning.

About nine years later, the Ministry of Education (2010) in China released the Long-and-Middle-Term Planning of National Education Reform and Development (2010-2020) (The Plan). In which, teachers have been once again required to continuously improve their capacities and competences of teaching in order to fulfil higher expectations from stakeholders in the twenty-first century (Gu, 2009). 'Backbone teachers', who are officially recognized teacher leaders in the Chinese context, have been stressed many times in the Plan. They should be promoted and should be shaped as teacher leaders who are experts in teaching and research (Zhang & Pang, 2016a).

More recently, another education reform document, 'The 13th Five-Year Plan of National and Educational Development', was released (MoE, 2017). Specifically, the plan acknowledges a global megatrend in education which focuses inclusive, equitable and quality education as the future goal for Chinese education (MoE, 2017, Chapter 1). A highlighted approach in the reform is to enhance teacher quality, and to nurture teacher leaders who would lead the changes in classroom practices and who are transformers of student learning (Zhang & Pang, 2016b). Backbone teachers, subject leaders, teaching experts, excellent teachers would be identified as the key personnel who can promote the quality of teaching and learning (MoE, 2017, Chapter 8). These teachers are expected to be exemplars to other teachers and expected to lead the changes of curriculum, teaching and assessment within classrooms. Most important, these teacher leaders would serve as mentors to young and junior teachers and help them to develop further.

To summarise, since the education reform in 2001, the State has been changing the paradigm of school reform from examination-oriented education to quality-oriented education. The existing focus of the reform is to nurture teacher leadership

and it is highly recognized that teacher leaders are ones who are expected to be the key players to bring about successful educational transformation in terms of innovative ideas and practices. In this context, educational reforms in China are therefore fertile grounds for teacher leadership as well as school-based research which together lead to extensive educational transformation and school improvement. As an independent municipality in China, Shanghai has always been a leading field in education reform and Shanghai schools have been very successful in educational transformation under the national education policies (Zhang & Pang, 2016a).

PISA and Shanghai

Shanghai began the journey of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2009, as representative of China. Out of 65 countries and districts, Shanghai students led OECD average scores by a large margin, were ranked number one on all three subjects, reading, math, and science (OECD, 2010). When compared to the high performing OECD countries, say, Korea and Finland, Shanghai still outperformed them by a significant margin. In 2012 PISA, Shanghai students not only kept their first position on all three subjects, more importantly, they improved their achievements greatly while the average scores of all participating countries and districts remain unchanged (OECD, 2013). It proves that Shanghai has been successful in education reform and Shanghai schools have found their way to improve continuously (Zhang & Pang, 2016b).

Because of the success in PISA, Shanghai's experience in education reform has drawn attention from all over the world and Shanghai has become the center of educational research. For example, in 2014, the United Kingdom allocated 11 million pounds to fund 32 model schools across England, and invited experts from both Shanghai Normal University and England's National Centre for Excellence in the Teaching of Mathematics (NCETM) to improve mathematics education in England (Department of Education, 2014). Moreover, the government of England has decided to adopt the process of teaching multiplication, and translate Chinese versions of learning materials into English for their students (Han & Cai, 2016). In a nutshell, learning from successful educational systems may help understand the processes that support schools' continuous improvements in terms of enhancing the roles of teacher leaders.

Aims of study

In view of Shanghai being ranked top in PISA 2009 and 2012, and increasing significant roles and functions of teacher leadership in the success of educational reform, the present study has the following two research questions:

1. What is the role of teacher leadership in the context of Shanghai schools?
2. What are their functions of teacher leaders in school improvement in Shanghai?

Data collection

A qualitative approach using interviews with principals and teachers from six Shanghai schools were conducted. Three were primary schools, two junior middle schools and one high school. The principals of each school participated in the interviews, except that from the high school a vice principal was interviewed. In addition, the vice principals and 2-4 teachers from different ranks were also invited to the interviews. In total, five principals and 19 teacher leaders were interviewed with a protocol of pre-set questions. The interviews of the principals lasted for about an hour each and the interviews of teachers were conducted in focused group discussion which lasted for about 1-2 hours.

Findings and discussion

The significant role of teacher leadership and its contributions beyond classrooms have long been acknowledged and promoted by Chinese schools. An honorable title ‘backbone teacher’ is given to a teacher, who has been excellent in teaching or outperforming his/her counterparts with certain expertise. Backbone teachers are reviewed continuously and critically according to certain criteria, say, teaching excellence, research capability and administrative competence before they are selected to assume this title by their principals or senior officials from the education bureau (Wang & Cai, 2004). Backbone teachers are widely recognized in formal positions as grade leaders, subject leaders or directors of research groups (Wang, 2013). Once a teacher has acquired the title of ‘backbone teacher’, he/she would have greater opportunity for professional development, is entrusted with power and authority, and enlisted with a role of leadership in his/her position. Backbone teachers are commonly regarded as teacher leaders in Chinese schools (Jin, 2008).

Analysis of the interview data confirmed that teacher leaders in Shanghai schools do hold critical roles in supporting school improvement, particularly when schools face the challenges arisen from educational reform and changes arisen from competition due to globalization. Teacher leaders within Shanghai schools were expected to lead other teachers in different areas to strive for excellence. They were recognized as the key players to drive for school continuous improvement. One school principal explicitly pointed out the significant roles of teacher leaders in the teaching and research teams.

From the experience of our school, we now focus on the development of teaching and research teams. Such teams are formed due to the needs of our school development. In forming these teams, there are two key factors to be considered. First, a team must have teacher leaders. To be more specific, each team should have at least one to two teacher leaders and those who have innovative ideas or expertise. The Chinese wisdoms often say that ‘two heads are better than one’. From my own experience of growth, I can see that choosing and appointing of a good teacher leader within a team would be a determinant of the team’s success. Each teacher is unique. Most teachers have different strengths and expertise in different areas. We have to explore their potentials and let them contribute to school success.

Most principals acknowledged the important roles and functions performed by teacher leaders. They claimed that teacher leaders are the pioneers in school reforms and it is also they who support the reforms and embrace the changes arisen. These teacher leaders have proactive attitudes to the reforms and have adapted well in the

change processes. Teacher leaders through their proactive beliefs, attitudes and practices have demonstrated that reforms are possible and changes would bring positive benefits to the classroom and students. Most important, teacher leaders have set examples to their peers in how to cope with the challenges from reforms and changes. When we asked what major difficulties they encountered in the reform, a principal replied that:

The biggest challenge is that, when we want to improve continuously and to strive for excellence, I always feel that I do not have enough number of backbone teachers (teacher leaders). The availability of backbone teachers are not yet in a critical mass in my school.

From the interviews with the Shanghai school principals, it is certain that Chinese teacher leaders have played an important role in school reform and improvement. They are the key players who are expected to initiate reforms and improvement in terms of pioneers, agency to promote teacher learning, and reliable partners with the principals to advocate change.

Then what are the functions of teacher leaders in the processes of school improvement? Three themes that have emerged from the interviews are:

- (i) supporting young teachers for professional learning;
- (ii) leading curriculum development; and
- (iii) facilitating collaboration.

The backbone teachers (teacher leaders) in Shanghai schools have played a critical role in supporting young teachers to develop and to acquire the knowledge and skills of effective teaching. That is, there is a well-developed mentor-mentee system within each of the schools. This system can effectively lead to teacher professionalism throughout Shanghai schools. The backbone teachers host learning meetings, provide opportunities for professional learning in different subjects and lead school-based research activities within each discipline. The backbone teachers are entrusted and empowered to identify problems and priorities in teaching, explore difficulties in student learning, and most importantly, provide consultancy and support to junior and novice teachers. The following quotations are from three teacher leaders.

Like the first year teachers, particularly the ones who just came to our school, our school will arrange 'meetings of apprentice/consultation'. The novice teachers will be led professionally by the experienced ones, such as subject experts, to help them adapt to the profession of teaching promptly and become a practicing teacher in the classroom. Then, for our junior teachers, who have teaching experience with about two years, we (teacher leaders) would organize 'teacher salon' for them. It is a group meeting where junior teachers meet together for sharing, learning and improvement. They meet regularly, usually once a month, to discuss issues and difficulties in teaching encountered in the classroom.

The backbone teachers and subject experts are responsible for supporting our junior teachers and leading them to grow and become mature in teaching. We help them to prepare lessons step by step and evaluate the progress in every moment. We provide such support to them as least once and sometimes twice a month because they are expected to demonstrate teaching in open class and in public. We always encourage them not to be afraid, because it is an opportunity of growth and development. Their

demonstration of teaching in open class and in public are actually results of the team's endeavor, rather than individual work.

Junior teachers would take advice from the backbone teachers. From the backbone teachers the junior teachers learn how to prepare lessons, deliver instructions in class, and reflect on their own performance. In addition, junior teachers were also required to run a lesson on their own ideas and ways, then, we (backbone teachers) would sit in the class and observe the lesson. We would participate in the whole processes of preparation, conduction and reflection of the lesson and attempt to critically comment on the junior teachers' performance and help them to reflect and improve.

The second function of teacher leaders identified in the Shanghai schools is that the backbone teachers also play a role in leading curriculum development. Both principals and novice teachers would rely on backbone teachers as curriculum developers. Some backbone teachers (teacher leaders) expounded why and how they responded to the required curriculum changes and to align with teachers and students' expectations in their schools. These backbone teachers also play a key role in the development of school-based curriculum and instructions, while they have to adopt specific text books in the national curriculum.

We (English Department) are responsible for 'boya' class (a school-based curriculum). The Head of the Department designed the main part of the lesson, and we would carry it out based on the current requirements of the curriculum reform. Basically, it is a core course in the curriculum reform, that is, literacy. We need to cultivate students' literacy. From the perspective of English, it means that not only do we teach the language, but also, more importantly, introduce students to the English culture. When we combine the two elements together, then, it forms the basics of English literacy. When we put these together, we then have a 'boya' class.

Our team of backbone teachers led the development and publishing of the school-based curriculum into a resource kit for teachers, which comprises of 155 pages. It includes basic information of teaching strategies, learning methods, and cases for study. It is a deliverable from a collaborative team work because all the teachers concerned have made their contribution in it.

The third function of backbone teachers (teacher leaders) is to build teams, promote group work and enhance collaboration among team members. A teacher leader said that 'we pay much attention to collaborative work. No matter in educational and administrative duties, form masters' duties, and daily instructions, we all work together'. She continued that: 'In last year, I was promoted to the role of a leader who leads teaching preparation, and I had a small team of my own, including about four to five ordinary teachers. We worked together to research on how to make use of English as a medium of instruction and to have cross-curriculum integration with other subjects'. Another teacher leader claimed that she enjoys team work and collaboration, because it makes things possible and leads the school to success.

According to my working experience in the last two decades, I now strongly understand the importance of collaboration in our work. It is not a matter of how much knowledge you have, but a collaborative way of problem solving. Many things can only be made possible when we work together.

The spirit of collaboration has now deeply rooted in Shanghai schools. Collaboration and team work are the first priority in the daily management and administration by the teacher leaders. The degree of collaboration among team members has become an important performance indicator for teacher leaders in resource deployment and leadership responsibilities.

Conclusion

The importance of teacher leadership resides in the role and functions teacher leaders play. From our study in six Shanghai schools and the interview data obtained, it is evident that Shanghai teacher leaders have critical contributions in supporting their schools' improvement. Their contributions to the education reform in Shanghai and school success in the PISA 2009 and PISA 2012 are indispensable. It can be argued that educational reforms are more likely to succeed when teachers are involved and when they work collaboratively. Moreover, in order to sustain consistent school improvement, not only should school leadership focus on principals, but also, be extended to teachers who can act as leaders. With this new momentum for change, teacher leadership can contribute directly and positively to school improvement.

In addition to the critical contribution from teacher leadership that we identified in Shanghai schools, our study has further confirmed three specific functions that teacher leaders can engage in during their daily work. These functions are to support junior teachers to grow via professional learning, to lead and develop curriculum, and to facilitate collaboration amongst teachers. The findings are consistent with the Western literature. The accounts of teacher leaders' roles and functions have been much detailed in many teacher leadership studies. Teacher leaders should be enhanced in school, because they can play the core roles in schooling, which have direct impacts on both teaching and learning (Pang, Wang & Leung, 2016). Now in Shanghai schools, teacher leaders in various positions and areas are viewed as the center of classroom change, school improvement and educational transformation.

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