

Introducing the Possible Advantages of the PGCE to STEPS: A Report on English Teacher Development in Rural Primary Schools in China

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[Abstract] This report probes into the professional development of rural primary school English teachers in West China and aims to explore whether the UK model of the Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) could be successfully introduced to the rural primary school context in China. Reflective questionnaires were used to examine the Chinese rural primary school English teachers' needs, challenges, and perceptions of the implementation of Standards for Teachers of English in Primary Schools (STEPS) in the professional development in rural school contexts in China. 300 teachers participated in the research, whose feedback illustrated that there exist serious problems in the current training model and they have a very high expectation of being involved in the UK model.

[Keywords] rural primary school; professional development of English teachers; the Professional Graduate Certificate in Education; CPE of teachers of English in China; the STEP model

Introduction

In 2001, as a result of the global expansion of programs in English teaching to young learners, as well as of China's rapid social and economic change, the Ministry of Education of China (MOE) initiated a curriculum innovation: the promotion of English as a foreign language in primary schools from Year 3 (Ages 9-10). In 2005, the Ministry of Education formulated STEPS. It encourages all primary teachers to transform their views on teaching, to develop students' comprehensive language competence by making learning a process during which students develop language proficiency, form positive attitudes, improve thinking skills, increase cross-cultural awareness, and learn to use learning strategies so as to gradually become independent learners. The major change is the shift from traditional grammar translation exercises to the development of overall language competence. The emphasis lies on activating students' interest in learning, relating the course content to the students' life experiences, promoting cooperation among students, and advocating learning by doing the course.

In short, the current era of educational reforms in China aims to bring about a shift toward more student-centered teaching and learning, a greater emphasis on critical thinking and the application of skills, and the establishment of a more democratic classroom environment. The implementation of the reform likely requires greater levels of teacher initiative and innovation, making teacher commitment and motivation increasingly important. Disengaged teachers are unlikely to inspire student engagement or, consequently, student achievement. China's teachers have long been the subject of much policy activity. As new notions of good teaching are introduced, the challenge to reform China's enormous teaching force has led to changes in teacher professional development.

The rural primary school teachers of English adopting STEPS have found it quite a challenge. They need a reasonable degree of target language proficiency, to acquire a fair degree of autonomy in classroom decision-making, and to cope with local constraints. There is also tension between the proposal for an apprenticeship model for the learning of their "new trade" and the traditional model of teacher education, based on study of academic, educational theory alongside teaching practice. They are not only overloaded with teaching hours but are also underpaid. Thus they are not always able to meet the needs of their students. In essence, their sense of professional self is now threatened (Hayes, 2006:160). In addition, for the majority of the teachers, they have to travel half a day or more to attend the STEPS training program.

For many education systems, the implementation of an innovation is simply a matter of providing in-service courses to teachers to inform them about what they are required to do, often in a cascade model of

training. The cascade training model has been employed as the sole training mode since the implementation of STEPS nationwide. The cascade training is designed to improve the confidence and the English skill level of those teachers working in rural schools in China as well as their understanding of STEPS so that they can start to use English to teach rather than Chinese. Where this has happened, the lack of take-up at the grass-roots level may be as much a function of the lack of consultation with the teachers by policy makers in the initial stages of STEPS (re)design as a shortcomings of the cascade model itself (Gilpin, 1997). The rural primary school teachers of English have seen a disparity between the training they are receiving and the innovative practice they are being asked to implement in their classroom in the rural school context, which has resulted in being criticized for offering diluted training the further one progresses down the cascade. Why, the teachers may feel, should they have faith in the STEPS training in the first place?

Yet, without adequate training, these teachers are not able to maximize the English learning potential of rural school pupils. Owing to the need for English teacher professional development created by STEPS, I have been motivated to conduct research. This report is about the study into the professional development of a large group of rural primary school English teachers in China. The aim was to explore whether the UK model could be introduced in the rural primary school context in China.

The Cascade Training Model

According to Eraut (1995, 6:21) cascade model of training uses a top-down approach or centre-periphery strategy. It is a training model where the experts, the core-trainers, are at the top of the structure. They are charged with the responsibility of the training provincial teams who are approximately double of the trainers at the national level. The provincial trainers in turn will have to train in-service trainers at district level who are approximately triple of the number of provincial trainers.

For decades, the cascade training model was the dominant model used in rural schools of China owing to it being consistently required by MOE. The model is known as one strategy widely used to try to provide training for a maximum number of teachers in a cost effective manner, especially where the numbers ultimately needing training are very large, and/or funding to provide training is limited (Hayes, 2000; Bax, 2002). Thus, in many developing countries, the cascade training is popular because it reaches a great many participants in a short period of time (Leu, 2004). The advantages of this training model are that it allows training to take place in stages so that progress can be monitored. Also, as more teachers receive training, information can be disseminated quickly and to an even larger number of teachers. In theory, cascade training is cost-effective because those who have been trained can then train others, thus minimizing the financial outlay involved (Ono & Ferreira, 2010).

The cascade model has also been widely criticized as an inadequate model for delivering effective training (Khulisa, 1999; Human Science Research Council, 2000). The result of the cascade training was “watering down and/or misinterpretation of crucial information” (Fiske & Ladd, 2004:162). The model allows a high dilution rate, losing quality from level to level so that by the time the information reaches the final target group, it has lost some of its real value. When the intended message is transmitted to the next level in the cascade training, the chances of crucial information being misinterpreted are high (Fiske & Ladd 2004). The cascade training model always failed to prepare either trainers or trainees for the complexity involved in implementing the new curriculum. Ono and Ferreira (2010) find support for their view on how teachers frequently complained that even the district trainers themselves did not always understand the curriculum. Robinson (2002) also discusses the dissatisfaction with the cascade model, arguing that this model offers training, but little or no follow-up support structures for teachers who have to deal with the long-term implementation of the new reforms. Dichaba & Mokhele (2012) noted that the cascade training lacks successful translation of curriculum innovation into classroom practice.

Weaknesses in the cascade training model are linked with a tendency to develop the vanguard team’s user skills as opposed to their provider skills. This direct training, in the knowledge and skills thought necessary to enable the desired changes in classrooms, is given to a relatively small number of specialists or trainers. Another weakness of the model is the distance between the central and the local level. A third limitation is its one-way transmission. Proper monitoring and assessment of activities are not possible

and there is no way of fairly measuring teacher performance on a comparative basis against one's own performance and against others.

Some disastrous consequences of the application of the cascade model are evident in the abortive attempts at implementing the Curriculum 2005 in South Africa (More, 2004). Survey results from the Gansu Institute of Education Research in the year 2010 done by a professor in Northwest Normal University of 366 teachers show that 98.9% of teachers participated in cascade training. The content of the cascade training focuses mainly on general pedagogy. Little attention is paid to pedagogical practices, teenage psychological development and classroom management (Pan, 2008).

The dissatisfaction of the cascade training model is observed in the research on professional development of teachers in developing countries (Leu, 2004; MacNeil, 2004; Villegas-Reimers, 2003; Schwille & Dembélé, 2007; Tatto, 1997; Tatto & Velez, 1997). Dichaba (2013) concludes that the prime cause of failure of the cascade model of training is its concentration of expertise at the topmost level of the model, combined with a purely transmissive mode of training. Recipients of such "first level" training are then expected to train other groups, who may then, in turn, be expected to pass on the essence of their training to their colleagues. If the hoped for "cascading" down from first to subsequent levels occurred, albeit with the training content diluted as it trickles down (Hayes, 2000), educational planners consider that they have introduced the means of implementing desired changes to classroom teachers cost effectively.

The UK PGCE Model

In the UK, the PGCE is a ten-month pre-service teacher training course for undergraduate degree holders. Those passing the PGCE are acknowledged by Ofsted (2011) and granted "eligibility to teach" in the UK schools. The PGCE is also widely recognized in the rest of world, allowing holders to easily register as teachers there after some additional local training and certification.

Within the PGCE, student teachers attend intensive and focused sets of lectures, seminars and workshops for some weeks. These provide them with basic knowledge. The students read, research, reflect and deliberate with each other and with lecturers. A number of assignments are planned, researched and written. In this period, they are encouraged to develop their own philosophy of teaching and learning. Then the students start the approximately 24-week school and observation placement. During each school placement there are joint observations of student teachers' lessons. The students have to undertake at least two substantial placements in different schools, providing them with a wealth of experience from different practitioners in different contexts. Their school partnership tutor will provide them with an alternate outlook to help them to further develop their own philosophy. Finally when the students return from each school placement they share their ups and downs, reflecting on their experiences. Rixon (2000) and Papp (2011) emphasize the necessity of such adequate training for teachers.

From 2005 to 2006, I, as a senior school teacher of China, attended a PGCE course at a university in London. During the period I worked with my academic tutor and school-based mentor collaboratively. The tutor and the mentor helped me to reflect on issues or experiences and assess and evaluate my own learning to identify priorities for further action. As trainees, we discussed the recent work on child development and we also learned from each other in pair or group work, which worked as teacher professional learning community. In the community, the trainees interact and collaborate regularly around issues of teaching and learning and engage in the production and consumption of knowledge (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). I got a sense of what some of my peers had experienced in communities. And the need to cooperate with fellow trainees in the lesson preparation was extremely beneficial since there was a more lively interchange of ideas as well as the need to adapt individual teaching methods. My skills of working with others also developed.

The training program is interactive, participatory, and experiential. My concept of a teacher's role changed from one of being a didactic presenter to one of a collaborative facilitator enabling learning. I gained considerably from discussion with experienced school staff, who knew the children well. At the end of the PGCE, I had a clear framework of the job of a 'teacher' with systematic teaching skills and

classroom management and became a qualified teacher of Mandarin Chinese. In the following year, I started to teach in a school in the centre of London. I found the skill and techniques I learned in the PGCE of great value. As a result the BBC interviewed me and reported my classroom teaching on the BBC website on November 24th, 2006.

My personal story confirms that in the PGCE period systematic help with methodological skills, refining curriculum subjects in more relevant and intercultural ways, setting the social and psychological context of educational transactions, giving dependable professional and personal support and encouraging critical thinking against a background of a broad and structured school experience, the ability to identify and teach the gifted kid and those with special skills, skills in testing and assessment, guarding against preconceptions based race and gender, and links with parents and communities, etc. All this and more is too long to list. Linked to the PGCE are the efforts being made to conceptualize teacher education as a whole and to bridge the theory-practice gap, which is the key function of the PGCE.

Theoretically, cascade training appears to have failed to significantly improve the performance of trainee teachers. It is therefore a challenge for STEPS implementers to explore what would work best for teachers. Even if the PGCE in the UK is adopted in the pre-service teacher education, and even if it is well-employed in some other countries for the pre-service teacher as well, it is brandy new to make the hypothesis below: The problems, which the teachers encountered in the cascade training of the STEPS could be avoided with implementing the UK PGCE teacher training model.

The Study

The study, which lasted four years, has evolved through four phases: a formative phase (the first year), the paradigm debate (the second year), the procedural period (the third year), and the emerging recent interest exemplified in the public (the fourth year).

Brief Description of Rural School Contexts

To support teacher training targeted to STEPS, China has appropriated 800 million yuan for teacher development in 389 poor counties in 12 provinces and autonomous regions (China Education Daily, December 25, 2013). The study was conducted in Gansu, Ningxia, two of China's interior northwestern provinces. The provinces stretch across the flat Loess Plateau, parts of the Gobi Desert, mountainous and hilly areas, and vast grasslands. They have the highest incidences of rural poverty among provinces in China, making them ideal sites for research on the impact of poverty on Chinese English education. Gansu and Ningxia, two of China's poorest provinces, are also homes to many ethnic minority groups..

A survey of rural, primary school English teachers, principals, and village leaders was conducted by the Gansu Institute of Education Research in the year 2010 by a professor in Northwest Normal University. It shows that the number of primary English school teachers decreased by 8.9 percent. The impact of provincial teacher shortages is much greater in rural communities. Consequences mainly include the inability to offer classes in English. In rural primary schools in Gansu and Ningxia certified English teachers are difficult to recruit and retain, principals hire substitute or temporary teachers, who generally have lower levels of education and little or no formal teacher training.

Participants and Instruments

The study involves 300 primary school English teachers. 150 participants are from 101 rural primary schools in Gansu. Another 150 are from 153 rural primary schools in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. The participants, as "leading English teachers" in their schools, all attended the cascade training locally, still taking place at the time of the research. And they also experienced ideas of the PGCE in the past sessions. Among the participants, 52 percent are female with 60 percent of them under 40 years of age. With regard to educational attainment, less than 0.2 percent of them in China have a 4-year college degree or higher, 2 percent have a 3-year college degree, 95 percent have a secondary school level of attainment, and 3 percent have less than a secondary school level of attainment.

There are three types of schools found in rural areas in China, including central primary schools, complete primary schools, and incomplete primary schools. In Gansu and Ningxia, the teachers involved in the study work in primary schools and face a lack of access to transportation, cultural resources, or educational facilities. Recreation and opportunities for enrichment and personal advancement are often limited, compared to those available in towns. The participants may also feel isolated from the local community, especially if they are from outside the village or if there is a wide educational gap between themselves and the local community. Most frequently, they also have to engage in farm work to support their large family.

In the study, I adopted two reflective questionnaires distributed by the staff from local teaching research center attached to the local educational bureaus. Data were gathered with their help. Below are the sorts of statements that I put to the teachers after their local cascade training combined with their direct experience of the ideas of the PGCE. I asked them if they agreed with the statements or not.

Sample Statements

1. Regarding the local cascade training

- The school authorities require all the teachers to attend the training section within the frame of STEPS. Teachers have no say in this.
- Teachers have little opportunity to discuss STEPS or to share ideas about it.
- Teachers' critical problem in the implementation of STEPS lies in English language competence.
- The lectures are too theoretical and inappropriate to be of great assistance on the teachers.
- The lectures are too intensive and too often repetitive not much use in the practical situation.
- Teachers find that much in the training is not very relevant and sometimes vague.
- Being a rural primary school teacher looks like a challenging profession.
- Teachers have access to publications to learn and to understand more about STEPS.
- Teachers are largely given support to attend the teacher training section within the frame of STEPS.
- Time for professional development is built into teachers' workloads.

From the answers I found that all the participants were required to attend the training by the school management teams. 98.9% of them put 'lack of English competence' as their most critical problem. 95.9% had no say in the implementation of STEPS. The participants said teachers had access to professional development resources. Over 90% had opportunities to develop their English proficiency and methodological skill. The vast majority believed that professional development had become an important part of teachers' professional lives.

2. Regarding experiencing ideas of the PGCE

- The PGCE model meets the requirement of STEPS.
- Teachers are motivated to take a PGCE to be qualified teachers.
- The PGCE can be adopted as a new training model.
- Teachers need a PGCE in order to feel confident in the teaching role, initiate more varied teaching situations and interacting more successfully with rural primary school kid.
- Teachers consider that professional development based on the PGCE model is of importance and of help to their career development.
- Practical training within the PGCE model is much better than theoretical training dominating the current cascade training program.
- Teachers are willing to reflect on their practice from the perspective of English methodology as the PGCE model suggests.

- Teachers would be led directly to a consideration of the theories underlying the concrete teaching practices, enabling teachers to plan, implement, and evaluate schemes of work, to locate or devise suitable resource materials, to motivate rural primary school kids to learn etc.
- Teachers would understand the curriculum content appropriate to the age and ability of the rural primary school kids.
- The trainers in the PGCE courses would be allowed a variety of teaching methods compare to the simple presentation in the cascade training.

From the answers I found that over 94% of the participants were very positive about the PGCE model and very few held negative attitudes towards it. The ambivalent ones were less enthusiastic. For them, STEPS based on imported pedagogy was opposed to local cultural values in various ways, particularly the role experiences of “teacher” and there may be a corresponding resistance to STEPS perceived as western (Davis, 2012).

After the initial experience of elements of the PGCE model, 98% of the participants agreed with were “a new training model;” 98% of them stated that the PGCE model met the requirement of STEPS; 98% expressed that the PGCE likely promoted them to be qualified teachers; 96.7% thought the PGCE was of importance and of help to their career development; 93.7% were willing to reflect on the varying perspectives of English teaching methods; 94.5% held the view that the PGCE was able to make them feel confident in the teaching. This depicts the cascade model of training as ineffective model.

From the answers to the PGCE statement, I can find that the overwhelming majority of the participants believed that professional development had become an important part of teachers’ professional lives. The findings also informed us that the current implementation system in rural Chinese primary schools is a challenging situation. Compared with the PGCE, some of the criticism in opposition to the current ways of implementing STEPS was related to its lack of relevance to the “real teaching in real schools” and lack of connection between theory and praxis.

The data also confirmed that in response to the tensions and constrains and pressure, the primary school English teachers were turning to ideas of reflective practice, which the PGCE model attempts in its an integration of theory with practice. They were doing so to reassert a professional view of teachers’ theory under the power of the school authority.

Reflection

A reflective orientation is central to professional development (Hayes, 2000). The data from the study support the view that the cascade model is an ineffective model for training teachers. Comparison of the cascade training with the PGCE has been made above. But such comparisons are notoriously difficult, mainly because of the complexity and variety of the many elements inherent in professional development. Compared with the PGCE model, the cascade training program carried out in the rural China primary school context is short, quick, fast and cheap, potentially reaches more teachers and focuses on the prime importance of the subject knowledge of teachers. However, even though it is economically beneficial, if teachers are not willing to accept it, they cannot change their practice at classroom. Not providing training at all could be cheaper than conducting meaningless training. Thus this study can serve as a foundation of presenting the PGCE model into the English teacher professional development in rural areas of China.

Many of the initial teacher trainers in the cascade training are from urban primary schools. All had attended one year PGCE training at a university in the UK. Previously, it had been rare for a primary school teacher in China to get the chance to study abroad so it made an impression. When quite a number of rural schoolteachers failed the cascade training program, the rural trainers started entertain the idea of the PGCE model that they had experienced in their training classes in the university in the UK. This was met with interest by the trainees from rural primary schools and led to a positive view of the PGCE in many cases. It is recognized that high ratio of the participants and trainers are offered such PGCE model on demand. What, then, are the possible factors that are associated with presenting the PGCE model across rural primary schools?

Firstly, professional learning communities employed in the PGCE have strengthened the connections

between professional learning and the immediate needs of teachers (Bolan, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, & Wallace, 2005). In accordance with this, as administrative behavior, there should be growing support for the fostering of teacher professional learning communities in STEPS.

Secondly, the data from experiencing ideas of the PGCE obviously show that the desire to be a qualified English teacher in rural Chinese primary schools is the main motivator to be involved in the PGCE training. Leading teachers of English in rural primary schools involved in the survey reported strong motives for choosing the teaching profession, which forms another solid foundation.

“The PGCE can be used to encourage in-service teachers to be analytical about why they are teaching in a way they are to help them develop the rationale of their practice. What we don’t want is a teacher who simply opens the book and says ‘OK, I’ll give the pupils that to learn, that to do’ without really thinking about the quality of the learning and whether that is the best way.... Learning might be about understanding rather than simply knowing the facts. We help teachers to develop an awareness of assessing their teaching in a critical way and continuing think about the different ways of doing things so that their teaching stays dynamic...”(from a teacher trainer). This remark, to some extent, proves that the initial training model is also of fit for the in-service teaching training.

Thirdly, the traditional PGCE language program has wider contents for students’ language improvement. It has courses of differing lengths and content. It seems that the courses are more flexible at least in two respects. One is that there are different lengths and contents available for different training needs of teachers. The other is that the program is well planned and well organized before it takes place. Copies of a variety of booklets are distributed to all schools in January of each year, showing the whole year course program by subject with the evaluation form. There are a variety of announcement flyers including the clearly-stated training objectives and contents and all the flyers are supposed to be sent to schools at least one term in advance so that teachers get enough time to choose the appropriate courses according to their real needs. The procedures in the PGCE seem flexible and individualistic than the cascade training.

“The introductory PGCE course I attended focuses on the development of English teaching proficiencies and cross-cultural communication competencies. The former emphasizes basic teaching skills, including teaching pedagogies, analysis of curricular materials, and proven models for teaching English lexicon, grammar, listening, speaking, reading and writing. The latter emphasizes improvement of the teachers’ comprehensive understanding of intercultural communications, including theories of teaching English as a foreign language, and interpreting/transmitting English cultural values within a modern global context” (from a trainee teacher).

Fourthly, the trainee teachers involved in the PGCE are always encouraged to think critically or reflect critically about their teaching. The trainees’ pedagogical competence will be developed through critical reflection and continuing experimenting with different ways. All too often, trainees attempt an approach or techniques, which has been reduced to a formula, with no understanding of the rationale of the method or technique being employed or its application in the particular context. Adapting this idea to their respective contexts will be able to integrate rural primary school English teacher education and to develop the teachers’ awareness to reflect and appraise their teaching in a critical way.

In addition, the following ideas from the PGCE are of great help in implementing the STEPS. On one hand, different training lengths and contents are able to increase the possibility of meeting different training needs. On the other hand, training objectives and content are clearly stated and publicized in schools in advance, so as to allow the teachers to choose suitable training courses.

However, in order to provide the most appropriate training at all levels of STEPS, effective strategies are informed by examining its training context beforehand, and are sensitive to emerging features of context (Hayes, 2000). Thus we must be aware of whether the ideas or elements of the PGCE are really appropriate for the rural school Chinese situation. Mechanically or blindly copying the PGCE takes dangerous risks for thousands of rural primary school teachers of English in China.

Discussion

The current centralizing trends result in trainee teachers’ feeling “that they have little autonomy in their

work, that they are constantly overloaded, and that they are not always able to meet the needs of their students as they would wish: in essence, which their sense of a professional self under threats” (Hayes, 2006:160). “It is a cultural and political problem in China that head teachers and teachers, who have no say in the decision making process, are the ones required to implement the changes in curriculum design and materials” Wang (2010: 68-70). This is also emphasized by Hilton (2006), saying what is significant is the influence agendas surrounding curriculum development.

I strongly agree with Fullan (2007:25), who describes “re-culturing” as the process by which “teachers come to change their beliefs and habits.” In a word, there must be wide consultation among participants, who feel that they have had more of a say in the change. Teachers are often the targets of a change initiative, but they are also frontline change agents. They need to be involved in the development of STEPS stage as early as possible and inspired to take ownership of the change.

Conclusion

The results from the current study among the 300 participants seem to suggest two answers. First, in rural primary schools in China, primary school English teacher training is still at the early stage of experiment compared with those working in urban primary schools. Second, the current programmes designed and implemented by the top-level authorities, who rarely conducted needs identification, cannot fully meet these actual training needs.

My experience of attending the PGCE shows that it can provide the trainee with critical information, which can be looped back into his/her own teaching and learning practices. Rural primary school English teachers would establish an understanding of the PGCE, which were satisfying the requirements of STEPS. So what we need is an approach which takes into account the teacher’s own knowledge, skills, and attitudes to then guide the teacher towards responsibility for his/her own professional development—encouraging him/her the same kind of independence and commitment to future growth (Hayes, 2000).

In the study, participants show the intensity to welcome the PGCE since they wish that the training mode could bring benefits to themselves. But how can we translate a felt need for STEPS into practice to help primary school English teachers to take personal responsibility for their professional development in rural China primary school context? How can we maximize the potential of everyone involved in STEPS to be active agents in their professional development? The questions and appropriate answer will greatly challenge school authorities and teacher educators in the future.

Further research has to focus more on disclosing what ideas of the PGCE could be sorted out to fulfill the requirements of STEPS, exploring how the PGCE ideas affect the teachers’ professional development as becoming a qualified rural primary school teacher of English is crucial not only for the raising of educational standards leading to greater satisfaction of both teachers and pupils, but also for the development of the nation, given the importance that a command of English has in the global economy.

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