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Conceptualizing innovation and professional learning in the Hong Kong context.

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Abstract

In this paper, we review the challenges of sustaining effective teacher professional learning in Hong Kong and propose that professional learning could enable teacher innovation, and teacher innovation reversely rejuvenates professional learning. We also argue that greater exploration is needed of how professional learning is theorised in relation to broader themes that influence it. These key themes explored have significant implications for both organisational and wider systemic culture and practice both in Hong Kong and in systems around the world.

Teacher professional learning in Hong Kong

Hong Kong's education system is often perceived and portrayed as a high-performing one in the literature (Ho, 2014). The high-performing outcomes came with high costs: the number of actual working hours of teachers in Hong Kong far surpass that of their counterparts working elsewhere. It is not uncommon that teachers work for around ten hours per day, sixty hours per week in school (e.g., Cheung & Chow, 2012). Long working hours and high workload not only make it difficult for teachers to engage in quality, reflective professional learning and collaboration, but also present a hindrance for the implementation of education reform agendas within the system (Cheng & Walker, 2008; Cheung & Wong, 2012).

In Hong Kong, under the teachers competencies framework (ACTEQ, 2003), teachers are encouraged to engaged in no less than 150 hours of continuing professional development (CPD) activities every three years. There is a wide range of professional learning activities that teachers can choose from. Wan (2011) offered an overview of the CPD activities that primary school teachers often participate in Hong Kong. In order of self-reported effectiveness, the top five CPD activities are peer class observation, higher academic study, collaborative learning, study circles among colleagues, and workshops/conferences. It was worth noting that three out of five highly regarded professional learning activities involve collaborative interaction with peers in school-based contexts. Similarly, ACTEQ (2009) identified peer observation and coaching as the most effective form of teacher professional learning activity.

Several other findings also point to the importance of engaging in collective, school-based professional learning activities. ACTEQ (2009) found that the primary measure that teachers think would be helpful for promoting the effectiveness of professional learning is to set

specific requirements for the contents of individual teachers' CPD. It was further recommended in the same survey report that schools should consider strengthening the provision of school-based teacher professional learning activities and more opportunities should be provided to teachers to learn from actual practice (ACTEQ, 2009). ACTEQ (2009) also stressed that the notion of teachers as co-learners need be further promoted among teachers to foster a collective learning culture in the school community.

Teacher innovation: An end or a means?

Hong Kong, where the east meets the west, is presumably a fertile soil for generating innovative ideas. However, two social and cultural factors may inhibit the introduction and development of innovative ideas in the education system. First, the cultural values of respecting seniority and authority, acceptance of unequal distribution of power (i.e., high power distance culture) may inhibit the expression of innovative ideas (Chiu & Kwan, 2010). Second, the system-wide expectation and competition for academic performance (Ho & Lu, 2019) could discourage schools from exploring other innovative practices in teaching and learning. This deeply rooted cultural inhibition of innovation is seldom discussed or recognized in the public or professional discourse. Instead, an other-attributing attitude of "I like innovation, but it is not my job" can be widely observed in the school community, where school leaders are found to claim there isn't enough innovation, because teachers are not creative/innovative, and teachers believe that they are not engaged in innovative activities because their ideas do not fit into the local education system, and there is lack of support from the top. We argue in this paper that teacher innovation could start from any member in a school, and evolve from everyday mini- or little-creativity into professional creativity (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009) through formal and informal professional learning activities while also recognising the need to consider wider themes of systemic structures and influences, the role of leadership, and the importance of collaboration (Lieberman, et al, 2017).

Professional learning enables teacher innovation

Lu (2019) clarifies that teacher innovation should meet at least three features: namely, 1) novelty, 2) usefulness, and 3) collective implementation in school. In line with this conceptualization, we suggest that professional learning enables teacher innovation in at least three ways. First, a strong learning orientation, as opposed to performance orientation, is essential for all forms of innovation. Most innovative ideas need to travel through a long journey of trial, testing, and improvement before they thrive. Learning orientation would enable higher tolerance of mistakes and allow teachers to safely engage in exchanging ideas, modifying practice and solutions (Edmondson, 1999). Second, the usefulness feature of innovation is surfaced through formal and informal professional judgement and evaluation (Earl & Timperley, 2015). An innovation need be extensively discussed and exchanged before the purpose or the value of the innovative practices can be firmly established and widely shared among teachers. During this process, the new practice may be questioned, challenged, and criticized, only those innovative ideas and practices that can survive the scrutiny are likely to succeed. In this sense, professional learning would help to consolidate and elevate the meaning of novel practices through explicit exchange of ideas and intentional

reflection (McCharen, Song, & Martens, 2011). Third, professional learning facilitates collaborative exploration and collective implementation of innovative ideas. Through professional learning, especially where collective in nature and school-based, novel practices engaged by individual teachers can sustain or scale up into a school feature or a competitive advantage.

Teacher innovation sustains teacher professional learning

We also argue, teacher innovation has the potential to reversely rejuvenate teacher professional learning. As reviewed earlier, teacher professional learning in Hong Kong could benefit from clearer specification of learning contents (ACTEQ, 2009). Teacher innovation could provide teacher professional learning with a concrete motive, a clear purpose or a complete project identity. Indeed, teachers' engagement in continuous innovative activities eventually sustain professional learning communities and school improvement (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006). Teachers' engagement in innovative activities could also be inherently exciting and motivating, as the intellectual delight of creative problem-solving is always coupled with a quality source of intrinsic motivation (Starko, 2013). Pragmatically, the education authorities in Hong Kong and beyond increasingly advocate for innovative practices in schools through setting innovation awards, and providing extra funding opportunities (Curriculum Development Council, 2015). Winning this funding support and awards could also bring useful resources to support teacher professional learning activities.

Key themes, challenges and considerations for the future

Given the complex interplay between factors influencing both teacher professional learning, and teacher innovation in Hong Kong and beyond, we argue that further exploration of the themes of systemic structures and influences, the role of leadership, and the importance of collaboration could add to our understanding of how to enable teacher innovation through professional learning and vice versa.

The systemic factors and influences that can enable or restrict professional learning and innovation can be characterised in many ways. Greater emphasis need be paid to teachers as more of an effective source of expertise and innovation. Clarity of goals that drive professional practice and development, and the effective allocation of resources aligned to these goals and associated strategies have been found to be central to supporting professional learning and fostering innovation (Lieberman, et al, 2017). This must be matched with an examination of the working conditions, and opportunities for learning and development that are available to teachers, as well as the time and resource allocation necessary to ensure professional learning is equitable in access, and impactful on practice.

Leadership across the system is central to achieving this. The knowledge leaders have, their ability to mobilize others, and how they sustain collective forms of professional learning, and improvement are key to fostering innovation through professional learning (Sharratt & Planche, 2016). Leaders who demonstrate knowledge of professional practice, and the complex combination of tacit knowledge and pedagogic decision making are better able to set directions about meaningful forms and areas of focus for professional learning. With this

knowledge, and a commitment to the development of others, through clarity of communication and strategic investment of time and resources, leaders can mobilise teachers towards a common goal in the pursuit of innovative practices that can foster improvement in the experiences and outcomes of students (William, 2016). These common goals can also act as the measure to understand the utility and enable the collective implementation of the innovation (Lu, 2019), and move beyond only focusing and relying on individualistic forms of innovation. With this, comes the need for a focus on the sustainability of both the approaches to and outcomes of professional learning and the innovations that come from it. Through the establishment and maintenance of collective forms of school based professional learning, leaders can make visible and sustainable their commitment to the individual and collective development of teams, and support the scaling up of innovation where they are seen to have a positive impact on practice and student outcomes.

As presented earlier, for innovation to be sustainable and for professional learning to enable this, the collaborative component to both are key. Traditionally, and in many ways in contemporary contexts too, teaching has been characterised by individualism (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). The discretionary judgement and professional expertise of individuals are things that are valued by teachers. While individualism could bring about a range of innovative and highly effective practice, there are also valid questions around whether these innovations would be able to be sustained or scaled up. In order to develop greater collaborative approaches to professional learning and teacher innovation, a range of forms and structures can support this. Teachers need opportunities, both formal and informal, planned and unplanned, in order to share anecdotes, help and assistance, ideas and strategies, and engage in joint professional work, innovation, and learning. This can lead to more meaningful and sustainable forms of professional learning and the scaling up of innovations across contexts (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; McKinney, et al, 2005; Little, 1990).

Within the subdiscipline of professional learning, we argue that there is value in pursuing a deeper understanding of the linkage between teacher professional learning and innovation, and the complex phenomena of professional learning itself. As Kennedy (2014) argues, we have a plethora of typologies and reports on examples of professional learning in a range of local and global contexts, however the literature is arguably limited in its scope, and leaves the concept of professional learning particularly under-theorised in relation to how we understand the phenomena itself, and what is influencing it. By moving beyond research that just reports on models of professional learning and their impact, wider research and theorising around themes of culture, professionalism, power, and policy could enable us to better understand the complex interplay of factors influencing the learning of professionals, and how this relates to fostering innovation for sustained professional engagement and organisational improvement.

Conclusion

In this paper, we suggest that more attention needs be paid to the linkage between teacher professional learning and teacher innovation and propose a reciprocal relationship between them. These key themes explored have significant implications for both organisational and wider systemic culture and practice both in Hong Kong and in systems around the world.

More empirical and intervention research could also be useful to better understand the linkage between the concepts of professional learning, and teacher innovation, alongside a wider theorisation of the concepts themselves.

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