

# WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST

## **Fellowship Report**

Professional Learning Communities and Teacher  
Development

*Dr Geoff Baker*

## **1. Project title**

Professional learning communities and teacher development.

## **2. Project activities**

This project involved extended visits to Finland and Hong Kong, during which I met with and interviewed government advisors, school leaders and academics. I also visited a number of schools, observed lessons and toured the buildings. Schools visited included local government run schools and international private schools.

## **3. Countries selected**

The education systems in Finland and Hong Kong are internationally renowned as being high performing and are frequently heralded by politicians as being worthy of emulation (Goodwin, 2014). They are also countries where good practice has been identified in terms of teacher development, with various publications indicating that provision in Finland and Hong Kong has led to real developments in teaching and improved outcomes for students (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2009). In particular, both countries have developed a reputation for having established a Professional Learning Communities model of teacher development (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2009).

## **4. Aims**

The aim of this project is to see first hand how teacher development has been supported in Finland and Hong Kong and bring the findings back to the UK. Both countries have acquired a reputation for having established a Professional Learning Communities model of teacher development in which teachers and support staff work together to identify areas of development and share expertise (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2009). The key to this approach is that members of the Professional Learning Community share experience and support each other (Palincsar, 1999; Stoll and Louis, 2007; Vescio *et al.*, 2008). By looking at these approaches to teacher development in their natural context I hope to draw out principles for their effective use in the UK.

## **5. Objectives**

- Identify the range of approaches to teacher development employed in Finland and Hong Kong.
- Consider the rationale behind these approaches and the impact they have had on staff and other stakeholders.
- Compare findings with approaches to teacher development typically employed in the UK.
- Create principles about effective teacher development in general and supporting a Professional Learning Community specifically that can be applied in a UK setting.

## **6. Ethical considerations**

The project gives rise to a number of ethical considerations. Central to this study is an ethic of respect for all involved. Embedding a strong ethical framework within the project was essential to ensure that it is able to capture the authentic voices of all participants, within the context of the phenomena being studied. From the offset all involved in the project were given a choice as to whether to take part and the right to withdraw at any point (Seidman, 2013). Participants were given a clear overview of what the project involved and informed that the findings would be published. Given the nature of some of the responses that are discussed in this report, to protect participants and their schools their responses have been fully anonymised throughout and the schools referred to by their context as opposed to their direct identity (Bassey, 2012; Busher and James, 2012).

## **7. Approaches used**

The primary research activity used throughout the project was discussion with relevant individuals. Consequently, the research tool that was developed to record and analyse these was semi-structured interviews. Beyond this I observed a number of lessons and had tours of school buildings. To capture the findings from these experiences I kept a researcher diary throughout the course of the project.

## 7.1 Semi-structured interviews

Interviews are one of the main tools used in qualitative research, with estimates positing that around 90% of qualitative research studies use interviews (Roulston *et al.*, 2003). There are many advantages to using interviews. Interviews receive a far better response rate than do questionnaire surveys and the interviewer can be certain that the answers given are genuinely their answers and they have not received help from others in coming up with the response (Barriball and While, 1994). It has also been noted that face-to-face interviews stimulate interest in a project in a way that few other research tools can, encouraging deeper more meaningful responses (Galletta, 2013). There is a continuum of interviews from highly structured surveys to completely unstructured life histories. Structured interviews involve the interviewer sticking rigidly to a set of questions (Fontana and Frey, 1994; Coleman, 2012; Fontana and Frey, 1994). Given the prescribed nature of structured interviews, these are less effective at eliciting values and motivations. Unstructured interviews on the other hand tend not to impose any form of categorisation that may limit responses (Rubin and Rubin, 2012; King and Horrocks, 2010). While this technique has been central to life history approaches, a particular risk with completely unstructured interviews is that the interview does not garner material pertinent to the research questions (Rabionet, 2009). Therefore, semi-structured interviews were deemed to offer a happy medium between these two approaches.

Semi-structured interviews by their nature have a degree of structure, with a pre-defined set of questions established by the interviewer, but the interviewer and interviewee have the capacity to probe particular areas more deeply (Carruthers, 1990). Semi-structured interviews also give an opportunity to check that the respondent has understood the question as they can check understanding with the interviewer (Barriball and While, 1994). In the same way, the interviewer can push the respondent to deepen answers or clarify responses through the use of probing (Rubin and Rubin, 2012; Coleman, 2012). However, the main reason that semi-structured interviews were chosen as the research tool for this project was that they

elicit the kinds of information on which this study will be centred, as they can help us to develop an understanding of people's beliefs and attitudes.

## **7.2 Researcher diary**

Researcher diaries are a widely used tool in qualitative research. They provide a vehicle in which to document observations, experiences and feelings during a project as well as giving 'an opportunity for reflection and inner dialogue' (Engin, 2011).

They played a further role in this project in allowing me to make sense of an array of information and draw connections between seemingly disparate pieces of information. This was particularly the case in relation to the lesson observations and school tours I completed. One example of this is seen in the links between physical space and teacher development, which I initially thought were unrelated, but became a regular feature in my reflections. In this sense the researcher diary allowed me to scaffold my own learning as I began to move toward drawing out tentative conclusions and possible principles based on the research completed.

## **8. Findings**

### **8.1. Caution must be exercised when studying other educational systems.**

The finding that stood out above all others from this project and was unintentionally found was that the wisdom that is so often communicated to us about education in countries that have been deemed to have successful education systems should be rigorously questioned. Before I could begin discussing specific aspects of teacher education, the majority of participants had already begun airing their frustrations that the UK had taken the 'wrong' lessons from their country's educational success. One Headteacher in Hong Kong felt that politicians had 'cherry picked' the things they wanted to see in the systems they had studied, regardless of what the research had shown. The 'Shanghai Maths' approach to maths education was a particular area of concern for this Headteacher, with a lack of differentiation and excitement in the classroom leading droves of students to disengage from their learning and fail to develop a passion for education, while weaker learners – particularly those with SEN – found it 'virtually impossible' to access the curriculum. This Headteacher noted

that it was this didactic style of instructional approach that was the biggest recruiting tool for the English-based curriculum model he was delivering, with parents at his school believing that in the long term their children will enjoy more success if they are passionate about what they are doing. On the same topic, a Headteacher at a government funded school in Hong Kong that used the 'Shanghai Maths' model, felt that it had been misunderstood in the UK. It was not the curriculum or a particular set of methods that led to success, in her eyes it was the teacher development opportunities that sat behind it, a factor that has also been suggested in a number of recent articles on this topic (see, for instance, Field, 2015).

During a discussion with a Headteacher in Finland, he seemed equally perplexed at the way the UK was heralding the Finnish system as worthy of emulation. While he felt that there were many exemplary practices that could be studied in more detail he was quick to assert that the success of Finnish students in the PISA tests had less to do with the way they had been taught and more to do with the cultural milieu in which they found themselves. This Headteacher, who had experience of teaching in both the UK and Finland, felt the success of Finnish students was due to the resilience they developed during their upbringing, citing the Finnish concept of *Sisu* as being instrumental in this (also noted by Brueggeman, 2008). Likewise, all of the Headteachers I spoke to in Hong Kong emphasised that an important part of the success their students enjoyed was the incredible, sometimes unbearable, pressures their parents put on them to succeed (Ripley, 2014).

The culmination of these discussions was a stark reminder of the limitations of comparative studies (Bray, 2014). When looking at comparative educational systems it is essential that the observer keeps in mind that they are not looking at a system that can simply be implemented with the same levels of success elsewhere, divorced from the culture in which it is imbued. Equally, the success of students in that system cannot be put down solely to the educational system, without consideration of the cultural circumstances in which the students have been operating. This highlighted the importance of disciplined, nuanced engagement with other educational systems, which should be considered not solely in the light of a single visit, but instead

analysed alongside literature on the topic being discussed. All of those I spoke with were quick to point out that all systems have their flaws and copying, wholesale, a particular approach is usually indicative of a lack of thought which can result in the negative consequences outweighing the positive.

## **8.2. Teacher development requires appropriate resourcing and should be the driving feature of the school's development.**

All of the schools that I visited were high performing schools. The main feature that I could identify that was truly shared across all the schools was an absolute focus on enhancing the quality of teaching and learning. Amongst the leaders I spoke to there appeared a belief that discussion of exam results missed the point of what schools should be focusing on, as put best in the words of one Headteacher: 'I don't worry about grades. I worry about teaching and learning, then the grades take care of themselves'. The role so commonly found in English schools and often the remit of a Deputy Headteacher, that of 'Raising Attainment', did not exist in the majority of the schools seen. Instead that resource was focused on teaching and learning. In these schools there were well thought through CPD programmes and staff were given cover to observe colleagues and plan lessons. Interestingly, even the physical school buildings reflected the importance of teaching and learning. The majority of schools visited had rooms that were set aside for teacher development, which included movable furniture, cameras to film lessons and in one case two way glass so observers could watch lessons without distracting the class. Only a minority of the Headteachers interviewed felt that the management of data was a significant element of their job, with the majority believing that developing outstanding teaching was their main goal as Headteacher. Interestingly, more than 90% of Headteacher participants had postgraduate qualifications in teaching, with one member citing that their aim was to create a learning school, therefore 'I have to embody the learning I want my staff to do'. This is akin to the work of Barth (1984), who has argued that one of the main functions of the Principal is to become the head learner in their school.

### **8.3. Leadership of teacher development must be underpinned by a clear vision.**

In all of the schools visited it was noted that teacher development was not a tick-box exercise, but directly fed into a clear vision for both the institution and the staff within it. In some cases senior leaders noted that the teacher development opportunities at their school were directly mapped onto the vision of the institution – such as the senior leader in Hong Kong who noted ‘When I plan out our annual CPD plan it is always framed on the vision of the school – I start with our vision and then work out from there, linking every teacher development opportunity directly to the vision’. In all the schools visited the staff in the school had articulated their own version of what constitutes outstanding teaching and this was what the school community collectively worked towards establishing. In fact a number of respondents noted that the creation of the school vision was, in itself, a teacher development opportunity. As one Finnish teacher noted ‘Thinking about what we wanted our school to look like and be like was not easy. We had to think about the needs of our students and our community and then think about our own values and how they all related. It was a really challenging intellectual activity, that we regularly redevelop, but it has led to real practical change on the ground’. Again, the importance of having a clear vision driving any initiative is seen in both generic works on management and more specific works on educational leadership (Collins, 2001; Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012).

### **8.4. Management of teacher development can be more effective when distributed.**

In more than 90% of schools visited, the responsibility for coordinating or delivering teacher development opportunities was shared amongst a team of people. This was deemed to be critical by one Headteacher who stated that ‘having spent five years as a Deputy in charge of CPD I realised they needed to hear more than just me, it was just my ideas they were hearing and I didn’t have all the answers’. One school in Hong Kong had only recently adopted a team approach to teacher development, involving three senior leaders and a senior teacher all of whom met at the start of each term and drew up a programme in discussion with each other. The coordination of activities was then shared amongst the group. The Headteacher at the school, who was one member of the team of four, felt that this new approach

had helped to reinvigorate teacher development at the school, stating that ‘it just brought so much more energy in ... we began to engage in dialogue and debate about what style of teacher development the school should be providing ... I changed my views on a number of issues as I heard new views to which I had not been exposed before’. In a number of the schools visited middle leaders were also instrumental in the whole school teacher development programme, meaning that teachers with an expertise in – for example – the development of oracy skills in drama were able to share their perspectives and experiences with colleagues who were seeking to develop oracy in a different disciplinary setting. In some ways the distributed approach to coordination and delivery of teacher development opportunities was more resource heavy than simply having one person leading this, but in keeping with the earlier finding about the importance of teacher development in the schools visited this was seen as the right thing for the school to invest in.

#### **8.5. Teachers are at their most effective when trusted.**

When asked what it was that made the approach to education in Finland and Hong Kong so successful the majority of respondents noted that a key factor was that in these systems teachers were trusted to do their jobs and given freedom to develop a style that suited them. In Hong Kong teachers from both international schools and government funded schools remarked that while there is often a perception that in China there is more central control, within the classrooms teachers were actively encouraged to experiment with different approaches and that there was not one particular style of teaching that was preferred over others. Likewise, in Finland a reoccurring term used by respondents was ‘trust’. Not only did teachers remark on the high level of trust that were accorded to them, but the ministers I spoke with noted that this was a deliberate policy. In accordance with work on trust in the professions, they believed that if you wanted to get the best from professionals they needed to be treated as such (Tschannen-Moran, 2009). A key point to note though was that in both countries there was an extremely high standard of entry – teaching was highly regarded as a profession and consequently attracted a high calibre of employee. Whether this was the cause or a symptom of the level of trust in the educational system in these countries might be debated, but the respondents

interviewed as part of this project believed that less central direction was key to ensuring more high quality local provision.

#### **8.6. Participatory, active approaches to teacher development are most effective.**

During the discussions with staff about their experience of teacher development one of the key differences between the systems seen in Finland and Hong Kong, as compared to the UK, was the participatory nature of teacher development opportunities. Whereas various studies have identified that in the UK didactic, lecture style approaches to CPD dominate (Opfer and Pedder, 2011), the dominant approach in the schools visited was lesson study. Lesson study is a collaborative approach to teacher development in which colleagues work in triads planning a lesson, then one member delivers the lesson while being observed by their peers, the lesson is then developed in light of feedback from the observers and delivered by another colleague (Desforges, 2014). In all of the schools visited teachers spoke about the significant impact that this approach has had on their practice, particularly in opening up their classrooms and fostering collaboration in a profession that a number of respondents stated had been 'secretive'. In a number of cases lesson study was deemed to have had a deep impact not only on individuals, but also on the school culture. So one respondent from a Finnish school stated: 'over the last decade we have really made lesson study a core approach – during that time not only have we become better teachers learning from each other, but our school genuinely seems more concerned with learning. We all learn together, not just the students but the teachers too'. Likewise, a senior leader at a government funded school in Hong Kong stated, 'we have all improved because of our participation in lesson study, but perhaps the biggest difference is that we are really creative now and we are all committed to and not afraid of trying new things'. The use of participatory, active approaches to teacher development was seen as important in helping teachers become more reflective and more capable professionals, but it also had a deep impact on the culture of the institutions in which they worked.

#### **9. Conclusions**

Completion of this project has provided a perspective on the success of the

education systems in Hong Kong and Finland and the extent to which this can be explained by the teacher development opportunities that are provided in these countries. While the findings of the project must be tempered as each system sits within a distinct culture, when aligned with the conclusions of broader research projects a number of recommendations have been made. Looking ahead I will be sharing the findings with colleagues in my own school and beyond, considering how the principles identified can inform our own developments. I am also in the process of writing up a deeper commentary on aspects discussed here, which will be published in peer-reviewed journals.

## **10. Recommendations**

The key recommendations from this project derive directly from the findings discussed above and include:

- Conclusions from international comparative studies must be tempered. It is not enough to visit schools working in a different system and expect to achieve the same results by copying one small aspect of their practice. Schools in different systems exist in a different cultural milieu and consequently direct conclusions need to be grounded in broader evidence and studies.
- Teacher development is at its most effective when driven by a clear vision and when utilising active, collaborative approaches as opposed to relying on a more traditional didactic lecture style approach.
- Teaching and learning are the core business of schools. Therefore, they should be resourced accordingly, with substantive resources set aside for teacher development.

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