

Leadership story: Professional learning through immersion in a new culture

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Abstract

This article reports on a study which explored how school leaders acquired professional learning through immersion in Chinese language and culture. The study was founded on the 2014 New Zealand Principals' Delegation to China. A key outcome from the study was that the school leaders' experiential learning was conceptualised as a form of professional learning and development. This resulted in the leaders being empowered to better equip their students to become more culturally competent and, thus, Asia-aware.

Keywords: *School leaders; empowerment; experiential learning; cultural competence; Chinese language and culture; professional learning and development*

Introduction and background to the study

This article explores how the 2014 New Zealand Principals' Delegation to China was a means of powerful experiential professional learning and development (PLD). It supported the enhancement of the school leaders' awareness of Chinese language and culture and empowered them to strengthen Asia-aware practices in their schools. Increasing evidence in research literature suggests that effective school leadership and quality PLD opportunities improve learning outcomes for students (Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, 2009). However, authentic and effective PLD must be innovative and engaging for school leaders in order to meet their diverse needs and to bring about sustainable change in their schools. Learning as spectators is not conducive to engagement; thus, credence must be given to providing 'on the job learning' (Fullan, Cuttress & Kilcher, 2005). Additionally, it is important to personalise PLD to provide increased autonomy to individuals as they take ownership of their professional learning.

Being empowered through immersion in Chinese language and culture, the school leaders felt compelled to provide effective PLD for their staff. Subsequently, this empowerment supported the intent to transform existing practices within the leaders' schools to best prepare all stakeholders, particularly students, for their futures in increasingly multicultural and multilingual environments.

As the scale and development of China's economy and exchange with the world have seen rapid growth, there has been a sharp increase in the world's demand for Chinese language and culture learning. With China now considered by many to have the potential to become the biggest global market in the 21st Century, New Zealand students are growing up alongside the fastest growing economy in the world (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2014). Though China was already considered one of New Zealand's most important trading partners, our relationship with China has realised continued rapid expansion following the signing of the New Zealand-China Free Trade Agreement in 2008. This means that New Zealand students are immersed in a world with an abundance of business and trade opportunities, particularly for those who are fluent in speaking Chinese. A student with a working knowledge of, and empathy for, Chinese language and culture is therefore more likely to boost his or her future employment prospects and align themselves in a positive manner with any Chinese people they may come into contact with.

In response to its flourishing economy and devotion to developing global cultural diversity, China began its exploration into the promotion of the Chinese national language and culture in 2004 through the establishment

of non-profit public institutions named Confucius Institutes (Confucius Institute Headquarters (Hanban), 2014). The Confucius Institute Headquarters (Hanban), located in Beijing, is an executive body affiliated to China's Ministry of Education. The notion fundamental to the Confucius Institute lies in the theory that learning each other's language and culture will help to enhance the mutual understanding and friendship between China and the rest of the world, and that forging closer relations through positive partnerships will result in the growth of global educational and cultural exchanges (Xi, 2013). New Zealand's current Prime Minister, John Key, supported this notion when he stated that "any student going through school today, faced with a choice of learning Mandarin, or another language, would be well served to think about learning Mandarin" (New Zealand Herald, 2013).

The Confucius Institute's main objectives are stated as being devotion to enhancing the world's understanding of Chinese language and culture, deepening the friendship between China and the rest of the world and promoting cultural diversity and harmony (Confucius Institute Headquarters (Hanban), 2014). Specifically, the Confucius Institute's intent of Delegations to China, for school leaders, is:

- i) to increase New Zealanders' knowledge of China through early exposure to the Chinese language and greater familiarity with Chinese culture
- ii) to expand the number of schools at all levels teaching Chinese
- iii) to promote opportunities for New Zealanders to be exposed to, and become familiar with, Chinese culture.

(Victoria University of Wellington, 2013)

The key outcome extending from the Confucius Institute's objectives, therefore, is that the members want to promote positive change – by enhancing the world's perceptions, awareness and understanding of China, its language, culture and people. They achieve this through offering school leaders across the world opportunities to participate in PLD through immersion in first-hand experiences in China. These experiences are tacitly designed to provide the catalyst for helping to empower and support school leaders as agents of change; thus, they were the focus of the study. It must also be noted that for PLD to be considered effective, it must result in improved outcomes for students.

Literature

Conceptualising experiential learning as a form of PLD

Current literature clearly signals that effective needs-based PLD supports improving people's capacity to enhance and grow their practice (Timperley, 2005; Robinson et al., 2009). Experiential learning as a form of PLD can be thought of as 'learning on the job' (Fullan et al., 2005), or 'learning by doing' (McCarthy, 2010) where school leaders are equipped with relevant skills and dispositions to build their capacity to make change.

Effective needs-based PLD opportunities, such as experiential learning, or immersion, empower change. This aligns with Robbins and DeCenzo (2001, as cited in Shen, 2008) who posited that the ultimate goal of change is to improve people's practice or practices within an organisation. Fullan et al. (2005) concurred with this view and also prioritised the need to empower others through building people's capacity and collective power in order to drive change. In the context of the study, experiential learning through immersion can therefore be conceptualised as a form of PLD which empowers school leaders to grow awareness of Chinese language and culture in their schools.

Learning languages

Empowering school leaders through immersion in Chinese language and culture requires the exploration of the concepts underpinning learning languages in schools. Notwithstanding the notion that language and culture are inseparable, the literature examined illustrates how learning a second language enhances a student's ability to think more creatively and divergently while also enabling the student to achieve a better grasp of his or

her native language. The Ministry of Education (2002) outlined the benefits of this, establishing the fact that learning a second language may well provide broader career opportunities for multilingual learners. It could therefore be inferred that a student may well be limited and restrained by being monolingual in today's culturally diverse world. Additionally, there is a growing awareness that learning second languages benefits students by contributing to their cognitive, intellectual and social development (MoE, 2002; Mandarin Stars, 2014). Learning a second language increases cognitive power, divergent thinking and creativity, enhanced literacy ability in the first language, and communicative abilities (Mandarin Stars, 2014). According to the *New Zealand Curriculum Framework* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 1993), students benefit from learning another language from the earliest practicable age as it broadens students' general learning abilities and sharpens their focus on their own language. Bilingualism is the norm internationally and people with a range of intellectual capabilities can achieve success in learning more than one language (Waite, 1992).

Learning languages can be seen as a national resource that serves communities within New Zealand, enriches New Zealand as a whole and enables the nation to engage in commercial, industrial and diplomatic enterprises on an international scale (MoE, 2002). The literature clearly espouses the benefits of acquiring a second language to ensure participation in other societies and cultures through developing understanding, skills, attitudes and values. Thus, it appears that there is compelling evidence to suggest the need for school leaders to promote second language learning not only to enhance students' cognitive and social development but also to enable future graduates to compete successfully across international boundaries.

Methodology

Qualitative data were gathered from three semi-structured interviews, using open-ended questions to encourage free interaction and focused conversation. Due to geographical restrictions regarding access to participants the interviews were conducted by Skype. Notes taken during the interviews were digitally recorded to provide the opportunity to check on details from the responses at a later date. A thematic analysis approach was employed to make sense of the data by identifying broad themes.

Participants

The participants in the study comprised three of the nine school leaders who travelled to China as part of the 2014 New Zealand Principals' Delegation. All nine school leaders were invited to participate in the study via an initial email. Because more than three school leaders volunteered to take part in the study, a random selection of three was made. The participants were each involved in one semi-structured interview which lasted no more than thirty minutes, during which they shared their experiences of visiting China and, in particular, how this impacted on their awareness of Chinese language and culture and motivated them to promote this in their respective schools.

In order to preserve their anonymity, the three participants who were selected are referred to as Leader A, B or C throughout this article. The participants held varying leadership positions that typically reflected the diversity of leadership roles within schools and also across schooling structures in New Zealand.

School leaders' experiential learning

Data arising from the study showed that the three school leaders were empowered by their immersion in a new culture when they participated in the 2014 Principals' Delegation to China. Additionally, it illustrated that experiential learning can be conceptualised as a form of PLD. Literature agrees that being actively involved and interacting with others, through opportunities that afford experiential learning, are likely to result in positive outcomes (Fullan et al., 2005; McCarthy, 2010). The assimilation and synthesis of new knowledge that is gained through first-hand experience can lead to valuable new learning for school leaders. This is highlighted

by the experiential learning opportunities afforded by the Confucius Institute that clearly impacted on the three school leaders in a positive way. Leader A stated that the “trip enabled me to be the learner”. It allowed them to experience aspects of the country and culture through a personal and authentic lens. The experiences appeared to have a profound impact on the school leaders as it conveyed to them the richness of history, culture and traditions as well as the enormity and contrasts within China. The rich heritage that the Chinese people have in themselves and their nation was also highlighted to the school leaders. This was reflected in the following comments:

I started off with a 'blank sheet' and was overwhelmed by the richness of the experiences, particularly by the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square ... we could only absorb so much at the time – since returning home I have been able to appreciate more some of the vast opportunities we had e.g., being in the centre of Beijing and then suddenly in rural Shayang – it was a real privilege to be there. (Leader A)

Leader B agreed, stating that “the sheer size of China, plus the huge amount of development happening ... there is obviously a tremendous energy and expertise being put into buildings and engineering”. Leader C said, “I think for me it was about the size of everything: just everything was huge, it was busy, it was overwhelming on lots of levels”.

This rich tapestry of history and cultural experiences drew Leader A to read the novel by Jung Chang entitled *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (1992), which depicted life as a Chinese citizen growing up during the Cultural Revolution. Additionally, Leader A intended to have a “crack at learning the language – despite my good intentions in China, I’ll definitely make a commitment to learn the language in the future”.

The school leaders felt a sense of being in a minority throughout the trip and this conveyed to them the importance of ensuring that students in New Zealand grow their awareness and appreciation of diversity through understanding the concept of difference. As Leader C explained:

With us being the minority it was the first time I'd experienced that to the extent where I was the only white face in the sea of Asian faces. I don't think I would like to have travelled by myself. I wouldn't have liked to have coped without the support of our guides – it would have been quite frightening.

Leader C also added that priority should be given to building students’ capacity to ensure they readily relate to and interact with different cultures. Indeed, Leader C stated that: “our students are going to have interaction with China at some stage in their lives and therefore we need to prepare them for that otherwise we are doing them a disservice”.

This demonstrated that the school leaders in the study recognised the need to build their own capacity in order to better equip students to become culturally competent and Asia-aware. The insight and understanding that they gained by being immersed in the Chinese language and culture supports the notion that personalised and authentic learning, such as experiential learning, empowers leaders to enact change in their schools (Fullan, 2006; Timperley, Wilson, Barrar and Fung, 2007).

Empowering school leaders to enact change

Synonymous with terms such as liberation and authorisation, empowerment can be viewed in this context as enabling the leaders to be more confident and assertive to transform, or change, existing practices within their schools. Change is a process of improving practice through learning to do and learning to understand something new (Fullan, 2006; Shen, 2008). Aligning with the notion that facilitating change must include the provision of innovative and personalised PLD (Fullan, 2006; Timperley et al., 2007), the trip to China provided the school leaders with this rich opportunity. This was exemplified when they talked about how the opportunities impacted

on them and empowered them to enact change in their schools. The school leaders' appreciation of the need to equip the students in their schools to be Asia-aware was conveyed strongly in the data:

I think our children being competent in speaking Mandarin will be a huge career advantage to them in the future ... the immersion in Chinese culture made me realise how important China is to our students and our economy. It is very important for our students, teachers and Board of Trustees to be China-aware, but especially our children because that's where our economy is going to be based in China and Asia. No longer is our economy going to be based on America and Europe. (Leader B)

Leader A commented that, "It's really got me looking at what I can do to support my students", and likewise, Leader C said, "We would be doing our students a disservice if we were to ignore the compelling evidence urging us to support the need to increase students' awareness of Chinese culture".

Throughout the trip, the school leaders developed an increasing admiration for second language learners and began to consider their personal acquisition of the language. Leader A expressed that, "I had intentions of trying to learn at least one new phrase a day".

Furthermore, the leaders commented on the importance that was placed on Chinese students to learn to speak English. Leader C said, "The children in the schools were really eager to engage with us and practise their English – a high value was placed on English".

Throughout the trip to China the leaders encountered experiences that broadened their knowledge and understanding of Chinese culture. Through this, they showed how they had become more aware and passionate about the need to enact change in their schools:

[It] makes me think about how I will deliver professional development because we were so hands-on and interactive ... it will improve my practice as I'll be thinking carefully about ways to engage people working in a visual model. (Leader C)

Thus, feeling a sense of empowerment as a result of their experiences in China, the school leaders were motivated and compelled to drive change in their schools. They saw that this could occur through the provision of effective PLD for their staff, with the purpose of equipping students to become more culturally competent and Asia-aware. This view was supported by Fennell (2005) and Fullan et al. (2005) who stipulated that for change to occur there must be the need and empowerment to do so. Each of the school leaders expressed the need to act on their newly acquired awareness and learning through the vehicle of school-wide curriculum development. There was a sense of urgency around the need to address this before the energy, motivation and momentum gained from the trip waned.

School leaders equipping students through school-wide curriculum development

The New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2007) stated that schools are required to "encourage students to participate more actively in New Zealand's diverse, multicultural society in the global community" (p. 4). As a result of their experiential learning in China, the school leaders were better equipped to meet this requirement. As Leader C stated, there was some urgency for them to "up-skill our children on China and also our staff ... get on the bus with our kids so it's not a culture shock for them in the future". The leaders therefore became more aware that the changing face of our globally interconnected workplace requires the provision of an education that ensures our students are successfully prepared to enter the workplace more culturally competent and Asia-aware. There was clear evidence that they could achieve this through a range of school-wide curriculum development strategies:

We are getting a Mandarin Language Assistant (MLA¹) coming in after the holidays to create opportunities for students in schools in our district to learn Mandarin. The MLA will be the start of a process of enabling our students to have an experience and this opportunity will be offered as after school classes to all students within our community, which is approximately five schools. (Leader A)

First and foremost I am going to contact the Confucius Institute about getting an MLA so we can provide Mandarin classes to our students through an elective programme ... increasing the focus on China/Asia in terms of the curriculum ... we want to do more study around the environment as part of being an Enviroschool. We want to look at the impact we have on our environment including learning around growth and pollution. (Leader B)

Similarly, Leader C explained that: “we are having a cultural week with MLAs coming in to take groups of students – our current MLA is amazing, a real asset to the school”.

The enthusiasm exemplified by the school leaders illustrated their commitment to developing their curriculum, with emphasis on making language learning in their schools a priority. They were better able to see the relevance of students learning second languages, due to their experiences in China, as a way to enable their students to take their place in a multilingual world (MoE, 2002).

Conclusion

This article illustrates how school leaders felt empowered by experiential learning and immersion in a new culture, to equip students to become more culturally competent.

Experiential learning opportunities undertaken by these school leaders resulted in their professional and personal appreciation and understanding of Chinese language and culture being significantly strengthened. The rich descriptions of their experiences in China exemplified the impact of experiential learning as the school leaders voiced their intention to explicitly incorporate Chinese language learning into their school curriculum.

The embedded message revealed from the leaders’ experiences was that experiential, personalised PLD results in empowerment to facilitate change in schools and therefore equip students to become culturally competent, connected, globally-enabled and future-focused citizens.

The following recommendations have been identified from the study, which require further consideration by schools:

- There should be provision of authentic opportunities to enable and empower school leaders and teachers to broaden their China and Asia-awareness and understanding. This can then empower them to provide authentic and deliberate opportunities to develop students’ cultural competencies.
- The *New Zealand Curriculum* (MoE, 2007) principles of ‘Future Focus’ and ‘Cultural Diversity’ integrated within the curriculum should be embraced as a means to foster students’ dispositions to best prepare them for their future connectedness with China and beyond. This includes an increased emphasis on learning languages, specifically Asian languages such as Mandarin.

¹Note

An MLA is a post-graduate tertiary student from China, who works to promote the learning of Mandarin and raise the quality of Mandarin language provision in New Zealand schools. The New Zealand-China Free Trade Agreement (2008) allows MLAs to temporarily work in New Zealand. The New Zealand and Chinese Education Ministries have partnered with the Office of the Chinese Language Council International (Hanban) and the Confucius Institute in Auckland to implement the initiative.

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