

CATALYSTS LEADING EXPERIENCED PRIMARY TEACHERS TO MODIFY THE WAYS THEY TEACH STUDENTS TO READ CHINESE

Catalysts Modify Teachers' Pedagogy

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Abstract.

A report is presented of experiences that persuaded a group of experienced Taiwanese Chinese Language primary school teachers who had visited Hong Kong to observe how the subject they were responsible for teaching was being taught in Hong Kong to change their practice on returning to Taiwan. Overseen by Taiwanese and Hong Kong university academics, the Taiwan and Hong teachers exchanged professional experiences and ideas, and school visits were arranged to allow the Taiwanese teachers to see for themselves how reading comprehension was being taught in Hong Kong primary schools. On returning to Taiwan, retrospective impressions of the visit by the Taiwanese teachers were reported to colleagues, and seminars, follow-up focus group meetings and online forum discussions were organized. A group of Hong Kong teachers later visited Taiwan to see how their Taiwanese colleagues were teaching reading. The visits, exchanges of ideas and the follow-up activities were very productive, all serving as catalysts causing the teachers to change their pedagogy on returning to Taiwan, one of the most important being the experience of seeing at first-hand the strategies used by Hong Kong teachers to improve the reading comprehension of their students and another being the way the students had responded.

Keywords: catalysts, teacher change, professional experiences, changing pedagogy

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1. INTRODUCTION

Both Taiwan and Hong Kong launched programmes of education reform in the final decade of the Twentieth Century, partly in response to political and social changes and partly in response to criticisms of the ways children were being taught how to read the Chinese language in schools. Hong Kong's inhabitants are predominantly Chinese who until 1997 lived in a British colony, whilst Taiwan's population is almost exclusively Chinese living apart from their ethnic brothers and sisters in the People's Republic of China. Educators in both locations favour deeply-rooted Confucian traditions of having children work hard and respect teachers, and of teachers who employ pedagogic approaches that mainly require learners to learn by heart fundamental literacy processes that serve as tools for subsequent independent learning (Watkins & Biggs, 2001; Lai, 2004; Wang, 2005). The economies of both Hong Kong and Taiwan have strong links with the West, and educators in both places are sensitive to alternative Western approaches to those used so widely in mainland China to boost attainment standards. They also know how to capitalise on technological advances that may serve as platforms for learning how to apply independently what has been taught in school. Taiwan's education system was imported from mainland China and its cultural ties with Chinese traditions are very strong indeed, whilst Hong Kong still has many educational, administrative and organisational links with those used in Great Britain. As a British colony, Hong Kong employed systems in its schools that clearly had Western educational and cultural associations. Although its citizens now live within a culture that is overtly 'Chinese', Hong Kong is still looked upon somewhat derisively by many Chinese in Asia as a 'cultural desert' in terms of educating its children along lines traditionally favoured by the Chinese (Zhang, 2003; Commonwealth Educational Foundation, 2008a, p42).

In Hong Kong, the Chinese Language curriculum and its framework were for many years rigidly prescribed and imposed by the Hong Kong Education Bureau. The features and processes of spoken and written language expected to be learnt in each year group were clearly set out, and firm guidance was presented about methodology and expected progress in listening, speaking, reading and writing. Students in every school in the same year group were taught in broadly the same way, and a narrow range of textbooks and resources was utilised. The new reforms still stipulated precise learning targets and objectives but allowed each school to construct its school-based Chinese Language curriculum to suit the needs of learners in the local catchment area. Although all schools were informed about expected numeracy and literacy aims and objectives, teachers were encouraged to use pedagogy and strategies that made use of individual and collaborative learning among students, and all children were encouraged to make reading a life-long vehicle of learning and leisure.

For many years, educators in many countries have been increasingly interested in seeing how well the impact on students of approaches they use for teaching literacy and numeracy stand in comparison with those used to teach students in other countries around the world. Both Hong Kong and Taiwan participated in international comparison surveys of student attainment such as the *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA), a survey of numeracy standards, and the *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study* (centre on grade 4 students aged about 10 years old) (PIRLS). In the 2006 PIRLS survey of the literacy standards of students in primary schools, Hong Kong was ranked 2nd among the 46 participating countries or regional locations, whilst Taiwan was ranked 22nd (Kennedy et al., 2007). In the 2009 PISA survey of the mathematical attainment of students aged 15 years, Hong Kong' students were ranked 4th among the 65 participating countries or regional locations whilst Taiwanese students were ranked 23rd (OECD 2009).

All students in PIRLS literacy surveys sit examinations in their own native language, with test content carefully controlled and standardised in order to permit valid comparisons (Kennedy et al., 2007). The written form of Chinese in the test scripts used in Hong Kong and Taiwan is Standard Written Modern Chinese. The 2006 PIRLS results triggered considerable surprise and interest in South East Asia for the Chinese communities of Hong Kong and Taiwan have a lot in common: both are predominantly ethnic Chinese; both proudly uphold the Chinese culture; and both have recently experienced far-reaching education reforms designed to drive up standards. Many Asian educational commentators were startled by the PIRLS results and the impressive performance of students from Hong Kong. Whereas the everyday language in both communities is Chinese, in Taiwan it is Mandarin whereas in Hong Kong the *lingua franca* is Cantonese (a dialect of Chinese). Furthermore, the spoken and written forms of Mandarin Chinese used by teachers and students in Taiwan are directly equivalent, whereas spoken Cantonese differs in some ways from the written Mandarin students in both places are required to use when answering PIRLS test items. One would have thought that the fact that Mandarin is the medium of instruction in every Taiwan classroom would have placed Taiwanese students at a distinct advantage. In fact, some Hong Kong students are taught in Mandarin since most Hong Kong teachers are more comfortable using Cantonese as the medium of classroom instruction. Although more and more schools in Hong Kong are now turning to using Mandarin when teaching Chinese, the vast majority of students and teachers are more comfortable conversing colloquially at home and in school in Cantonese.

In terms of teaching students how to read Chinese as first language, there is a long tradition that has been used for centuries in schools across China. The Taiwanese teachers rigorously adhere to this tradition and invariably begin by teaching children to recognise key Chinese characters and their pronunciation. They also teach from the start a phonetic system for pronouncing Chinese words. In contrast, Hong Kong children are very seldom taught these aspects in isolation in the beginning stage: nor are they taught phonetic symbols or any phonological system in the

early stage of learning how to read. The meaning of Chinese characters and how they are pronounced are taught simultaneously, and Hong Kong students swiftly move on to using what they are able to read for real-life communicative purposes. This approach is also utilised early in the 'learning how to read process' when Hong Kong children are taught English, the second language of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of China. Although the Taiwanese Government recommended in 1999 that reading skills and strategies be taught as key learning objectives as soon as learners are able to write in characters the words they have in their heads, very few Taiwanese primary schools move to this stage until they judge that learners are comfortably able to read, write and correctly pronounce a range of 'officially recommended' Chinese words (Kennedy et al., 2007, p. 91). They spend much more time on the meaning and appearance of words rather than on using them for authentic communicative purposes. Hong Kong teachers may sympathise with this practice to an extent but they have long since relinquished this approach as the exercises in the textbooks used in every class quickly move on to giving learners practice in effectively using their reading in purposeful, communicative tasks. In other words, teaching primary children how to apply reading skills, although officially recommended in Taiwan, is not generally enforced until students are confident and competent basic readers (Kennedy et al., 2007, p. 93).

Taiwanese educationists were prompted into reflecting seriously about the approach they were habitually using for teaching reading comprehension when the PIRLS 2006 results were announced. Intrigued by how Hong Kong had managed to raise students' literacy so effectively from 2001 to 2006, a Taiwanese non-governmental social enterprise (the *Taiwan Commonwealth Education Foundation*) which since 2004 had supported 200 Taiwanese rural primary schools in promoting literacy standards, embarked on a teacher professional development project in partnership with Taiwan Central University and the University of Hong Kong. Twenty Taiwanese primary school teachers, keenly interested in literacy education, were selected from different rural districts in preparation for a visit to Hong Kong and training workshops were provided by the social enterprise and Taiwan University. The teachers were assessed for their potential for using new approaches in their teaching, and the workshops familiarised the group with the PIRLS test framework, targets and procedures. The group was also introduced to methods used by educators outside Taiwan to boost students' literacy standards.

Led by a Taiwanese university professor and staff from the social enterprise, the teachers made a three-day visit to Hong Kong in 2008. The visit began with a workshop conducted by Hong Kong researchers and academics that involved an overview of Hong Kong's education landscape; a study of the Chinese Language curriculum generally used in Hong Kong; an overview of innovative methods for teaching Chinese characters; and the rationale for using alternatives to traditional pedagogic approaches in the teaching of reading. In the next two days the Taiwanese teachers visited two local primary schools in Hong Kong that welcomed visitors and were known to Hong Kong University for successfully teaching Chinese to a very high

standard. Both of the schools had also devised their own school-based reading curriculum. One of the schools had collaborated with Hong Kong University as an experimental school for many years. Each visit began with a briefing by the school principal and Chinese Language teachers, special attention being drawn to the role of the school culture and the development of a school-based Chinese Language curriculum. The teachers observed lessons and spent time with the Hong Kong teachers exchanging views on a wide range of issues, including the practicalities of school based rather than curricula of Education Bureau, the need for in-service training and the impact of new methods of teaching reading on teacher workloads. Each visit ended with a reflection on what had been seen and discussions of its relevance for Taiwan. The plan was for the Taiwan teachers to return to their own country after their stay in Hong Kong, and to attempt to apply in their own lessons a number of the teaching strategies they had witnessed in Hong Kong. They were also encouraged to share their experiences with colleagues in their own schools and to conduct workshops in different regions of Taiwan to pass on their Hong Kong observations to fellow teachers and to parents. They also shared their experiences with colleagues, near and far across Taiwan, on the Internet (CommonWealth-Education-Foundation, 2008a, p12).

The overall education system in Taiwan is in many ways similar to the one the teachers had encountered in Hong Kong. In order to highlight key differences that might have accounted for the outstanding Chinese reading comprehension of the Hong Kong students in PIRLS 2006, the visiting Taiwanese looked closely at the overarching organisational arrangements in Hong Kong; how the Hong Kong children coped with the incongruence between the language used in the tests and the spoken language used in the classroom and in the home; the influence on learning of the medium of instruction; the ways individual schools had organised the Chinese Language curriculum and its content; the ways teachers group children in the class and cater for individual learners; and the teachers' general interrelationships with students. As is the case in Hong Kong, individual teachers in Taiwan are in theory free to modify classroom provision and to adjust the way they comply with the curriculum. In reality, in the experience of the Taiwanese and Hong Kong University professors, they are discouraged from departing from Taiwan's official Chinese Language instructional framework and from teaching towards objectives outside the officially prescribed curriculum (Zhou, 2006, Commonwealth Education Foundation, 2008c).

The plan from the start was to seek to identify factors involved in facilitating change in Chinese Language teaching and learning in Taiwan. This type of enquiry is quite uncommon in Taiwan, and there is a paucity of published academic literature in this area. When commencing such a study, it was helpful to outline approaches and conditions referred to in Western academic literature that need to be in place for a significant modification and realignment of accepted pedagogical practices. It was also helpful to look at approaches that might inform the awareness and recognition of the need for change in pedagogical practice on the part of the Chinese

Language teachers from Taiwan. Analyses and descriptive accounts were framed against theories of teacher development in the Western literature concerned with illuminating the complex processes involved in teacher change.

There are various theories of teacher professional growth in the academic literature. The inter-connected model suggested by Clarke and Hollingsworth (2002) proposes that teachers are most likely to change if they are propelled into action by the processes of "reflection" and "enactment" in four domains: the personal domain, the domain of practice, the domain of consequence and the external domain. In the case of the present study, the domain that most helped trigger the Taiwanese teachers' willingness to change was the external domain, in the sense that outside resources of information, stimuli and sources of support promoted changes in the Taiwanese teachers' beliefs and practice. Key factors in the present study included on-the-spot observations, exchanges of ideas and experience with the Hong Kong teachers, and the encouraging and professional support from the Taiwan and Hong Kong Universities and the Taiwanese Commonwealth Education Foundation. Academics in both institutions were inspired by suggestions embedded in the 'Variation Theory' proposed by Marton and Tsui (2004). Marton suggests that teachers are most likely to change their practice if they are first clear about their own existing practice; see for themselves how others are doing the same tasks in a different manner; recognise where variations in the two patterns of practice exist; assess the implications and consequences of change; then take steps to arrive at a state where their own beliefs have absorbed the new information and are stable. In this vein, a comparative education style research project conducted by Dutch and Australian educators and teachers also drew attention. This research investigated the teaching of literature in two countries using protocols for classroom observation and inquiry developed by the International Mother Tongue Education Network (IMEN). Teachers from the same country observed each other and engaged in extensive conversations before and after the observations. Both parties were encouraged to identify similarities and differences in their pedagogy, hopefully assisting them to perceive their own practice with fresh eyes and to learn from each other (van de Ven & Brenton, 2011).

2. CONDITIONS AND PROCESSES UNDERPINNING EDUCATIONAL INNOVATIONS

The experience of a teacher seeing another teacher teach in a way that is different from the approach favoured by the observer does not guarantee that a change of behaviour will ensue. If this were the case there might be a greater similarity between teachers in China and the West! Researchers such as Desimore et al. (2002), Garet et al. (2001) and Weiss and Pasley (2006) conclude that changes in teachers' pedagogy are most enduringly brought about by well-structured courses of professional development, especially when they highlight the relevance of the new information for the teachers' own planning and favoured instructional approach. In fact, all of the teachers from Taiwan were experienced language teachers, their

mission being to identify ways of raising literacy standards to the level attained by Hong Kong students and to introduce into their own schools aspects of practice that they judged had helped Hong Kong students to read so well. If they were to succeed, educational innovations needed to be based upon factors, procedures and conditions that resulted in and underpinned effective learning.

The importance of a favourable learning community

Many educational innovators have recommended the importance of having a professional learning community that will judge as a group whether recommended innovations are pertinent (Fullan, 1999); to assess whether recommended innovations will actually improve the impact of teaching; and to judge whether the innovations will actually improve the quality of learning. Grossman et al. (2001) recommend that teachers trying out innovations need to do so within a sympathetic community of like-minded colleagues, an essential prerequisite for nourishing professional growth. For such communities to be established, Grossman et al. (2001) propose that several factors are essential: an agreed community identity and norms of interaction; the development of a sense of communal responsibility for the regulation of norms and behaviour; and a willingness among group members to accept a degree of responsibility for helping colleagues to grow and develop.

Little (2007) stresses the importance of teachers exchanging teaching experiences with one another for their professional growth. Singapore is a country that favours the practice of teachers being changed by external stimuli and contact with fellow professionals. In 1998, the Singapore Ministry of Education established the "Teacher's Network", a network that involves learning circles, teacher-led workshops, conferences, well-being programmes, a well-constructed Website and a regular supply of professionally produced publications. The belief is that teachers are most likely to be persuaded by teacher-initiated development, sharing, collaboration and reflection. The Singapore Government aims to produce life-long learners by making schools into learning environments for everyone, from teachers to policymakers, and by having an interconnecting spiral system of collaboration (Tripp, 2004; Salleh, 2006).

Perceiving the need for change

Many teachers are conservative in that they tend to persist with practices that they themselves have found to work. In fact, a number of studies have shown that many professional development courses do little to change teachers' beliefs and practices for any appreciable period of time (Brindley & Hood, 1990; Fullan, 1991). If the strategies teachers witness and new practices are not reinforced by convincing professional development and rapid improvements among the children, they tend to have little lasting impact (Brindley & Hood, 1990; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Fullan, 1991). Clark and Peterson (1986) found that teachers hold personal theories

and beliefs that influence how they perceive proposed changes to their existing classroom practice. Elbaz (1981) notes that teachers are intensely practical and that they assemble their ideas about teaching approaches and techniques on tried and tested experience rather than on abstract, “theoretical” rationalisations. This echoes the notion that teachers are more likely to change if the new teaching practices address concrete, everyday challenges involved in teaching and learning specific subject matter. In addition, teachers are more likely to try classroom practices that have been modelled for them in professional development settings (Garet et al., 2001, Penuel et al., 2007, Snow-Renner & Lauer, 2005). Many research studies suggest that teachers are much more likely to change if they can see for themselves clear and tangible improvements in their students’ learning following the introduction of new teaching strategies. Enduring changes in their beliefs and attitudes are likely in these circumstances (Gersten et al., 1986; Huberman, 1981). Hargreaves (2001) goes further by arguing that teachers will only voluntarily change their practice if they see clear evidence that there are better ways for them to teach and for students to learn.

The Taiwanese teachers visiting Hong Kong were on familiar ground in that they were all Chinese Language teachers and the lessons they were observing were concerned with teaching students how to read, write and recognize Chinese words, to master Chinese syntax and semantic conventions and to comprehend spoken and written discourse. They were for the most part unfamiliar with the variation theory that had contributed to aspects of the Chinese Language teaching practised in many Hong Kong classrooms. Marton and Tsui’s recommendations (2004) warned against overloading the visiting teachers with so much information that they might be prevented from discerning aspects of Hong Kong practice that contrasted with those in Taiwan. Faced with an abundance of information and data, the Taiwanese teachers might lose sight of aspects of provision that are immutable, and elements of educational provision that are actually open to change. Bowden and Marton (1998) suggest that optimal learning occurs only when learners discern that certain aspects of phenomena or events vary whilst other aspects or events remain invariant. In order for such a change to occur, variation must first be experienced and discerned by the learner.

2.1 The issues specifically addressed in this paper

This paper draws attention to catalysts responsible for persuading the teachers from Taiwan to modify and change some of the ways they were teaching the Chinese language. It also highlights some of the new experiences the visiting Taiwanese teachers witnessed; whether or not differences between their own practice and those in Hong Kong were able to be reconciled; whether what they had seen had drawn attention to how their own practice and the practice generally advocated in Taiwan might be improved; whether the ways Hong Kong teachers had set about raising literacy standards highlighted weaknesses in conventional provision

in Taiwan; and the difficulties involved in small groups of enlightened teachers trying to reach large groups of fellow teachers operating within structures outside their direct control.

The lead researcher in the project and the writer of this paper is a Professor of Education in the University of Hong Kong, with a specialisation in Chinese Language education. He oversaw the conduct of all of the PIRLS studies in Hong Kong and is very familiar with the situation in Taiwan. He was able to use his knowledge of Hong Kong to select the schools to be visited in Hong Kong and the lessons to be observed and to prepare the training package. He also advised colleagues in Taiwan about the nature of teacher change and the obstacles along the path towards understanding. However, at all times he took great pains to ensure that his own ideas and beliefs were not overly influential on the responses and reactions of the visiting teachers, his main role being that of liaison and encouraging reflection on what had been witnessed. He also collaborated closely with university colleagues in Taiwan to ensure that his perceptions were balanced and valid, and that his conclusions and observations were reliable. In other words, subjectivity was kept to a minimum.

3. METHOD

The evidence base

The author-researcher and his team gathered multiple sources of evidence to inform the research over the three-year project, and university staff in the two locations responded to the on-going questions from the teachers in each country about the ways they might collaborate with colleagues. Chinese Language teachers from Hong Kong and Taiwan communicated with one another electronically and visited schools and observed lessons in schools in each other's country. The Taiwanese teachers visited Hong Kong in the early stage of the project, and lectures and discussion sessions were arranged by Hong Kong University to inform them about Hong Kong's education system and the teaching approaches used for training children to comprehend text in Chinese Language lessons. The contact and preparatory briefing involved three distinct stages of interactive briefing: briefing before the Taiwan teachers came to Hong Kong provided by professors from Taiwan Central University; on arrival in Hong Kong, the professor of University of Hong Kong organized another briefing section; prior to and after the school visits, Hong Kong primary school teachers organized sharing sessions. In order to arrive at a clear picture of the current situation of Chinese Language teaching in Taiwan and Hong Kong, the content of the briefings included information such as the actual situation in classrooms in Hong Kong and Taiwan, the approach to teaching Chinese reading in both places, the issue of curriculum design, education policies and the organisation of schools, and the differences between Taiwan and Hong Kong in terms of Chinese Language teaching.

The Taiwanese teachers visited Hong Kong schools, in particular to learn about how Hong Kong Chinese Language teachers had managed to raise literacy standards and to identify reasons why the Chinese reading comprehension of Hong Kong students was so superior to that of students in Taiwan. Retrospective reflections on the experiences of the visiting Taiwanese teachers were formally published for other teachers to consult (CommonWealth Education Foundation, 2008a and 2008b). An on-line Forum was also established to foster communication between Taiwanese schools and between front-line teachers and university professionals. Some Taiwanese teachers video-recorded lessons and placed these on the Web to demonstrate techniques they had seen in Hong Kong. They invited comments from school colleagues and fellow Taiwanese teachers about the feasibility of introducing such techniques into Taiwanese primary schools as a strategy for boosting literacy standards.

Later in the project, Hong Kong teachers and University staff visited Taiwan. The research team organized school visits for the Hong Kong teachers to let them see at first-hand how Chinese was being taught in Taiwan and the pedagogical approaches used to raise literacy standards. At the same time, the participants were invited to comment freely on what they had seen in each other's schools in the reunion meetings. The author-researcher and his team video-recorded all of the meetings to check the responses and for further data analysis.

The Taiwanese teachers were asked to say frankly what they felt about the ways in which Chinese language was being taught in Hong Kong; the influence of the children in Hong Kong speaking Cantonese but having to write in the same language as their Taiwanese, Mandarin-speaking peers when taking PIRLS tests; and the reasons why they thought literacy standards were inferior in Taiwan. The Taiwan teachers were surprised about the significant improvement of the reading standards that Hong Kong children had made and, in order to understand the reasons behind this, they asked the Hong Kong peers to offer their ideas about the situation. They also talked about the benefits of a school-based Chinese language curriculum and the difficulties imposed on learning Chinese for children who had to write in school in a language they did not speak at home. Teachers from both locations were then asked to comment on what had inspired them during the project and the lessons to be learnt. The writer also asked the Taiwan teachers to say what had made them decide to make changes to the customary practice.

Sources of data

As well as the above visits and face-to-face discussions (all video recorded), a number of sources of data were established and information was gathered. These included:

- 1) A book produced by the CommonWealth Education Foundation (2008a) recounting the experiences and perceptions by the Taiwan teachers of their visit

to Hong Kong, what they had witnessed in Hong Kong schools and their reflections on the implications for improving practice in Taiwan.

- 2) A DVD produced and circularised by the Commonwealth Education Foundation (2008b) summarising the Taiwan teachers' impressions of practice in Hong Kong; innovations they had witnessed; accounts of their own attempts to introduce changes to classroom practice in Taiwan; and the incidental problems encountered.
- 3) The author-researcher and his colleagues assembled and closely scrutinised summaries of all focus group discussions.
- 4) The HKU research team collected the messages posted on the Internet Forum contributed by the Taiwan teachers throughout the project and coded the data (Commonwealth Education Foundation, 2008c).
- 5) In the reunion meeting, the Taiwanese teachers offered their impressions of classroom practice and provision in Hong Kong; they gave their views on the Hong Kong education system; and they discussed reflectively the teaching methods they had seen being used in Hong Kong. They recounted their own experiences of trying out some of the procedures witnessed in Hong Kong and they also spoke about ways to improve practice in Taiwan in the light of what they had seen in Hong Kong.
- 6) Hence, the resulting databank was linguistically very rich. All the professional learning experienced during the project was brought to the surface, documented and verified by the ongoing dialogue between peers, both within and across the national settings. All observations and comments were regarded as important evidence.

It is worth noting that the language used in discussions, on Web Forums and on the DVD was Chinese (Mandarin). The content of the book reflecting the Taiwan teachers' thoughts and impressions, the verbal protocol collected from the DVD and during discussion groups, and the full discussion during the reunion meeting were transcribed and faithfully collated. The author researcher from Hong Kong University and his Taiwan University counterparts scrutinized all of the data for its content, accuracy and comprehensiveness. It goes without saying that such a retrospective assembly of information, although interesting, lacked evenness of structure and was rather 'messy'. Themes and issues would have been addressed more formally and comprehensively if such a documentary summary had been initiated and planned in detail at the start of the project. However, the evidence base that emerged was richer and probably more informative about the participants' professional learning than might have been the case if neat and tidy data collection methods had been specified at the outset, possibly shaping the focus and direction of the actual venture (Crotty, 1998).

4. RESULTS

Teachers' awareness of important differences in educational practice

The teacher exchanges, discussion Forum and support from university staff alerted teachers in both locations to strengths and weaknesses in the teaching of Chinese in the two countries. All twenty Taiwanese teachers said that they were struck by the marked differences between the teaching of Chinese in Taiwan and in Hong Kong. All the teachers concerned were quite experienced and they recognised that the Hong Kong teachers were explicitly addressing the attainment of agreed levels and benchmarks but were also frequently switching attention to the teaching of higher order reading skills. The Taiwanese teachers were sufficiently experienced to discern these important differences and to recognize that such practice rarely occurs in Taiwan. As one of the Taiwanese group leaders commented: "The purpose of visiting Hong Kong was not shopping but observing the education system and teaching practice of Hong Kong. Although people are using traditional Chinese characters both in Hong Kong and Taiwan, the reading literacy of Hong Kong students is much better than that of their counterparts in Taiwan. We looked forward to observing the teaching of reading, especially reading strategies, by teachers in Hong Kong and hoped to transfer the methods seen to Taiwan" (CommonWealth Education Foundation, 2008a, p. 106). Another said: "The greatest objective of education is to bring hope to people ... reading brings miracles and pleasure, and effective teaching brings this miracle to children" (CommonWealth Education Foundation, 2008a, p. 99).

After the Taiwanese teachers had visited the 'cultural dessert' of Hong Kong, they realised that there was considerable scope for improvement in the educational provision in their own country. As one of the visiting teachers concluded: "This year, when the rankings of the first 100 universities in the World were announced, Hong Kong universities were in the top 100, but there was no Taiwan University in this group. I am only a teacher in a rural area. What can I do with my 30 students and others in the school?" (CommonWealth-Education-Foundation, 2008a, p. 117).

The Taiwanese teachers also realised that Chinese Language teaching in their country was explicitly focused on content and the mastery of language knowledge, such as the number of characters learnt and so on. In contrast, the Hong Kong teachers seemed to place more emphasis on teaching students language processes, how to use these independently and for a purpose, and the development within students of reading skills and using reading as a means of learning.

Aspects of education identified as being in need of change in Taiwan

The aspects that seemed to attract most attention and interest by the visiting Taiwan teachers were the Chinese Language curriculum in Hong Kong, the teaching materials and resources used, the teaching strategies taught to students, the ways

of student learning the assessment of students, the pedagogy seen and the role of the teacher in fostering learning.

Curriculum development and pedagogy

Both Taiwan and Hong Kong have undergone major curriculum reforms in recent years and the emphasis is now less on spoon-feeding students and more on teaching them "to learn how to learn." However, according to one Taiwanese teacher, the recommended reforms have not actually been implemented to any large extent, unlike the situation in Hong Kong where there is very clear guidance about modifying traditional teaching practice. The Taiwanese teachers noted that a crucial feature was that in Hong Kong the Government, professors in universities and primary teachers shared the same objective and worked in harmony. The Hong Kong teachers also seemed to feel that they were supported and encouraged in their efforts by people outside the school, possibly because the Hong Kong University academics had provided them with a stronger sense of the rationale and theoretical bases for the recent reforms. The Taiwanese teachers were very impressed by the fact that individual teachers in the schools visited have access to a team of people from the local university to support and praise them. This cohesiveness gave the Hong Kong teachers the impetus to persist with their work (CommonWealth Education Foundation, 2008a, p. 116-117). In contrast, the Taiwanese teachers said that the Taiwanese curriculum reforms relating to the way children are to learn to read the Chinese language seemed to be somewhat of a "paper exercise," (CommonWealth Education Foundation, 2008a, p. 120). They also commented that empty declarations were no incentive for Taiwanese teachers to change their regular practice. Educational resources provision in Taiwan was judged to be comparable to that in Hong Kong but less emphasis was being placed on using these resources to boost the teaching of reading comprehension. The Chinese Language curriculum in Taiwan is content- rather than process-driven, this emphasis reflecting the contents of prescribed textbooks.

The Taiwan teachers envied the Hong Kong reading curriculum which focused on a "sensible" learning framework; the emphasis on reading as a tool for accessing knowledge; the development of reading strategies across school sectors; and the importance of reading for pleasure in school and at home. The Taiwan teachers also observed that the central Hong Kong Chinese Language curriculum encourages higher-order thinking, and that there is no mention whatever of this objective in the current Taiwan curriculum (CommonWealth Educational Foundation, 2008a, p. 109). A Taiwanese teacher was impressed by the emphasis in the lessons she observed on "learning to read" and "reading to learn". She said that the focus of one of the lessons she saw was on learning the meaning and using the new characters. In Taiwan the focus would have been on reading the characters aloud without error and on repetition and drill. In contrast, the Hong Kong teacher said that her objectives went beyond simply reading characters aloud: they also included knowing

what the characters said and represented. From the outset, the emphasis was on using the characters to comprehend surrounding information and words on the page, on the board and in the environment (CommonWealth Educational Foundation, 2008a, p. 159-161).

Teaching materials and resources

The visiting Taiwanese teachers immediately noticed differences in the provision and use of teaching resources in Hong Kong classrooms. As was the case in Taiwan, the Ministry of Taiwan prescribes textbooks, the content of which constitutes the framework of the curriculum in terms of the order in which new aspects of language are introduced, progression in learning and provision for returning to previously learnt material in order to revise aspects of language covered earlier (Peng, 1995). However, teachers in Hong Kong were allowed to supplement the official curriculum with school-selected books, reading material and electronic reading material. The teachers also purposely catered for children with different reading ability and could refer children with learning difficulties for extra help. The children seemed to welcome such variety and boys and girls would choose different 'favourite' books to read. In contrast, all Taiwanese teachers usually use the same standard textbook assigned by the education authorities to teach Chinese.

The reality seemed to be in Taiwan for the textbook to dictate the curriculum and the order in which every element of the Chinese language was introduced and studied by every student, regardless of ability and previous progress. Such inflexibility made it difficult for teachers to use differentiated work for slow learners and very clever children. One of the visiting teachers was surprised by a number of classroom features in Hong Kong: "The first surprise was that language education in Hong Kong has systematic support. The second surprise was that storybooks can be used in lessons, even fiction. They were not restricted to using a standard text or reading material. The third surprise was that Chinese Language teaching was not built around learning a phonetic system for Chinese" (CommonWealth Education Foundation, 2008a, p. 127). The Taiwanese teachers had appreciated the idea that the language curriculum and pedagogy ought to be meaningful to young people, enabling them to engage in language for authentic communicative purposes. It was heartening for the writer to see that such professional learning among the teachers was occurring due to the communication between fellow professionals through which they were learning together – not simply as something imposed from above.

After contrasting the teaching materials used in Taiwan and Hong Kong, the Taiwanese teachers concluded that using only the reading material in the prescribed textbook was insufficient for covering all aspects of language and reading skills and for children with contrasting levels of language ability. They experimented by designing their own teaching material, tailor-made for the students in the class. Some of the Taiwan teachers tried using 'authentic' books and reading material with higher form students, and reported that their students showed much

more interest and a sense of purpose in learning Chinese characters and vocabulary. Students had fun with teaching materials such as mind-mapping and they spontaneously used the dictionary to check their work. In other words, they were "learning how to learn" when faced with difficult Chinese characters (CommonWealth Education Foundation, 2008a, p. 164). In essence, the marked differences in the classrooms of Hong Kong and Taiwan had prompted the visiting teachers from Taiwan to reflect seriously on the way Chinese was being taught in their schools. Whilst the highly controlled and standard style of teaching in Taiwan allowed the teachers to assure parents and the school that all students had been taught thoroughly and identically, the visiting Taiwanese teachers were struck by the inflexibility of their provision and could see that the needs of very able children and slow learning students were not being adequately addressed (CommonWealth Education Foundation, 2008a, p. 164).

Teaching methods and strategies

The average class-size in both Hong Kong and Taiwan is about 25 to 30 students. However, whereas the Taiwanese teachers tend to deliver the identical learning demands to all children, regardless of their ability and competence, the Hong Kong teachers planned lessons to cater for diversity of learning needs at different stages of learning and they used different methods with different children. The visiting teachers immediately noticed that the Hong Kong teachers specially planned individual learning experiences for individual students. A variety of differing learning activities was seen: individual and group learning, partner learning, enquiry-based learning and children focussing on different language skills and exercises. This brought home to the visiting teachers just how much the provision in their own country emphasized teacher talking and giving all learners the same learning tasks with the teacher being central to all activities. Whereas "Hong Kong classrooms were like bee hives with children buzzing around busily doing different tasks, in Taiwan the teacher dominates every single lesson, talking to the whole class, giving the same dictation exercises to all, and expecting the learning of all students to progress at exactly the same pace" (CommonWealth Educational Foundation, 2008a, p. 119). Although the teachers in both locations were covering the same topics and addressing similar objectives, Hong Kong's teaching and learning was student-centred, whereas in Taiwan it was teacher-centred.

The variation between the emphases in the classrooms in the two places was immediately apparent. The Taiwanese teachers had an instinctive desire to control every lesson: they preferred quiet and well-ordered lessons and at first they were uncomfortable with the noisy classrooms of Hong Kong (CommonWealth Education Foundation, 2008a, p. 16). However, once they realised that the noise was 'working noise' and that it came from controlled learning activities and discussions, they were very impressed (CommonWealth Education Foundation, 2008a, p. 17, p.119, p.127). They concluded that there was much room for improvement in Taiwan,

especially since the high quality of learning witnessed in the classrooms in Hong Kong was so apparent (CommonWealth Education Foundation, 2008a, p. 120). In effect, exposure to experiences that contrasted with their own experiences helped them to see their own situation through new eyes. For example, they were surprised by the fact that the Hong Kong teachers used group work and cooperative learning from the start in the primary school, playing learning games with the children and endeavouring to make lessons fun. They also noted that the Hong Kong students soon learned to accept some responsibility for their own learning, sharing materials, working at different paces and helping one another (CommonWealth Education Foundation, 2008 p.79, p.102).

The Taiwan teachers were astonished to see the very high participation rate of students in classes they had visited. The students focused on tasks assigned by the teacher and also spontaneously helped peers who were struggling with assigned tasks. They did not do the work for them but gave advice to their peers and ensured that all in the group were joining in and persevering with the assigned task (CommonWealth Education Foundation, 2008a, p. 25). As a teacher reported to colleagues in Taiwan, "The teacher is the facilitator of learning and students are the main characters in the learning process....During the teaching activity, the teacher was not put off by noisy students disturbing the teaching activity" (CommonWealth Education Foundation, 2008a, p. 127).

Changes to their usual practice in Taiwan when the teachers returned to their own school were reported to teachers in the Forum and to focus groups. For instance, the returning teachers encouraged students to tell and re-write stories so that the children could exercise some personal creativity (CommonWealth Educational Foundation, 2008a, p. 97). The teachers said that their students thought that guessing games about the meaning of words were really fun and that, for the first time, they enjoyed looking up words in the dictionary. The students also learned for themselves how to answer comprehension questions at different levels of complexity (CommonWealth Educational Foundation, 2008a, p. 89), not only in relation to academic texts but also in newspapers and material supplied by the teacher. They loved group discussions and group work, saying that it increased their learning motivation, enjoyment and friendship (CommonWealth Educational Foundation, 2008a, p.102). A teacher reported that her students had said, "The teacher gives us room to think freely in class." She also reported her impression that students were now able to work towards common targets; they had better reading skills; and were better able to grasp key learning points. The children had also learnt how to observe people, events and things from different perspectives (CommonWealth Education Foundation, 2008a, p. 186).

Assessing and evaluating progress in learning

The Taiwan teachers instantly noted that the Hong Kong teachers did not use coverage of textbook-assigned exercises by every single child as the central instrument

for monitoring progress. They also utilised school-based, class-based and individual assessments to track the learning of individual students. They ensured, however, that the articles and reading material selected as supplementary reading matter in class were in line with the suggested abilities in the curriculum. They made use of such formative evaluation alongside periodic summative evaluation to keep track of students' progress. In contrast, Taiwanese assessment is mainly summative in character, with lots of tests designed as 'target objectives' for all students. These targets were known to parents, who would complain if they felt that other activities were displacing this "mandatory" monitoring of learning. Taiwanese parents expect their children to work hard in every lesson and are keen to know their own child's marks. The visiting teachers envied the Hong Kong teachers' freedom to depart from the official Chinese language curriculum and to use their own school-based curriculum. A teacher commented: "Taiwan teachers' dictation activities are boring. The teacher gives a paper to students and expects them to jot down all the words and memorize them in their brain. If the students do not memorize these words properly, they are not able to complete the tasks that follow" (CommonWealth Education Foundation, 2008a, p. 193).

The visiting teachers also saw at once that there were differences in the assessment styles used in Hong Kong and Taiwan. On returning to Taiwan, some teachers tried out exercises such as "creative dictation" with their children. They let the children write freely what they thought they had heard using words they thought "fitted" the passage. These Taiwanese teachers reported that their students were surprised to learn that reading can be a fun activity and that they enjoyed creative dictation. The teachers also reported that their students actually mastered the new words when engaged in the new methods and were better prepared than before for the passages in the textbook that followed (CommonWealth Education Foundation, 2008a, p. 196).

Reflections after the visit to schools in Hong Kong

The CommonWealth Education Foundation (2008a) published a book to record the perceptions and reflections of the Taiwan teachers on their visit to Hong Kong. They assembled a record of what the teachers said they had witnessed in Hong Kong schools and their reflections on the implications for improving practice in Taiwan. The following selection of quotations relate to the classroom observation and reflections of the visiting Taiwanese teachers:

Feelings of shock and reflection on personal opinions:

"We were very touched and shocked to observe and experience the Hong Kong classroom teaching and exchanging ideas with the Hong Kong teachers, and that pleasurable learning can be so effective" (CommonWealth Education Foundation 2008a, p. 92).

"After three days spent in Hong Kong, one sentence from the visit keeps on appearing in my mind. The definition of 'illiteracy' has change. It no longer refers to students who are not able to recognize Chinese characters but to the students who cannot read to learn and read to think. We brought this shock back to the schools in Taiwan rural areas. I feel really sad, and decided that we should begin to make some changes" (CommonWealth Education Foundation 2008a, p .113). "I still remember how surprised I was after visiting the Grade 1 students in Hong Kong, not only the classroom atmosphere, but also how students behaved" (CommonWealth Education Foundation 2008a, p. 202). "The experience in Hong Kong really shocked me. How was I to apply the new teaching methods in my class? I decided to start by trying out some ideas about early reading with my students every day" (CommonWealth Education Foundation 2008a, p.178).

"The three days of teacher development in Hong Kong was a real surprise. I have now noticed that I have totally changed my ideas about the teaching of reading and I am now ready to try out what I learnt" (CommonWealth Education Foundation 2008a, p.127). "During the three days observation, I felt the 'teaching of reading comprehension' is the most impressed" (CommonWealth Education Foundation 2008a, p.108). "Usually, teachers in Taiwan are the authorities, making value judgments in the classroom. However, in Hong Kong students are required to learn how to make learning judgments about what is correct or incorrect by themselves" (CommonWealth Education Foundation 2008a, p. 22).

"During the class observations, we noticed that Hong Kong teachers led students into asking questions and drawing mind-maps. In Taiwan, we tend to put more focus on teaching phrases and terms, rhetorical skills and writing sentences. We expect student to be able to produce this work at home and outside school" (CommonWealth Education Foundation 2008a, p 186).

"In Hong Kong I saw for myself that Hong Kong students can recognize many more Chinese characters than students in Taiwan. I also saw that they were able to learn faster without having to learn phonetic symbols" (CommonWealth Education Foundation 2008a, p. 159).

The decision to make changes:

"After seeing the learning atmosphere in the Hong Kong classrooms, I (a Taiwan teacher) started thinking whether it was possible to make such changes in my own classroom" (CommonWealth Education Foundation 2008a, p.11).

"It is never too late to change. Please do not be afraid of changes. Let us work together to turn our students into learners with passion and enthusiasm" (CommonWealth Education Foundation 2008a, p. 99).

"When we did our class observation of Grade Two students, the teachers were teaching the students how to find the main point of the story using the 'six w method'. Students were able to summarize the theme of the story when they completed the worksheet. I thought to myself, if the Hong Kong students are able to achieve so much, why cannot this be tried in Taiwan?" (CommonWealth Education Foundation 2008a, p.198).

"This trip to Hong Kong really broadened my vision...I resolved to try out what I had heard, seen and learnt in Hong Kong" (CommonWealth Education Foundation 2008a, p.145).

Trying out what was learnt in Hong Kong

"The most impressive fact was that the students were actually able to finish the mind map sheet. From the answers they produced, we could see that both their higher order and critical thinking were far beyond my expectation of what Grade 1 students in Taiwan can achieve. This inspired me to reflect seriously on my own teaching methods" (CommonWealth Education Foundation 2008a, p. 202).

"I try to share my experience of observing the class in Hong Kong with my students in Taiwan. Sometimes I also show them the video we took in the Hong Kong classroom. After watching the videos, my students were quite shocked. They kept on saying that "I never realized reading can be interesting"" (CommonWealth Education Foundation 2008a, p211).

"Even my students noticed the changes after my visit. They said "My teacher seems like a different person after she came back from Hong Kong. Our class is more fun now, and we really enjoy the changes" (CommonWealth Education Foundation 2008a, p. 13).

"I realized that the teaching methods like 'six w' and 'self-questioning' used in Hong Kong schools are very effective and innovative. I have tried to use them in my own teaching" (CommonWealth Education Foundation 2008a, p.188).

The above reflections are evidence of the initial impact on the Taiwanese teachers of the visit to schools in Hong Kong. Six of the teachers mentioned that they were shocked by what they had seen and by the noisy classrooms. The way the Hong Kong teachers were teaching the Chinese language was a direct challenge to their existing beliefs and the way they were teaching the Chinese language. They were amazed to see that the demanding teaching pedagogy practised in Hong Kong made learning pleasurable. Five of the teachers said they had decided to change their ideas and classroom practice immediately; five said they would try out the new approaches as soon as they went back to school in Taiwan; and others said they would convey their experiences to the school head and respectfully suggest that there was room for improvement in the school.

The first steps towards making changes to the teaching of Chinese in Taiwan

The Secretary of the CommonWealth Education Foundation reported that, very soon after their trip to Hong Kong, the Taiwan teachers were very active in spreading the news about how the Chinese language was being taught in Hong Kong. They organised research symposia and seminars, reporting what they had seen to numerous teaching groups, to teacher trainers and to school principles (CommonWealth Education Foundation, 2008a, p. 13). The Taiwanese teachers reported that the Hong Kong teachers were not tied to the textbook: nor were they obliged to follow the sequence of learning entrenched in the prescribed textbook. They had seen for themselves that the Hong Kong teachers had more freedom to engineer lesson content to suit the students in their class. They also designed some of their own teaching materials and activities in contrast to the situation in Taiwan where the teaching methods are strictly laid down and all Chinese Language teaching

complies with school guides and the official textbook (CommonWealth Educational Foundation, 2008a, p. 34). One of the visiting Taiwanese teachers said that she had always regarded herself as a good, responsible teacher. She said that she had always diligently taught students systematically as if this was the best and only approach available. She announced to teachers in various in-service training groups that perhaps she now needed to change this mind-set and to try other approaches.

The focus group and Forum comments revealed that some of the Taiwanese teachers had tried out some of the approaches witnessed in Hong Kong. For instance, some had tried using 'authentic' books and had selected supplementary reading material to allow the children to acquire and experiment with specific reading strategies. As an example, they chose reading material that permitted children to make inferences based on information in several passages. They shared with other teachers their experiences of trying out approaches not contained in the official textbook in Taiwan, as well as the feeling that they were now "facilitators" of learning rather than the "sole source" of learning (CommonWealth Educational Foundation, 2008a, p.122 and p.124). They also said that they had now realised that just as they now saw themselves as 'facilitators of students' learning', they themselves were also facilitators of their own professional learning.

The whole experience prompted many of the teachers who had visited Hong Kong to reflect on the quality of the teacher training available in Taiwan. Some of the visiting Taiwanese teachers suggested that pre- and in-service teacher training needed to be revised. They reported that teacher training in Hong Kong prepared teachers to engage actively in teaching children how to comprehend text, and to use reading matter enjoyed by the children themselves as passages for scrutiny. Hong Kong teacher trainers drew upon evidence from research to support the suggested approaches, and they stressed to all trainees that it was their responsibility to select reading material to suit the age of the students and the stage of learning reached by the students so far (CommonWealth Education Foundation, 2008c).

Some of the Taiwanese teachers used the above suggestions to highlight limitations in teacher training in Taiwan. They recognised that reading courses were provided but said that the focus was all-too-often on separate reading strategies. They called for more flexibility in the way textbooks were used and the idea that textbooks should not constitute the "spine" of the curriculum. They also suggested that it was timely for reading institutes and universities to survey provision and practice in Taiwan and to examine critically the reasons why standards of reading in Taiwan had fallen behind standards elsewhere in Asia (CommonWealth Education Foundation, 2008c).

The return visit of Hong Kong teachers to Taiwan

Three years after the Taiwanese teachers' visit to Hong Kong, a number of Hong Kong teachers visited Taiwan. These teachers had the chance to observe how the ways they were teaching had been transferred to Taiwan. In the focus groups

meetings, it was soon apparent that teachers in both locations had benefited from the sharing of experience. When asked by the Hong Kong teachers what had most made them decide to make changes, 90%, (18 out of 20) of the Taiwanese teachers instantly replied that they had been so impressed by the school visits. The Hong Kong teachers were reassured and heartened by this, especially to see that their own daily classroom practices had been recognised as effective and had been imported into Taiwan. They were also delighted to see that the ideas they had introduced in Hong Kong had been found pertinent and relevant in Taiwan. In fact, teachers in both locations had had the opportunity to examine their own methodology critically in the course of preparing to demonstrate new strategies to colleagues. At the same time, some of the Hong Kong teachers noted how the Taiwanese teachers had modified and even improved strategies they had witnessed in Hong Kong. For instance, the teaching of child literature and the use of picture books were much more adventurous. Such experiences were enlightening and encouraged the Hong Kong teachers into seeing possibilities for extending their current practice when they returned to their own schools in Hong Kong.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND GENERAL DISCUSSION

The project reported above allowed teachers of Chinese Language in two different places to look critically at how Chinese was being taught in each of the places in question, and to see whether there were lessons to be learnt. The present paper has focused largely on the views and responses of the Taiwanese teachers to their visit to Hong Kong, and on the actions they took on returning to their own places. The reality is that the Taiwan Education Bureau is unlikely to change its entire provision for teaching Chinese to children in the primary school on the basis of the experiences of a relatively small number of visitors to Hong Kong classrooms for a brief period of time. Nevertheless, the experiences reported above are a start and they offer evidence that changes are needed (a) to how Chinese is being taught in Taiwan primary schools, (b) to the way Taiwanese students are being taught how to read, and (c) how teachers are being trained to teach students to access the meaning of text in an age when international communicative exchanges are on the rise.

The Taiwanese teachers brought clear ideas to the learning situation: they saw ways of teaching that were greatly at variance with their usual practice; they assessed the differences; tried out new initiatives; evaluated their experiences; then adjusted their ideas in response to their first-hand experience, as recommended by Marton and Tsui (2004), Clarke and Hollingsworth (2002) and Van de Ven and Brenton (2011). These constitute elements and stages likely to feature in many other educational innovations and situations in which the theatre is the real classroom and where real students and teachers are the characters.

At the outset, the Taiwan organizers thoroughly briefed the Taiwanese teachers on the Taiwan education system, the curriculum and the style of teaching encouraged in this 'Chinese' country. The teachers were thus well prepared for looking at

the situation in Hong Kong and for noting key differences in provision and practice. On the other hand, Hong Kong organizers of the visit had a clear guiding brief: to help the visitors ascertain why reading standards in Hong Kong were superior to those in Taiwan and to explore whether the superior performance was the result of contrasting styles of pedagogy. In order to assess how classroom practice in Hong Kong differed from that in Taiwan, the visiting teachers were systematically and formally given an overview of Hong Kong's education system, the place of Chinese in the school curriculum and some of the practices used by Hong Kong primary school teachers to boost students' literacy. The knowledge generated through a range of professional conversations with the University personnel in Hong Kong and Taiwan was useful and gave confidence to the teachers in both locations.

The Taiwanese teachers, all experienced teachers with years of service, were very keen to see at first-hand how the Hong Kong Chinese Language teachers actually taught the subject. The impact of this in-context, personal experience in Hong Kong classrooms was profound. The Taiwanese teachers saw for themselves how fellow professionals in another place were actually teaching the very subject about which they themselves were very knowledgeable. The student participation rate in the schools visited in Hong Kong was exceedingly high in the eyes of the visiting teachers, greatly surprising the Taiwan primary school teachers. Their most immediate impression was that discipline needed to be tightened in Hong Kong classrooms since the students were acting so independently and making decisions about subject matter and Chinese language issues entirely on their own. However, they quickly realised that such behaviour was in very large part responsible for leading the Hong Kong students to learn so well, prompting the visitors to reflect on whether making lessons more relaxed was a lesson that could be imported into Taiwan.

Their on-site experiences shocked the teachers, particularly the way textbooks and non-textbook reading materials were being used in lessons; the way the school allowed staff to follow a school-based curriculum and to depart from the learning exercise structures presented in the class textbook; the way students were grouped and allowed to interact; and the objective of having children develop for themselves the strategy of using reading as a vehicle for personal learning.

The Taiwan teachers were able to see a concentrated amount of very pertinent and persuasive information in a very short period of time, including the very relaxed and enjoyable learning atmosphere, the influence of a school-based curriculum, the wide range of novel teaching materials, the unusual but very productive teaching strategies and how deeply the students were engaged and absorbed in their learning. From the teachers' perspective, the visit to schools, more than any other factors, led the Taiwanese teachers to recognise that pedagogical change was needed in literacy education in Taiwan. The fieldwork also gave them concrete ideas to take back to their own schools in Taiwan and to disseminate the ideas to fellow professionals in their own school and elsewhere in the country.

This should not be interpreted as a suggestion by the writer that personal experience alone had been the sole catalyst bringing about change. The previous professional training and first-hand experiences of the Taiwanese teachers had helped them to identify factors and issues that needed to be addressed for any need for possible changes to be ascertained. Vitally important was the task of the teachers articulating to themselves what they had seen and analysed when preparing dialogue with other teachers and educationists in Taiwan about the relevance of what they had seen. There had been a lot of information for the visiting Taiwanese teachers to absorb in a few days in Hong Kong but the background knowledge that the teachers brought with them to Hong Kong helped them discern major elements of practice missing from how the Chinese language was being taught in Taiwan. Within a very short space of time, the visiting professionals had identified which aspects of their own teaching and practice in Taiwan they could possibly change on returning to their homeland. The school visits more than any other experience had persuaded the teachers to change.

The teachers were supported by a Taiwanese academic who specialised in Chinese Language education, and the contextual background summaries offered by the Hong Kong academics helped to supply a framework for the style of teaching the teachers had witnessed. This, together with introductory presentations by school principals and teachers on curriculum development, education philosophy and lesson design ensured that the critical features of Hong Kong's literacy education were explicitly made apparent to the Taiwanese teachers. Interesting as such input might have been, for teachers who were not naturally attuned to theory the lesson observations were critical. They allowed the teachers to see innovative teaching methods at first-hand, and to envisage whether these were worth importing into Taiwan. In short, this project had helped them to assess and evaluate the suitability for their own students of the pedagogical strategies they had seen.

The systems for communicating with fellow professionals in Taiwan were very interesting. The Forum discussions encouraged critical and retrospective reflections on the part of the visiting teachers about the effectiveness of the observed pedagogical strategies. The academics and researchers from Taiwan and Hong Kong also offered support that helped the teachers assimilate and consolidate key learning points from their own observations and personal experiences. Through comparing the conditions in Hong Kong and Taiwan, the Taiwanese teachers realized that Hong Kong teachers face similar, if not greater, workloads to those in Taiwan but that they produced more effective learning within students. This realisation was a catalyst, stimulating self-reflection among the visiting teachers and helping them to identify aspects of provision in Taiwan in need of change.

It is well known that teachers can learn from colleagues within their own cultural context but a key implication for the professional development of Chinese Language teachers is that their perspective can be radically widened by witnessing for themselves good Chinese Language teaching being delivered in other places and countries where Chinese is taught. Researchers like Florio-Ruane (2001) stresses

that education and learning are at their most meaningful when they go beyond reified or techniques knowledge. Marton (2004) has also written that the professional competence of all teachers may profit if they widen their horizons and look at how teachers in other settings perform the same task. Recognising the variation between their own methods and the methods used by respected others offered teachers the chance to reflect seriously on their own, favoured classroom teaching. The experiences of relatively small groups of teachers in two countries caused them to ponder seriously on their own teaching, the importance of a differentiated curriculum and teaching in the classroom, the value of using literacy resources that stimulate learners, and the value of admitting to other teachers that weaknesses are present in long-favoured pedagogy.

The present research suggests that teachers are able to benefit immensely from school visits and seeing for themselves how the subjects they teach are taught elsewhere. It may be useful for education authorities to consider identifying outstanding schools in which to pilot and demonstrate innovative teaching methods to other teachers. These could then be visited by fellow teachers and the impact of innovations may be evaluated at first-hand. On the other hand, the instantaneous reaction of very many teachers of Chinese, the most widely spoken language on earth, is that students who have not grasped skills and lesson content need extra practice and drilling. There may be an element of truth in this belief, but the Taiwanese teachers saw the other side of the coin: how learning can be productive and very enjoyable at the same time. Learning associated with enjoyment is likely to endure.

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