Leading and managing Chinese complementary schools in England: leaders' perceptions of school leadership
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This is a work in progress and comments are welcome. Please feel free to contact me if you would like to discuss these topics further.

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Abstract:

Chinese Complementary Schools form a distinctive part of the complementary school sector which is itself a significant element of the English education system. Yet little is known about those who lead and manage Chinese Complementary schools though research into mainstream schools suggests that leadership is one of the major factors in creating a good school. It is estimated that around 288 Chinese complementary schools exist in England. The schools operate on a part-time basis to meet cultural and language needs of the communities they represent. They are seen as 'complementing' mainstream schools though they are sometimes referred to as supplementary schools. Drawing upon early outcomes of a research project by the author and existing literature, the paper explores how leaders in Chinese complementary schools came to take up their position, how they perceive their role, and the extent to which they feel equipped to undertake it.

Key words: school leadership and management, Chinese, complementary schools, supplementary schools, headteachers

INTRODUCTION

Chinese Complementary Schools form a distinctive part of the complementary school sector that is a significant element of the English education system. It has been noted that, ‘Chinese complementary schooling is particularly long-established in the UK; however, their practices and functions have been little documented by researchers’ (Mau et al. 2009:17). Also little is known about those who lead and manage Chinese Complementary schools though research into mainstream schools suggests that leadership is one of the major factors in creating a good school (Day et al. 2009). Drawing upon early outcomes of a
research project by the author and existing literature, the paper explores how leaders in Chinese complementary schools came to take up their position, how they perceive their role, and the extent to which they feel equipped to undertake it.

EXISTING LITERATURE.

Complementary and Supplementary Schools

Complementary schools are largely operated on a part-time basis by community organizations to meet the specific cultural and/or language needs of the minority ethnic communities that they represent. They are a European and worldwide phenomena and are known in the USA and Australia as heritage or community language schools (Kenner & Hickey 2008). In England, most complementary schools charge a small fee to the parents of children who attend as funding from local government or foreign governments is either nonexistent or else does not cover the full costs of running the organization.

Existing research on complementary schools, which has included Chinese schools, has concluded that these schools are meeting important social and cultural needs (Martin et al. 2004, Li Wei 2006, Creese et al. 2007, Francis et al. 2008) and impact positively on student achievement in mainstream schools (Maylor et al. 2010). Minty et al. (2008) looked at the aspirations of teachers in the complementary sector. However, the research has focused upon the schools' impact upon students and their families, rather than those who lead the schools. Where head teachers were interviewed, it was for their views on the children, staff and wider communities rather than themselves (Maylor et al. 2010).

The schools are seen as ‘complementing’ mainstream schools though they are sometimes classified as ‘supplementary’ amongst other terms such as ‘community’ and ‘mother tongue’ (Martin et al. 2004). However, the term ‘supplementary’ is often used to describe these organizations in national government and local authority documentation (Maylor et al 2010; Cousins 2005; Bristol 2007) where the schools are seen as supplementing the ‘mainstream’ state schooling and, perhaps, presented as subordinate to the mainstream. In contrast, the term ‘complementary’ has been used by a number of ESRC funded research projects (Martin et al. 2004; Cresse et al. 2007 and Francis et al. 2008) which stresses the value and importance of the schools and their contribution to people’s lives (Martin et al. 2004). Both complementary and supplementary have a very similar sense in broad terms but ‘complementary’ has a sense of completion and ‘evoke[s] a non-hierarchical relationship to mainstream schooling’ (Mau et al., 2009: 17).
**Chinese Complementary schools**

It is estimated that there may be around 2,059 complementary schools of which approximately 14% are Chinese schools (Maylor et al. 2010) that amounts to approximately 288 such schools. The students are often British born Chinese children (Francis et al. 2009). Along with many other complementary schools in the UK, the majority of the Chinese schools are non-profit and voluntary based organisations. They are usually organised by groups of individuals, or as part of an existing Chinese community or religious organisation and most receive limited or no financial support from the local authorities. (Mau et al. 2009:21)

Like many other complementary schools, Chinese schools operate on a part-time basis to meet the specific cultural and language needs of the communities they represent. The schools teach Cantonese or Mandarin and, in some cases, both languages depending upon whether the local community has its roots in Hong Kong, mainland China or parts of south east Asia. It should be remembered that written Chinese uses a system of characters which are not directly linked to the pronunciation of the languages as is common with the romantic languages though many Mandarin speakers use a simplified form of the characters as opposed to traditional characters preferred by Cantonese speakers.

Francis et al.’s (2008) ESRC project studied the interaction between language, identity and the student experience within Chinese schools. The project was concerned with six different Chinese schools in London, Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool. There is some literature from the USA and Canada with also focuses on the social identity of students (Chow 2004, Zhou & Kim 2006), or teacher identity (Wu et al. 2011). However, previous research has not focused upon those who lead the Chinese complementary schools. Where head teachers were interviewed, it was for their views on the children, staff and wider communities rather than themselves (Maylor et al. 2010) and there has been a call for research to be conducted into the headteachers (Francis et al. 2008).

**METHODOLOGY**

The project seeks to explore how leaders of these schools perceive their leadership role, how they came to take on the role, and the extent to which they feel equipped to undertake it. As mainstream school leaders can have a significant impact on student outcomes (Day et al. 2009) then Chinese complementary school leaders may have an equally crucial role.

Semi-structured interviews are being conducted with senior leaders of a small number of complementary schools in the south east of England. The qualitative method of semi-structured interviews provides an appropriate way to allow the interviewees to express their perceptions around the particular aims of the research (Ribbens 2007). This method was employed by Pratt-Adams and Maguire (2009) who conducted 11 interviews in their
study, from an emotional perspective, of urban primary school leaders in England. The sample will be broadly representative comprising a mix of female and male leaders from 16 Chinese complementary schools based in London, Birmingham, Manchester and Bristol. The greatest concentration of complementary schools is in the capital.

The participants’ knowledge and use of the terminology of education leadership common to mainstream school leaders is not being assumed. Throughout the interview and data analysis stages, care will be taken to avoid understanding educational leadership solely through a dominant Anglo-America context and culture (Shah 2004; Dimmock & Walker 2005).

RESEARCH FINDINGS.
The initial outcomes of the research uncover previously unheard narratives and nuanced understandings of leadership which have implications for how educational leadership is understood and undertaken. The findings below also draw upon previous research to supplement the early outcomes of this project.

How leaders in Chinese complementary schools came to take up their position.
What emerges is that most school leaders are parents who become involved with the school either as teachers or because as one interviewee put it ‘I was interested that my children learnt Chinese’ (Headteacher B). The move to parent led schools is a change noted over the last 20 years as before then many of the schools were led and staffed by postgraduate students from Hong Kong or China studying in the UK.

Therefore in most cases, the interviewees did not become involved in the Chinese complementary school in order to become a leader as often they stepped into the position because of a crisis at the school. In one case, dating back to the early 1990’s in London, the then headteacher announced that he and most of other teachers at a school were all leaving the UK to return to their homes after completing their studies and that none of the remaining teachers wanted to take up the leadership positions. So as one interviewee commented, ‘The main thing is who’s going to do it’ (Headteacher A) because no one else wanted to, so he stepped forward with a friend to be the headteacher and deputy.

Many of the leaders come from professional backgrounds such as lawyers, civil engineers, bankers and nurses as well as those with a formal teaching background. Whilst many of those in leadership positions are not qualified teachers, they have an understanding of administration and organization that may place them in good stead for the tasks and challenges that they face.
How leaders in Chinese complementary schools perceive their role

In many cases, interviewees saw their roles as dealing with problems and liaising with outside organizations. In some leadership teams, the headteacher focuses on outside links with the authorities, community and parents whilst a deputy head takes on a director of studies role dealing with teachers and students, but in other schools the role allocation is reversed dependent upon the interest of the individuals.

It is the regulations around the running of complementary schools that many interviewees find the most daunting aspect of their role. One interviewee commented that, ‘The problem at the moment is that there are so many regulations, it puts some people off. If I put so much effort in then it’s like running a business, so it’s a wonder why people want to do it’ (Headteacher C). These regulations are often based around the recruitment of teachers as complementary schools become more formally organized and focused upon exams.

It’s not just about volunteers now saying ‘I want to teach’, now it’s qualifications which is very different to 20 years when it was anybody who can speak Chinese, and no pay. Now it can be £25 per day but you have to prove your qualifications and experience. (Headteacher B)

Links with the local authority were a feature of the leaders’ role in previous decades when many schools received funding and when mainstream schools let their premises for free. However, much of the funding from local authorities has now dried up and mainstream schools charge for the use of their rooms. In some cases, Chinese complementary schools have not registered as a charity because of the perception that the form filling and need for formal accounts outweighed any benefits that might accrue from this status.

For complementary schools, links with mainstream schools and the extended programmes are often fraught with difficulty (Thorpe 2010). Interviewees felt mainstream schools were not interested or else that, as volunteers, they did not have the time themselves to initiate contact. This general problem has been summed in other research where a Local Authority co-ordinator said:

The suspicion is that from the mainstream schools point of view this is a kind of a voluntary agency, it’s run by people who are not entirely professionally trained and so on, so the value of that education isn’t taken or deemed as appropriate (LA Coordinator). (Maylor et al. 2010:141)

So many Chinese complementary school leaders face significant difficulties especially as government funding has disappeared and the administrative requirements upon schools bring greater costs (for example, the cost of Criminal Record Bureau checks). As Francis et al., found, the Chinese schools they conducted their research in faced considerable problems with resources:
All schools were under-funded and under-resourced. Staff and pupils complained of the impact this made on the quality of service provided. Lack of funding for teacher salaries affected recruitment in terms both of supply, and the level of teaching experience/qualification among recruits. Facilities were often limited. (Francis et al. 2008:2)

**The extent to leaders in Chinese complementary schools which they feel equipped to undertake it.**

In most cases, leaders of the Chinese complementary schools did not particular see themselves as being equipped for the role as it was one that they had taken on as a volunteer. They saw themselves as solving problems through trial and error as well as the help of others in the school and their Chinese community contacts. One interviewee recounted his desperate search for new premises for the school when the primary school they had been using wanted to begin charging rent. It was a chance meeting with an acquaintance who happened to be a committee member of a Chinese Community Association that led to the school relocating to the Association’s premises for no rent.

It might be thought that being a teacher in one’s full time role would be particularly helpful preparation for leadership in a complementary school but, as one interviewee who was not a teacher put it, ‘I’m not quite sure that that is useful or not because teaching in Chinese school is different to teaching in a mainstream school’ (Headteacher A). Some stories emerged from the interviewees of headteachers who had been classroom teachers in mainstream schools but were unable to cope with the management challenges of the complementary school perhaps because these were not what they dealt with in their full time careers. In contrast those leaders with professional experience in local authorities or other large organizations were often better equipped to deal with problems especially in liaising with government and community organizations.

In many cases the Chinese complementary school associations were perceived as a point of support on general matters. The two major groupings are UKFCS (United Kingdom Federation of Chinese Schools) and UKAPCE (United Kingdom Association for the Promotion of Chinese Education) which both provide text books and teacher conferences for schools. However, there remain a number of well established schools which are not aligned with either of these organizations.

In some local authorities there are regular meetings of complementary school leaders from not just Chinese schools but complementary schools from other ethnic communities. Yet, with the reduction in local government funding, these meetings and the Local Authority support officer role are under threat. The National Resource Centre for Supplementary Schools run by ContinYou (www.continyou.org) provides training programmes for
complementary school leaders though none of those interviewed so far had attended these courses.

CONCLUSION
The initial outcomes of the research project have uncovered previously unheard narratives and nuanced understandings of leadership which have implications for how educational leadership is understood and undertaken. Chinese complementary schools are rooted in the community yet often seem to be overlooked in discussions concerning the development of education in England and the enhanced community ownership of, and involvement in, local education.

REFERENCES


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