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# How do teachers view the effects of school-based in-service learning activities? A case study in China

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Recent educational changes in China such as the decentralization policy and the marketization of education have introduced concepts such as performativity, competition and effectiveness to the education sector and they have become part of the educational lexicon. Such policy shifts force more local participation in teacher education programmes and schools are now identified as the prime site for offering relevant professional learning activities to teachers. However, interestingly, research on professional development of teachers in China has not devoted significant attention to the voices of teachers. This paper examines how teachers from seven schools in Guangdong Province view the effectiveness of these school-based learning activities within the new context of educational change.

## Introduction

Educational reforms in the last three decades in China have mostly aimed school improvement efforts at optimizing teaching effectiveness and advancing students' learning outcomes. Teachers now need to work closely with other educational stakeholders, such as education officials, local communities, parents and of course students. Teachers are now expected to possess a wide range of working knowledge involving five key aspects: school management, teaching, learning, researching new fields and communicating with the larger school community (Hargreaves, 1998). They need this breadth of knowledge to meet the new educational challenges demanded by society and parents. Indeed, the professional development of teachers seems to be currently regarded as the key to the success of educational reform, school development and changes (Harris & Young, 2000). Professional learning activities therefore are currently undertaking the important role of invigorating

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teachers' professional knowledge base, the traditional foundation of the authority of teachers.

In fact, schools in China have a long history of using school-based learning activities to improve the overall performance of individual teachers and the profession as a whole. Schools have always been prime sites teachers could use to enhance their professional competency through school-based learning activities. However, research on the professional development of teachers in China has not devoted a great deal of attention to the voices of teachers either prior to the reforms or since the reforms. This paper sets out to take a close look at how teachers from seven schools in Guangdong Province view the effectiveness of current school-based learning activities which aim at improving the professional quality of teachers within the context of educational change.

The following three research questions are addressed in the paper:

1. How do teachers in this study regard current school-based learning activities in China?
2. Are there any differences in the ways private school teachers and public school teachers in this study view the efficacy of these activities?
3. What are the reasons behind the different views, if any?

### **Theoretical context**

Since the 1970s, teacher education in China has had to shift its focus towards developing much more comprehensive continuing education programmes in order to cope with the demands put upon teachers by the extra duties involved in the shift from central control of education to school-based control. Such duties can range from keeping up with the many new regulations, to gaining an understanding of adolescent psychology, to interacting effectively with demanding parents. Consequently this is an appropriate time to ask teachers their opinions about how they are coping in order to assess the success of the present regime's teacher education policies.

#### *School-based professional learning and knowledge construction*

Professional learning activities in the West have had three significant changes since the 1970s. First, the provision of teacher education activities has shifted from the central government to various levels of local governments. Second, a growing number of teacher education programmes are conducted by schools rather than by tertiary institutions. Third, the design and implementation of teacher education programmes tend to depend on the type of partnership between tertiary institutions and schools (Elliott, 2001; Lieberman & Miller, 2002). All of these changes indicate that schools themselves now largely manage and design professional learning activities for teachers to undertake. Teachers' learning, consequently, is moving away from high reliance on external support towards the resources available within schools (Lakerveld & Nentwig, 1996). As Little (2001) states, 'most schools

introduced new organizational arrangements that were conducive to teacher learning' (p.33). Schools are expected to identify and organize individual staff development activities which are relevant to teachers' practical needs and to support professional growth of teachers in the context of school reform.

Many researchers agree teachers' learning should be situated in an environment where teachers teach; in other words, teachers' professional development should be embedded in the daily practice of teachers (see Wang, 2001; Desimone *et al.*, 2002). Schools can provide occasions for teachers to exchange their personal beliefs and experiences and to foster their working effectiveness through reflection and professional dialogues (McLaughlin, 2002; Hargreaves, 2003). The professional knowledge of teachers, in this context, is developed by teachers themselves rather than imposed by researchers outside the school. As McLaughlin and Talbert (2001) state, 'teachers' joint efforts to generate new knowledge of practice and their mutual support of each others' professional growth' (p.75). Not only can they acquire new knowledge and understanding, but they can do so interdependently in a climate of trust (Patrick *et al.*, 2003). Consequently, school-based learning now is deemed an important way to provide the most relevant teacher education for teachers, and schools have become key actors in the professional development of teachers.

As discussions of school-based learning programmes in the West have been drawing extensive attention in recent years, it is considered that this study of the reactions of a small sample of teachers in China to school-based in-service learning activities in an era of educational change might be of interest to educational planners in other countries.

### *School-based in-service learning activities in China*

As Law (2001) notes, knowledge construction of teachers in China is highly dependent on experience sharing and involves a process of collecting, transmitting and regenerating of pedagogical knowledge from the field. This process includes collective lesson preparation meetings, lesson observations and post lesson conferences and open lessons (*gongkaike*), all of which attempt to shed light on their teaching in a classroom context through teamwork. Given this approach, teachers are likely to act as reflective practitioners when they participate in these learning activities. Table 1 below describes various types of learning activities in schools in which teachers can learn from their peers.

Teachers in China generally use three types of materials to teach: a teaching and learning framework (*jiaoxue dagang*), textbooks (*keben*) and a teacher's manual (*beike fudao cailiao*) (Ma, 1999). Teaching materials are studied intensively and carefully because textbooks in China present the essence of the lesson; teachers are expected to have a careful and critical knowledge of the textbooks (Gu, 2003). Collective lesson preparation meetings provide, to a certain extent, an opportunity for teachers to learn ways to master their knowledge and put it into practice. Via teamwork, teachers, theoretically, develop a shared repertoire for learning (Ball & Cohen, 1999)

Table 1. School-based learning activities for teachers in China

Learning activities	Purposes	General description	Requirements
Mentoring programmes	Offering professional support and advice to novice teachers	Mentoring programmes exist in many forms. A mentor teacher, who is an experienced teacher or head of department, is assigned for each new teacher.	It is a kind of duty of experienced teachers
Open lesson ( <i>gongkaike</i> )	Disseminating good practices of teaching and providing a context for open discussion	Each open lesson is arranged by Teaching Research Group (subject department). Different subject teachers are also required to attend open lesson.	Normal routine of teachers
Collective lesson preparation	Providing a supportive environment for teachers to acquire more pedagogical skills and knowledge of teaching materials through teamwork	Subject teachers who teach at the same level have a fixed schedule for discussing and sharing their views on a teaching topic.	Normal routine of teachers
Lesson observations and post lesson conferencing	Providing a reflective and inquiry context for teachers to discuss their practices and share their views on teaching	Each school has its own requirements to require teachers, heads of departments and principals to participate in lesson observations individually in each semester. In some cases, teachers are required to have post lesson conferencing afterwards to discuss and share their views on teaching and possible ways to improve it. Teachers are requested to submit written records after their lesson observations for the school's reference.	Normal routine of teachers
Monthly/weekly learning activities	Offering assistance to teaching staff through experience sharing and widening teachers' worldview by information flowing during the meetings	The programme consists of a broad array of topics over such areas as clarifying current political philosophy, new educational regulations and documents to teachers, introducing adolescent psychology and ways for teachers to build up their self-confidence.	Participating in these programmes is compulsory

Table 1. Continued

Learning activities	Purposes	General description	Requirements
Self-reflection reports or essays	Having individual reflections on teaching and bridging the gap between theories and practice	Teachers have autonomy to decide the topic of their self-reflection reports and the main theme of their essays. In some cases, schools are also able to assign certain topics for teachers to write. A financial incentive is applied to encourage those teachers who have completed the task of submission of self-reflection reports.	Each teacher is required to submit at least one self-reflection report each year

and 'critical collegueship' (Carroll, 2001). All of these activities are designed to form the foundation of a supportive working environment for teachers and to allow them to take advantage of others who have diverse teaching styles and different strengths (Paine & Ma, 1993). Against this background, how principals and teachers perceive these professional initiatives and to what extent they think such ideas work in practice will be explored.

## Methodology

This small-scale study investigates principals' views and teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of various kinds of in-service learning activities. The study consisted of 69 interviewees who teach in seven schools located at Guangzhou, Panyu, Shenzhen and Conghua, all of which are in urban areas of Guangdong Province in China.

The seven schools studied included two key point (elite) grammar schools (Schools K1 and K2), one vocational school (School V), one normal grammar school (School N), and three high-fee paying private schools (Schools P1, P2 and P3). The public schools studied were recommended by different local Education Bureaus and the three private schools were from personal contact. Of the 69 interviewees, 37 were responsible for school administration, such as managing subject panels, handling student affairs, organizing teaching and research and dealing with external affairs. Fifty-nine of the interviewees were from inland China. Thirty-seven interviewees were from public schools and 32 were from private schools. Most interviewees were chosen from a pool of teachers recommended by school administrators.

Semi-structured interviews were used during the data collection process. The interview protocols focused on two issues: (1) the extent to which school-based learning activities enhance teachers' professional qualities; and (2) whether public and private school teachers had different attitudes towards these learning activities. Each semi-structured interview was recorded and generally lasted for 30 minutes.

When all the interviews were transcribed, synthesis and organization of the preliminary information into several categories was done as a reference point for further analysis. Analysis of the data source included reading and rereading interview transcripts in order to give the data initial codes. The coding process involved three steps: open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The researcher then further grouped different interviewees' views into different themes. School documents and official documents were included in the data collection and analysis. However, there is no attempt to claim that these perspectives are the only possible interpretation of events.

For the purpose of confidentiality, pseudonyms are used for all schools and teachers in this study. Interviewees were given a number in accordance with the chronological order of their interviews in each school. Each quotation used is identified by school (letter) and then by interviewee (number).

### **Findings and discussion**

Teachers' comments on the effect of these school-based learning activities were analysed in order to answer the three research questions: (1) how do teachers in this study regard school-based learning activities in China; and (2) do private school and public school teachers in these schools have different views about the efficacy of school-based professional learning activities? Their responses are shown in Table 2.

#### *Positive views*

Of 69 respondents, 47 (68.1%) viewed school-based learning activities positively. In each type of school, more than half the teachers studied regarded school-based learning as a way to 'enhance professional growth of different kinds of teachers', to 'learn new knowledge through different channels' and to 'create a supportive working environment for teachers to work within'. Interestingly, among the four groups of teachers, key point grammar schools had a remarkably high proportion of teachers (89.4%) who viewed school-based professional learning activities more positively than other types of schools. In both the vocational school and the normal grammar school studied, two-thirds of the interviewees (six teachers in each school) viewed school-based learning activities positively. Contrary to expectation, only slightly more than half of the private school teachers (56.2%) believed that school-based learning activities can bring beneficial effects to them.

The teachers studied mentioned the positive effects of school-based learning activities on professional growth of teachers. Twenty teachers in total felt that these learning activities 'enhance professional growth of different kinds of teachers'. For example, one teacher from this group mentioned that cooperation among colleagues is a good way for 'improving teaching effectiveness and overall enhancement of individuals (Interview K1-7). The learning activities are particularly important for

Table 2. Teachers' attitudes towards school-based learning activities

Teachers' comments on school-based in-service learning activities	Schools				Total
	Public schools		Private schools		
	Key point grammar schools, 100% (n=19)	Normal grammar school, 100% (n=9)	Vocational school, 100% (n=9)	100% (n=32)	
<i>Enhancing professional growth of teachers</i>					
• Helping new teachers to learn and grow	15.8% (3)	33.3% (3)	22.2% (2)	6.2% (2)	10
• Helping non-local teachers to adapt their new working environment				6.2% (2)	2
• Improving individual teaching abilities	21 % (4)	22.2% (2)	11.1% (1)	3.1% (1)	8
<i>Learning new knowledge through different channels</i>					
• Learning new knowledge through experience sharing	10.5% (2)	11.1% (1)	11.1% (1)	18.8% (6)	10
• Learning new knowledge from experts	10.5% (2)		11.1% (1)	9.4% (3)	6
• Professional learning through apprenticeship	5.3% (1)		11.1% (1)	3.1% (1)	3
<i>Providing a supportive working environment for teachers to work within</i>	26.3% (5)			9.4% (3)	8
Positive respondents: 47	89.4% (n=17)	66.6% (n=6)	66.6% (n=6)	56.2% (n=18)	47 (68.1%)
<i>Unlikely to have real collaboration among colleagues</i>					
• Collaboration is a duty as teachers will not give real suggestions		11.1% (1)	11.1% (1)	18.8% (6)	8
• Competition among colleagues and hard to have real sharing				12.5% (4)	4
<i>Unsatisfactory of learning content</i>					
• Collaboration among colleagues is only at the instrumental level	5.3% (1)				1
• Collaboration ignores different individual needs	5.3% (1)		11.1% (1)	6.2% (2)	4
• Sharing content is hard to be put into practice			11.1% (1)		1
• Hard to have further improvement if the participants are at the same academic level		11.1% (1)		6.2% (2)	3
• Sharing outdated information		11.1% (1)			1
Negative respondents: 22	10.6% (n=2)	33.3% (n=3)	33.3% (n=3)	43.7% (n=14)	22 (31.9%)



novice teachers. Several teachers commented that novice teachers can get professional advice from these activities to improve their pedagogical skills and subject knowledge (Interviews K2-6, N3, N5). One geography teacher with four years' experience reported that she gained learning experience from her subject head teacher when participating in these learning activities:

Our subject head teachers are responsible for transferring new information from outside to us during these activities ... I am the youngest teacher in this subject (geography), I am still in the process of learning and growing. My subject head teacher has been guiding me how to improve my professional competency through these activities. (Interview K1-7)

It would seem that school-based learning activities are perceived positively as a way to enhance the professional competency of various kinds of teachers.

Nineteen teachers believed that they can 'learn new knowledge through different channels', especially having guidance from experienced teachers and peers. These activities are seen as an effective way to help their professional development. One six year experience teacher shared her views:

Having guidance from a veteran teacher can make a difference to your professional growth. Suggestions given by veteran teachers mostly are based on their practical experience which always inspires me a lot. Some problems which they pinpoint may take me a couple of years to discover. Their suggestions are more realistic and helpful. These suggestions also help me to reshape my teaching strategies and make my teaching more relevant to students' needs. (Interview K2-4)

Another non-local private school teacher shared her learning experience through having comments from her peers:

The first time, I was uncomfortable about the comments given from other teachers. However, I found that their comments are very useful for me ... It helps me a lot ... We can have a particular discussion regarding some specific teaching problems that we are facing now. (Interview P3-6)

According to these views, school-based learning activities provided various learning opportunities for teachers.

However, these learning activities were not only provided a platform for teachers to learn new knowledge through various channels, but also were able to 'construct a supportive working environment for teachers to work within'. Eight teachers supported this view. Sharing among colleagues has been identified as the foundation of the success of school-based learning activities. It is also deemed an important way to help teachers to grow: 'without sharing, it is very difficult for me to grow: after the sharing, I can learn a lot and grow up very fast' (Interview N5). One teacher described learning through a school-based mentoring programme from highly experienced teachers as actually like 'learning through apprenticeship' (Interview K1-9).

It is clear from the above that many teachers studied believed that school-based learning activities had the function of boosting their individual development by situating their learning in their workplace contexts and receiving mentoring from more experienced teachers. However, there was another side to the coin.

*Negative views*

Of all interviewees, slightly less than one-third (31.9%) commented that school-based in-service learning activities were not as useful as expected. They felt that it was 'unlikely to produce real collaboration among colleagues' when teachers participated in these learning activities. 'Unsatisfactory learning content' was also identified as an important factor which lessened the effectiveness of these learning activities on professional development of teachers. Interestingly, only two of the key point school teachers studied (10.6%) commented on school-based in-service learning activities negatively. Their criticism was mainly on the issue of 'unsatisfactory content'. Both the vocational school and the normal grammar school studied had one-third of interviewees who viewed school-based professional learning activities negatively. Amongst these, more interviewees mentioned 'unsatisfactory learning content' (22.2%) as opposed to 'unlikely to have real collaboration among colleagues' (11.1%). Comparatively, private schools studied had 14 teachers (43.7%) who viewed teachers' professional learning activities in school contexts negatively. Among these, 10 teachers (31.3%), i.e. more than one-third of the private school teachers in this study, stated that school-based in-service learning activities were 'unlikely to have real collaboration among colleagues'. This was the highest number of teachers among the four types of teachers studied who viewed this factor—'unlikely to have real collaboration among colleagues'—as an obstacle to making school-based learning activities more relevant to teachers' needs.

Collaboration is a strong indicator of the quality of school-based learning activities. However, 12 teachers in total responded that it was 'unlikely to have real collaboration' in their school-based learning activities. Even though cooperation among teachers has been institutionalized and included in their normal working schedule, this kind of cooperation seems highly dependent on the working morale of teachers. Not surprisingly, some school teachers studied were reluctant to offer suggestions to others when they participated in collective lesson preparation meetings and post lesson conferencing for two reasons: keeping good teaching methodologies to themselves and being unwilling to share with others (Interviews D5, P1-2, P3-3, P3-14, V8), and avoiding jeopardizing interpersonal rapport with other colleagues by not pinpointing others' teaching problems (Interviews P1-4, P2-6, P3-8, V3). In order to maintain a harmonious working environment, teachers tended to give only positive feedback to their colleagues as: 'Most teachers here don't like to give more practical suggestions (during learning activities). Therefore, most suggestions are not very useful ... This can avoid or lessen confrontations and not let other teachers become unhappy' (Interview P1-3).

Another teacher echoed this view:

Some teachers understandably have conflicts about offering suggestions to other teachers. They think this makes problems for the relationship. I guess it is kind of human nature that people tend to listen to positive views rather than receive criticisms of their performance from others. Teachers will be unhappy when they are critiqued by their colleagues ... I normally will give real suggestions and comments to the teacher

whose personality is more open-minded and willing to accept others' comments. For those who are conservative, I would keep my mouth shut. (Interview P3-8)

This could explain why some teachers mentioned that they lacked motivation to collaborate with others. For them, attending school-based learning activities was seen as a kind of duty (Interviews D3, P2-2, P2-4) and it was believed that teachers were unlikely to experience an in-depth level of sharing (Interviews P1-3, P3-9, V3). For example, one teacher considered the experience of sharing among colleagues occurred only at a superficial level which was unlikely to be related to teachers' real needs:

Frankly speaking, it (giving suggestions during learning activities) is a kind of formality. Ideally, attending open lessons is an opportunity for us to identify our teaching problems and attempt to resolve them. However, the comments we receive are normally 'good' and 'well done' which are not much help in finding out what went wrong in your teaching. Teachers seldom tell you their real feelings and always remain silent. I don't think this kind of learning activity helps me much. Lots of teachers, even though they have brilliant ideas and good methods in teaching, keep them secretly and don't share them with others. This is very common here ... Attending these learning activities hardly gives you a real experience of sharing. (Interview V3)

Teachers expressed the view that lack of real collaboration was a stumbling block for developing effective school-based professional learning activities.

Ten teachers studied felt that there was a gap between the learning content and their teaching needs. They considered school-based learning activities were not as effective as expected due to 'unsatisfactory learning content'. For example, one teacher echoed this view and went further:

They (other subject teachers) still use conservative and traditional pedagogical skills to teach. I feel that their teaching effectiveness is just average and without any creativity in it. I really wonder how I can learn more from them. Some teachers claimed that they used new pedagogical skills in their teaching. However, when I had lesson observations of these teachers, I still found that their ways of teaching were still traditional and not creative at all; they did not even mention using critical thinking strategies to lead their students' learning. (Interview P1-9)

More importantly, school-based learning activities cannot be one size fits all. It has been criticized that standardizing learning content cannot fit the needs of different teachers who are at different stages of their professional trajectory:

When I was a novice teacher, I found that these learning activities were really helpful and practical. I learned how to teach in a more practical sense in my workplace practices ... However, I need more now. All of these (school-based learning activities) concern pedagogical skills and knowledge only and hardly provide learning opportunity for teachers to improve their self's quality and to have critical thinking. (Interview P1-3)

Taking these views together, the teachers studied accepted the fact that school-based learning activities help novice teachers to enhance their professional competency to a considerable extent at an early stage of their career path. However, they felt these activities did not take into account particular individual needs and are not adjusted to various stages of the personal and professional growth cycle of teachers. Consequently, they viewed the school-based in-service learning activities rather negatively.

*Reasons behind the differing views of public and private school teachers regarding school-based in-service learning activities*

As has just been shown, teachers from public schools, in particular key point school teachers, had quite different views on the effects of school-based in-service learning activities from private school teachers. What follows is an attempt to answer the third research question and identify the reasons behind the different reactions to school-based learning activities between these two groups of teachers.

*Sense of competition and type of culture present in school*

Key point grammar schools in China are not only places to cultivate potential university students, they also act as locomotives of education development and are showcases for local educational achievements. Teachers who work in key point schools are very stressed about keeping their school status up. For example:

We have to maintain the ranking of our school. We have to keep our name and can't lose our position and reputation in the society. We need to be No. 1 here. (Interview K2-2)

The stress of being the best locally perhaps explains why key point grammar school teachers viewed school-based professional learning activities more positively, as these are considered a way of developing collaboration among teachers with the purpose of improving individual performance and the overall academic achievements of the school. Key point grammar schools studied usually had a strategic plan to enhance professional qualities of teachers through school-based learning activities, and the better the plan, the more effective the teaching.

School K2, for example, had especially clear guidelines aimed at invigorating the professional growth of teachers and improving the school performance and its competitive abilities. Having such a school culture promotes a sense of cohesion among teachers, and this equips the school for coping with problems of change and builds a strong culture for teachers to work within. As a result, teaching effectiveness in School K2 was better than another better-equipped key point school in the same district. School K1 developed a series of small-scale research studies aimed at developing a teaching model for improving teaching effectiveness with professional support from Guangdong Academy of Education Sciences. Results clearly show that such a collaborative ethos is especially important for the purpose of improving teaching practices. Because of such initiatives, not one key point school teacher studied had the view that in-school learning activities were unlikely to foster real collaboration among colleagues.

In private schools, however, the situation was different. Teachers studied regarded in-school learning primarily as a way for them to retain their jobs when encountering competition from other private schools and teachers. They viewed school-based professional learning as a means of improving their performance in order to attain higher salaries and job security. Competition among private school teachers was more evident, in that it rests upon the rationale of a businesslike management which

tends to retain effective teaching staff only. One private teacher remarked of this kind of working culture that ‘the salary is higher, the risk is larger, and the work is harder’ (Interview P3-2). One teacher also explained the strong sense of competition in private schools:

Competition in here is very serious. We have a very strong sense of competition among teachers. If you don’t have any special ability or you don’t perform well, it is impossible for you to work here because the school, students and even parents do not give you any recognition. As a result, you have to leave ... In inland, teachers’ turnover is low and very few teachers will leave their work. Here, however, teachers’ turnover rate is relatively high. (Interview P3-2)

Teacher’s remuneration in Guangdong is sometimes up to 10 times higher than in the inland. This is a tempting factor to attract good quality inland teachers to come there and teach. Of 32 private school interviewees, 28 were from inland China, especially from impoverished areas. The chief motive for them to leave their hometown and teach in Guangdong Province was straightforward: to improve the living standard of their families and to broaden their worldview. This helps to explain why an intensified level of competition commonly exists in private schools. The remarkably high teacher turnover rate of the three private schools studied, approximately more than 10% each year, is a result of the active execution of the performance-led employment system. Stated simply, teachers in private schools have less job security than teachers in government ones. The strong competitive atmosphere in private schools makes developing a cohesive working environment for teachers unlikely and gives many private school teachers a reluctance to share teaching skills with others. This explains why a significantly high number of private school teachers commented on the lack of real collaboration among colleagues when they participated in school-based learning activities.

#### *Working conditions influence teachers’ commitment to learning*

Performance related payments with the rationale of ‘work more, earn more’ differentiate between teachers on the basis of both their working hours and their abilities. This financial incentive is used to motivate teachers to work harder. It is noted the teaching workload of private school teachers studied ranges from 18 lessons to 28 lessons weekly compared to 12 lessons weekly which is the normal workload for a public high school teacher. After normal school hours, each class teacher in the private schools studied was also responsible for offering tutorial lessons to their students at night, often until 9:00 p.m. or 10:00 p.m., during weekdays. Not only does this tremendous workload contribute to the significantly high level of yearly turnover at private schools, but it can form an obstacle to participation in in-depth school-based learning and research activities. One private school teacher explained this:

Our work here is very intensive. We have no time to update our knowledge and share it with other colleagues. More importantly, we all have great pressure to keep our job here. We can’t afford time to think about how to have good collaboration in our learning activities. (Interview P1-4)

Another factor that makes private school teachers studied have less commitment to improving their skills is the nature of their students. Nearly all non-local private school teachers studied agreed that both the motivation to learn and the academic performance of students in Guangdong's private schools were relatively unsatisfactory, compared with inland students. Private school teachers studied also generally agreed that the overall quality of students in private schools, in terms of academic and behavioural factors, is relatively worse than in the government ones. Lots of students in private schools lack the motivation to learn because of their wealthy family background which can provide abundant material resources for them. Two private school teachers commented on their students as follows: 'We can't use the normal ways to manage and control them (the students) because lots of them have serious conduct and personality problems' (Interview P1-2); and 'they have paid a large amount of money to study here because they mostly have behavioural and academic problems. If students can perform well, for sure, they will not study here' (Interview P1-7).

Furthermore, private school teachers apparently have to pay more attention to student behaviour rather than spend the time attending school-based learning activities. Some private school teachers stated that their responsibilities were no longer restricted to academic work, but involved disciplinary issues; 'I feel I like a policeman having to catch them when they are absent from their evening lessons' (Interview P2-2). This is yet another reason why private school teachers focus less on school-based learning and research activities.

## **Conclusion**

School-based in-service learning activities are considered important because they offer 'knowledge as constructed by and with practitioners in their own context' (McLaughlin, 1997, p. 80). Schools in both China and the West are now the hub for providing opportunities for teachers to enrich their knowledge by interacting with and learning from colleagues. Teachers' team spirit is considered the foundation for establishing strong individual school cultures to cope with the extra educational demands brought by market values in education.

Most schools in China attempt to construct a professional learning environment for teachers. However, this study has clearly shown that key point grammar school teachers in China generally possess a remarkably positive view of various kinds of school-based professional learning activities. For key point grammar schools, factors such as the strong professional ethos cultivated over decades, the prestige held by these schools, and the commitment of their staff to remain competitive and retain their reputation, act as a strong incentive for key point school teachers to acquire new knowledge and pedagogical skills and to improve their teaching effectiveness by collaboration. Contrary to expectation, private school teachers studied were less committed to professional learning. The sense of competition among teachers and the intensified teachers' workload in private schools negatively impact on their attitudes to school-based professional learning activities.

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