

## Original Paper

# Professional Development of Music Teacher in China: Practice and Challenges

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### Abstract

*Since 2001, national basic education curriculum reforms have been instituting to meet the demands of quality-oriented education in China. Due to this nationwide reform proposed to cultivate students' moral, intellectual, physical and aesthetic development, music education which is a vital component of aesthetic education has received considerable critical attention from Chinese government. In the last two decades, the argument of significance of teachers' professional development (PD) in curriculum reform has led a growing trend towards practice aimed to promote PD of music teachers in China. This paper presents an analysis of challenges the music teacher PD practice has met. Based on the discussion, it must be suggested that policymakers, school principals, PD program providers should increase attention to the effectiveness of music teacher PD programs and take available measures. This paper contributes to ongoing discussions about factors to be considered in designing PD programs for music teachers in countries or societies under the influence of Confucian culture. Potential areas of further work include exploring the factors restricting the effectiveness of music teacher PD programs in China and the framework of high-quality PD program for music teachers in the context of Confucian culture.*

### Keywords

*music teacher, professional development, China, practice and challenges*

## 1. Education Reform and Aesthetic Education in China

At the turn of the new millennium, the People's Republic of China launched its eighth education reform, which is regarded as the most radical and far-reaching education reform in the 21<sup>st</sup> century of China (Ryan et al., 2009; Tan, 2016). The official document that implemented the education reform, *Outline of the Curriculum Reform for Basic Education (Trial)*, claimed that it is a decade-long curriculum reform designed to better accommodate its booming socio-economic development and improve

international competitiveness (MOE, 2001). The Chinese government has stated that the goal of the eighth curriculum reform is to implement quality-oriented education, cultivating globally competitive citizens with all-round development in the moral, intellectual, physical and aesthetic (MOE, 2001). As a result, aesthetic education occupies an important position in Chinese K-12 curriculum system and is viewed to be an indispensable part of primary and secondary school education. A series of aesthetic education reform policies have been published by Chinese government. Accordingly, the number of aesthetic education courses was determined to account for nine to eleven percent of their total hours in primary and secondary schools in China (MOE, 2008). In the latest aesthetic education policy, the Chinese education officials declared that China is committed to incorporate aesthetic education subjects in the Chinese High School Entrance Examination (Zhongkao), promising to comprehensively strengthen and improve aesthetic education in schools (MOE, 2020).

## **2. Music Education and Music Teacher in China**

Aesthetic education comprises seven subjects of which the music education is one (MOE, 2020). Music has existed in ancient China, when it was always regarded as a political tool (Ho, 2010). For example, the scale of the orchestra used to perform court music varied according to the rank of nobility in the Zhou Dynasty (1045-256 BC) (Xie & Lueng, 2011). In modern China, an important purpose for Chinese authorities to carry out music education is to cultivate the moral character of students (Ho, 2010). Moral education is the ultimate goal of education reform in China (Xue & Li, 2021). Therefore, music education, which is viewed as a means to promote education reform has been attached importance and supervised by the Chinese government (Law & Ho, 2009). The Chinese government has made a lot of efforts to alleviate the shortage of music and academic teachers, including: 1) publishing education initiatives to improve the social status of teachers; 2) setting up Master of Fine Arts to cultivate high-level music and artistic talents in Chinese colleges and universities; 3) encouraging schools to invite artists to offer music education in classes; 4) improving the treatment of full-time music and academic teachers, for instance, ensuring that the average salary level of primary and secondary school teachers is no lower than that of local civil servants. These attempts, to some extent, ensured an adequate supply of music teachers in China, and provided a relatively solid foundation for China's music education reform.

## **3. Chinese Music Teacher's PD Programs**

Over the last few decades, there has been a dramatic proliferation of Asian and western research on the relationship between education reform and the teacher's PD (Choi & Walker, 2018; Crockett, 2007; Lei & Medwell, 2020; Paik et al., 2011; Starkey et al., 2009; Tao & Gao, 2017). A review of the literature and research demonstrates that teachers are the most crucial implementors of education and curriculum reform, and that PD is a central vehicle to accomplish the intentions of reform (Bain et al., 2011; Fullan, 2009; Mourshed, et al., 2010; OECD, 2015; Spillane, 2012). PD can enhance teachers' teaching skills

and knowledge (Choi, 2015; Muijs & Lindsay, 2008) as well as improve their attitudes towards and preparation for curriculum reform (Hargreaves, 2001; Scott & Sutton, 2009). In response, policy makers in various countries have considered deepening and expanding teachers' professional competence through formal and informal learning opportunities to accelerate education reform (Richter et al., 2011; Zhao, 2010). In China, a number of top-down government-led arts and academic teacher training and teaching supportive policies aimed to cascade training from "experts" to address curriculum reforms have been launched (Lei & Medwell, 2020). National Teacher Training Program (NTTP), a national demonstration project of teacher training, has given preferential support to teachers in aesthetic education, physical education, special education, and Chinese traditional culture. From 2019, the Ministry of Education has supported more than twenty Chinese universities to provide continuous assistance and volunteer services to thirty-eight rural primary and secondary schools in eighteen provinces of China in terms of arts and academic curriculum teaching. At the time of writing, as a government official working on supervising music and arts education activities in communities, I attended the fourth annual National Music Education Conference (NMEC), alongside more than 1,000 conference participants. NMEC provided participants with a wealth of learning opportunities and resources, such as lectures, workshops, as well as videos and teaching plans of music education in kindergartens, primary and secondary schools. At the opening ceremony of NMEC, a Chinese government official claimed that The NMEC has become the most influential music education conference in China. The conference on its own is an indication that Chinese government has continued to try to fulfill its voluntary commitments on promoting the PD of music teachers.

To meet curriculum reform challenges, Chinese music teachers experienced school-based inquiry-led PD training (Lei & Medwell, 2020). Previous research suggests that educators working together collaboratively and continuously can improve teaching and learning practices effectively (Reichstetter, 2006). It has been proved that a large number of Chinese arts and academic teachers attended Teaching Research Groups (jiaoyanzu, TRGs) which is equipped with the principles of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) (Paine & Ma, 1993; Wang, 2016), and there was no exception in music teachers. Although developing PLCs was consistently found as one of the most effective strategies for school reforms (Harris, 2010; Pyhalto et al., 2011), substantial studies have been performed to show that PLCs were voluntary and loosely organized in western countries (Hargreaves, 2007; Lieberman, 2007). In some Asian countries PLCs were structured in a state-led manner, while in few countries like China they were institutionalized as a part of the school education system. Resultingly, the concept and practice of PCLs was not at the initial stage in China (Hairon & Dimmock, 2012; M. Lee & Kim, 2016). A series of studies have shown that almost all provinces and cities in mainland China have TRGs (Paine & Ma, 1993; Tsui & Wong, 2009). Usually, TRGs consist of teachers who teach the same or similar subjects in a school and seek to improve teaching practices through collective work (Paine & Ma, 1993). They need to regularly organize various professional activities, such as collective lesson preparation, open class, peer observation, action research at different levels, etc. In China, Master

Teacher Studios (MTSs) have increasingly become a popular TRGs format. Music MTSs in China are generally combined by: (1) the principal master teacher, who is responsible for the orderly operation of the studio and the successfully development of various activities; (2) the master teacher team, which consists of several excellent teachers who have abundant music teaching experience; (3) trainee teachers, who need to conduct team research activities in the studio; (4) expert consultants, who provide technical support and theoretical guidance for studio activities. The member of master teacher studios should carry out research on issues related to music teaching and music teachers' PD. The growth plan, research proposal, award certificates, music teaching plans, and seminar video materials are usually recorded by studios.

The concern from the Chinese government and schools towards music teachers' PD has led an increasing number of Chinese education companies to devote themselves to developing teaching resources for music teachers and teacher training programs. In recent years, various music education and training institutions have been established in China. Founded in 2006, Beijing Magic Flute Innovation Technology Development Co., LTD, as a partner of Beijing Normal University, developed and sold early childhood music teaching resources to more than two hundred well-known kindergartens in China. The company also offered professional training for music teachers, and there was nearly six thousand music teachers participating in the training up to now. With the popularity of Orff music in China, Professor Dana Li, the former president of Chinese Musicians Association Orff Professional Committee, founded Jin Wawa Education, offering offline training courses for primary and secondary school teachers in southwest China. Tens of thousands of music educators have participated in its teacher training projects. The need of Orff music education training also attracted experts and music education trainers from Taiwan and Hong Kong to deliver lectures in China. In order to improve market competitiveness, the latest online music teacher training project from Beijing promised that participating in its training is a great shortcut to apply adult undergraduate student programs in The Central Conservatory of Music of China.

With the continuous expanding of music teacher training market, sino-foreign cooperative music teacher PD programs have been prevalent in China. The JZ-Bachson School in Shanghai provided music teacher training programs with Jazz Theory, Modern Music History, Jazz Guitar, Jazz Piano, and Jazz Vocal Music. The JZ-Bachson School officials claimed their teaching team were all world-renowned professional musicians with affluent performance experience. Topsky Education declared that the highlight of its music PD program was that participants could obtain the Orff Teaching Certificate issued by the Orff Association of Australia. By 2018, nearly seven hundreds music teachers had passed the training and assessment. The outbreak of COVID-19 made more and more music PD programs choose to be conducted online, which also provided great convenience for sino-foreign cooperation in running music teacher training. Since 2019, Shanghai Xinli Education Technology Co., LTD has cooperated with Professor Paul Hille, chairman of the FIER International Federation of Eurhythmics Teachers, carrying out Dalcroze Methods Teachers Training Program in China.

#### 4. Challenges the Chinese Music Teacher PD Practice Met

Although much work has been done to date, many challenges persist. Firstly, the shortage of music teachers relatively restricted teachers' PD, especially in rural areas of China. The role of music teachers was often performed by language, math or other academic subjects teachers in Chinese rural regions. "There is unreasonable curriculum structure, very scarce number of music, art, biology, chemistry, and physics courses, basically we cannot recruit rural teachers of those courses. Many of the teachers who teach now are actually not majoring in this subject, but if he or she is qualified for those courses, let him or her teach those" (Li et al., 2020). As a result, teachers "hardly have time to stop and breathe for a minute during the school day, and have no time to learn new things (Liu & Hallinger, 2017). Financial and career plan have been reported to be the crucial factor associated with the shortage of teachers in rural China (Li et al., 2020; Qian et al., 2020).

Secondly, China's top-down music PD programs were considered ineffective. The core reason was that more attention has been brought to studying theories instead of nurturing practical teaching abilities (Sun & Leung, 2014). The similar indication could be found in some empirical studies on the effectiveness of NTTP in promoting teacher's professional development (Lu et al., 2019). Although NTTP is substantial and teachers attended the PD program actively, the PD program did not work since the most content of on-site and online PD was laborious to apply to teaching practice (Loyalka et al., 2019). However, some Chinese studies, which rely more on teachers' self-report to obtain data, have concluded that NTTP was effective in improve teachers' professional level. In this aspect, Loyalka et al. (2019) stressed that high self-report satisfaction was not the original intention of teachers, but driven by the physical conditions of training sites and the way teachers were treated by NTTP providers.

Some researchers also queried the effectiveness of PLCs and TRGs in China (Guo et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2011; Song et al., 2013; Zhao, 2010; Zheng et al., 2021). Ideally, PLCs and TRGs can mean teachers would be able to reflect on their practice and become empowered as agents of change (Lei & Medwell, 2020). However, under the influence of Confucian culture which emphasizes avoiding of conflict, pursuing social harmony, and respecting for authority (Yin, 2013; Zheng et al., 2019), teachers can work together in PLCs and TRGs seemingly (Wong, 2010; Yin, 2013) while talk "the right nonsense" to maintain a harmonious atmosphere (Zheng et al., 2019) to avoid criticizing others. Research from Yu and Leung (2019) illustrated that the influence of Confucian culture went far beyond it. As Confucian culture emphasizes utilitarianism, both school leaders and parents attached greater importance to the language, math, physics, and chemistry class. As a result, the support for music PD programs was also inadequate. To some extent, it also affected the initiative of music teachers pursuing PD. A research from Song et al. (2013) portrayed that China's honor system which requires schools of different levels and educational organizations to identify and recommend prominent educators could help teachers reduce isolation by getting more support from school leaders. Although there was not enough research on the extent to which the China's honor system reduce the isolation of music teachers, it can be found that on Chinese social media, some certificates and photos of music honored teachers

are posted on the official website of the schools to openly express the advocacy from the school leaders.

Last but not least, some problems appeared with the emerging music teacher training organizations. These off-campus music PD program's common problems include: 1) training time and targeted guidance were limited; 2) front-line music teachers' development demands could not be satisfied sufficiently; 3) despite the high cost of training, it is hard to guarantee the qualification and commitment of trainers. In 2021, the Chinese government issued a document which is called by Chinese people as "double minus" (Shuang Jian) policy in short. The Chinese government hoped to increase opportunities for art practice in primary and secondary students while reduce their academic pressure and intensive academic training. Due to government intrusiveness and communal pressure to achieve targets, numerous well-known academic training institutions in China have announced layoffs or closures. Some academic training institutions turned to aesthetic education and aesthetic educators' training to struggle for survival. Optimism about the aesthetic education market in China may also spur more Chinese and international entrepreneurs to invest more in the development of teaching resources and music and arts teacher training programs.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, there is still a long way to go for China's principals, music teacher PD program providers, policymakers in China. Although China has spent massive capital and countless time on music teacher PD programs each year, an exceedingly growing number of recent publications and empirical studies have reassessed the limited positive contribution that music teacher PD programs can make to music teacher's professional levels. The present study is not without limitations. Owing to space constraints, the music teacher PD program concerning kindergarten and college music teachers was less involved in this study. Therefore, it is necessary for future research to analyze more kindergartens and universities' music teacher PD programs. Above all, the discussion on factors restricting the effectiveness of PD programs for Chinese music teachers is a promising line of inquiry. It is also possible to expect that the high-quality music teacher PD projects applicable to the Confucian cultural background can be further proposed more in the future.

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