Teacher Retention in China: The Role of Effective Leadership

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Much has been written about the relationship between effective leadership and teacher retention, yet there is scant research on this theme within the field of extra-curricular language schools in Asia. This qualitative study aims to describe the perspectives of 4 principals working for one of the leading EFL-institutions in China through semi-structured interviews. Questions were asked relating to 5 different categories: teacher retention, effective leadership, shared leadership, collaborative learning and induction programs. The findings of this research indicate that there is a contrast between the academic aspirations of EFL-principals and their actual job responsibilities. The main challenges to effective leadership were found to be changing expectations, an unclear job role and a lack of training. This research exposes the peculiar nature of teacher retention in the EFL-sector and makes a case for a comparative study.

Introduction

The extra-curricular education industry in China is an enormous market. A 2010 China Daily article (He, 2010, p. 1) rated the estimated value of China's ESL business at 30 billion yuan, or around 3.4 billion pounds. The world's biggest population, a sharp increase of their middle class, an education system that heavily relies on tests and a set of unique cultural values have contributed to the world's biggest education market. Such schools charge a premium, so Chinese parents hold high expectations for their children and are very engaged in their education. In Wuying Zou et al's study (2013, p. 1846) middle-class parents were asked about their expectations for their children's education. 92 percent stated that extra-curricular classes were an indispensable educational activity. These parents expect quality teachers, that they know and can build a connection with. Yet scores of teachers leave ESL schools after just one year. Their leaving does not necessarily mean that teachers withdraw from the educational field, or even the country altogether. Due to the size of the market, various competing educational actors have emerged, supplying different salary packages and enticing international teachers to join them (Bolton & Graddol, 2012, p.3). Regardless of why teachers leave, it is usually the school and the students who pay for it.

As the principal of an English as a Second Language (ESL) school for one of the leading language companies in China, two of my main responsibilities are the recruitment and training of teachers. As ESL schools in China rely heavily on international (native and non-native teachers from outside China) teachers, losing them represents a loss in collective experience, principal time and school resources. This is exacerbated by the relatively high turnover rate.

The main aim of this study is to better understand the impact of effective leadership on teacher retention in extracurricular ESL schools in China. Previous research has proven that administrative support can be a determining factor in teachers' willingness to stay (Hughes, 2012; Thoonen et al, 2011). This study aims to contribute to the research on how administrative support can contribute to teacher retention. One of the research goals is to create a profile of the interviewed principals by studying their perceptions of self-efficacy, teaching ideology and their preparation for the job of principal. Principals in ESL schools fulfil diverse functions. An important benefit to these diverse job roles is that principals are in an opportune position to implement change in schools. My aim is to study how principals implement these changes and how they perceive their effectiveness.

This study uses qualitative data that was collected through semi-structured interviews with four qualified principals who have a track record of high retention. Participants first answered a concise questionnaire to ascertain their demographic and professional profile. After this a face-to-face interview was conducted where respondents were asked open-ended questions. Choosing this format for my research allowed me to gauge the principals' perceptions and strategies they employ to retain their teachers in a natural environment, without losing focus on the topic.

The motivation for researching principals' strategies for teacher retention in China came from being a principal myself. This research has benefitted my own practice and that of my peers. Though the impact on academia will be small, I do not mean to be what Pilkington (2009, p. 157) calls a one-way consumer of theory. This research aims to provide a small contribution to the existing literature and research on teacher retention. Few studies have been made on retention in ESL schools in China. This is an exploratory study its aim is not to produce a general theory but to provide further incentives for research on retention within this context.

Literature Review

The following sections seeks to provide an academic context for my research. The first section summarizes some of the main findings on teacher retention and the peculiarities of retention in ESL-schools. After this, I will describe what constitutes effective leadership and how educational leaders can implement this in their schools. A closer look will be given to three strategies: collaborative vision building and leadership, mentoring and induction programs and collaborative learning.

i) Teacher Retention

There is a large body of academic work on teacher retention in academia, but very little of this research focuses on teacher retention in an international setting. This is surprising for two reasons. Firstly, the international education industry, particularly in Asia and the Middle East, is large and hires thousands of teachers from western countries. This exacerbates the already

existing shortage of qualified educators in their domestic countries. And secondly, the complex nature of hiring teachers internationally and how it affects retention is complex and seems an appealing problem to academics.

From a financial point of view, retaining teachers is a prime concern for schools. A 2014 survey conducted by the European Commission (2014, p. 36-37) asserted that more than a third of teachers in the EU work in schools facing teacher shortages. The US educational sector faces similar problems. Ingersoll (2001) gathered data from the 2016 National Teacher and Principal Survey and revealed that, depending on the state, between 9 and 23 % of teachers had left the profession or moved to a different school. An important side note with this last piece of data concerns the notion of teachers who move schools, a term coined as migration by Richard Ingersoll. Though migrating teachers do not leave the educational sector, the effects on an education institution are the same. Though reliable data is hard to find, ESL schools in China are confronted with high teacher turnover as well. The fact that these language schools are dependent on recruiting foreign teachers from areas where these teacher shortages are apparent further complicates matters. The recruitment for ESL schools does not only rely on a smaller recruitment base in a fiercely competitive market, but it also incurs significant expenses; visa processing, criminal background checks, finding suitable lodging and transfer costs make recruiting new teachers an expensive endeavour.

High teacher turnover also has a significant effect on the roles of ESL school principals. Due to the high demand and low supply of foreign teachers, principals in ESL schools are often required to fulfil a variety of roles. They are often in charge of both training their staff and recruiting new prospective teachers. Time invested in recruiting is time lost that could be spent on supporting the training and continuous professional development of existing teachers.

Yet apart from these financial and organisational aspects, the most important consequence of high teacher turnover is its effect on the students and teachers of a school. Various research has shown that the most important factor for students learning is teacher quality. (Guarino et al, 2006; Thoonen et al, 2011) More experienced teachers that remain with their school have a better grasp of the specific curriculum and teaching culture. Most language teachers who apply for a job in China are new to teaching. Training a new teacher to grasp the basics of language teaching usually takes around a year and represents a significant investment in time and money. The problem is that many international teachers leave after one or two years. Johnson & Birkeland (2003b, p. 21) wrote that a 'school that loses a teacher, also loses that teacher's familiarity with school practice, experience with the school curriculum and involvement with parents and colleagues.' This loss of continuity and commitment can upset the balance within a teaching team. Teachers' motivation and job satisfaction are dependent on their feelings of trust and the possibility to collaborate and develop with their peers (Tschannen-Moran, 2001). Research has shown that migrating teachers move schools not just for money, but also to go to better schools with better training and experienced teachers (Ingersoll & Smith, 2001).

Retaining teachers for longer periods of time would reduce the costs for ESL schools, improve overall teacher quality and lead to an increase in students' learning. An experienced core of teachers can aid new teachers in adapting to the teaching profession and show them the 'tools of the trade'. The importance of teacher retention is apparent. Raising teachers' salary and implementing performance bonuses are a possible solution, but they do not guarantee the quality of teachers. How can schools make sure they retain their teaching staff? Which role do principals play in this and what are their limitations?

ii) Principal Leadership

Principals traditionally fulfil multiple roles in their professional careers and this is no different in the ESL sector. As stated previously, they oversee both recruiting and training new teachers, yet the list of job responsibilities does not end there. Implementing curriculum changes, scheduling teachers' classes and developing teachers represent but a few educational leaders' duties (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003, p. 1).

The current situation due to the Covid-19 outbreak exemplifies the difficulties that come with these varied job responsibilities. After the outbreak in Wuhan, all educational institutions in China were closed, and started their preparations for teaching classes online. Principals played a crucial rule in facilitating this change. They were instructed to provide a new schedule for teachers who were working from home. Some language teachers relocated to their native countries which further complicated scheduling. Teachers also needed training on how to use new online platforms to teach engaging classes. These changes did not just affect teachers, but also the students and their parents. Chinese parents have a vested interest in their children's education (Ren & Edwards, 2005, p. 620-621). Parents are very engaged with these online lessons and often sit next to their children during class. When complaints arise, the principal is often asked to provide an academic perspective. The variety of job roles makes the role of principal a difficult one. It can also lead to a dissatisfaction amongst the principals themselves as they may perceive some of these duties not to be 'academic' in nature.

These difficulties also bring possibilities. Due to the nature of the profession and the many roles they fill, principals can positively affect all departments, academic or not. The impact of effective leadership on schools has been well documented and has proven to be a defining factor in teachers' decision to stay or leave their school. Stockard & Lehman's (2004) study on the job satisfaction of American first year teachers showed that effective leadership and social support were central factors influencing teacher's satisfaction. Effective school management increased teachers' satisfaction, which in their turn increased teacher retention. Other studies confirm these findings. Johnson & Brikeland (2003a) interviewed 50 new teachers in Massachusetts across a period of 3 years and found that one of the main reasons that teachers stayed in school was the presence of a supportive environment.

The effects of good leadership on teachers to stay with their schools did not limit itself to starting teachers. Ingersoll & Smith's (2003, p. 522) analysis of federal surveys of more than 50,000 teachers in the US indicated that 42% of teachers left their jobs because of job

dissatisfaction, and a lack of administrative support was one of the main factors causing this. Hughes (2012, p. 254) came to a similar conclusion. A link between job satisfaction, effective leadership and teacher retention is apparent. This statement brings us to the research question of this study. This essay is less interested in proving the connection between the 3 factors, but to study what strategies principals use to increase teacher motivation and as a result, increase the retention of ESL teachers in China.

I have decided to study these strategies' success within a framework developed by Leithwood, Jantzi & Mascal (2002). They ascertained that variations in the success of educational reform can be explained by the influence it has on teachers' motivation and their work environment. Though Leithwood et al used this model to study large scale reform, the dual focus on teacher motivation and school climate is still useful for my research. Effective leadership can have a substantial impact on these two areas, which in their turn have an ameliorating effect on other aspects of a school. Research has proven that teacher motivation has a direct correlation with both teacher learning, teaching practices and retention (Hughes, 2012; Leithwood et al, 2002; Thoonen et al, 2011). My research does not focus on studying the relation between teacher motivation and those other aspects, I will take this as a given and look at how principals in the ESL-business increase teacher motivation and create a positive working environment.

The creation of a positive working environment involves many different aspects. Principals take part in their school's organisation by setting appropriate expectations for their staff and scheduling their classes in a way to minimise teachers' workloads. Though school leaders have a certain impact on school organisation, there are also limiting factors. Proper scheduling and expectation setting can aid teachers in their daily duties, but the curriculum and policy makers decide in a large part teachers' workload. Though principals can request extra materials to maintain an adequately equipped office, those requests are not always answered. Yet teachers are not just looking for appropriate materials and resources to do their job.

iii) Collaborative Leadership and Vision

Leithwood & Riehl (2003, p. 2) state that 'At the core of most definitions of leadership are two functions: providing direction and exercising influence. Leaders mobilize and work with others to achieve shared goals.' Effective leaders do not just motivate their teachers to achieve shared goals, but also involve them in the creation of a collective vision for the school, preferably one that accommodates teacher development and that has students' learning as its prime focus.

Though my research is centred around the role of principals with regards to retention strategies, it is important to note that educational leadership is best shared. Successful principals seek out those teachers who have leadership potential and motivate them to not only take part but to take the lead in implementing change within their educational centres (Charlotte Advocates for Education, 2004, p.17). By including teachers in decision making and vision building, principals create buy-in. As a result, teachers look for ways to actively improve the school climate of their school.

These concepts of shared leadership, decision making, and vision building are of interest to my study. Do principals in ESL schools engage in communal vision building? Does the business model of an extracurricular language centre, with its relatively high turnover, allow for teacher involvement?

iv) Mentoring/Induction

Several studies have pointed out that the rate of teacher attrition is at its worst with new teachers (Guarino, 2006; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). Ingersoll and Smith (2003, p. 29) estimate that around 50 % of teachers leave within their first 5 years. A possible solution to combat this high turnover is induction programs. Induction is not to be confused with pre-service training. Induction is provided to teachers who have already completed basic teacher training but lack the practical know-how of standing in front of the classroom. Ingersoll and Smith (2003, p. 29) aptly describe 'These programs are often conceived as a bridge from student of teaching to teacher of students.' The term may refer to a variety of different practices such as workshops, trainings and observations.

Mentoring programs have been gaining popularity in the last 30 years and are the most popular form of induction in schools and ESL schools are no exception. Mentoring can be described as a training period where an experienced teacher serves as a guide to aid a new teacher in their development. Wynn (2007, p. 213) distinguishes two different types of support a mentoring program can provide, psychological and instructional support. Teaching can be a stressful job, even more so in extracurricular schools in China. Because of the high turnover new ESL-teachers are often expected to start teaching a full-time schedule without a proper transition period. Parents might also complain when their child gets assigned a new, inexperienced teacher. All these factors can have a negative impact on a new teachers' psyche. An experienced member of staff who has experienced these circumstances before can be a calming and supportive presence. New teachers also need instructional support. Mentors can be a source of knowledge to help teachers with the basic practicalities of teaching such as classroom management, lesson planning or staging, … Though the relation between successful induction programs and retention was proven by Ingersol and Kralik (2004), it is important to note that the success of a program depends on the quality of the support provided (Ingersoll & Smith, 2001, p. 208).

Depending on the school, induction programs can have a different function. Some are solely focused on developing the candidates teaching skills, yet others are also used to assess the suitability of candidates and to make sure they are a right fit for the school. Yet the most defining factors for an induction programs success are its scope and duration (Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004). Ingersoll proved that different types of support, lead to higher retention of new teachers. Having a mentor from the same field, collaboration with other teachers and trainings specifically aimed at beginners were some of the more effective induction supports. Other factors that influenced the effectiveness of an induction were its duration and intensity. Does the induction program stop after a couple of years or does it go on after a year? Are mentors

trained to aid their mentees in developing their teaching quality?

Figure 2. Percentage of beginning teachers who received various induction supports: 1999–2000.
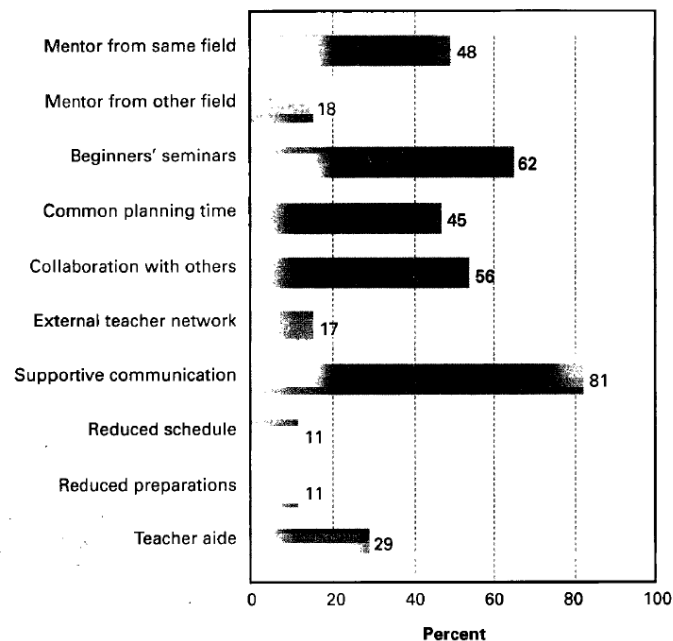
Source: Schools and Staffing Survey.

Image 1

Extra-curricular schools in China rely on a high number of new teachers to teach their classes. Induction programs are common but come in many forms. I will study the implementation and characteristics of these programs as to understand if these programs impact retention. My study does not aim to prove the relation between the induction program and retention within the four ESL-centres that employ the researched principals. This research focusses on the perception of principals on what aids retention within their schools through strategies that improve school climate. Does an inefficient induction program explain the high rate of attrition within ESL-centres in China?

v) Collaborative Learning

Another major factor in teachers' satisfaction is the presence of a climate where teachers can learn from each other and get administrative support in their development. Johnson & Birkeland (2003a, p. 21) ascertained that teachers who migrate to other schools did not just look for schools who provided better salaries and materials, but 'they also looked for schools where they could feel like professionals—sharing ideas and resources with colleagues and receiving respect and guidance from the principal.'   Teachers are no longer expected to work and develop their teaching skills individually, without guidance from more experienced peers. Successful educational leaders foster an environment where teachers can learn in a social context. Morrisey points out that,

'Teacher and administrator learning is more complex, deeper, and more fruitful in a social setting, where the participants can interact, test their ideas, challenge their inferences and interpretations, and process new information with each other.' (Morrisey, 2000, p. 4-5)

This constant exchange of new ideas and knowledge leads to a collective improvement of teaching practices and strategies of teachers and administrators, which because of its many viewpoints cater to the specific learning needs of each child. Research has shown that the determining factor underlying student achievement is the quality of their instruction (Leithwood & Mascall 2008; Thoonen et al 2011). Though implementing a method that fosters collaborative learning amongst teachers is a worthwhile pursuit, this does not mean that individual support for teachers should be neglected. Tschannen Morran's (2001) study proved that trust positively impacts both teacher motivation and teacher professionalism. Furthermore, principals who hold the trust of their employees have an easier time providing instructional guidance. I will research the limits and possibilities of individual support and collective learning from a practical standpoint. As afore mentioned, principals in ESL-schools fulfil a variety of roles and have a heavy workload. Can enough time be made for providing individual support? If present how is collective learning incorporated in their schools.

Methodology and Methods

The main goal of this study is to analyse and describe the strategies principals of extracurricular language schools in China use to retain their teachers. This is an exploratory study, looking to describe perceptions rather than proclaim any general theories.
The research tradition of Phenomenography provides a suitable framework for my study. The term first appeared in an article from Ferenc Marton in 1981. Marlon (1981, p. 180) describes phenomenography as: 'research which aims at description, analysis, and understanding of experiences; that is, research which is directed towards experiential description'. This emphasis on description lends itself to qualitative research. Phenomenography has a non-dualistic view on knowledge. Knowledge is assumed to be based on thinking, yet the methodology is not entirely interpretive in nature, knowledge is also dependent on the external reality. These two spheres of thought and external reality influence each other.

This relational aspect has some important implications for my study. The aim of this study is not to analyse if principals use the right strategies to retain their teachers, but to describe what principals believe are the right strategies to retain their teachers and why they believe these are impactful. Although my contribution to academic literature is small, this does not mean my research is meaningless. Through describing principals' perceptions on effective leadership, I want to expose what motivates principals and how they implement change in their schools and what limits they perceive to doing this. I am interested in comparing these perceptions with what academic research has taught us about retention and teacher motivation. Do their strategies differ from what academics propose as successful school climates? If so, what are the reasons for this? My aim is to provide a clear picture of the factors

that influence retention in ESL-schools in China and clarify the role principals play in this. This is a worthwhile pursuit because much has been written on the public educational sector in the US and Europe, but there has been scant research on extra-curricular language schools in China. This is surprising, as these extra-curricular classes play a crucial role in Chinese society and are a growing phenomenon throughout South-East Asia (Zou et al, 2013, p. 1845-1846).

To fully understand the perceptions of the interviewed principals, it is necessary to provide the context within which these perceptions came about. This means that apart from describing the school climate in which they work, I also need to seek out their viewpoint on what effective leadership entails. How do they define successful leadership? Is this dependent on training, or are some people just born with a sense of leadership? Do they perceive themselves as sufficiently trained to introduce changes within their schools? My research seeks to provide answers to these questions. This is a valuable pursuit because it may provide a roadmap for future educational leaders and policymakers on who to promote to a leadership function and how to train them.

Methods

The data for my research was collected through a short questionnaire and semi-structured interviews of four principals. The questionnaire was used to collect general information about the interviewed principals' schools and their professional profile. The bulk of my data was gathered through semi-structured interviews. The choice of this medium was deliberate as interviews allow the participants to freely express their thoughts (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012, p. 2). The crux of my research revolves around principals' perceptions on retention and leadership. Interviews allow the participants to tell the story from their perspective in a natural setting. My initial intention was to conduct these interviews face-to-face, yet this was impossible. The interviews took place during the Corona outbreak and were conducted through WeChat, a Chinese social media platform. The date and time of the interviews were shared with the participants three weeks in advance. At the start of the interview the principals were informed that the interview would be recorded and that their anonymity would be guaranteed. I mentioned that the audio recording and transcripts will be deleted after the completion of my research. My interview was centred around 14 questions (see appendix A) which can be divided into four categories: the role of principals, strategies for teacher retention, teacher development (mentoring and induction) and school climate (collaborative learning). I did not strictly adhere to the order of these questions, but all of them were asked. The interviewed principals were given the chance to elaborate on their answers, yet they were prompted to remain focussed on the topic. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes to an hour. At the end of the interviews, principals were informed about the ensuing proceedings of my research.

Data analysis

After conducting and recording the interviews I set myself to the task of transcribing the interviews. These transcripts were then analysed to distinguish any common themes within

the principals' responses. Aside from categorising these common themes I also paid attention to divergent data and tried to interpret why these perceptions came about. Svensson (1997, p.168) notes that 'In phenomenography the aim is to both preserve the specific content of the phenomena in the description and to focus on some more fundamental characteristics.' My focus on the categorisation and variation of qualitative research data is an important pursuit of my study and ties in with the framework of Phenomenography.

Participants

The four principals that I interviewed are all colleagues of mine and work for the same language institute in the Chinese city of Xi'an. They are all male and British. My original setup was to interview a female principal to avoid gender bias, but she had to cancel our interview because of circumstances relating to the Corona outbreak. The one American principal that works for our company has recently been promoted to the position and was omitted from this research due to his inexperience. All four principals have different levels of experience but have a track record of relatively high retention compared to the organisation's benchmarks. The principal with the most seniority had served 10 years with the company and 5 years of those as a principal, while the principal with the least experience had been with the company for 5 years and had only held the position of principal for a year. All principals had held the position of assistant principal for at least a year before stepping up to principal.

Ethics

The fact that I work for the same company in the same position as the participants complicated the interview procedure. Firstly, there was the danger that my colleagues felt intimidated to answer personal questions about their motivation and professional career. The legal documentation supplied by the Ethics Application Procedure of the University of Sheffield helped ease these fears. The Adult Consent Form and the Detailed Project Information Document explained the direction and goal of my research and provided legal reassurance that this research was to be conducted following a strict ethical code where their anonymity and interests would be safeguarded. This documentation was shared with them well before they took any part in my research. I reminded them again about the general outline of my research and the protection of their anonymity at the start of their interview.
Another complicating factor with practitioner research is the need to avoid subjectivity (Pilkington, 2009, p. 162). Throughout this research I have had to step away from my role as a practitioner and approach this study from the perspective of a researcher. To guarantee the objectivity of my findings I have had to be aware and cautious to not confuse my own experiences and perceptions with those of my interviewees. I have tried as much as possible to explain the principals' points of view in their own words, making only slight alterations for clarity.

Analysis and Discussion

Overall, the conducted interviews went to plan. If anything, interviewing those I work with made the process simpler as the industry specific jargon did not require clarification. Everyone answered to the best of their ability and stayed on track. Below are the questions asked with common themes and data extrapolated:

Retention

All principals interviewed viewed teacher retention as an important factor. Retaining teachers represented an efficient use of principal time as if teachers come and go frequently, this would increase time spent on recruitment and the training of new teachers which is very time consuming.

One of the principals touched on the clear negative effects of high teacher attrition. He stated that teachers often left in groups, as friends talked with each other about job opportunities and influenced their colleagues to move with them. This lead to a negative atmosphere with those teachers who were 'left behind' and often created further retention issues. His views mirrored what Ingersoll (2003, p.31) describes as a vicious cycle between high rates of teacher turnover and a lack of community.

Two of the four principals mentioned that the high expectation of keeping staff meant that sometimes less qualified or desirable teachers stayed and when they left this did not diminish the quality of the centre. It was also mentioned that due the high expectations of Chinese managers that principals should 'convince' teachers to stay led to other factors not being considered, such as the international teachers own best interest, being taken into account.

Two methods were mentioned with regards to how principals retained teachers:

> 1)   The high workload of a principal and the relatively large number of teachers per centre meant it was relatively easy for a teacher issue to go unnoticed. Having frequent direct contact with the teachers (formal and informal conversations, quarterly performance evaluations, observation feedback sessions, etc) were vital in setting clear expectations for the teacher.
>
> 2)   As ESL teachers are not only working but living abroad, the role of pastoral support is not to be diminished. In a country like China where there is a good chance the international teacher will have no or beginner level Mandarin, having a member of staff help with simple day to day issues had a big effect on the happiness and productivity of teachers at work.

Leadership

All the principals defined effective leadership through the principal's ability to develop

teachers. This at least provides confidence in the interview process for academic managers and paints a positive picture of the principals in place. The reason for development being the defining characteristic of an effective academic varied slightly. One principal mentioned that it has the biggest direct influence on the learning and development of the students. This viewpoint of placing student learning at the centre of educators' goals is increasingly propagated in public schools in the US. (Morrisey, 2002, p. 5; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003, p. 2) Another principal thought the academic development of a teacher was the main role of a principal as they saw themselves primarily as an academic manager and not as an administrator.

This sentiment, of having an unclear job description, was again mentioned by the majority of the principals in noting the main challenges of being an academic leader. Two other interesting points raised were many teachers come to the ESL field with the primary goal of making money and resist development. Another valid point raised was having an international member of staff as a manager in China produced a system that breeds cross-cultural conflict.

Another commonality amongst the principals is that none received any form of formal training. One of the principals noted: 'We have no formal training as a principal, but also there was no clear organisational structure either to who was my manager. My centre manager who is my line manager will often come to me asking for advice and asking me how things should be done. Who is in charge of this relationship?'

This is a direct result of two main factors: a high teacher turnover rate and a lack of motivation amongst principals due their unclear job description and as result, not feeling any sense of duty or accomplishment.

Shared Leadership

All principals shared the vision on an effective principal building a school where teachers can develop and progress. All principals also agreed that their visions were not realised, due to two factors. One is that their job description is unclear, mainly due to the rate of change in job expectations. The management structure of Chinese schools means that despite being an academic manager, there will always be someone ranked above them. It is also engrained in Chinese culture that a boss's decision is paramount, so such local managers will often take no heed to the words of principals if it contradicts their own vision. Tschannen-Moran's study (2001, p. 313) shows that a lack of clear expectations and unilateral decision-making can cause distrust and resentment.

The other factor is teacher retention. As the turnover rate is so high, a principal will often spend a lot of time training and developing teachers who could have been kept if the principal was not overwhelmed in the first place, or by teachers who should not have been hired in the first place. This creates a vicious cycle which diverts the principals' expertise into more administrative functions.

Collaborative Learning

The questions regarding collaborative learning did not yield many commonalities in opinion as the size of school that the teachers managed varied dramatically, from 300 to 2500 students. Smaller schools were in a better position to have shared planning sessions with their teachers, whereas this becomes exponentially more difficult in a larger school.

The principals did however agree on the important role principals play in creating a positive atmosphere at work and the importance this can have on incentivising teacher development and as a result, retention.

Mentoring/Induction

All principals were happy that the existing mentorship program was adequate but that the rate of teacher turnover did not allow for this to happen. This may seem like a contradiction, but it would not be possible to make a mentorship program that allowed for last minute teacher replacements and a large workload for new and untrained teachers.

Two principals agreed that the focus had been shifted to making sure teachers with seniority were able to provide quality training for new teachers who were expected to take a heavy workload in a short period of time. This does run the risk of demotivating these teachers who are then expected to not only train the teacher, but also share the workload of the departed teacher, but it would be impossible for the principal to perform their role without delegating. This situation ties in with Feiman-Nemser (2003, p.29) statement that: 'Even the best induction programs cannot compensate for an unhealthy school climate, a competitive teacher culture, or an inappropriate teaching assignment.'

Conclusion

Having asked these questions and extrapolated the data it is clear to see that there are shared issues. We can conclude three things:

Those who develop to the level of principal in the ESL industry are mostly interested in academic development. The role is seen as desirable by those involved in teaching as an academic pursuit more so than those interested in management. This raises several important issues as the common assumption would be that principals are academic managers, but a high teacher turnover rate also means a high turnover rate for principals. Perhaps a change in the role of an ESL principal is required; one that reflects what they actually do day to day. The fluid nature of the job may be better suited to someone with high organisation, adaptability and interpersonal skills rather than those who are promoted on their academic acumen. It could also be a product of the complete lack of training they are receiving to take on leadership roles that leads to their demotivation and ultimate departure. This is an area for further research.

Retention rates of teachers in an international setting are not as straightforward as one might think. Traditionally, retention is seen as a test for the health of a school – if teachers are trained properly, positively reinforced and not overburdened, then they are happy and will stay. It also represents an effective use of time for those who are trained and a loss to the collective academic experience of the school. However, the remarks of two principals highlighted an interesting point: the competitive nature of international recruitment and costs incurred incentivises schools to retain undesirable teachers or not consider what is best professionally or personally for the departing teacher.

If job roles are constantly being changed and the focus is never on teacher development, is the role of an ESL principal really the right role as it stands for these individuals at all? The role of principal is of course appealing to those with an interest in academics, and it would be naïve to dismiss other principal motivations such as salary and personal circumstances, but perhaps their interests and talents would be better served elsewhere. The role at the moment might be more suitable for someone interested in management and cross-cultural communication.

There are many different factors that determine teacher retention and it is my belief that the principal has a big role to play. Through these interviews, it is clear to see that the role of principal attracts those interested in academics who are often put off by the lack of training, unclear job description, changing expectations and overwhelmed by the workload. Any future studies should try to build a cross-company profile of an ESL school principal in China and match it against the profile of an average job description to see if this job should be filled by those with management or academic experience. Research should carefully examine retention data to determine whether it is misleading or not. As the principals I spoke to mentioned, keeping substandard teachers or going against the best interest of quality teachers is incentivised due to the costly and time intensive process of international teacher recruitment. It should also investigate whether the current pool of principals would find more job satisfaction in the other academic roles, such as teacher trainers or in curriculum design.

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Appendix: A

Script

Thank the participant for taking the time to do this interview. Explain that the aim of this research is to gain insights on factors that influence retention and effective leadership in ESL schools. Inform the participant that this interview will be recorded but that the recordings will be deleted after the completion of my study. Assure candidates that if after the interview there is any information they want omitted from my research, they have the right to mention this and I will not include it. Ensure participants that their confidentiality is guaranteed. Ask participants if they have any questions so far, if not start the recorder and commence the interview.

Questions

Effective Leadership

1. What do you believe defines effective educational leadership?
   a) In what manner does this relate to your profession?

2. What do you find the most difficult aspect of your job?

3. What gives you the most satisfaction in your job?

4. Were you properly prepared and trained before being promoted to principal?
   a) Which parts of that training do you perceive as crucial to your development?
   b) Which one characteristic do you believe a principal should have to be succesful at his job?

Retention

5. How important is teacher retention?

6. What are some of the main reasons teachers leave the school?

7. What makes a difference in retention?
   a) What role do you play as a principal in retaining your teachers?

8. What do you believe is the single most important factor in retaining teachers.

Shared leadership, vision building & decision making

9.   What is your main vision for the school?
   a)   How do you practically aim to implement this vision in your school?
   b)   Are others involved in this?

10. How are decisions made in your school?
   a)   What, if any, role do others play in this?

Collaborative learning

11. How would you describe your current school climate?
   a)   What strategies do you use to create a supportive environment?

12. How are you supporting teachers in their professional development?
   a)   Do you rely on others to accomplish this?
   b)   Do other teachers play a role in teacher retention?

Mentoring & induction

13. How are new teachers supported when they first arrive at the school?
   a)   What role do you as the principal and/or other teachers play in this?
   b)   How long does this support last? What type of development follows afterwards?

14. Are new teachers monitored through their induction period?
   a)   How do you measure their success?