

‘Nowadays, teachers are relatively obedient’: Understanding primary school English teachers’ conceptions of and drives for research in China

Xuesong (Andy) Gao* Gary Barkhuizen** Alice Chow*

*Department of English, Hong Kong Institute of Education, Hong Kong SAR

**University of Auckland, New Zealand

Abstract

Research engagement has been widely considered crucial in transforming teachers into ‘expert knowers about their students and classrooms’ (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 16).

This article reports on a mixed-method study of the research engagement of a group of primary school teachers in China’s Guangdong province, focusing particularly on their conceptions of teacher research and the contextual factors driving them to do research. The study revealed that the majority of these teachers opted for the type of research involving experimental use of particular teaching methods or approaches in their classrooms with the intention of improving their teaching and their students’ learning. While sharing research findings through publication is an integral part of academic research, these teachers did not place much emphasis on writing for publication, although they reported alternative forms of research dissemination. The study also revealed that research has been promoted through a top-down performance review process for schools and teachers, which has research activity and outcomes structured into it. This mechanism may be effective in *promoting* research

activity among schools and teachers, but it is far less effective in actually *supporting* teachers' research efforts. We conclude that further research on primary school English teachers' research experiences is needed in order to provide relevant and useful knowledge to teacher educators and policymakers on the Chinese mainland, making research a sustainable path to professional excellence for teachers.

Introduction

Research engagement has been widely considered crucial in transforming teachers into ‘expert knowers about their students and classrooms’ (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 16).

In language teacher education, reflective teaching and action research have been promoted as an important means for in-service teachers to upgrade their professional knowledge, undertake pedagogical innovations and assert greater agency in their professional practices (Barkhuizen, 2009; Borg, 2007a 2007b, 2009; Burns, 1999; Farrell, 2006). However, scholars have tended to have disagree with regard to a number of issues in teacher research such as standards for and sustainability of teacher research. Nunan (1997), for instance, argues that ‘teacher research should, first and foremost, be evaluated against the same standards that are applied to any other kind of research’ (p. 366). In his view, rigorous teacher research not only improves classroom practice but also enhances the standing of the discipline. In contrast, Allwright (1997) points out the ‘irreconcilable conflict between the demands of quality and of sustainability’ (p. 368). He conceptualizes teacher research as ‘exploratory practice’ that integrates ‘worthwhile research elements into teaching and learning without simply copying academic research’ (pp. 368-369). Allwright further contends that teacher-research should not be evaluated by the standards for academic research and instead should focus on local understandings for teachers’ professional practice (see also Burton, 1998). In spite of these differences, interest in teacher research has grown in recent years (Allwright, 2003, 2005;

Freeman & Richards, 1996; McDonough & McDonough, 1990, 1997), to the extent that Borg (2007a) has now called for empirical research into the research engagement of English language teachers. Topics for research may include issues such as teachers' conceptions of research, the benefits of teacher research for teachers and their learners, conditions that facilitate or constrain teacher research, institutional policy regarding teacher research, support for teachers engaged in research, teacher attitudes towards research, and teacher research knowledge and skills.

Until recently, however, only a limited number of studies have examined language teachers' research engagement. In a comparative study of 505 teachers of English in 13 contexts, Borg (2009) found that the teachers held conceptions of research aligned with conventional scientific notions of inquiry. He also found that they were driven largely by practical and professional concerns to do research, e.g. professional development, solving problems in teaching, and identifying better ways to teach, rather than extrinsic incentives such as promotion. Similarly, Barkhuizen' (2009) explored the research experiences of 83 teachers of English in Chinese universities and his findings echo the dominance of practical and professional concerns as factors motivating teachers to do research (e.g., motivating their students, improving teaching materials, and encouraging students to speak in class). Both Barkhuizen's and Borg's studies reveal numerous constraints on teacher research such as lack of time, knowledge and resources required for research (see also Allwright, 2005; Kirkwood

& Christie, 2006).

In these studies, the participants were mainly teachers of adult English learners. In general, there has been limited information about English teachers' research engagement in secondary and primary school settings. As Borg (2007a) pointed out, further empirical research into English teachers' research engagement in different contexts, is required 'if we are to develop an evidence-base which can inform policy and initiatives aimed at promoting research engagement by teachers in ELT' (p. 733). To this end, this article reports on a mixed-method study of the research engagement of a group of primary school teachers in China's Guangdong province, focusing particularly on their conceptions of teacher research and the processes driving them to do research. Specifically, we aimed to answer the following two research questions:

(1) What are the primary school English teachers' conceptions of research?

(2) How and why are these teachers engaged in research?

The article begins by describing the contextual conditions of the teachers' professional practices, and continues with a description of the methods used to conduct the study, followed by the findings which emerged from the investigation.

English language teaching and teacher research in China

Since China reopened to the world in the late 1970s, English has been promoted on an

unprecedented scale in the country, no longer just as a foreign language but as an essential skill for the vast population to acquire (Wang & Gao, 2008). The public has also shown an unwavering enthusiasm for the learning of English, causing its rapid expansion at all educational levels (Hu, 2005; Jin & Cortazzi, 2002). It is estimated that over 200 million students are learning English in primary, secondary and tertiary settings (Wen & Gao, 2007). To cope with such a gigantic task, a total of 1.23 million English teachers need to be recruited, while many practising teachers are in need of further training as they were not initially trained specifically as English teachers (Hu, 2005; Wen & Gao, 2007; Wang, 2002).

In the educational sector, the need for effective ways to foster teachers' professional competence is most pressing in primary schools. Primary schools have a serious shortage of English teachers as a result of the government's introduction of English as a primary school subject in 2001 before sufficient numbers of teachers could be trained to these schools. While an increasing percentage of English teachers in secondary schools have received the required qualifications for teaching (Hu, 2005), about half a million English teachers are still to be recruited and trained in addition to the current 200,000 practising teachers to cope with the task of teaching English to 112.5 million students in primary schools (Wen & Gao, 2007). This creates an enormous challenge for educational authorities and schools to develop and enhance primary school English teachers' professional competence.

The need to do so has been further exacerbated by the government's ongoing efforts to

reform the English language curriculum with the aim of improving the effectiveness of English language teaching. Recognizing the size and diversity of the country, the educational reforms since 1985 have instituted a decentralization process allowing curricula decisions to be made in response to local needs. Before this, school teachers and local curriculum developers ran the risk of being fired if they met these local needs, such as choosing textbooks appropriate to their students' English levels (Xu, 2008). In recent years, then, teachers have been attributed greater responsibility in the curriculum development and pedagogic innovation process. They are expected to be curriculum developers, active in pursuing innovative teaching practices. Some educational researchers on the Chinese mainland even maintain that teachers themselves are 'curriculum' (Zhong, 2006, p. 372). As a result, they are increasingly encouraged to reflect on their professional practices, often through action research in their professional settings (Gu & Wang, 2006; Thorne & Wang, 1996; Wang, Zhou & Gu, 2005; Zhan, 2008).

Given these voices for innovation, most teacher education programmes have 'tended to be a mixture of teaching English as a subject and learning about teaching as a profession' (Zhan, 2008, p. 56). Except for a few leading normal universities (such as the university in Thorne & Wang, 1996), many teacher education programmes have ineffectual teaching practica and little coverage of educational research methodology, including action research for teachers (Hu, 2005; Li, 1999; Zhan, 2008). Since very few primary school English teachers

are graduates from the few prestigious normal universities, much of their professional development inevitably takes place within their school contexts.

As is traditional in China, educational authorities at different levels have a unit called the Research and Teaching Office which is responsible for research and pedagogical innovation activities in schools under its administration. The office has staff in various subject areas who organize and support professional development activities for teachers. Teachers are usually assigned, according to their subjects, to ‘Teaching and Research’ groups in schools, in which they prepare lessons together, share their teaching experiences, and support each other in their professional practices. These mechanisms play an important role in primary school teachers’ ongoing professional development and in promoting their research engagement.

The huge population and limited educational resources in China, however, have led to great regional disparity among different schools in terms of educational resources and pedagogical practices (Dooley, 2001; Hu, 2003, 2005). These regional disparities have been further worsened by the government’s inclination to concentrate financial and educational resources on select elite institutions, which are called ‘key’ schools (Zhao & Guo, 2002). Compared to non-key schools, well-resourced key schools attract highly qualified teaching staff and recruit high-caliber students who have more opportunities to receive higher education (Ross, 1993; Schoenhals, 1993; Tsang & Ding, 2005). The key school system has been criticized because of the way it intensifies educational competition within schools

resulting in severe anxiety for students, parents and teachers alike (Dooley, 2001; Gao, 2006, 2008; Phelps, 2005; Yang, 2002; You, 2007; Zhao & Guo, 2002). At the same time, the system also creates ambitious principals who have ‘strong achievement motivation, attach importance to the public image of school, ... [and are] willing to be engaged in research work’ (You, 2007, p. 234). As a result, key schools are more likely to involve their teachers in research and inspire the principals of non-key schools who wish to promote their schools to key school status.

The inquiry

In April 2008, a group of 40 primary school English teachers, including four former English teachers who had been transferred to work in the Research and Teaching Office in their counties, visited Hong Kong to participate in an in-service training programme. The in-service programme, attracting select teachers from Guangdong, aimed to develop their professional competence to cope with ongoing curriculum reforms in their school settings. Thirty-three members of the group consented to participate in the study. All the participants taught full-time in state primary schools, the majority of them (28) having taught for 5-19 years. As is evident from their educational backgrounds, few of them had research training as part of their pre-service teacher education programmes.

We adopted a mixed method approach to explore the teachers’ conceptions of research

and the research culture at their places of work. We first administered a survey among the participants and then drawing on a preliminary analysis of the survey data, we invited participants to take part in focus group interviews.

Survey

A modified version of Borg's (2007a, 2009) questionnaire was used (see Appendix 1). The modifications took into account the contextual circumstances of the teachers and their schools, including the fact that they were primary school teachers. The questionnaire items were translated into Chinese. In the translation process, efforts were made to ensure that the translated version reflected the teachers' professional experiences. For instance, *Because my employer expects me to do research* in the original questionnaire was translated into Chinese as *Because my school leaders (superiors) expect me to do research*. These modifications do not change the coverage and intentions of the original questionnaire.

The adaptation of Borg's questionnaires, including the ten research scenarios, risks pushing the respondents into comparing their own beliefs about and conceptions of research with dominant discourses of research represented by the contents of the questionnaire. To compensate for this apparent methodological bias, we inserted two sections in the questionnaire asking respondents to describe their school settings and any research experiences that they may have had (see Sections 4 and 7), however they themselves define

research. As teachers might have had quite different professional experiences in well-resourced, urban schools and in under-resourced, rural schools, we wanted to determine whether such differences would mediate their conceptions of research. We were also interested in knowing to what extent the participants had engaged in research, however their conceived of it.

Focus group interviews

Based on our preliminary analysis of both closed- and open-ended questionnaire data, we identified and invited 10 participants out of those who claimed that they had some research experiences in the questionnaire to participate in focus group interviews. There were four interviews in total, each involving 2 or 3 participants and lasting at least an hour and a half. In the interviews, the participants were asked to further elaborate on their answers to the questionnaire (see Appendix 2). The preliminary analysis of the data led us to the surprising discovery that many of the participants had indeed been involved in research. We were therefore also interested in exploring in the focus group interviews the reasons for the extent of their engagement in research. The participants were particularly encouraged to share details of their research experience and the settings in which they conducted research. Most of the participants in the focus group interviews taught English in state primary schools except Teachers 9, 10, and 21: Teachers 9 and 21 taught in an experimental primary school, which is

also a state school but has financial autonomy, while Teacher 10 had recently become an officer in the primary English section attached to the Educational Authority in her county.

Two teachers also worked as English panel chairs or group directors in their schools, and were responsible for promoting research among their colleagues.

The interviews were conducted by the two Chinese-speaking researchers and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then translated into English so that we could all (the three researchers) participate in the analysis equally. The translated transcripts were double checked and extracts were selectively back-translated to ensure the accuracy of the translation. Since we aimed for the inquiry to obtain a situated understanding of these teachers' research experiences, the qualitative analysis of the data followed a process of paradigmatic cognition (Erickson, 2004; Smeyers & Verhesschen, 2001). Though in general, grounded theory procedures were adopted, we paid particular attention to the participants' references to contextual conditions and their conceptions of research as guided by the research questions (Patton, 1990). Among the emerging findings on context and conception, we also attempted to identify the interaction between the two. We were all involved in the analysis, thus enhancing the quality of the analysis as different interpretations of the same data converged through a process of collegial discussion.

Teachers' conceptions of research

In order to understand how and why the teachers engage in research, it is necessary to ask first what they understand by research. We have used three sources of data which provide answers to this question: their ratings of the 10 research scenarios, qualitative comments in the questionnaire (see Appendix 1), and their contributions to the focus group interviews.

Research approach and purpose

As recorded in Table 1, the participants rated three scenarios to be most likely to be research (percentages for *Definitely Research* and *Probably Research* combined), including scenarios 6 (100%), 5 (97%), and 2 (93.9%). All the participants considered scenario 6 to be research - a situation where different vocabulary teaching methods were used in two classes in order to determine which method was more effective. The classes were compared using pre- and post-tests. The positivistic overtones of this design no doubt clearly signal to the teachers that research is in progress (see similar findings in Borg, 2009, who points out that experimental designs are commonly recognised by teachers as being more 'scientific' research). This case also makes connections between the research findings and the desire to improve teaching practice. So too does scenario 5, in which teachers learn to improve classroom management after observing each other's lessons. They publish their results in a teachers' association newsletter, thus adding a further typical research practice to the scenario.

Scenario 2, again, involves teachers' experimental use of particular teaching methods.

Table 1: Participants' rating of the ten research scenarios (N=33).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Positive	69.7%	93.9%	78.8%	81.8%	97%	100%	33.4%	63.7%	51.5%	39.3%
Negative	27.3%	6.1%	21.2%	18.2%	3%	0	66.7%	36.3%	48.5%	60.7%

Among all the scenarios, only two were rated by less than half of the participants as research; scenarios 7 (33.4%) and 10 (39.3%). In these scenarios, the research roles were played by a headmaster and a department head respectively, there is no focus on teaching practice or improvement, and there is no direct teacher involvement or collaboration in the research process. From these data, it is evident that the teachers in this study see research as being research in schools which is closely related to the improvement of their practice. They also appeared to be attracted to the idea that research should be systematic (especially of the positivistic kind) and disseminated (but see next section).

Experimental research

These general observations of teachers' conceptions were supported by the qualitative data in the questionnaires. In the open-ended question section (Section 7), the participants described a variety of research experiences and further elaborated on their views and expectations concerning teacher research. Among 17 such comments, at least 7 participants mentioned their experiences of organizing experimental classes for trialling innovative teaching

techniques such as games or task-based instruction. For instance, Teacher 12 reports:

I was involved in a project called ‘The Design and Application of English Games in Classroom Teaching’. ... In the process, we selected an experimental class and students for the experimental teaching. We then decided a plan for the experimental teaching. We did the teaching in a scheduled period of time. In research we used a questionnaire and interviews and the data collected were analyzed statistically. In every research stage, we analyzed the data, reflected on the findings and adjusted our teaching.

There were also other types of research that these teachers were both planning and engaged in, such as lesson studies (Wang et al., 2005) in which teachers collaboratively prepared for lessons and reflected on their actual teaching process for further refinement (e.g. Teacher 13). Most of these research projects aimed to improve a particular aspect of students’ learning. For example, one teacher (Teacher 10) reported on her efforts to improve ethnic minority students’ English pronunciation. Such research was also encouraged by school principals who wanted teachers to explore ‘doubts’ and ‘questions’ in the teaching process and experiment with using ‘innovative techniques that could be easily promoted among teachers’ (Teacher 16).

The participants in the focus interviews provided further evidence which confirms the findings from the questionnaires. For example, in all the participants’ interview narratives, ‘experiment’ (i.e. experimental use of particular teaching methods or techniques) was

essential in doing research. Teacher 9 describes her research experience in the following interview extract, which appears to be typical among the interview participants:

Teacher 9: After we successfully make the bid for the research project, we will organize a research group. The first thing to do is to make preparations. Then we select a target class and a target teacher who will carry out the experiment. Then we will collect information about the research before the experiment, for example, what kind of teaching materials we should use.

Interviewer: So what kind of information will you collect?

Teacher 9: Some students' work, and for the lesson, the target teacher has already started teaching the class. So we will collect information about students' performance.

In addition to the centrality of 'experiment', the above extracts also suggest that most of their research projects were collaboratively done, either in the English subject group that they belonged to or special task groups set up for the project.

Research and publication

Though the participants unanimously accepted an experimental design as essential to research, they revealed in the questionnaire an ambiguous attitude towards dissemination or publication

of research results. Although they did mention their publication experiences and considered publication to be an important aspect of the research process, the teachers did not place as much emphasis on publication as they did on the application of research findings for improving practice. Confirmed by the focus group interview data, the participants were found to be more concerned with their professional development than whether or not their research would receive wide attention. The positive research experiences in their accounts were mostly associated with comments like ‘the research findings helped improve our English teaching a lot’ (Teacher 5). Even though it was found that schools sometimes financially rewarded those who managed to have articles published, the participants still reported low motivation to write about and publish their research. Possible explanations are that they had a heavy load of other written work to cope with as part of their job responsibilities, and that publishing in their professional settings is a highly selective process, as the following exchange illustrates:

Teacher 7: We all had to write papers and submit them to school every semester. Then the school will choose a few of them as the best articles [to the municipal teaching research committee and certain educational magazines.]

Interviewer: The same to you? [Asking another teacher in the focus group.]

Teacher 1: Essay... it is just kind of [reflection] on what you have done in the semester.

Interviewer: The same to you?

Teacher 3: I [have to] write [such] essays.

Teacher 7: And a lot of articles on our teaching reflections. Many other writings to do.

Interviewer: But you do not need to!

Teacher 1: Yes [we have to].

Teacher 7: Because her school is a state school. Mine, too.

Due to the highly selective nature of the publishing process, many teachers might have written up their research and other professional activities, but most of it had not been published. Three teachers, in response to the question concerning the writing-up and dissemination of research findings, mentioned that they wrote internal reports on their research projects which were submitted to their principals and/or the officers who were in charge of the Research and Teaching Office at local educational authorities.

As reported in the questionnaires and group interviews, there were alternative ways of sharing their research outcomes, which reduced the necessity to write and publish articles in professional journals. Teacher 12 wrote the following in the questionnaire (Section 7):

In our multimedia project, we had a presentation on what we did. After our presentation, one teacher did a demonstration class showing how he used multimedia to motivate students' learning interests. ... We also used students' work, the pictures or storybooks they made as a result of our experimental teaching.

Teacher 13 recalled how she distributed results from their pedagogical innovations through self-made CD Roms, which stored a collection of teaching materials. Together with other mentioned dissemination approaches, such as demonstration classes and audio-video products, it is likely that their pedagogical innovations will have an impact on other teachers, probably more so than if they were reported in academic articles.

There were also participants who admitted doing very little writing even though they were involved in pedagogical experiments. These teachers, such as Teacher 3, believed that they had limited capacity for research and writing:

In fact, not all of us were strong at doing research. Some of us might be a bit weak in doing research. Our team leader is good at it and he could write good articles. ... As for me, I think that I am a bit weak in doing research. For instance, I am not good at expressing myself in writing or speaking.

Teacher 3 was not the only one who had a low regard for their writing ability. There were others who had been successful in producing written accounts of their research, but who nevertheless felt somewhat uncertain about their own research knowledge and skills. Teacher 8 complained about ‘still having vague understanding of the research issue’ even though she had written articles about the research she had done. Similarly, Teacher 10 was disappointed about her research performance as she could not do complex ‘experiments’: ‘I do not know how to do complicated experiments and research. Even though I have published a number of

articles in municipal and provincial educational journals, I still think that I have done poor and unsuccessful research’.

In short, research as conceived by the participants in this inquiry resembles quite closely what is generally considered research in the academic community (Borg, 2009). However, they also have distinctive characteristics; namely, the participants attached great value to the use of experimental teaching as part of their research designs, particularly with the aim of improving teaching practices, they did not always value publication as an integral part of the research process, and publication was not necessarily associated with their success in doing research.

Contextual conditions and personal drives in teacher research

The findings in the previous section have already suggested that the participants’ conceptions of research were mediated by contextual factors, such as school principals’ expectations, and their particular working conditions. In this section, we examine further contextual factors evident in the data; specifically those leading to the promotion of research and those which present substantial constraints on research planning and activity. Closely connected to these factors are the teachers’ personal drives underlying their research efforts.

Contextual challenges for research

One of the features of the teachers' research experiences is that most of their projects were not funded by educational authorities at local and provincial levels, although all the projects that these teachers were involved in were either strongly encouraged or forced on them by their principals or educational authorities. Teacher 11 recalled with regard to her first research experience: 'I have done research only once. It was suggested by the local educational authority. The research project lasted three years and the educational authority asked us to become involved'. Many of the teachers' initial research projects were not even financially supported by their schools. Echoing Teacher 9's remark concerning the educational authority's unwillingness to provide financial support, Teacher 10, who was in the same focus group with Teacher 9, described in her interview a similar experience:

We had a similar situation. If you want to do research, you will not get financial support either. Then we need to order a lot of materials. And there will be costs. If you do not order them, it is not possible to do research.

Teacher 5 was only able to secure a promise of financial support from her principal after she had successfully completed her second project: 'For the second project, we did a lot and gained a lot. ... We became more experienced and the headmaster promised financial support orally to us'. With little or no financial resources, these teachers have only limited access to research resources, such as journal publications. They also could not afford to take courses related to research methodology or to receive support from experienced 'expert' researchers.

The only form of preparation they had for doing research was ‘one-off mass lectures’ given by university academics, which, we believe, is inadequate for them to plan for research and to deal with the numerous methodological and logistical problems that arise during the research process.

Another constraint emerged during the actual research process. This involved dealing with the time-consuming work required by the research activity, such as collecting the relevant data, on top of an already heavy teaching workload. Teacher 17 explains:

We had to keep looking for all sorts of information and materials. Most of our English teachers teach two or three groups of students. If they are capable, they could teach two or three more groups of students. One might end up teaching five or six groups of students. They also have to make a lot of copies. ... We have large classes and one class may have around sixty students. Teachers have heavy teaching tasks, your see. ...

To keep oneself involved in this three-year project, many teachers will find this a very tiring job. It is really tiring.

English teachers from rural areas expressed doubts about doing research in their school contexts, not only because of a lack of research skills but also because they had limited competence in English. In addition, a poorer quality of training in English teaching probably meant that they had to make even greater effort in their teaching tasks.

In spite of these challenges, many of the participants persisted in doing research. One

may ask, therefore, why they felt so motivated to do research and whether such research efforts were sustainable. One teacher (Teacher 12) observed that teachers did research because ‘most teachers are relatively obedient nowadays’, implying that they followed what their superiors asked them to do. But it was not only top-down instructions which motivated teachers to do research, there were a number of other factors which drove them to challenge and overcome the constraints they encountered in their working environments.

Personal drives

In the case of Teachers 12 and 17, they felt obliged to be more proactive in doing research because of their roles as ‘departmental leaders’ in their schools:

Interviewer: My impression is that both of you are very enthusiastic about doing research.

Teacher 17: Well, we have some research experience.

Teacher 12: Moreover, as a departmental leader [panel chair], we have to motivate and encourage other teachers to do research. For this reason, we have to be proactive in the first place

Interviewer: To act as a role model, you mean?

Teacher 12: Only if you are more proactive than other teachers, you can persuade them to do research.

Though these teachers were driven to do research as part of their school responsibilities, Teacher 17 was also interested in exploring teaching for the sake of her own professional development. She certainly considered professional development necessary in order to uphold her other roles in her school, such as being a leading teacher: 'I am a teacher who constantly looks for better ways to improve English teaching in my school. In a sense, I am also an investigator of teaching. Therefore, I need to improve myself in my subject'.

There were also individual teachers, who did not necessarily have an official responsibility for promoting research, but were nevertheless committed to integrating research into their professional practices. Teacher 5, in particular, felt that it was normal for teachers to do research because 'those who experience teaching have the most persuasive voices'. In her written questionnaire narrative, she projected herself as an energetic and innovative teacher highly motivated to engage herself in research activities:

On the one hand, I have to do research because I was given such tasks by others (school principal and/or panel chair). On the other hand, it is my belief that I should do research when I am still young and have enough energy to take the challenge of doing research. I do not care what my principal thinks. I just feel that I have a clear goal and I will assess whether I can do it or not. Now we have great competition because our school charges more tuition than other state schools. Our teachers, as a result, are

expected to do a lot. The parents' comments on us and our social reputation means a lot to us. Nevertheless, my professional performance and attitudes are part of me and I need to improve them [constantly through research]. Although the process is tough, it is worthy.

Teacher 5's comments concerning her strong motivation to do research reveal that her research engagement was determined by other factors such as the need to participate in pedagogical innovation. It is not surprising for the participants to associate their research engagement with the 'difficulties' one might 'encounter in the teaching process' (Teacher 9), as research was primarily targeted to improve teaching and learning. However, the above extract, together with other participants' observations, shows that teachers were also obliged to do research so as to demonstrate that their schools were of a high quality. Educational competition, therefore, mediated the participants' research engagement.

Contextual mediation

In our analysis of the participants' focus group accounts of their research experiences, the type and ethos of their school were found to have clearly mediated their research engagement. The experimental school in which Teacher 7 taught, for example, was an elite school partially funded by real estate developers to attract middle class buyers who were anxious to send their children to good schools. Consequently, Teacher 7 confessed that 'we really have a lot of

workload because our school has high expectations for teachers'. Teachers in key schools also have high expectations of themselves, particularly since research activity is a category in their performance reviews, as described by Teacher 12:

Apart from encouraging teachers to do research, we have also a system of rewards. For example, if we are doing some research projects, we will complete these research tasks and have some visible achievements later. When the committee selects teachers to be awarded the 'Excellent Teacher' title, they will consider those who do research. As our school does not have financial autonomy, we cannot say how much money the school can give those teachers who do research and publish articles. ... Besides, teachers do not value material rewards that much. We do treasure our personal reputation a lot.

In some cases, however, such positive professional recognition was related to material rewards. In order for these teachers to be promoted to a higher professional grade, they need to distinguish themselves by excellent teaching performance, verified and assessed through demonstration classes for the public. The demonstrations often display the results of their pedagogical innovations. Following their promotion, they will receive a pay rise as determined by educational authorities at various levels. The promotion is understandably considered by all teachers to be a great boost to their pride in their professional performance and an irrefutable mark of professional achievement.

Moreover, teachers' research engagement not only improves their own standing and the

teaching and learning of English in their schools but is also a crucial part of the *school's* performance review. Schools that have teachers actively involved in research will get high scores in regular school performance evaluations. As a rule, Teacher 9 noted that research had already become an item in the evaluation process: 'When our school is evaluated, there is one column in the evaluation form called 'research'. If we have research projects, our school will score high on research'. As a result, in order for a non-elite or a non-key school to be officially recognized as a good school, the school principal will encourage its teaching staff to be actively engaged in research (Teacher 10). Elite and key schools also have to push teachers to do research if they want to retain their honour and reputation. Consequently, some schools became obliged to fund teachers' research activities if necessary as they want to be 'rated to be a particular standard' in regular performance reviews (Teacher 9). Teacher 10 agrees:

Teacher 10: We are just like this. If the school is going to achieve certain publicly recognized standard, we must do a lot of work. One of them is to do research.

Interviewer: So the teacher might just do research for the sake of school but for their own interests. Or they just want to help their school to reach its goal.

Teachers 9/10: Yes. Yes.

In this regard, teachers' professional development and promotion is closely tied to the development and promotion of schools. The more individual teachers engage in research, the more likely they are to have their professional performance rated 'excellent' and consequently receive promotion to higher professional grades. Meanwhile, schools are more likely to be recognized as 'high quality schools' if they have more teachers of higher professional grades (i.e. those doing research). This has led to the top-down promotion of teacher research in schools as principals and other senior staff exert pressure on teachers to become research active, even if they feel disinclined or unable to do so.

In sum, the teachers' accounts reveal how contextual processes mediated their engagement in research. They acknowledged that research had a positive impact on their teaching and that they had personal ambitions not only to become more involved in research, but also to enhance their professional development, including being promoted. In many cases, the teachers' efforts to do research were compromised by enormous challenges.

Discussion

We have reported on a group of primary school English teachers' research engagement in China, focusing on their conceptions of and motivation to do research. The survey and interviews reveal that the majority of these teachers opted for the type of research involving

experimental use of particular teaching methods or approaches with the intention of improving their teaching and their students' learning. The teachers' primary concern in doing research was to solve problems they encountered in their teaching. They also described the enormous challenges facing them when planning for and actually doing research. These challenges are no different from those recorded in studies such as Barkhuizen (2009) and Borg (2009). Complaining of the lack of research support, the focus group participants felt that they had to confront intellectual and financial challenges, as well as make an extra effort apart from their heavy teach duties, to do research. Nevertheless, many of them still reported great enthusiasm for engaging in research. Therefore, it has been particularly interesting looking at the reasons why these teachers were involved in doing research in the face of these constraints.

Perhaps the main pressure for undertaking research comes from the top-down performance review systems for schools and teachers, which have research activity and outcomes structured into their review processes. The mechanisms to promote research, and consequently educational innovation and teachers' professional development, were particularly evident among elite and key schools, which were expected to show that they deserve their honorific titles. Ambitious school principals exert great pressure to promote research among teachers in these schools (Yu, 2007). Individual teachers therefore are obliged to do research for their personal honour as well as for their schools' collective honour, though

there were also teachers who were genuinely interested in taking up the challenge of doing research.

However, while these factors may be effective in *promoting* research activity among schools and teachers, they are far less effective in actually *supporting* teachers' research efforts. For instance, when Teacher 9 wanted to find out what previous research had been conducted in her county before she started her own project, she could not find any help from the Teaching and Research Office, at the Local Educational Authority – precisely the office responsible for promoting and supervising teachers' research efforts:

I feel it very strange. Because I think they should provide the example for us to refer to.

Since other people have finished the projects, you should let us know what they have done and what information they have collected. ... What I got to know is just the brief content table of the project. We can't know whether they have done certain procedures or what they have done in detail. I just want to check whether they have related information. In fact, we don't know what they have done.

This problem may be a result of the limited resources that the Teaching and Research Office itself had in creating and maintaining an archive of completed projects. However, the participants also suspected that such secrecy might be related to the competition inherent in research promotion processes. Different schools compete with each other in doing research, and the winning schools can claim that they are the 'best'. Such attitudes tend to reinforce the

pervasiveness of a positivist research paradigm as it facilitates comparison and evaluation of teachers' research activities.

These findings provide further food for thought concerning the debate concerning what teacher research should be like (Allwright, 1997; Nunan, 1997). The respondents, who were found to have been actively involved in research in the inquiry, have made it clear that they had approached 'research' not only as a professional development activity but also as a means to seek professional recognition. In other words, they wanted to do research that has meaningful impact on their own students' learning and that is of high quality. The dual objectives of their research engagement were related to pedagogical needs as perceived by the respondents, but they were also sustained by the professional obligations imposed on them by a competitive educational system. As teachers discharge their professional duties within the given system, it is probably wise for teacher educators to provide the kind of support desired by these teachers and to see what forms of research engagement they will eventually choose in the end. Sustainable teacher research will be those activities that teachers feel comfortable with and find worthy of doing given all the contextual constraints. In fact, the participants did report some indigenous forms of research activities such as presenting demonstration classes (Wang et al., 2005). In the inquiry, this was shown to be one of the most common ways for teachers to display to other teachers the effect of a particular innovative teaching approach or method. In most cases, such demonstration classes were used by teachers to show how well

they could teach and to highlight the ‘results’ of their research endeavours, but they also presented learning opportunities for observing teachers to become familiar with useful methods or teaching procedures for the purposes of improving their teaching. Therefore, demonstration classes could be considered a means to disseminate teacher research for the dual purpose of competition and sharing.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored the research engagement experiences of a group of Chinese primary school English teachers, and have reported our surprise at the widespread research activity among them. In order to examine the nature of this activity, it was important to first understand what the respondents actually meant by research. Given the size and heterogeneity of Chinese primary school teaching contexts, it goes without saying that this study represents only one regional example of teacher research, and cannot be generalized to other contexts in China. However, the article does bring to our attention some new findings concerning teacher research practices (as called for by Borg, 2007a), namely the education policies of schools and districts with regard to teacher and school reviews, professional development, and the improvement of teaching. One example is the competitiveness nature of the Chinese educational system. This quality has been criticized by many scholars (Gao, 2006, 2008; Phelps, 2005; Yang, 2002; You, 2007; Zhao & Guo, 2002) and some of the Chinese contexts

that we are aware of do attempt to foster a collaborative, sharing research culture among schools. However, it is not easy to get rid of competition, mainly because of the entrenched belief among policy-makers that competition leads to better performance (Yang, 2002; Zhao & Guo, 2002).

China has a huge number of English learners in primary school settings and at the same time has an inadequately prepared teaching force to teach them. Like many policymakers and educators, we view research and ongoing reflection on teaching as one important means for in-service teachers in primary schools to develop and improve their professional competence. For this reason, we suggest that further research on primary school English teachers' research experiences is needed in order to provide relevant and useful knowledge to teacher educators and policymakers on the Chinese mainland; the aim being to enhance their efforts to make indigenous forms of research a sustainable path to professional excellence for teachers.

Among the various issues worthy of further inquiry, we suggest examining the critical role of the Teaching and Research Office and of various Teaching and Research groups within schools in promoting and supporting teacher research. We also suggest investigating the impact of research engagement on their instructional practices and student learning as seen by researching teachers. In particular, we are interested in exploring the relationship between demonstration classes and research, as demonstration classes in theory should represent the impact of research on classroom practices. There is also a need to explore how teachers share

their research findings and innovative teaching practice to see whether a culture of sharing could be promoted in a highly selective and competitive educational system. It is our belief that if research is to be a meaningful part of teachers' professional lives, every resource should be utilized to promote and facilitate this culture of sharing among teachers so that their research efforts could be better recorded and shared.

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Appendix 1: Extracts from the survey questionnaire

(Only the sections of the questionnaire relevant to this article are included.)

SECTION 2: SCENARIOS

This section presents 10 brief descriptions. Read each and choose **ONE** answer to say to what extent you feel the activity described is research.

1. A teacher noticed that an activity she used in class did not work well. She thought about this after the lesson and made some notes in her diary. She tried something different in her next lesson. This time the activity was more successful.

Definitely not research <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably not research <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably research <input type="checkbox"/>	Definitely research <input type="checkbox"/>
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2. A teacher read about a new approach to teaching writing and decided to try it out in his class over a period of two weeks. He video recorded some of his lessons and collected samples of learners' written work. He analyzed this information then presented the results to his colleagues at a staff meeting.

Definitely not research <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably not research <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably research <input type="checkbox"/>	Definitely research <input type="checkbox"/>
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3. A teacher was doing an MA course. She read several books and articles about grammar teaching then wrote an essay of 6000 words in which she discussed the main points in those readings.

Definitely not research <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably not research <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably research <input type="checkbox"/>	Definitely research <input type="checkbox"/>
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4. A university lecturer gave a questionnaire about the use of computers in language teaching to 500 teachers. Statistics were used to analyze the questionnaires. The lecturer wrote an article about the work in an academic journal.

Definitely not research <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably not research <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably research <input type="checkbox"/>	Definitely research <input type="checkbox"/>
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5. Two teachers were both interested in discipline. They observed each other's lessons once a week for three months and made notes about how they controlled their classes. They discussed their notes and wrote a short article about what they learned for the newsletter of the national language teachers' association.

Definitely not research <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably not research <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably research <input type="checkbox"/>	Definitely research <input type="checkbox"/>
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6. To find out which of two methods for teaching vocabulary was more effective, a teacher first tested two classes. Then for four weeks she taught vocabulary to each class using a different method. After that she tested both groups again and compared the results to the first test. She decided to use the method which worked best in her own teaching.

Definitely not research <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably not research <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably research <input type="checkbox"/>	Definitely research <input type="checkbox"/>
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7. A headmaster met every teacher individually and asked them about their working conditions. The head made notes about the teachers' answers. He used his notes to write a report which he submitted to the Ministry of Education.

Definitely not research <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably not research <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably research <input type="checkbox"/>	Definitely research <input type="checkbox"/>
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8. Mid-way through a course, a teacher gave a class of 30 students a feedback form. The next day, five students handed in their completed forms. The teacher read these and used the information to decide what to do in the second part of the course.

Definitely not research <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably not research <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably research <input type="checkbox"/>	Definitely research <input type="checkbox"/>
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9. A teacher trainer asked his trainees to write an essay about ways of motivating teenage learners of English. After reading the assignments the trainer decided to write an article on the trainees' ideas about motivation. He submitted his article to a professional journal.

Definitely not research <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably not research <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably research <input type="checkbox"/>	Definitely research <input type="checkbox"/>
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10. The Head of the English department wanted to know how a new teacher in her school was coping. She interviewed him three times during his first semester at the school. She then wrote a story based on the information she had gathered and published it in an education journal.

Definitely not research <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably not research <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably research <input type="checkbox"/>	Definitely research <input type="checkbox"/>
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SECTION 4: RESEARCH CULTURE

1. Write a few sentences which describe the institution in which you work; e.g. its mission, where it is, the students, the curriculum, etc.

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SECTION 7: YOUR TEACHER RESEARCH STORY

In the space below, please tell us your research story; e.g., your story about how you have been involved in research, any research you have done or would like to do, or why you have not been able to do research. In other words, tell us a story about your experiences of research in your life as a teacher.

Appendix 2: Focus group interview questions

1. Can you briefly introduce yourself? (Your educational and professional experiences. Your current job duties and so on.)
2. Can you talk about your school? (What kind of school it is? Does the school always have collaboration with educational authorities or universities? What about their school policy towards research? Are leaders in your schools supportive? How about teaching and research groups in your school? Why do you think that it is important for primary school teachers to do research?)
3. Can you describe your research experience in more detail? Refer to what they have written on the questionnaire. (Why did you join this research project? What did you actually do in the research process? How did you feel in the beginning? What kind of difficulties and challenges have you encountered in the process? What kind of support do you need? What benefits have you gained from participating in the research process? What kind of dissatisfaction did you have with your research experience?)
4. Imagine you were the person responsible for promoting research in your school. Will your colleagues be enthusiastic about doing research? Why? How about promoting research among teachers in other schools?