



Emerging Scholars

Experiencing Finnish Education Export: Chinese In-Service Teachers and Finnish Teacher Trainers

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Abstract

This paper provides a summary of a doctoral dissertation that explores how Chinese in-service teachers and Finnish teacher trainers experienced Finnish education export programmes and how the Chinese participants subsequently adapted Finnish pedagogical approaches in their schools. Based on data obtained through semi-structured interviews, the findings suggest that professional development was facilitated through experiential learning and intercultural dialogue. However, language barriers, mismatched expectations, and contextual differences complicated programme participation and educational borrowing.

Keywords: Finnish education export, international in-service teacher training, educational borrowing, teacher professional development

Introduction

Finland's international reputation for education has attracted considerable interest in China. This coincides with Chinese reforms intended to promote holistic learning and move beyond an excessive reliance on examinations and rote learning. Consequently, Finnish universities, companies and other educational organisations have offered professional development programmes to Chinese teachers as part of Finland's education export sector. However, educational practices do not travel as easily as programmes, trainers or teaching materials. Instead, they are embedded in curricula, institutions, professional traditions and



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cultures, and social expectations. My doctoral dissertation (see Peng, 2026), *Finnish Education Export Programmes for Chinese In-Service Teachers: Experiences of Chinese Teachers and Finnish Teacher Trainers*, examines what happens when Finnish pedagogical ideas encounter Chinese educational settings. The study addresses two key questions: how Chinese teachers and Finnish teacher trainers make sense of their programme experiences, and how Chinese teachers subsequently apply Finnish pedagogical approaches through educational borrowing in their own schools.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framing

The dissertation draws on Stier's *Ideologies of International Education* (Stier, 2004; 2006) and Holliday's *Grammar of Culture* (Holliday, 2011; 2018). Stier distinguishes among three overlapping orientations: instrumentalism, which treats international education as a means of achieving economic or strategic objectives; educationalism, which emphasises professional and personal learning; and idealism, which connects international education with aspirations for social improvement and mutual understanding. Stier's framework was particularly useful because it enabled an analysis of the combination of educational and commercial objectives in Finnish education export. It therefore enabled an analysis of how Chinese teachers and Finnish teacher trainers understood their participation, motivations and expectations. It also revealed tensions between professional learning, idealised perceptions of Finland and the market-oriented nature of education export. In particular, Chinese teachers generally sought professional development, whereas Finnish trainers valued intercultural and professional learning. However, some Chinese participants approached the programmes with an idealised image of Finland and its education system.

Holliday's (2011; 2018) framework challenges explanations that treat national cultures as fixed and homogeneous. His concept of 'small cultures' draws attention to the meanings and practices that emerge within specific classrooms, workplaces, and professional groups. This perspective was particularly relevant because the programmes could not simply be understood as encounters between Finnish and Chinese national cultures. Instead, it was the participants' professional and educational backgrounds, and personal lived experiences that shaped how they learned from and responded to the programmes. With this said, participants brought their own areas of expertise, professional roles, institutional positions and personal histories. Consequently, educational borrowing was not understood as the direct transfer of supposedly superior practices, but rather as a dynamic process of interpreting, selecting, and adapting educational ideas abroad.

Methodological Choices

The dissertation took an interpretivist epistemological approach and a social constructivist perspective. It

synthesised three qualitative sub-studies (Peng et al., 2023; 2026a, 2026b) based on semi-structured interviews with eleven Chinese educators — nine teachers and two principals with teaching responsibilities — and five Finnish teacher trainers. The participants had experience of programmes concerning, for example, science education, special and inclusive education, and wider Finnish pedagogical approaches. The interviews explored the motivations, expectations, intercultural encounters, professional learning and post-programme actions of the participants. I analysed the data using qualitative content analysis, moving from individual meaning units to broader categories and themes (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

Researcher reflexivity was essential, as was the ability to think critically and to be trustworthy (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). My initial interest was partly shaped by the positive image of Finnish education that I had come across while undertaking my teacher training in China. However, my later experiences in the Nordic region complicated this perception. Instead of claiming neutrality between the two contexts, in the dissertation, I considered how my background and experience had influenced the formulation of research questions, carrying out interviews, and data interpretations.

Main Results

The Chinese teachers found lesson observation especially important because it was a familiar form of professional learning in China. Without sufficient opportunities to observe Finnish pedagogical principles in practice, some participants found it difficult to envisage how they could be used in their own work. The relevance of the programme was also affected by differences in the subjects taught by the teachers, their career stages, and the school settings in which they worked.

Firstly, the motivation of Chinese teachers was primarily curiosity and professional development. Although some initially assumed that Finnish or foreign practices were inherently more advanced, several described the programmes as eye-opening. Finland's reputation for education encouraged participation, but it also created expectations that short-term education export programmes for Chinese in-service teachers, often lasting only from several days to a few weeks, could not always meet.

Secondly, practical and experiential content, such as lesson demonstrations, workshops and school visits, encouraged teachers to reconsider their assumptions about teaching and learning. For example, one intended outcome of the programmes was professional learning through exposure to alternative perspectives and planned educational reform afterwards. For many participants, this resulted in transformative learning when they critically re-evaluated their previously held assumptions about education after encountering Finnish pedagogical approaches. Yet transformative learning was not automatically achieved through international exposure. Language barriers, limited time and mismatched expectations restricted participants' understanding and learning. The Chinese teachers found lesson

observation especially important because it was a familiar form of professional learning in China. Without sufficient opportunities to observe Finnish pedagogical principles in practice, some participants found it difficult to envisage how they could be used in their own work. The relevance of the programme was also affected by differences in the subjects taught by the teachers, their career stages, and the school settings in which they worked.

Thirdly, the Finnish trainers encountered professional development opportunities and practical challenges. Those familiar with China were able to use their linguistic skills and contextual knowledge to recognise potential misunderstandings. Those with less experience relied more closely on interpreters, local partners, participant feedback and active observation. Adjustments to vocabulary, pace, examples and teaching methods were required for effective transnational teaching.

Finally, Chinese teachers did not simply replicate Finnish pedagogical practices. Instead, they selected and adapted ideas to suit, for example, local curricula, examination pressures, class sizes, timetables, and available resources. While classroom teachers generally focused on changes at the level of individual lessons, participants with leadership responsibilities were more likely to pursue broader school reforms. It was vital to receive support from pupils, parents, colleagues and school leaders. Innovations gained recognition when stakeholders could recognise their relevance. However, they faced resistance when they appeared inconsistent with established educational priorities. Or when they were unfamiliar. Educational borrowing therefore emerged as a negotiated process, shaped by teacher agency, institutional conditions, and stakeholder recognition.

Significance

Firstly, this dissertation shifts the focus away from education export policy and commercial strategy, which were studied by the main body of earlier studies on Finnish education export, and towards the experiences of programme participants and providers. By examining the experiences of Chinese teachers and Finnish teacher trainers, it demonstrates that learning, uncertainty and adaptation occur on both sides.

Secondly, the findings also challenge the conception of learning from the 'best system'. International comparison should not merely rank education systems or identify practices for imitation. Rather, it should encourage educators to question their assumptions and develop contextually appropriate alternatives. The quality of similar international programmes should be assessed not only in terms of participants' immediate satisfaction, but also in terms of whether their learning can be sustained in their schools.

Thirdly, international teacher education programmes should involve co-design with participants and local partners. Programmes should include realistic orientation, experiential content relevant to the subjects

taught by each teacher, classroom observation where possible, and careful mediation of concepts rather than word-for-word translation. Support should continue after the programme through peer networks and opportunities for piloting, as well as dialogue with key stakeholders, such as school leaders and parents.

Lastly, exporting education should not mean delivering a successful national model to foreign recipients. Its public value lies in creating reciprocal spaces where educators can learn from differences and develop locally meaningful practices. The goal is not to reproduce the Finnish education system in China, but rather to support critical, collaborative, and sustainable educational change.

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