

Community Outreach in an International School: The Chaoyang English Project

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Abstract: Community outreach projects have been integral to the work of international schools for many years. Outreach programs do not, however, always achieve the lofty goals they aim for. Beijing BISS International School is one school modelling investment in the local community through a unique English language teacher-training program called the Chaoyang English Project. This paper will introduce the project in the context of service to the host community and explore some of the associated opportunities and benefits.

Keywords: community outreach, international schools, co-teaching, team-teaching, professional development, observation and feedback

1. Introduction

International schools function best when they are supported by, and integrated into, the communities in which they operate. Strong relationships with community are imperative in approvals processes for the development of facilities, they support student learning by providing a rich cultural resource, and the philanthropic aspect of outreach programs sets an example of social responsibility for the students of these often elite and exclusive schools. Service to the community is also integral to the [International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme](#), a curriculum framework offered by many international schools, with [Creativity, Action and Service \(CAS\)](#) a mandatory, core component in the senior years.

2. Barriers to outreach programs

Outreach programs do not, however, always achieve the lofty goals that they aim for. Genuine student engagement has proven difficult in the implementation of outreach programs (Allen, 2002), due to the transient nature of the expatriate families who typically attend international schools (Dunne & Edwards, 2010). While international schools themselves usually make a long-term investment in the host country, expatriate families tend to operate on short-term contracts, typically between two and five years in length, before moving on to a new home in a new culture. Engaging students in substantial, long-term projects that they are unlikely to see to fruition is therefore a significant challenge.

A lack of real contact with the local community has proven to be a challenge for the children of local families attending international schools (Allen, 2002). Local families from developing countries with the resources to enrol their child in international schools

sometimes do so in an effort to procure social advancement. Isolating these students from the local culture in favour of engagement with Western cultures and ideals therefore reinforces this concept of social privilege (Allen, 2002; Dunne & Edwards, 2010), and provides a subsequent barrier to local outreach programs. In this context, international schools offer a way of maintaining and providing advantage, rather than enacting societal change (Dunne & Edwards, 2010).

For both local and expatriate students, therefore, there are tangible barriers to genuine, long-term engagement with outreach programs that typically have a service learning focus.

3. School outreach programs as a model for student outreach programs

With the documented issues concerning depth and engagement with outreach programs for students, it is useful to look to schools themselves as an example of meaningful engagement with local community. If the international school, as part of its core business, engages in outreach programs that build strong relationships between the school and the community, the school provides a role model of social responsibility for students and their families.

A cursory search of international school websites finds very few examples of outreach programs that extend beyond student service including, for example, the International School of Ouagadougou, who run an annual professional development conference for local teachers on pedagogical practices. Beijing BISS International School (BISS) is another example of an international school modelling investment in the local community, through a unique English language teacher-training program called the Chaoyang English Project. This paper will introduce the project in the context of service to the host community and explore some of the opportunities and benefits that have arisen as a result of the project.

4. The Chaoyang English Project

The Chaoyang English Project is a pilot English language teacher development project established in 2011 in collaboration between BISS and the Chaoyang Education Committee. The project has been documented previously by Sarah Williams, one of the foundation teachers on the project (Williams, 2012), as a co-teaching project aiming to introduce a modern approach to language teaching grounded in Communicative Language Teaching principles across government schools in the Chaoyang district of Beijing. Chaoyang is a large, central district of around 3,500,000 people encompassing most of Beijing's foreign embassies in addition to the central business district. In such an international environment, the development of English language skills in Chaoyang's students is a priority for the district education committee, and the Chaoyang English Project is one of a number of priority projects across the district available to interested schools.

The Chaoyang English Project was established as a long-term teacher-training project designed to embed foreign teachers into local school communities, working closely alongside their local colleagues in a co-teaching capacity to implement best practice in language teaching. Participation in the project is open to all government schools across Chaoyang and currently involves a wide range of teachers and students from varying educational and socio-economic backgrounds.

Methodology

The initial focus of the Chaoyang English Project was simply to reflect on existing practices in English Language Teaching across the district with a view to seeking improvement in both teaching and learning. An action research methodology was selected, using teachers and teacher-trainers as reflective practitioners and principal researchers (Glanz, 2014), with the Chaoyang Education Committee and project administration also participating in the research cycle through a process of goal setting, data collection and analysis, and reflection. While there are broad, long-term aims specified for the project, such as promoting learner autonomy through student-centred learning, there are multiple aims in existence at any one time on this project, and these are identified and researched by the individuals involved according to the specific needs of teachers and students in their context. Qualitative and quantitative data are continually collected through written reflections on lessons and lesson plans, annual reports written by all teachers on the project, regular questionnaires and surveys and formalised student testing, both from within the project and through district-wide examinations.

As the project moves into its fifth year of operation it is continuing to grow. Its success is arguably a result of three factors: a) strong partnerships between stakeholders, b) the co-teaching framework, and c) comprehensive, regular training for all project teachers, with follow-up support from experienced teacher-trainers. The following section will discuss these factors in light of feedback from foreign teachers in their annual Foreign Team Teachers' Review Reports (unpublished.) These reports are one of a number of data sources used to inform the research surrounding this project, and the 2013-14 reports are the primary data source for the purposes of this paper. (To protect the privacy of the teachers, pseudonyms have been used.)

The reports are completed by each foreign teacher involved in the project at the conclusion of each school year, and ask for feedback and recommendations regarding the following areas: team teaching, team planning, assessment, materials, resources and equipment, and the overall impact of the Chaoyang English Project in schools. The reports are collected and analysed by administrators of the project, including the co-authors of this paper, and help to inform further developments within the project. The data are representations of the teachers' reflections on their professional development in various teaching contexts within the project and subjective in nature. The samples of the teachers' reflections were categorised by theme and analysis showed an emergence of perceived strengths as well as constraints within the project's scope. The quotations

included in this paper are examples of common themes that arose from multiple reports and have, where necessary, been combined and paraphrased in order to fully represent the range of feedback provided by teachers.

Stakeholder Partnerships

The Chaoyang English Project does not operate in a vacuum. The teacher-trainers work closely with the Head of Programme and colleagues at BISS. They are able to utilise the resources available at the school to plan and deliver high quality training sessions to teachers. BISS also liaises regularly with the Chaoyang Education Committee and affiliated Research Committee members, to report on the project and set strategic goals for continued improvement. The project is a designated research project for the Chaoyang Education Committee Research Committee and, as such, is reviewed regularly as part of internal review processes. It is because of this informed oversight that the Chaoyang Education Committee can recommend the project to schools across the district. Regular meetings between the committee and the project teachers and trainers provide evidence of direct engagement and evidence of the enthusiasm about the success of the programme from top-level stakeholders, including the Chaoyang Education Committee itself, Beijing BISS International School and School Principals.

While both primary and secondary schools across China have been offering English language classes for over ten years as mandated by the Ministry of Education (Hu & McKay, 2012), schools apply to be a part of the Chaoyang English Project and may withdraw from the project at any time. While previous studies have noted the limited success of projects designed to 'transplant' Western pedagogical practices, including Communicative Language Teaching, into Chinese schools (Hu, 2005; Zhang & Hu, 2010), support from schools involved in the Chaoyang English Project is increasing; perhaps as a result of the collaborative nature of the project in contrast to an enforced pedagogical mandate.

Co-teaching

In most partner schools, the Chaoyang English Project employs foreign English teachers and places them in local schools across the district. This idea is not new: native English speakers have been recruited to work as English teachers for decades, particularly across Asia. Examples of such large-scale, government-backed programmes include the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme, the Foreign Exchange Teacher programme in Taiwan and the English Program in Korea. These projects undoubtedly introduce second language learners to the English language, as spoken by native-speakers; however they have been criticised for a lack of teacher training and support (Stoda, 2011), a lack of support at community level (Stoda, 2011), and for the recruitment of under-qualified staff (Dawe, 2014; Jeon, 2009) in preference to more qualified, local teachers.

Co-teaching, or team-teaching, has been identified as a significant factor in improving teacher performance (Fattig & Taylor, 2008; Turkich, Greive & Cozens, 2014). At the planning stage, teachers are able to share and debate ideas and pedagogy, working towards compromises that suit the aims of the project and the needs of particular student groups. In the teachers' own words, co-planning inspires "more diverse and

interesting lessons" (Michelle); provides an opportunity to "review some of the techniques covered in the training sessions [and prepare to] put them into practice" (Frank); and requires that teaching partners "share, explain, clarify and agree upon [ideas and approaches] for use during the lesson" (Alex).

In class, co-teaching relationships do not always utilise classroom time evenly (Dawe, 2014), which is one of the reasons the project includes the delegation of specific tasks to each teacher during the planning stages to attempt a 50/50 split of teacher input. Specifying which teacher will conduct which tasks during the lesson ensures that the teaching partnership reflects on the best use of each teacher's time, as well as providing a record of which components of the lesson each teacher has implemented. Throughout the course of the year it is intended that each teacher will have had multiple opportunities to develop the ability to implement each stage of the lesson, in order to assist both teachers in preparing to teach independently if they move on from the project the following year, or to co-teach more effectively in other contexts.

Along with the impact on teachers' long-term development, Chaoyang English Project teachers have commented that, in-class, co-teaching means they are able to "support and monitor each other... through classroom management... letting each other know when an activity was running too long, or that teacher talking time had become a little too much" (Frank) and they can better "keep their own energy and enthusiasm up" (Frank). While one teacher leads whole class activities, the other teacher is available to pay attention to timing, to manage behaviour, or to assist students who need extra support, leading to more frequent one-to-one attention (Alex, Frank, Ivan).

In addition to having a 'critical friend' to run ideas by at the planning stage, co-teachers reflect together on their teaching. Reflection time is a mandated component of the Chaoyang English Project timetable, taking place after each lesson, to provide the partnership with opportunities to discuss the effectiveness of the lesson and make improvements to future lesson plans. Co-teachers are encouraged to provide non-judgmental feedback on teaching performance post-lesson, as a peer and not a supervisor. This reflection has been reviewed positively by teachers, as "teaching partners focus on different aspects of the lesson, thus providing more comprehensive feedback" (Ivan), resulting in more opportunities for development.

Planning comprehensively with a partner is time-consuming. Time limitations were acknowledged as a potential barrier to the implementation of the Chaoyang English Project, and as a result teachers on the project teach an average of three classes, seeing each four times per week for 40-45 minutes; an unusually light teaching load that allows a generous amount of time during the school day for teachers to plan and prepare materials together. English-language co-teaching projects have been criticised previously for providing a lack of time for the co-teachers to establish a positive working relationship and plan effectively together (Fennelly & Luxton, 2011). Teachers have also noted that co-teaching positively impacts on the local teacher's workload: "Working in a Chinese public school places heavy demands on the Chinese teachers, so the greatest advantage of our co-teaching model is that it provides support to the Chinese teachers"

(Ivan). Planning time remains a challenge, however, in terms of “being able to be faithful to the assigned time for planning” (Jake), as urgent matters do continue to arise during planning times that require the immediate attention of the Chinese teachers. These matters include pastoral care issues concerning particular students, follow-up with parents, and other tasks as designated by their School Principal.

For students, teachers have noted that additional benefits of having both a foreign and a local teacher in class include “opportunities for students to speak in English with a teacher” (Jake) and “exposure to a variety of cultures, accents, and teaching styles, each with their own unique strengths and perspectives” (Aaron, Michelle). Of course, there are challenges too, such as when students “may be confused by the different approaches to teaching and may tend to favour one teacher over the other, compete for attention, or tend to only listen or care about what one teachers says or asks them to do” (Michelle).

Training and Teacher Support

There is a tendency to prefer English teachers to be native speakers of English worldwide, and particularly across Asia. This preference is evident in the government support of high profile projects recruiting from abroad, such as those mentioned above, and is also clear in the burgeoning growth of English language schools hiring young, foreign teaching staff. Native English speakers are often positioned as superior teachers to their local teaching colleagues (Jeon, 2000), despite generally lower levels of qualification or lesser experience.

To help combat this issue, the Chaoyang English Project runs weekly or fortnightly training sessions, led by qualified and experienced teacher-trainers, for all teachers, both foreign and local. These training sessions have been described by teachers as “interesting and practical” (Jake), and are designed based on Communicative Language Teaching theories and the specific needs that are uncovered during the lesson observations making the techniques immediately applicable to the teachers’ contexts. Like the teachers on the project, teacher-trainers undertake their own research cycle by constantly reflecting on and refining existing training sessions, and designing new ones, to meet teacher needs.

To integrate teacher training with teacher development the Chaoyang English Project combines those training sessions with a teacher observation and feedback cycle. This element of the training and development concentrates on the individual teachers and teaching pairs, guiding them through reflection and self-evaluation to professional growth (Freeman, 1982). Historically, observation of teaching practice has played an integral role in teacher training and development; however it is often viewed as a method of surveillance and a way to evaluate, regulate and control teacher behaviour (Varga, 1991). Here, the aim of observations is to create a space for exploring the teachers’ beliefs about teaching and learning without imposing value judgements from one dominant culture. Through the reflection process teachers are given a voice and the three-way perspective sharing can promote collaborative learning from one another (Silcock, 1994; Freeman,

1982). The process of reflection and feedback discussions forms a bridge between knowledge explored in training and experiences in the classroom and helps transform personal knowledge and theories into skilled practice (Silcock, 1994).

5. Conclusion

Through community outreach programmes, international schools have the potential to set an example of philanthropy, social responsibility, and cross-cultural integration. While student engagement in outreach programmes may be difficult, due to expatriate families' transient natures, the schools themselves can engage with the local communities in ways that model such responsibility. The Chaoyang English Project is one example of this kind of community engagement, through which BISS invests the time and resources into professional development opportunities for local school teachers. Through outlining this project, this paper has highlighted a range of strategies that can be employed to ensure that such projects engage with the community in a way that enacts change rather than simply reinforcing social privilege; and to do so in a way that is constructive and mutually respectful of the people and cultures involved.

Schools from a range of socio-economic backgrounds are able to benefit from the International School's investment in the community, because the Chaoyang English Project is open to all government schools across the district. By allowing schools to opt into the project voluntarily, the community is able to recognise the project as a valuable resource, rather than the imposition of foreign pedagogy. Through strong partnerships with affiliates, the project is held accountable to internal review processes, and participants have evidence of direct engagement by top-level stakeholders. By embedding foreign teachers into local school communities in a co-teaching capacity, the project builds intercultural awareness without devaluing local expertise and professionalism, in which local and expatriate professionals negotiate, share, and draw on unique strengths and experiences. Through the availability of training, support and feedback from experienced teacher-trainers to both local and expatriate teachers, risks associated with the recruitment of under-qualified foreign staff are diminished; and a sense of equality is established among the teaching partnerships. And through an emphasis on creating an open space for teachers to explore their beliefs and practises, observation-feedback cycles are not about surveillance and policy enforcement, but about bridging training and practice.

Teacher development programmes used as a form of community outreach face many challenges. When the emphasis is on collaboration, equality, and integration, not only can we overcome such challenges, but we demonstrate to our students and communities the values of these very qualities. We set an example.

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