

Primary Grade Literacy Development in Two Chinese Villages

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National Reading Conference, Austin, Texas, U.S. - November 28, 2007

China has been modernizing and changing at a breath-taking speed for several decades. In recent years, however, worries have arisen that urban areas outpace rural areas by a considerable degree, and that many rural areas have been left further behind. Since 1978 when Deng Xiaoping's policies led to more flexible working conditions, financial opportunities have expanded for rural residents and some noticeable improvements have occurred. For instance, more children attend and complete elementary school than one or two decades earlier and illiteracy rates have been significantly reduced among the young (Liu, 2007; Rao *et al.*, 2003; UNESCO, 2005; J. Wang & Ling, 2007).

However, inequities persist. Although the government has prescribed that more than 90% of the children should attend junior middle school (Chinese State Department, 2001), and all children should complete their first nine years of school by the end of 2007 (J. Wang & Ling, 2007), reports from numbers of sources underscore the fact that many areas have still not achieved this (Postiglione, 2006; Sargent & Hannum, 2005; D. Wang, 2003; Z. Wang, 2007). More than two million children have not completed their elementary schooling by the correct age, and more than five million never finished the required nine years of school. Most of these children reside in rural areas of Northwest China (Ministry of Education, 2005). In addition, the national government, beginning with the spring semester of 2007, eliminated all school fees in rural areas in an effort to increase school attendance, yet some provincial and local governments continue to levee illegal fees that parents are supposed to pay (Guo & Ma, 2007). Beyond these more obvious inequities, the need for upgrading curriculum in rural schools, as well as instructional materials, remains critical.

The exploratory study described in this paper investigates primary grade literacy education in two rural elementary schools. One is located in a small village in Shaanxi Province in the northwest of China; the other is in a rural town in Anhui Province in Eastern China and draws its students from several villages. In an effort to determine the specific needs of these rural areas, the study explores whether current teaching practices reflect an understanding of the new curriculum standards of China, what materials are available, and if teachers have opportunities for professional development. In addition it looks at the aspirations of the stakeholders within the communities.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Since China's Communist Party took power in 1949, the national government has formulated many policies concerning rural basic education. The current fundamental policy, however, is to promote equality between urban and rural education systems. Ten to twenty years ago, a basic educational policy was implemented in both urban and rural areas. But in fact, inequality of how the policy was implemented in the two areas was

clearly apparent and children in rural areas were more poorly educated because of poverty and/or less financial government support. This problem was even more notable at the county educational policy level in rural areas and in relation to unbalanced economic development (Tan, 2006).

In the late 1980s, the term “quality education” was advocated in some papers, and formulated as a national policy in 1993 (Chinese State Department, 1993; Kang, 1999). The policy focused on development of children as a whole, and the areas of cognitive, emotional, social and personal development were treated equally. But before that, students were merely asked to learn the basic knowledge of subjects for the sole purpose of passing different examinations. In the teaching of Chinese, the students' main tasks in class were to memorize vocabulary, theme, and grammar that the teachers taught.

In 2001, new compulsory education standards of different subjects were promulgated (Ministry of Education, 2001). The Standard for Teaching Chinese states that besides mastering the basic linguistic knowledge, the subject of Chinese should be used to help students understand cultural traditions through Chinese texts and develop the skills of hearing, expressing, reading and writing. Additional purposes of learning Chinese are to promote the development and mastery of other mental domains. Accordingly, at a minimum, the following concrete skills/strategies are needed by teachers. They need to know how to:

- a) make good use of the students' prior knowledge;
- b) ask authentic questions and extend students' answers to the authentic questions;
- c) encourage students to share their own experiences with their peers and/or teachers;
- d) encourage students to use different media to show their understanding of the text; and
- e) provide students time to respond more thoroughly.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY AND SETTINGS

Given the complex problems of rural education which are enmeshed in the rapid growth and advancement of China's economic and social structures, a qualitative research method was selected using an analytical ladder where one step builds from the previous one (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This allowed us to use findings from one village to explore more deeply the strategies and issues of the second village.

The purpose of this exploratory study has been to begin to uncover the needs of rural communities by observing the teachers' pedagogies in actual practice and by listening to the concerns and hopes of the teachers, school administrators, and parents. Our primary questions were how teachers' practice translated current curriculum standards for Chinese teaching into the classroom and what were the concerns and hopes of various stakeholders in the school communities.

Because trust is necessary to conduct such a study we selected two villages familiar to us. Separated from each other by more than 1000 miles, they draw from different histories and circumstances.

An Shang village, located a two-hour drive from Xi'an, sits on the southern edge of the loess plateau in Shaanxi Province. Farming, haunted by water scarcity, has been the primary means of sustenance, augmented by migrant jobs that began in the 1980s. The current population hovers around 1500. Most men between 30 and 50 years old migrate

to urban centers for cash income, returning home only for the summer and autumn harvests and Spring Festival. Almost all women with children under 15 remain in the village. Compared with many rural areas where children are left with grandparents, parental presence is strong in An Shang. With the impetus from villagers who have lived in urban areas, the village is beginning to modernize. In 2005, a two-block portion of the village main street was paved and, with help from outsiders, a new elementary school was built. It now has 190 students, Grades 1 through 6, with one class per grade. The new school includes a library, a computer room, and indoor toilets, but at present none of these facilities function. The library has recently received 1000 books in donations, most in English. Like many rural schools, enrollment has shrunk over the decades, because of implementation of the one-child policy and of gradual migration to urban areas.

Yang Tan is located on the southeastern edge of Anhui Province, 150 miles from Huangshan Mountain. Like other nearby communities, no modern corporations or factories are located there, so adults have no livelihood except farming and have no fixed income. Most of them leave for temporary work in big cities. A year ago several smaller village schools in the vicinity were closed because fewer and fewer children live in the villages, and the remainder transferred to the two remaining elementary schools in the town. Yang Tan Elementary School is near the center of the town, and now has 13 classes and 6 grades with more than 700 students in it. About half of the students are boarders because their parents work far from their village. The boarders go to their grandparents for weekends, and they see their parents only during the Spring Festival when they come back for the public holiday. The school has a new building with classrooms plus a dining room, a reading room, and a small library that has only 500 books bought last year.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological procedure for the study divides into four parts, one evolving from the next on an analytical ladder that utilizes a constant comparative process for defining categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

First, Pine observed a Chinese second grade lesson¹ in the An Shang village school, and interviewed parents, village school committee members, and the school Chinese teachers. Pine is a non-Chinese outsider to An Shang. She has spent two three-week periods there with a Global Volunteers project, living in a farmer's home and teaching English teachers from neighboring communities. She has also been a guest in the village two other times. For these interviews, she worked through a former village resident who is deeply involved in helping improve living conditions and is a professional interpreter.

¹ In both villages we observed the second day of a three-day cycle in Chinese elementary school lessons. A typical cycle begins by introducing the lesson topic, new vocabulary, and character components the first day. The second day examines the story and its structure. The third day is devoted to extending the lesson concepts - both the ideas and new language structures and idioms. Unlike previous textbooks, the new Chinese books emphasize connecting the stories to everyday life and having students transfer the new learning to their lives. In An Shang Elementary School, they discussed a well-known ancient story, "Nan Yuan Bei Zhe," about an arrogant traveler who makes a major mistake. The Yang Tan story, "A Strange Stone," was about a famous geologist, Li Siguang, who was persistent throughout his life in pursuing answers to puzzling questions.

Yu and Pine then analyzed these data, identifying teaching strategies used in classroom lessons and mentioned in the teachers' interviews. They also identified threads of interest and concern among the parents and village school committee members. The categories and findings from the investigation in this first village were used to develop strategies for the second village investigation.

Next, Yu visited Yang Tan. He is a near insider. He was raised in the community and a couple of his classmates are teachers there. Over the years he has had periodic contact with the school. During his interviews, he used the local dialect rather than Putonghua. At Yang Tan Elementary School Yu observed and videotaped a third grade Chinese lesson, held discussions with teachers who observed the lesson, and then had two audio-taped interviews, one with 19 teachers and the other with the principal and vice-principal. The main questions for this visit were based on the findings from the first school:

- What are the differences between strategies used in Chinese lessons, supportive conditions including materials and facilities, and teachers' personal qualifications and challenges, ten years ago and now?
- Has children's learning of Chinese changed during this ten-year period? If so, how?
- Do current teaching practices reflect an appropriate understanding of the new curriculum standards of China?
- What are the greatest needs of the school and teachers for supporting improvement of educational results?

At the last stage, the data from both rural schools were integrated and analyzed.

RESULTS

Rural Chinese Teaching - Present and Past

The teaching strategies used or attempted by the two teachers during the observed lessons are remarkably similar in some areas. Nevertheless, differences exist, especially in how much opportunity the children have to connect the lesson to their lives. Examination of the lesson transcripts yielded the following strategies being used. The types of teacher questions and requests divide into the ways the teacher explains something, the types of questions asked, the types of feedback given, and the ways to have the students read aloud.

To explain:

- TEO: the teacher explains something related to the student's or teacher's previous experiences
- TEC: the teacher explains something related to the text itself that has nothing to do with the teacher's or students' experiences

To ask questions:

- TAQ: the teacher asks the students to answer authentic questions (the answers are unknown to the teacher)
- TTQ: the teacher asks the students to answer test-type questions that are used to check if they have mastered information in the text

To provide feedback:

- TFR: the teacher repeats what the student(s) said
- TFE: the teacher expands what the student(s) said

- TFC: the teacher corrects the student(s) response
- Text reading:
- TAR: the teacher asks the students to read the text in unison
 - TRT: the teacher reads the text by himself
- Other:
- TOO: the teacher uses other strategies.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of usage for each category by school.

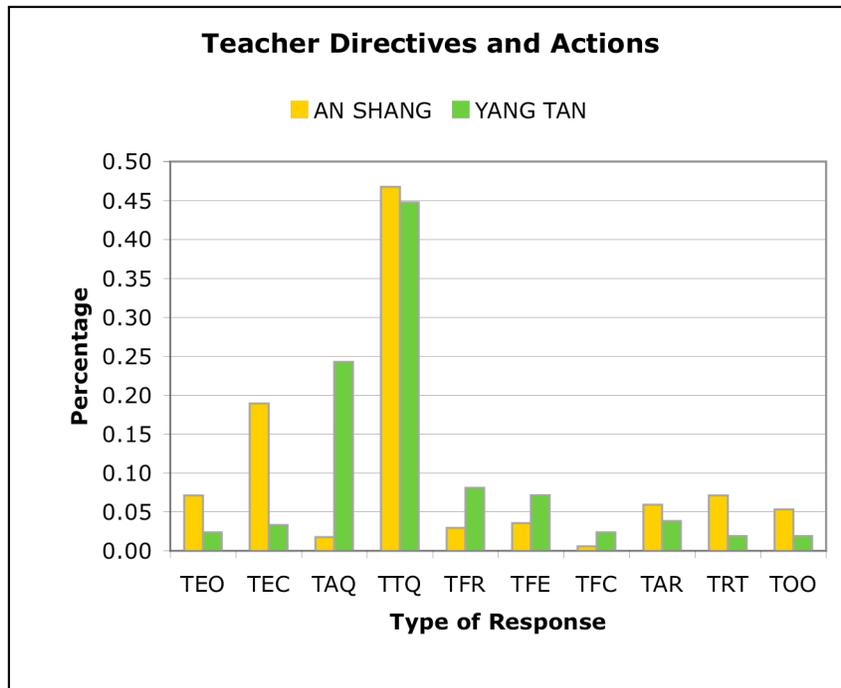


Figure 1. Teacher directives and actions, by school. The percentage of times each teacher used the identified types of responses. The total number of responses for the An Shang teacher was 169, for the Yang Tan teacher 210.

By far the most often used teaching strategy by both teachers is to ask a test-type, closed question (TTQ), with the An Shang teacher using it 46.75% of the time, and the Yang Tan teacher, 44.76% of the time. For example, in one lesson when asking about a traveler in the story who is going in the wrong direction, the teacher says, "Let's see, could Ji Liang reach the place where he had intended to go?" The students respond, "No." In another situation the teacher says, "Now, let's think about it: from this sentence we know the man wanted to go to Chu which was in the south. Which direction did he take?" The students respond, "The north." In the lesson about a famous geologist, the teacher asks the students, "How strange is the stone in the text?" "How do you know?" The students respond by reading the next sentence in the text. The answer in each of these situations is obvious either from the text or from what the teacher has just said.

The rest of the categories are spread rather evenly and are used between 1% and 8% of the time. The exceptions are explaining something in the text itself (TEC) which the An Shang teacher uses 18.93% of the time, and asking authentic questions (TAQ) which

the Yang Tan teacher uses 24.29% of the time. In one TEC example, the An Shang teacher explains the complicated naming system used in ancient times that the story employs. In Yang Tan, a quarter of the time the teacher asks questions that point the students toward an open-ended response and helps them share personal ideas and experiences. For example, when they talk about the question that Li Siguang, the famous Chinese geologist, had asked his teacher and father, and to which he had not received a satisfactory answer, the teacher asks the students, "Do you know anything about geology?" "What questions have you encountered when you were playing? And what did you do with the questions? Did you find the answers to them?" When the students discuss such questions, new information is shared among them. This strategy, in particular, is quite different from past ways of teaching.

In the Past

There have been continuous changes in educational approaches since the birth of the new country in 1949. At present current curriculum is attempting to move schools away from test-driven strategies and make learning more applicable and relevant to students' lives. In the interviews with teachers and principals at Yang Tan Elementary School and with the teachers, parents and village school committee members in An Shang, the following strategies were mentioned as being used before and during the 1990s.

- to analyze the paragraphs of texts one by one, so the students understand and remember the theme and structures of the text;
- to explain the strokes and stroke order of new characters and phrases, and also ask students to make sentences using the new characters and phrases;
- for the teacher to read the text, line-by-line, followed by the students, or to ask students to read the lesson story in unison repeated times;
- to ask questions tightly related to the texts themselves and check students' answers using "yes" or "no;" and
- to use the State texts plus chalk and a blackboard.

Other Teacher Strategies

In addition to TAQ, when the teacher asks students to answer authentic, open-ended questions, the teachers used two other strategies to encourage students to connect what they are learning with their own experiences. These are TEO, when the teacher explains something related to the students or teachers' previous experience, and TFE, when the teacher expands what a student or students have said. The Yang Tan teacher used these three strategies a total of 33.81% of the time. The An Shang teacher used them also, but combined they only comprised 12.43% of the strategies used.

These numbers suggest a marked change from older Chinese teaching techniques, especially in the Yang Tan class. Also the Yang Tan teacher spent little time explaining the theme and structures of the text, which have been a primary focus in the past. During the 45-minute lesson, he asked no questions about the structures of the text. The theme developed from the discussions.

Finally, both teachers had students read aloud (TAR) with more variety than was expected in the past. These reading strategies ranged from individual students trying to imitate the emotions of story characters, to reading aloud sentences they liked.

Children's Responses

In the past, the students had nothing but textbooks to read, and listening and memorizing were dominant in Chinese class. They had to remember language points that the teachers explained so they could pass exams. But now the students are beginning to have more opportunity to participate in language lessons and sometimes share their own experience with the teacher and their classmates. In the two observed classes, the students used four main response strategies (see Figure 2):

- SAA: the student answers the teacher's authentic question;
- SAM: the student answers the teacher's test-like question (sometimes done in unison);
- SUR: the students read in unison;
- SIR: the student reads the text individually; and
- SOO the student uses other strategies.

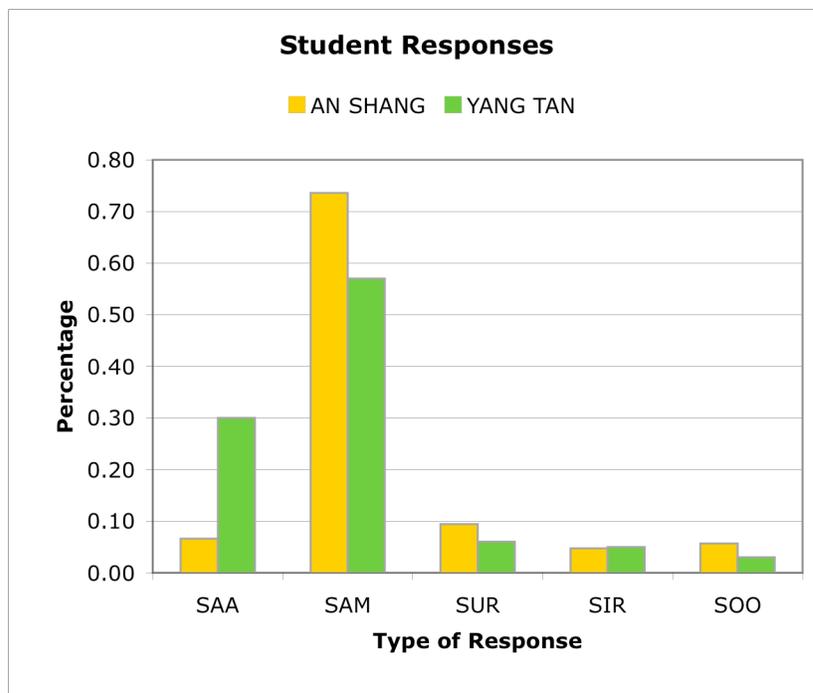


Figure 2. Type of student responses by school. The total number of responses for An Shang was 106, for Yang Tan 161.

Most student utterances are responses to the teachers' test questions (SAM)--73.58% in An Shang, 56.52% in Yang Tan. Nevertheless, nearly one-third of the Yang Tan student answers are responses to their teachers' authentic questions (SAA). For example, the teacher asked what the students would do if their teacher or father could not answer

their question. After a short silence, various students shared their individual answers with other students sitting near them. In both classes, the student utterances of reading in unison (SUR) are only 9.43% (An Shang) and 6.62% (Yang Tan). Also, in Yang Tan the students have the chance to read paragraphs they like best eight times (4.97%).

Nature of student responses. In spite of the change that appears to have occurred in moving toward more open-ended questions and connecting students' lives to the stories in Chinese lessons, the nature of student utterances was often limited to unison responses of only a few words, and often just one word. In both classes this is especially true of student responses to the teachers' test-type questions (TTQ), although to a lesser extent in the Yang Tan class because of the teacher's occasional use of more open-ended questions. However, even there, questions that appeared to be open-ended elicited - or really only had - a one word or yes/no answer (e.g., Do you ask teachers when you have questions?).

Table 1. *Number of responses by quality category.*

<i>Response Quality</i>	<i>An Shang</i>	<i>Yang Tan</i>
> 1 word	18	63
1 word	55	31
1 word, prompted*	26	47
Nonsensical response	5	1
Read the text	2	19
Total Occurrences	106	161

* answer included in the teacher's question

The length and quality of student responses in the two lessons fell into five categories (Table 1). Most responses were quite brief and, except for those read directly from the text, were less than four words. The few spontaneous longer responses seldom became full sentences. The two one-word response categories comprised 76.42% of the An Shang students responses and 48.45% of the Yang Tan responses. When the nonsensical responses, which were usually the repetition of the teacher's last word, and the times the students read a sentence from the text instead of using their own words, the percentages jump to 83.02% in An Shang and 60.87% in Yang Tan.

Supportive Conditions

Most teachers are now professionally trained and many have graduated from teacher training colleges. In addition, they have the opportunity to gain in-service training and can complete their certification in this manner. This is a major change from twenty years ago when many of the teachers were workers or peasants graduated only from high school. At that time they seldom received in-service professional training.

Chalk and textbooks were the only materials used to aid teaching in the past. But now colored chalk is used in Yang Tan, supplementary readings (e.g., magazines and story-books) were evident, and there was even an overhead projector in the classroom. Although during interviews, An Shang teachers talked about VCDs, CDs, and other supplementary electronic materials being available from the government to support

textbook lessons, they do not have these nor do they have any equipment to access such resources. The An Shang principal has a computer for his use, and the Yang Tan teachers have one computer with access to the internet for finding supplementary material.

Parental Concerns

The interview of the An Shang school committee, which included three parents of current elementary school students, suggested concerns that probably extend beyond this one village. Committee members were eager to share their ideas and frustrations. Highest on their list of frustrations was that they must accept any teacher the county sends them. Some of their current Chinese teachers have poor handwriting² and are careless about using Putonghua (the standard Chinese dialect, called Mandarin in the west). Classroom observations by committee members have revealed that teachers, even in Chinese class, often lapse into their local dialects and then the children follow, using the village dialect and losing the opportunity to practice Putonghua.

Their other primary concern is that the school has no computers or computer instruction, and they are quite concerned that even at the elementary school level their children are far behind their urban counter-parts.

Finally, recognizing that the school population will continue to shrink, they engaged in a lively discussion about how to lure students from other villages to the school and in the process raise funds to hire a few better-qualified teachers.

DISCUSSION

Changes from the Past

Both teachers have more variety in their teaching styles than what was acceptable in the past when teaching clung tightly to the text and to character learning and memorizing and when recitation aimed at memorizing the text and the characters. The Yang Tan teacher uses strategies that are more heuristic than those used before. His techniques provide students with conceptual scaffolding that is aimed at helping them connect their own lives and their own curiosity with those of geologist Li. For example, at the beginning of the lesson to get the children interested and to help them associate their own experiences with Li Siguang, he asks, "Have you seen big stones at your home or in other places?" He then provides them the opportunity to respond with their varied answers. At the end he has the students share some of their own questions that they have wondered about. In An Shang, two instances stand out as deviations from the past. The teacher has the students read the dialogue of the two characters in the story to express their moods. He is not just having the students learn the information that the two are providing, but also how they feel about the conversation. Also, when he makes an error writing a character, the students point it out. He encourages them saying, "Very good! You noticed that I have made a mistake," and tells them to hunt for errors and develop a habit of discovery.

² Well-formed handwriting is important in helping children learn to form Chinese characters correctly.

Lingering Habits from the Past

While both teachers appear to be aware of the Chinese curriculum standards expectations, habits from past teaching styles still dominate large portions of their lessons. The high percentage of test-like questions and student responses is one indication of this tendency.

One of the teachers used the language of the curriculum standards several times. For example, when he praised the students for correcting a mistake he made, he praised them and then said, "When we are studying, we should form a habit of discovering." However, he did not use teaching strategies that reflected those words. In another instance, he asked two students to read the dialogue of two characters while paying attention to their feelings and said, "We are reading the text by performing different parts." And yet, they were not really doing that.

The teachers also tended to use definitions that students did not understand because they were too complex. For example, one teacher explained "geology" and "glacier" in scientific terms that the students did not understand. When it became obvious that they did not understand he moved on to another topic rather than explain the words in ways they would comprehend.

In the An Shang teacher interviews, the dean spoke at length about the need for schooling to be applied to students' lives, and that Chinese needs to be a tool for learning about life and other subjects, rather than just a subject in itself. Xiao (Xiao, 2006) found in interviews at factories located in rural areas that the qualities factory management wanted from workers were the ability to translate book knowledge into real-life practical use, an open-mindedness and ability to comprehend new learning, a willingness to find new ideas and develop creative solutions to problems, a willingness to take the initiative to solve these problems, and a sense of responsibility so that they can hold themselves accountable for assignments they have assumed.

It appears that teachers still need help to understand how the language of the curriculum standards transfers to practice that will help their students make connections between the Chinese texts and their current and future lives.

Limitations

Significant limitations need to be recognized. First, this is only an exploratory study that involves two villages selected because we knew them, not because they were representative of specific practices or conditions. The purpose of the study was to attempt to identify areas for future investigations and work. In no way is it a full study and although it has suggested directions for future work, the findings should be viewed with caution.

Secondly, we observed only one Chinese lesson in each school. We were fortunate that we were both able to observe the actual teaching of the Chinese text so that the data were highly comparable in the material addressed by the teachers, and in both cases, the teachers were not given time to prepare for a visitor. But a week spent in each teacher's class would have provided us with much more depth of understanding.

Finally, Pine worked through an interpreter in the village and through translated material for analysis. Although Pine and Yu went through the transcripts line by line for conceptual understanding and innuendo, and to identify categories and analyze practice, significant points can be blurred when using translations.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The results of this exploratory study suggest that, to some extent, the strategies the two teachers use in their classes, their points of view about Chinese teaching, and the supportive conditions in the schools have changed a lot compared with ten years ago. The teachers in these village schools appear to understand the theories behind the new curriculum standards and try to bring the principles of the new curriculum standards of China into practice. However, their current teaching practices do not completely reflect an appropriate understanding of how to do this.

They try to focus on the connections between the text and students' prior experience and feelings through teacher-student and/or student-student interactions. Furthermore, the students are interested in and actively participate in the teacher-initiated activities, have more materials to read inside and/or outside class, and their teachers have much more pedagogical knowledge than they did in previous decades.

There are numerous implications for the study. Firstly, for teachers to learn about skills and strategies that comply with the new curriculum is one thing, but to use them freely is another. For example, they have learned from different training programs and reports that authentic questions are better than test questions. But in their practice, test questions still dominate. Different training programs are needed. One good way to help them might be for the teachers to listen to other teachers' lessons and discuss how to do something better. This type of collaboration has proven useful for teachers in some schools and is less expensive than getting training in another location. However, without a specialist to help them periodically, they will not know if what they are doing complies with what the standard encourages. Some teachers have reported, for example, that they do not know whether or not they have made effective changes in their teaching practice.

Secondly, there is an urgent need for researchers, including university professors and teacher researchers, to carry out in-depth investigations to understand teachers' needs and to develop training programs that reflect these needs. They also need to go to schools where they can find good examples of the practice related to each principle or standard. Most important, however, is for them to help teachers understand how to translate education policy into effective classroom practice. Finally, the national government should give financial support to the rural schools, so school conditions improve. Among other things, they need to build and stock libraries, buy more supplementary reading materials for the students and journals or magazines for the teachers to learn about new skills, and provide computer access to students and teachers.

This study is only a beginning and an attempt to identify areas for future work, not a full study by any means. What we found does not represent all the Chinese teaching in rural elementary schools. Observations of more teachers and questionnaires would provide additional contextual data to support this study. Also more in-depth research into factors affecting teachers mastering strategic practical skills would inform the teachers working toward implementing age-appropriate classrooms.

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