



The teacher title system and teacher empowerment in China

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YING ZHANG
KWOK KUEN TSANG
*Beijing Normal University,
Beijing, Republic of China*

INTRODUCTION

The teacher title system¹ is a strategy used by China's government since 1986 to cultivate teacher professionalisation (Song, Zhu, & Liu, 2013). Although teacher empowerment is an essential component of teacher professionalisation, few studies have investigated the impact of the teacher title system on teacher empowerment in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the teacher title system. Thus, this study examined the relationship between the teacher title system and teacher empowerment by surveying 262 primary and secondary schoolteachers in a city in Liaoning Province. The findings suggest that the teacher title system might insufficiently empower teachers in China. Implications for teacher professionalisation in China are discussed and suggestions for further studies are also addressed.

The Chinese government has cultivated teacher professionalisation to improve the quality of education in society (Song et al., 2013). One of the government's cultivation strategies involved setting up the teacher title system. When teachers are certified as having attained a certain degree of professionalism, including professional skills, knowledge, values and ethics, they are classified as either Third Grade, Second Grade, First Grade, High Grade, Senior Grade or Special Grade. These titles are hierarchically ordered from the lowest rank, Third Grade, to the highest rank, Special Grade. The higher the rank denoted in the title, the higher a teacher's income and the greater his or her social status. Thus, the teacher title system motivates teachers to engage in professional development (Bi, 2012). In addition to the development of professionalism, teacher empowerment is an essential component of teacher professionalisation (Amzat & Valdez, 2017). The teacher title system is expected to empower teachers by professionalising them (Liu, 2009). Yet few studies have investigated the relationship between the teacher title system and teacher empowerment. The pilot study reported here was designed to address this research gap. According to Chin and Huang's (2000) model of teacher empowerment, teacher empowerment consists of four dimensions: professional

¹ A hierarchical system of grading registered teachers.

development, teaching autonomy, decision-making process, and professional status influences. Based on the model, this study sought to determine whether the teacher title system empowers teachers to engage in professional development, develop teaching autonomy, participate in decision-making process and gain professional status influences.

METHODOLOGY

One secondary school and three primary schools in a city in Liaoning Province were selected by convenience sampling to join the pilot study. Questionnaires were distributed to all of the teachers at these schools. Two hundred and sixty-nine valid questionnaires were collected. Of the 269 participants, 88.1% were female and 11.9% were male. Primary school teachers made up 77.0% of the sample, and secondary school teachers 23.0%. Many of the teachers had taught for fewer than 5 years (61.0%) and only a few had taught for more than 20 years (8.2%). The remaining participants had taught for 6-20 years (30.8%). In terms of the teacher title system, 11.5% of the participants were classified as Third Grade, 27.9% as Second Grade and 55.4% as First Grade; the remaining 5.2% were High Grade, Senior Grade or Special Grade. For analytical purposes, the latter 5.2% of the participants were recoded into a category called 'Senior'.

Teacher empowerment was measured using the Teacher Empowerment Scale developed by Chin and Huang (2000). The scale had 32 items measuring the four dimensions of teacher empowerment, namely professional development, teaching autonomy, decision-making process and professional status influences.

FINDINGS

An analysis of variance indicated that the Senior teachers may have shown a stronger sense of empowerment in the professional status influences dimension than the Third Grade teachers, but their sense of empowerment did not differ from that of the Second or First Grade teachers (see Table 1). These findings imply that teachers' sense of empowerment in the dimensions of professional development, teaching autonomy and decision-making process may not increase with rank. Accordingly, the teacher title system may insufficiently empower teachers in China.

Table 1 Comparison of teacher empowerment (PD, TA, PMD and PSI) of teachers with different titles

	Third Grade		Second		First Grade		Senior # (4)		F	Sig.	Post Hoc
	(1)		Grade (2)		(3)						
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD			
Professional development	4.46	0.61	4.37	0.75	4.59	0.59	4.67	0.50	2.32	0.075	6
Teaching autonomy	3.99	1.04	4.12	0.82	4.29	0.67	4.27	1.12	1.11	0.171	1
Decision-making process	2.99	1.07	2.98	1.21	3.09	1.12	3.56	1.27	1.06	0.365	4
Professional status influences	3.91	0.82	4.17	0.59	4.23	0.58	4.49	0.53	3.10	0.037	4>1
									0		

The Senior category comprises Higher Grade, Senior Grade and Special Grade teachers

Certain characteristics of the teacher title system may explain its failure to promote teacher empowerment. Although the teacher title system is used to motivate teachers to engage in professional development (Bi, 2012), it may ineffectively delegate autonomy and power to them to design the methods, processes and content of teaching (teaching autonomy), to influence or participate in school decision-making processes (decision-making process) and/or to exercise their professionalism in the educational system (professional status influences). Although teachers may be motivated by the teacher title system to self-develop, they may not have the freedom to develop their professional skills and knowledge (professional development), because the teacher title system predefines certain criteria for evaluating teachers' professionalism. Therefore, if teachers aspire to gain a higher rank through the teacher title system, they have to develop predefined aspects of their professional knowledge and skills rather than improving themselves in areas that they value. Accordingly, the Chinese government should improve the teacher title system to make it a mechanism for empowerment and a force motivating teachers' professional development. This means that teachers should be given more autonomy and power in the dimensions of professional development, teaching autonomy, decision-making process and professional status influences in addition to extrinsic rewards (e.g. income) and intrinsic rewards (e.g. social status) if they receive a higher-ranking title.

In addition to the teacher title system, other educational policies should be implemented to foster teacher empowerment in China. Thus, follow-up studies should investigate whether the teacher title system and other educational policies have interactive effects on teacher empowerment in China. Researchers should also test the findings of the pilot study reported here with a larger sample. Other methods of statistical analysis, such as multi-group analysis, HLM and SEM should be used to investigate the more complicated relationships between teacher empowerment, the teacher title system and other variables to develop a robust model of teacher empowerment in China.

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