

RESEARCH

FOR THE WORLD

The state and education: lessons for the UK from China and India

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Dr Yifei Yan is an LSE Fellow in the Department of Social Policy at LSE. Her main research areas include public administration, public management, education policy and governance, with a comparative focus on China and India.

How can the UK government improve its education system? Research by **Yifei Yan** into the Chinese and Indian education systems finds that carefully managed government intervention in partnership with local stakeholders often yields the best teaching outcomes.

What can the UK learn from how education is managed in countries such as China and India? Dr Yifei Yan of the Department of Social Policy at LSE surveyed and interviewed teachers in both countries. She found that carefully managed government intervention in partnership with local stakeholders often yields the best teaching outcomes.

The Communist Party of China has substantial control of the economy and much of the media, as well as the education curriculum in China. But when it comes to how teacher in-service training is organised and how their schools deliver education, regions and districts enjoy a fair degree of autonomy with relatively little intervention from the central government.

Dr Yifei Yan's latest research investigates the state's role in strengthening teacher capacity in China as a means to deliver better education outcomes. She compares China with India, another developing country that has one of the largest basic education sectors in the world. Her research focused on the issue that current research models only provide a partial assessment of the education system.



If we look at education reforms over the past two or three decades, what was often recommended as 'best practice', such as decentralisation or school-based management, actually has a mixed record. ”

Delivering the best possible education: what we can learn from teachers in Beijing and Delhi

Dr Yan conducted extensive surveys with teachers in secondary schools in Beijing and Delhi for her doctoral dissertation. These teacher surveys were supplemented with interviews to understand how much teachers were consulted about education delivery and whether they felt able to express their voice when teaching.

Dr Yan says “We can’t fully understand how government’s education programmes work without taking into account the perspectives of the very recipients of such support. Hence, the use of the teacher survey allows us to compare and explore teachers’ on-the-ground experience and perceptions.”

Dr Yan says her findings and other studies cast doubt on the idea that “best practice” techniques can be applied in ignorance of local contexts. “If we look at education reforms over the past two or three decades, what was often recommended as ‘best practice’, such as decentralisation or school-based management, actually **has a mixed record**.

“This was particularly evident in cases where parents, local governments or school management are ill-equipped to utilise choice and autonomy productively.

“In contrast, when higher-level government is involved in offering or co-producing local-level training for school management to better utilise grants, increase parental involvement and carry out localised teaching activities, school management is more likely to function as a bridge between the community and the schools as intended.”



Top-down programme delivery intended as being supportive is always likely to disappoint. ”

Teacher capacity building, accountability-related stress and workload is an issue in the UK

The lessons from China and India are relevant to the UK as teacher capacity building is still identified as an aspect that “remains largely unexplored both in research and also in practice” by a recent **Edge Foundation report** on inspections across the UK.

Another recent piece of research finds that 68 per cent of teachers in England report feeling accountability-related stress, compared to a cross-country average of around 45 per cent. Such findings suggest that teachers in the UK feel overworked compared to their international teaching peers.

Dr Yan says: “Policymakers in the education sector in the UK need to consider and respond to the challenges teachers have by seeking to understand this problem better, and by taking measures such as balancing and integrating accountability measures with well-designed capacity building measures.”

Taking a broader look at the impact of decentralisation and local control on education reforms

More recently, Dr Yan has broadened her focus from teacher capacity building to examining education reforms as a whole. Using the Brazilian education system as a case study - the country has high levels of decentralisation and local control with regards to education policy and administration - she has been able to focus on the diverging outcomes of education reforms in two similar states in Brazil and scrutinise how their varying possession of, or deficits in, policy capacity has contributed to this observed divergence. Findings from this research will be presented at the annual conference of European Group of Public Administration (EGPA) in September 2021.

Dr Yan, together with Professor Michael Barzelay from the Department of Management at LSE, and collaborators from Brazil's Escola Nacional de Administração Pública (Enap) and Universidade de Brasília, has also studied the management of transition in system leadership organisations with a case of Instituto Unibanco and "Education Management" in Brazil. The **findings of this case study** were presented at the 5th International Conference on Public Policy (ICPP5) in July 2021.

Dr Yan's doctoral dissertation, winner of the Best PhD Dissertation Award of Indian Public Policy Network in 2019, will be published into a monograph titled *Getting Schools to Work Better: Educational Accountability and Teacher Support in India and China* by Routledge in mid-2022.

One lesson that Dr Yan highlights from her research into education is that these reforms and attempts to enhance education delivery should always involve the teachers. Without doing so, she says, "top-down programme delivery intended as being supportive is always likely to disappoint." ■

Dr Yifei Yan was speaking to Peter Carroll, Media Relations Officer at LSE.

Policy capacity matters for capacity development: comparing teacher in-service training and career advancement in basic education systems of India and China, by Yifei Yan and Kidjie Saguin (National University of Singapore), is published by the International Review of Administrative Sciences. It is also available to **read in French**.

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