Abstract

Purpose – This article responds to a recent article published in this journal by Stoll and Kools (2017) on the ‘School as a Learning Organisation’ (SLO). It critiques Stoll and Kools’ integrated model of a SLO by investigating whether the model can be applied to a specific socio-cultural schooling context using the example of mainland China.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper reviews the extant published works on SLO with a focus on Stoll and Kools’ integrated model of a SLO. The paper also reviews the existing literature on schooling practices in China.

Findings – It is argued that the application of Stoll and Kools’ integrated model of a SLO in China needs to take into consideration and incorporate the prevailing centralised, hierarchical and collective characteristics in the country. The paper questions the universal application of the seven action-oriented dimensions of the SLO for all schools regardless of socio-cultural contexts. It highlights the mediating and moderating effects of local histories, conditions and developments when promoting SLO in a specific learning site.

Practical implications – Policymakers, researchers and educators need to contextualise the ideal of the SLO by interpreting and applying it in ways that are compatible with the dominant socio-cultural norms and practices in a particular locality.

Originality/value – This paper fills a current gap by relating the notion of SLO model to the schooling settings in China. It offers a collective slant to SLO that is tailored for the educational realities and experiences in China.

Keywords Human capital, Professional learning community, Knowledge mobilisation

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

In a recent article published in this journal, Stoll and Kools (2017) review and extend the concept of the ‘School as a Learning Organisation’ (hereinafter SLO). First conceptualised a few decades ago, the vision of the SLO has gained mass appeal in recent years. The SLO is increasingly upheld by policymakers, researchers and educators as “the ideal type of school organisation for dealing with the changing external environment, for facilitating organisational change and innovation, and even effectiveness, i.e. improvements in the learning outcomes of students and other important outcomes” (Kools and Stoll, 2016, p. 10, also see Diggins, 1997; Giles and Hargreaves, 2006; Johnson and Caldwell, 2001; Senge et al., 2010; Stoll and Fink, 1996; Fullan, 1995; Gandolfi, 2006; Retna and Ng, 2016; Schlechter, 2008; Silins et al., 2002; Strain, 2000; Watkins and Marsick, 1996). The notion of SLO is rooted in the concept of a ‘Learning Organisation’ (hereinafter LO), the latter popularised by Senge (1990) in his book, The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organisation. Despite different and competing understandings of what a LO is and entails, a broad consensus among scholars is that the LO “is a necessity, is suitable for any organisation” (OECD, 2016, p. 1). Building upon the arguments for LO, proponents of SLO regard it as necessary and suitable for all schools. As articulated by Kools and Stoll (2016), a widely-held belief is that SLO “is suitable to any school organisation, regardless of the context in which the school operates” (p. 24). But given the plural and evolving education
systems in the world that originate from and are shaped by diverse historical, political, institutional and social factors, needs and interests, how can SLO be applied to a learning site effectively? Put it another way, how do prevailing socio-cultural conditions and developments mediate and moderate the furtherance of SLO in a particular schooling context?

This article answers this question by examining how the concept of the SLO can be applied to schools in mainland China. China has been selected for this study as it is the largest education system in the world with its unique historical roots, political system, social institutions and cultural traditions. Researchers have noted that the school organisation, teaching and learning in China are shaped by indigenous and foreign ideas, assumptions and practices (e.g. Brown et al., 2011; Lee, 1996; Phuong-Mai, Terlouw and Pilot, 2005; Stankov, 2010; Tan, 2016, 2019a). Although the terms LO and SLO are not mentioned in the official documents, the curriculum reform in China for the past few decades has centred on transforming its schools into learning communities (MOE, 2001). Targeting at equipping its graduates to meet the demands of a knowledge economy, the reform in China aims to develop “all-rounded students” who are “imbued with a spirit of innovation, practical ability, and equipped with the foundational knowledge, ability and methods to engage in lifelong learning” (MOE, 2001, p. 1). For the past few decades, an array of policy initiatives have been enacted across all public schools in China that encompass school management system, curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, teacher training and so on. Schools in China are envisioned as learning organisations that foster a culture of innovation, change and effectiveness for their staff and students. That an educational vision is anchored upon the lifelong learning of all students is attested to in the official goal to cater to all the students’ learning needs through the following major measures: strengthening the connections between the curriculum content and the students’ life experiences; acknowledging and enriching the students’ learning interests and aptitudes; and equipping them for lifelong learning (MOE, 2001). As a result of the reform, schools across China have experimented with and introduced a rich variety of novel and experiential courses, learner-centred teaching methods and alternative assessments (for details, see Chou and Spangler, 2016; Guo and Guo, 2015; Shangguan, 2005; Tan, 2016; Yin and Lee, 2011; Zhong and Wu, 2007). Despite an extensive body of literature on education reform in China, a research gap is the limited attention to the applicability of SLO to the schooling context in China. It is therefore salient to investigate the extent to which the SLO is relevant to the Chinese settings.

The conceptual framework for this study is the integrated SLO model that is conceptualised by Stoll and Kools (2017). Significantly, this model has been adopted by the Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and explicated in two official documents (Kools and Stoll, 2016; OECD, 2016). This SLO model has been selected for my exploration as it is one of the most prominent frameworks of SLO due to the wide publicity and endorsement by OECD. As claimed by OECD (2016), the integrated SLO model is a ‘shared understanding of the concept [of SLO] that is both based on the literature and is recognisable to all parties involved, i.e. scholars, educators, policy makers, students and parents” (n.p.). This SLO model is also influential as the Directorate for Education and Skills for Organisation for OECD has announced the plan to develop schools across the globe based on such a framework (OECD, 2016). The article is structured as follows: an introduction to the integrated SLO model advanced by OECD, a discussion of the application of this model to the schooling contexts in China, key educational implications and conclusion.

The Integrated Model of the School as Learning Organisation
As mentioned, the ideal of SLO is premised on the concept of LO (Stoll and Kools, 2017). According to OECD (2016), a LO is essentially a “a place where the beliefs, values and norms of employees are brought to bear in support of sustained learning; where a “learning
atmosphere”, “learning culture” or “learning climate” is nurtured; and where “learning to learn” is essential for everyone involved” (n.p.). A SLO is a school that “has the capacity to change and adapt routinely to new environments and circumstances as its members, individually and together, learn their way to realising their vision” (Kools and Stoll, 2016, p. 5; also see Ng, 2005). An integrated SLO model which is drawn upon Watkins and Marsick (1996) is elucidated in an OECD-UNICEF Education Working Paper (Kools and Stoll, 2016; OECD, 2016). The model comprises seven action-oriented dimensions that collectively underline the aspirations and processes for a school to become a LO. The dimensions are as follows (Stoll and Kools, 2017, p. 7; also see OECD, 2016, p. 1):

1. developing and sharing a vision centred on the learning of all students;
2. creating and supporting continuous learning opportunities for all staff;
3. promoting team learning and collaboration among all staff;
4. establishing a culture of inquiry, innovation and exploration;
5. embedding systems for collecting and exchanging knowledge and learning;
6. learning with and from the external environment and larger learning system; and
7. modelling and growing learning leadership.

Each dimension is consisted of a set of underlying elements that spell out the essential characteristics of a SLO.

**An Application of the Integrated SLO Model to the Schooling Contexts in China**

As the integrated model of SLO is derived from the concept of LO, the former shares the same strengths and weaknesses plaguing the latter. Space constraints mean that this article is unable to rehearse the existing evaluation, critiques and debates surrounding LO and SLO (for good discussions, see Caldwell, 2012; Easterby-Smith et al., 1998; Eijkman, 2011; Henderson, 1997; Kools and Stoll, 2016; McHugh et al., 1998; Retna and Ng 2016; Smith, 2008). Instead, this section shall only focus on the question of the socio-cultural appropriateness of the integrated SLO model as explicated in Kools and Stoll (2016) (also see Stoll and Kools, 2017). To do so, this segment shall explore how the seven dimensions of the integrated SLO model can be applied to the schooling contexts in China.

With reference to the first dimension of developing and sharing a vision centred on the learning of all students, Kools and Stoll (2016) maintain that school leaders should not monopolise the development of the school vision and simply present it to the rest of the school staff. Instead, the school leaders should involve all the key stakeholders such as staff, students, parents, the community and other education institutions or companies in crafting the vision. Arguing along the same line are Garvin, Edmundson and Gino (2008) who posit that leaders should “prompt dialogue and debate” among the staff and exhibit “a willingness to entertain alternative points of view” (p. 4). Underpinning this call is an egalitarian and democratic approach to decision-making in schools – a practice that originates from Anglophone histories, philosophies, needs and writings. The reference to cooperative efforts in vision-setting is predicated on equal power relationships reflects liberal values such as autonomy, liberty, equality and individualism. It is pertinent that this dimension of SLO makes it susceptible to a similar criticism of Senge’s LO that presupposes a “virtually untrammelled valorisation of human agency” that overlooks the social and political embeddedness of human beings (Fielding, 2001, p. 23). Highlighting the limitation of autonomy as an ideal, Haste (1996) reasons as follows:

It is meaningless to talk of people “stepping outside” or “transcending” their culture and time, however “rational” they try to be. Therefore it is pointless to make
autonomy an ideal either as a personal quality, or as a form of reasoning. Morality cannot be understood unless we take full account of the social, cultural and historical context. (p. 51)

The recommendation that school leaders should construct the school vision in consultation with the major educational stakeholders risks coming into conflict with the prevailing institutional and socio-cultural realities in China. Liberal principles such as individualism, egalitarianism and democratic decision-making are foreign to the Chinese contexts that are grounded in and marked by submission to authority, unequal power distribution and follower compliance. Research has shown that a more centralised, hierarchical and collective approach is privileged and practised in China and other East Asian jurisdictions (Tan, 2019a; Hairon and Dimmock, 2012; Marginson, 2011; Retna and Ng, 2016; Wong, 2012). Schools in China adhere to a ‘command and control’ school system where policies are initiated from the central authority and cascaded down to the schools. The top-down arrangement which shows up the high power-distance cultures in Asia (Hofstede 2001) makes it possible for a tight coupling of policy formulation and implementation. In practical terms, the school vision is chiefly conceptualised by the school leaders who may involve other senior management members and then presented to the rest of the school, parents and other policy actors. Wong (2012) draws attention to the “nested, hierarchical pyramid, where policies and resources are transmitted downward level by level” in China (p. 5). A teacher in China, commenting on the principal as the primary decision maker in the school, notes,

The authority rests with the principal as the school system adopts the ‘principal accountability system. So if my principal says so, it will be so (cited in Tan, 2016, p. 148).

The above critique of the first dimension of the integrated SLO model does not mean that the dimension should be jettisoned. Rather, a more contextually appropriate application to the Chinese settings is proposed. Such an interpretation locates the creation and dissemination of the school vision within the possibilities and constraints of a centralised, hierarchical and collective backdrop. Although the Chinese school principal is the primary decision-maker, he or she does not necessarily ignore or marginalise the needs and interests of the staff and other educational stakeholders. On the contrary, a good school leader is one who identifies oneself as a member of the learning community and acts in accordance with collective principles. Scholars have reported the prevalence of communal values such as group identity, duty consciousness, and consensus formation in East Asian schools and communities (Lee, Grossman, Kennedy, & Fairbrother, 2004). It follows that the school principal, even when taking the lead in conceptualising the school vision, needs to keep in mind one’s social responsibilities and interdependence. Such a leader will take the initiative to understand how a vision that is centred on the learning of all students can be articulated and actualised through the active participation of all educational stakeholders. The staff and other educational stakeholders, on their part, give their feedback to the school leader with the understanding that the latter is empowered to make and enact the best vision for the benefit of everyone.

Moving on to the second dimension of creating and supporting continuous learning opportunities for all staff, Kool and Stoll (2016) foreground professional learning and development that spur the teachers on to question their thinking about their own practices. Kool and Stoll (2016) aver that “intentional interruption of previous assumptions” and “challenge to thinking patterns” are critical to achieve and embed change (p. 39). Although teachers in China are given ample avenues and support for continuous learning, the pivot of
the learning opportunities for staff in East Asia is not to challenge the status quo. Rather, the continuous learning opportunities for the teachers are situated within and aligned with an accent on the transmission of knowledge, exam preparation and academic credentialism. China has instituted terminal exams, namely the zhongkao (taken at the end of junior secondary) and gaokao (taken at the end of senior secondary) for the purpose of evaluation, screening and placement of students through standardised assessments. The overall educational landscape is an exam-oriented culture that has been formed and consolidated over the centuries. Yang and Yorozu (2015) note that the distinguishing pedagogic elements in East Asian countries include the dominant role of teachers and exam-driven schooling. Pointing to the deep-seated mindset of exam preparation, a school leader in China commented:

The exam assessment system has lagged behind [the curricular reform on critical thinking]. The pressure of gaokao is immense. The screening function and need for stability and fairness [in the exam system] cannot be reconciled and are in conflict with [the promotion of critical thinking] (cited in Tan, 2019b, p. 17).

The second dimension, therefore, should attend to helping teachers in China to learn continuously – whether in the area of curriculum, pedagogy, curriculum and so on – with the ultimate goal of preparing their students for the high-stakes exams. It is noteworthy that educational reforms in China, under the influence of neoliberal ideas, assumptions and techniques, have increased the pressure on teachers to juggle both the launch of new initiatives and the deliverance of high test scores for their students (Tan, 2017; Tan and Ng, 2018; Chou and Spangler, 2016; Chu and So, 2010; Guo and Guo, 2015; Wu, 2010).

The third dimension on promoting team learning and collaboration among all staff amplifies the previous point on the entrenchment of an exam-oriented schooling system and its impacts on teacher practice. Kools and Stoll (2016) rightly point out the strengths of East Asian countries such as Singapore and Japan in emphasising ‘Professional Learning Community’ (PLC) in schools. Researchers have reported that the successful enactment of PLCs in China is due, to a large extent, to the hierarchical structure and workings within the education system (Hairon and Tan, 2017; Walker, Chen and Qian, 2008; Wang, 2014; Wong, 2012). The cooperation among teachers through PLCs serves to pass on good practices that are consistent with and reinforce existing cultural norms regarding teaching and learning. A top-down work environment does not necessarily inhibit teacher collaboration as human relationships in East Asian settings are lubricated and enhanced by a collectivist mindset (Huang and Gove, 2012). Governed by a spirit of human interdependence, performance of social roles and the pursuit of the common good, educators in China are generally predisposed to work together to share ideas and best practices. The introduction and flourishing of PLCs in East Asia, while prompting teachers to improve their craft through team learning and collaboration, affirm their traditional beliefs and presuppositions about test-driven teaching and learning.

The fourth dimension of establishing a culture of inquiry, innovation and exploration stresses the need for a school to support and recognise staff for taking initiative and risks, and viewing problems and mistakes as opportunities for learning. Kools and Stoll (2016) underscore the necessity to cultivate “a spirit of inquiry, initiative and willingness to experiment with new ideas and practices” that shows up “the cultural mindset of the SLO” (p. 45). Garvin, Edmundson and Gino (2008) echo the same point in their assertion that employees “should be encouraged to take risks and explore the untested and unknown” as well as “ask naïve questions, own up to mistakes” (p. 3). From a Chinese standpoint, it is difficult to entertain and carry out radical and socially disruptive ideas and practices in a
conservative society. Educators from China who were interviewed commented that the existing schooling climate does not encourage divergent thinking or critical thinking due to political and historical reasons (Tan, 2016).

The “pressure to conform to group norms” in China, according to Yang and Yorozu (2015), “might inhibit learners from developing creativity and an innovative spirit” (p. 12). Hall and Ames (1987) contend that the pre-eminence of tradition in China “as the source of practical and affective norms leads to a restriction of the novel contributions of persons as individuals who would break the continuities of the past and establish new directions in thought or institutional practice” (p, 23). The experience of educators in China parallels that for employees in public sector organisations where they face the “tensions between the need to deliver specific improvements in the organisation” – in the teachers’ case, high test scores – and “the desire to encourage creative innovation” (Betts and Holden, 2003, p. 280). But the action imperative of establishing a culture of inquiry, innovation and exploration is not totally irrelevant to the schooling contexts in China. Schools in China are open to changes and transformations that are evolutionary and socially acceptable rather than revolutionary and socially disruptive. Research has shown that East Asians privilege gradual improvements that play up the moral and social components of creativity (Rudowicz and Yue, 2000; Niu and Sternberg, 2002; Kaufmann and Beghetto, 2009).

The fifth dimension spotlights on embedding systems for collecting and exchanging knowledge and learning. This dimension illustrates a SLO that is ‘knowledge-rich’ and not simply ‘information-rich’. Kools and Stroll (2016) explain the differences between knowledge and information:

Knowledge is dynamic, since it is created in social interactions amongst individuals and organisations. Knowledge is context specific, as it depends on a particular time and space. Without being put into context, it is just information, not knowledge. Information becomes knowledge when it is interpreted by individuals and given a context and anchored in the beliefs and commitments of individuals (Nonaka and Toyama, 2000, p. 7, cited in Kools and Stoll, 2016, pp. 50-51).

In claiming that information becomes knowledge only through social processing, a social constructivist view of knowledge is presupposed for the SLO. Such an epistemological position views knowledge as ‘made’ rather than ‘discovered’ (Phillips, 1995). Learners, accordingly, should turn information into knowledge through exposure to student-centred and self-directed learning and environments (Jonassen, 1991). On the one hand, a constructivist approach to learning is recommended in the current education reform in China. Although the official documents did not name constructivism as the pedagogical theory for the curriculum reform, Chinese scholars and educators have observed that constructivism is a key learning theory that undergirds the reform (Ren, 2008; Wang, 2008; Zhang, 2010). Constructivist aspects of teaching and learning are evident in classroom practices such as giving students projects to construct their own ideas and solutions, connecting knowledge to daily experiences, and expecting teachers to set aside time for questions, debates and presentations. On the other hand, the propagation of constructivist theories and strategies co-exists with the traditional view of knowledge in China that holds that knowledge is not ‘made’ but resides in an objective world and external reality (Tan, 2017). A realist view of knowledge explains why textual learning and didacticism prevail in China: they are the means for the teacher to pass on the knowledge discovered by experts to students. Scholars in China such as Wang (2004) have cautioned against what they call a ‘contempt of knowledge’ – a neglect of foundational and disciplinary knowledge – if a constructivist view is privileged. As a result, although schools in China welcome embedding systems for collecting and exchanging
knowledge and learning, they do not necessarily assume an epistemic view that sees knowledge as dynamic and created in social interactions amongst individuals and organisations.

Shifting our attention to the sixth dimension on learning with and from the external environment and larger system learning with and from the external environment and larger system, a key element is for the school to work with parents/guardians and the community as partners in the education process and the organisation of the school. While schools in China appreciate the support of parents, it is rare for parents to get involved in the running of the school. Chinese parents, by and large, do not help with the classroom planning and management, learning resources and the school facilities, as is the case for Germany (Kools and Stoll, 2016). The relative inactivity of the parents in China is in tandem with the responses of the teachers to take a backseat and leave the decision making to the school leaders. The influence of collectivism in China is manifested in a subscription to a set of shared moral values by the parents and other social actors that are derived from a socially constructed, implicit, organic and communal consensus. There exists a culture of trust between the parents and the school as normative values are agreed upon by members of a learning community. An authentic common good is targeted at through socialising the students and staff of the school into a set of norms; “values cannot be shared without members’ participation in a common life” (Cochran, 1989, p. 427).

On the last dimension of modelling and growing learning leadership, school leaders are expected to be creative change agents who provide the direction for learning, distribute leadership and help grow other leaders, including students. But this dimension is mediated and moderated in the Chinese learning environments by a fairly tight coupling between policy formulation and implementation in a centralised system. Education policies are initiated by the central or municipal governments and disseminated to the provincial and district authorities for action. Given that the education authorities assert their dominance through various forms of initiatives, control and regulation (Tan, 2019c; Feng and Lu, 2013), there is a limit to how much autonomy the school leaders have. Although school leaders in China could still aspire to and become creative change agents, their plans and actions should not deviate from the policy goals, messages and directions established by the education authorities. In short, the leadership demonstrated by the school leaders in a SLO in China mirror the following traits in East Asian education systems: “strong government, a tight bureaucratic structure, a hierarchical social order, a networked social structure, high levels of educational aspiration and attainment, as well as an emphasis on values such as diligence, thrift, cooperation, respect for elders, loyalty to one’s group or organisation, reciprocity and humility” (Yang and Yorozu, 2015, p. 12).

Key Educational Implications
The preceding has put forward the claim that the integrated SLO model needs to be interpreted in ways that are contextually appropriate for the school organisation, leadership, teaching and learning in China. Two key educational implications are highlighted in this section. The first is a rejection of the universal application of the integrated SLO model for all schools regardless of historical, political and socio-cultural contexts. It is not the case that SLO models can be transported from one locality to another regardless of differing and competing ideologies and worldviews across cultures. Citing research by Dimmock and Walker (2000) and Hofstede (2001), Retna and Ng (2016) caution against the embrace of “western assumptions that might not be culturally suitable for application in non-western organisations” (p. 11). A more culturally sensitive approach is warranted by recognising the theory-laden nature of SLO models and understanding how a particular school community
makes sense of and adapts the different dimensions of the SLO model. Any specific construction of a SLO model must of necessity acknowledge and incorporate local histories, conditions, developments, agendas and needs. After all, learning “takes place in an emotional and political context that is as wedded to the established social order as it is desirous of making changes to it” (Vince, 2018, p. 273).

The second and related implication is a need for policymakers, researchers and educators to consider the mediating and moderating effects of local histories, conditions and developments when promoting SLO in a specific learning site. Policy actors need to be cognisant of local systems, characteristics and contingencies that may variously advance or impede the successful enactment of SLO. The contextual factors that challenge the smooth implementation of a particular SLO model should not be viewed negatively as hindrances to the achievement of a good school organisation. This is because such a mindset may exalt the SLO model as an infallible ideal and concomitantly disparage the local culture as ‘backward’, ‘obsolete’ and ‘harmful’. In other words, we need to reject limiting ourselves to only two possible outcomes: “utopian sunshine” or “Foucauldian gloom” (Driver, 2002): the former occurs if all the dimensions of the SLO model is embraced, and the latter if any of the dimensions is rejected (Field 2019a, b). Questioning this ‘either/or’ approach, Vince (2018) calls for ‘both/and’ approach that illustrates an ‘organisational paradox’ – “contradictory yet interrelated elements (dualities) that exist simultaneously and persist over time” (p. 273). This means, in the case of China, appreciating a collective slant to SLO where the values of collectivism, interdependence, centralised control and hierarchy are congruous with school improvements, change and innovation. In sum, the integrated SLO model is relevant to schools in China but needs to be interpreted and applied in light of the ongoing needs, conditions and interests that prevail in a learning site.

To sum up the implications, the ideal of a SLO is something that all schools should aspire to become, since such a school model enables all the staff and educational stakeholders to be prepared for internal and external changes through continuous improvements and innovations. Put simply, the general principles of a SLO are prescriptive for all good schools. But when interpreting and appropriating the dimensions of the SLO model for a particular learning site, it is important to do so in ways that are culturally appropriate. For example, while the first dimension of developing and sharing a school vision centred on the learning of all students is relevant to all schools in the world, its application should vary in accordance with local cultural norms. This means a more hierarchical approach of crafting and disseminating the school vision in China versus a more egalitarian process in the United States. That said, it needs to be clarified that this paper does not argue or imply that all the dimensions of the integrated model of the SLO are suitable for schools in Anglophone societies. The socio-cultural realities for these schools may differ due to a host of historical, economic, political, geographical and educational conditions. Furthermore, the specific schooling policy, degree of school autonomy, leadership style, management structure and teacher relationships, among other factors, play a part in determining the successful exercise of the SLO model in a local setting, whether in the East or West. It is therefore important, when analysing and applying the SLO model in a school or jurisdiction, to adopt a more differentiated and nuanced approach.

**Conclusion**

In a globalised world, schools in China reflect an international trend to equip their students with 21st century competencies. To be sure, political education that advocates national loyalty and party allegiance remains an important function of schools in China. But recent education reforms in the country show that a chief mission for Chinese schools is to transform
themselves into learning organisations. Prioritising student learning, the Ministry of Education in China declares its aim to “promote the students’ active participation, willingness to inquire, diligence in hands-on activities, abilities in collecting and processing information, obtaining new knowledge, analysing and solving problems, and interaction and cooperation” (MOE, 2001, p. 1). In this regard, the schools in China need to become SLOs, like many other schools in other parts of the world. Returning to the question on how the notion of a SLO can be applied across cultures, this article has investigated such an application in the schooling contexts of China. It has been argued that the prevailing socio-cultural conditions and developments in China mediate and moderate the promotion of SLO in Chinese schools. A collective slant of SLO is proposed for China so as to prevent SLO from being merely an “ideological cosmetic” (Fielding, 2001, p. 27). A hierarchical and centralised orientation espoused by schools in China is compatible with the goal of becoming a SLO in China because such an approach is rooted in collegiality, community spirit and larger good.

The concept of the SLO will gain greater currency if it is interpreted and put to use in view of the historical and socio-cultural realities, constraints and opportunities experienced by educators and other educational stakeholders. Looking ahead, it is recommended that further research be carried out on the actual implementation of the SLO model for schools in China, keeping in mind the regional disparities in educational developments and standards across the country. There are substantial variations in the schooling conditions, needs, developments and challenges in various parts of China, especially between the Eastern and Western regions as well as between urban and rural areas (Yao and Xu, 2014). Another line of inquiry is to explore the necessary contextualisation, localised readings and situational adaptations of different SLO models. Relevant research questions include the conditions for SLO to work, whether these conditions exist in schools in China, and what changes need to be made for the advancement of SLO. Such an endeavour will extend the existing literature on SLO, opening up new discussions and debates on SLO in cross-cultural settings.

Acknowledgements: An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Department of Educational Studies of Macquarie University in June 2019. The author is grateful to Dr Laurie Field, Associate Professor Michael Cavanagh, Professor Manjula Waniganayake and all the participants for their helpful comments.

References


Ng, P. T. (2005), The learning school: Innovation and enterprise. Pearson/Prentice Hall, Singapore


