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## Shanghai success a lesson in delivery

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*Teachers meet at least once a fortnight to discuss their teaching and ways to improve it, writes **Ben Jensen**.*

Some months ago I walked into Gezhi High School, a 10-storey building housing 1300 students near the centre of Shanghai. In my career I have been lucky enough to visit many schools in many countries. Some have been good, some bad. Yet, for all the talk of differences, most were similar. Even in Finland, for so long held up as the best of education, I found many of the teaching practices to be similar to the better schools in Australia. But when I spent time in the schools in Shanghai I found something truly different.

It is not that the facilities were flash. Many classrooms had not been renovated in a long time and would not meet Australian expectations. Many were also overcrowded by Australian standards, with 40 or so students in a class. No lavish learning spaces or state-of-the-art computers.

But there was something far more important. These schools are doing what we all know matters. Teachers' professional learning is the best I have ever seen. Feedback to improve teaching is constant and based on frequent observations of teachers' classes.

Professional collaboration is active and teachers are true researchers.

These are the things we have been talking about in Australian education for many years. Here, they are a daily part of school life.

In the school's cramped basement canteen, where students sat on one side, teachers on the other, I ate lunch with a young woman who taught English, and spoke it beautifully after scoring high marks at university.

She talked of how lucky she was to be a teacher, and how lucky she was to have a mentor who was a Master Teacher.

Her mentor observed her classes two or three times a week and gave her feedback.

I told her that many Australian teachers wanted to be mentored, but found that existing mentoring programs did not provide them much benefit. She looked amazed.

"I owe so much to my mentor," she said. "I go to watch her teach as often as I can, at least three or four times a week."

At Shanghai Experimental School, principal Xu Hong described the importance of the research her teachers undertake. Research groups of five or six teachers meet once a fortnight or more regularly to discuss their teaching and ways to improve it.

One particular group decided that while the school's teaching of classical art was strong, its teaching of modern art needed to improve.

Over a year, the group devised a series of new teaching practices, and established what worked to improve student learning. At the end of the year it published the results in a booklet for all teachers at the school.

Xu summed up the differences beautifully: "From what I have seen in Western countries, teachers place of work is the classroom with students coming and going. In Shanghai, teachers' main place of work is their office. The emphasis is on their professional learning and research."

I don't believe we should become exactly like Shanghai. But we can learn so much. Not just because their students learn more. But because they are excelling in the things we keep trying to achieve. We all know what works to improve learning. We talk about it a lot. They do it.

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