Dr. Ye He, associate professor in UNC Greensboro’s Department of Teacher Education and Higher Education, helmed the visit. Dr. He says, “It’s not about who is learning from whom,” she says. “We all have our various strengths and utilize them in different contexts.”

He’s headmasters project is funded by the Jack Ma Foundation, an organization created by the executive chairman of the world’s largest retailer, Chinese e-commerce company Alibaba Group. One focus of the foundation is the promotion of leadership and management skills for headmasters in rural China. The foundation chose UNCG as its international partner because of the university’s successes in working with rural educators, including the recent Principal Preparation for Excellence and Equity in Rural Schools initiative led by the School of Education’s Dr. Kimberly Kappeler-Hewitt. With $1.8 million from the NC Alliance for School Leadership Development, the initiative is helping 11 North Carolina school districts that are struggling to find and keep effective principals in high-needs schools.

Through the headmasters project, the Jack Ma Foundation aims to enhance management of schools and programming in rural China by broadening headmasters’ scope of knowledge. At UNCG, the goal is to provide North Carolina rural principals and teachers with opportunities for global engagement. “Depending on the resources you have, students may never have the opportunity to really go to China,” Dr. He says. “But this type of program makes it more mobile – you don’t have to go to China to interact with a Chinese principal.”

Dr. He (image right) hopes that UNCG’s partnership with the Jack Ma Foundation will lead to long-term engagement. Thus far, they have seen a large increase in participants’ willingness to take risks. Participants say they felt comfortable sharing thoughts and ideas, despite any language barriers, and expressed interest in continuing professional development. “We have found so far that generally the principals are very satisfied with our preparation and our program, and their experiences here,” Dr. He says. “Overall there is an increase in all aspects of knowledge – in terms of language, history, cultural customs, and the education system of the U.S.”

Tingting Huang, project manager for Jack Ma’s Rural Headmasters Initiative, says the visit exceeded expectations. “What we have learned here can be directly used to guide how we’re going to work on school improvement plans. We hope that in the future there is more collaboration between the foundation and UNCG, and I believe that will happen.”

By Elizabeth L. Harrison  •  Photography By Mike Dickens  •  Learn more at https://cs.uncg.edu/TeacherEducation