Understanding Teachers' Development in China: An Illustrative 'Snap-shot' of Three Teachers' Professional Lives

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Abstract

Teacher development is a major concern of current educational reform in China. This paper draws on theories that there are three aspects of teacher development : professional knowledge, teachers' commitment and community of practice. This paper reports an illustrative 'snap-shot' of three middle school English teachers' lives, to illustrate the current situation in China of teachers' professional development. An analysis of this data indicates a current deficiency in professional knowledge, teachers' commitment and community support, which undermines these teachers' professional practice for the purpose of professional development.

Key words

Teachers' professional development, Teachers' knowledge, Teachers' commitment

INTRODUCTION

Substantial progress in education has been witnessed in China, embracing both educational policies, institutional management and teacher training. However education in China is still found to be "imbued with problems" (Li,1999,p.179). One major cause of these problems appears to be the teacher education system (Zhang Jiaxiang, 2001). In China, teachers are usually graduates from normal universities, colleges or schools, where various area of 'subject knowledge' such as psychology, pedagogy and methodology are offered for professional development.

After graduation, the schools where they work may then provide limited in-service training including mentored teaching, basic skills training, modern technology training, short-term training in holidays, participant observation, and collegial lesson planning (Zhang Jiaxiang & Sang Yongna, 2001; Zao Mengceng, 1999). These forms of training however may not fit well with the teachers' professional practice (Song Deru, 2001).

Based on the concept of "lifelong education" (UNESCO report, 1996), the Ministry of Education in Mainland China now seeks to develop teachers' "further education", by involving all elementary and middle school teachers in the enterprise of professional development (Cheng Shuhua, 2000). The intent here is to raise the quality of education.

Learning from countries adopting a similar "quality of education" goal and with contexts similar to China, such as India (as reported in Dyer et. al, 2004), people come to realize that in-service training could not achieve expected goals where the training content is felt to be irrelevant to teachers' professional daily practice. To bridge this 'relevance' gap, the focus of teacher development has now been oriented towards the teachers' lifeworld (Goodson, 1994; Allwright, 2003; Wu, 2002a).

This paper seeks to investigate three 'teachers' lifeworlds' and to illuminate what is relevant to the 'professional development' of middle school teachers in Mainland China.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Research in teacher development has changed its focus over the past few years. Two decades ago, it was still based on the "delivery mechanism" (Freeman, 1998) which was mainly concerned with what we knew or thought was important about teaching. But by the 1990s interest had been diverted towards "the thinking of the teacher" (ibid) i.e. teacher learning. This implied that teacher development was to provide teachers with "opportunities to learn" (Hargreaves and Fullan, 1992, p.1). This change in focus is reflected in the various approaches adopted in teacher development practice. Hargreaves and Fullan (1992, p.2) categorize three types of teacher development as:

- knowledge and skill development
- self-understanding, and
- ecological change

In this paper the three facets of teacher development are reformulated as three guiding research questions to invesitgate the situation of Chinese teachers' professional lives.

What expertise does the teacher need to have?

"Xu gao wei shi" ('the knowledgeable can be the teacher') may best characterize Chinese traditional expectations of teachers. Knowledge of subject matter has long been considered central in China's teacher education system. This view is now gradually changing. Freeman and his collaborators (Freeman, 2002; Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Freeman & Richards, 1996) propose theoretical frameworks that redefine the scope and nature of teachers' professional knowledge and emphasize teachers' personal understanding of their daily practice. For Rose (2003) such changes in the notion of professional expertise indicate a move from 'official' to 'local' knowledge - the former being unitary and totalitarian while the latter appears to be "discontinuous, disqualified and illegitimate" (Jorgensen 2002, p.31).

What developmental approach deserves teachers' commitment?

Approaches to teacher development fell broadly with a 'skills- and knowledge-based' paradigm in the majority of our past practices (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992; Dyer et. al, 2004). Knowledge or skill was considered as something existing objectively there, usually discovered or possessed by some experts or authorities and therefore

known as "official knowledge" (Apple, 2000). Based on such a theory, teacher development is usually manifested as efforts exerted in various ways to facilitate the transmission of knowledge from trainers (experts) to trainees (teachers) Therefore it depends heavily on training institutions, beaucratic authorities and 'experts'. Teacher trainees only play a passive role. But for Hargreaves & Fullan (1992), this "top-down" or "outside-in" method may silence teachers' voice arising from their practice and prevent teachers from gaining true understanding for their own professional development. As more "local" knowledge is preferred now, we no longer regard knowledge as something that we can move around from one person to another (Wu, 2002a, p.339). This implies that teacher development cannot be achieved through institutional instruction but through understanding of individual teachers' life in exploratory practice. (Allwright, 2003)

What external supports are needed to facilitate teacher development?

Where top-down imposition of knowledge and contextual irrelevance may drown teachers' authentic understanding of their practice, interest has focused on communities of practice (Wenger, 1998).

Communities of practice are assigned two key characteristics:

Collaboration: Collaboration in teaching can take various forms such as peer discourse or dialogue (Manouchehri, 2002; McCotter, 2001), seminars or workshops (Frank, 1998), observing colleagues' classroom teaching (Richards, 1998), action research in group (Wu, 1995; Carr & Kemmis, 1986) or even informal communication like chat, discussion, writing letters or emails, and other collective activities among colleagues.

Autonomy: For Clement & Vandenberghe (2000, p.85) autonomy "holds prospect for creativity, personal study, reflection, the elaboration of new orientations and as a consequence for professional development". For Richardson (1997, p.185) a community conducive to professional development shall be one of "sacred space". Given these characteristics, for professional autonomy to flourish, it requires both social and institutional respect and nourishment.

Teacher development, as we can see from the review above, has been approached from various perspectives with different foci. A common feature amongst the more recent approaches is that they address teachers' practical and local needs and teachers' "dwellings" (Wu, p.2002a) i.e. their daily professional life (Goodson, 1994; Allwright, 2003; Wu, 2002a). So in this paper we propose to take a "snap-shot" of three middle school English teachers' professional life in China to illuminate the challenges and opportunities they encounter in their professional development.

THREE CASE STUDIES

The three case studies comprise three native-Chinese teachers of English and their reflections sampled over one representative teaching week. Convenience sampling - interviewees are long-term colleagues of the researchers: the 'teaching week' is arbitrarily selected - is an acknowledged research limitation. However the intent here is to report a 'snap-shot' of teaching reality. The validity of this 'snap-shot' stems from the mutual respect and confidence shared between researcher and respondent as demonstrated in the following biographic sketches:

Huifei: She was born in a scholarly family (her mother was the headmaster of a middle school), educated in a medium-sized city in Jiangxi, elected

Chairperson of students' union at college and awarded the Championship title in a debate contest. As a teacher, she has been honored as a "model teacher" in her school and invited to give demonstrative classes for her colleagues.

Lifang: She is a girl from the countryside, a second-prize winner in a provincial English proficiency contest and promoted from a rural middle school to the No. 1 in her county for her excellence in teaching achievement and professional competence. Her husband is headmaster of a middle school and they have one daughter.

Linwei: He is also from a rural family in Jiangxi and known for his diligence as a student at college. As a teacher, he was also promoted from a junior to a senior middle school for his professional accomplishments.

The three interviewees have each had five-years' teaching experience. They are reaching a stage of "impact concerns" (Fuller, 1969) in which teachers usually start to be concerned about further development in their profession by drawing on not only their personal but also social potential. This also can serve well our purpose of researching professional development.

Reflecting geographic distances, the data comprise a series of telephone interviews. All interviews are held in the evening, once a day over a period of one full teaching week. Each interview starts with the reminiscences of our past shared college life, our feelings about our life and career, an account of what they do at work during the day including their daily teaching routine, their contact with students or colleagues and their feelings and comments on these interactions.

Interviews are recorded in the form of book notes, whose accuracy is confirmed immediately after each interview. Then episodes or activities are identified. The analysis presupposed the concept that life is revealed as consecutive episodes and that the primary way of living is manifested as "comportment" within an episode (Donnelly 1999, p.936), so those episodes are the windows for us to understand the teachers' life. Episodes are categorized and analyzed in terms of teachers' knowledge, commitment and community of practice. The following serves as one example of this analysis process (Note: interviews were originally conducted in Chinese).

Prompt: How was your school day today?

Huifei: I attended a meeting this morning. It was summoned by the school's League Committee. It had nothing to do with teaching. It was held as a response to a circular from upper educational authorities. ... (Interview Notes on April 7). In this conversation we can see that Huifei is talking about an administrative meeting she had joined. Her story also reveals that in this meeting they just sit there, listening to one school leader's speech reporting on a circular passed down from the upper educational authorities. From this we deduce

1) that the knowledge within this meeting is "hard" or "official" (Apple, 2000) for it is circulated and universally applied in all schools of their city, taking no account of the specific situation or needs of individual teachers and schools.

2) that teachers show little or no commitment to the agenda of the meeting, since this meeting is imposed top-down on the teachers, does not emerge out of their authentic teaching practice and "it had nothing to do with teaching".

3) that there is no collaboration among leaders and teachers in this meeting, for what they have to do is follow the requirements or stipulations in the circular. They do not have the autonomy to change

the proceedings or content of the meeting. It appears that all teachers are taking uniform actions but this impression is contrived.

By drawing on the analysis of their daily practices in the way we illustrated above, we reach the following understanding of middle school teachers' professional life.

FINDINGS

Our analysis shows that the three case studies share remarkable similarities in terms of the three analytical dimensions of professional life.

Knowledge

Our talks with the three teachers all show that they are embedded in "an organizational knowledge structure" (Schon, 1983, p.336). The main drive of their professional activities is the imposed "official knowledge" from top down. Linwei has the following account:

Our primary duty is to fulfill the requirements listed in the syllabi and help students achieve high marks in exams. (Interview Notes on April 7)

As illustrated above the official guidelines are internalized as the perception of teachers' duty, and are embodied in their pedagogical discourse in terms of both their teaching content and method.

Commitment

By "commitment" here we do not mean the time, energy or emotion teachers devoted to their profession. Instead it is intended to mean the self-elaboration of authenticity of teachers' practice i.e. the personal horizon which a teacher explores in order to enact his authentic understanding in his professional life.

Their stories in our interviews indicate that the teachers are all more bothered with their daily routines than voicing and reconstructing the meaning of education within their own "knowledge landscape" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995). One example demonstrates this phenomenon:

Lifang: Every day, I teach lessons, grade students' homework, plan lessons or chat with some friends. (Interview Notes on April 7)

Linwei: The majority of teachers here consider that their only duty is to perform the routine classroom teaching. They care nothing about their own professional development. (Interview Notes on April 8)

However, we do find that instances where they can engage in "marginal practice" (Wu, 2002), which can lead to authentic understanding as demonstrated in the following:

Huifei: Now I am experimenting with a new theory—task-based learning.

Caishun: How did you come up with that idea?

Huifei: I came across it in some books. And I felt the idea is not only significant to our education but also practical in my teaching. So I started to try it. I surfed on the net to look for relevant materials and new ideas for my teaching. And now it works well.

Caishun: I am quite interested in it because in my university some teachers are experimenting with a kind of similar theory called "RICH".

Huifei: That's too great! Could you send me some relevant materials? The problem I have now is lack of materials and equipment. (Interview Notes on April 2)

Huifei's spontaneous response to the idea of task-based learning is rooted in her concern for her daily teaching routines. Through her marginal practice (experiment in her own private space of classroom) she starts to match her life and work. This could encourage her further exploration in her professional life. But this authenticity will depend on her capability in negotiating the dialogues between her reading of institutional text and her own exploratory practice, which is the hardest point for all of them.

Community of practice

All three stories reflect the features of their professional communities. The collegial activities they talk of in the interviews include:

> *Classroom observation:* In Linwei's school, all teachers are required to observe their colleagues' classroom teaching 15 times every school year. In Lifange's school, they are required to observe at least each colleague's classroom teaching once every school year.
>
> *Collegial lesson planning:* Both Huifei and Lifang's schools require that all those who teach the same subject grade meet and plan their lessons together once every week.
>
> *Staff meeting:* Every week the school administrators will convene all the staff at least once, to circulate new educational policies, regulations or information on school's daily life. (Interview Notes on April 7)

One remarkable feature of these activities is that they are all officially administered, as time and places are fixed for teachers to meet and measures are taken to make sure that all those involved will take part on time and make requested contributions. These activities were intended to develop a collective and collaborative culture

in which all teachers could achieve 'professional development'. But they are not well accepted by teachers as we can see from teachers' responses:

Lifang: This afternoon it was our time to do collegial lesson planning. But this activity has long existed in name only. We never actually did it. We just sat there, some having idle talks and others minding their own business. (Interview Notes on April 8)

Linwei: Although we are supposed to observe colleagues' classroom 15 times every school year, we do not observe this rule strictly. We think it is of little help to our own teaching. (Interview Notes on April 7)

However, this lack of interest in those collegial activities seems to be in contrast with their uncertainty in teaching and inner desire for opportunities to learn from others.

Lifang: I just go it blind. I really want to see how others are getting on. I wish we could have more chances to observe teachers' classroom teaching in other schools. (Interview Notes on April 10)

Linwei: Learning from other teachers is important. We need more opportunities to learn from those experienced teachers. (Interview Notes on April 7)

These two types of paradoxical stories are categorized as "overt" and "covert" by Clandinin & Connelly (1995), which are told respectively in public and private spaces. According to Clandinin and Connelly (1995), it is the covert stories that are related to teachers' professional development and therefore should be encouraged in practice. However, this kind of "narrative authority" (Olson & Craig, 2001, p.670) is often thwarted or silenced in professional contexts so that teachers always feel uneasy to speak out such covert stories: e.g.

Lifang: We do sometimes ask each other questions. But they are usually problems with language points for teaching. We rarely discuss such professional questions like how to teach. We feel uncomfortable to talk about those things. (Interview Notes on April 10)

Lastly we would also like to mention in passing some differences we find between these three teachers. They differ in degrees of passion and commitment towards their profession. Whereas Lifang is a highly devoted teacher and accepts her current way of life as a teacher, we can feel a sense of "having no other choice" from her words in our talks. Linwei has decided to change his job. He is leaving to study for his master degree. Only Huifei appears enthusiastic about her job. Certainly personality in relation to gender may be one important reason for their differences. But we find the contexts also play an important role. For example in Huifei's school, she can experiment with theories like task-based learning and explore new possibilities. We know these innovations in teaching require communities of certain authenticity. The possibility in Huifei's school is made possible by the openness of her school in the city. For example, she has easier access to information such as internet and higher value is placed on professional development. But Lifang and Linwei do not have such luck. In the relatively less developed towns, the institutional morale appears to be more conservative, where teachers are more ready to accept what they are used to through institutionalization.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

This paper reveals in current middle schools in China more challenges than opportunities for teachers' professional development. Through the study of three school teachers' one-week career life, we find that all the three teachers are imbedded in educational contexts where authorized versions of knowledge prevail, teachers' voice and their authentic understanding are suffocated, collegiality is mandated and manipulated superficially and staff are generally alienated at work. The culture can be characterized as stagnation, resistance and alienation. It is far from conducive to teachers' professional development.

Educational authorities and researchers in Mainland China recognise these problems and are making strenuous efforts to popularize the concept of school-based in-service training for middle and primary school teachers (Yang Xiuzhi, 2002). This concept allows schools to design their own training plans, objectives and content based on the school and teachers' specific practical needs. Teachers are expected to achieve development in their own daily practice. This approach towards teacher development aims to shape "teachers as learners" and "schools as learning communities" (Clarke & Hollingworth, 2002, p.949). Basically, we agree that this concept should be enouraged to address the situation facing middle school teachers now. But in order to realize a fundamental change in our educational practice, we would argue that our endeavors should be first directed to address the following three primary issues:

Transforming current teachers' beliefs and value systems about educational knowledge and practice

The first reality we reveal in our study is the dominance of "official knowledge". We have already pointed out that one result of such dominance is the uncoupling of theory and practice. In order to motivate teachers' professional development, we must first of all make

them realize the indeterminacy and unpredicatibility of the constant changing reality and the limitations of the authorized version of knowledge in addressing their changing practical needs. We shall also commit them to the belief that the truth of knowledge only comes from their authentic educational practice.

We find most of our teachers are always looking for or expecting to be given some kind of model in teaching so that they can simply follow it1. But they are actually often disappointed by those transplanted teaching methods or approaches, which are usually the results of technically manipulated experiments, because those scientific findings are irrelevant to their practical contexts. Their needs can only be addressed through their own understanding in practice or "local knowledge" (Dyer et. al, 2004). So "teacher development programme(s) needs to be able to convince teachers of their own capacity directly to effect change, and to build on and extend teachers' views of the possible" (ibid, p.51). Teachers will not simply depend on the theories and official knowledge they are provided with. Instead they will see themselves as creators of professional knowledge.

But this shift cannot simply be stimulated through inculcation. Otherwise, the new endeavor will fall again into a vicious circle as we we have seen in the past educational reforms.The prerequisite of its success is that school-based in-service training be implemented in an authentic sense of "school based".

Committing teachers to authentic reflective practice

As we have argued above, most teachers are more ready to accept what they have been accustomed to. They are resistant to change imposed upon them. This has been the reason for the failure of our past education reforms. We can never successfully formulate any model for all

teachers to follow. We argue that in-service training now should be re-focused on teachers themselves. This is congruous with our stress of "local knowledge".

When teachers begin to turn their interest to their own daily practice, they may be able to start a dialogic process between their own beliefs and practice. In this way teachers can involve themselves in "exploratory practice" (Allwright, 2003) and reflect authentically on their practice.

To arrive at such a goal theoretically teachers need to understand:

1) that teacher development programs are started not because their daily practice is problematic and needs correcting. Instead, we shall take our daily practice as normal and base professional development on the normal. (for this point see Donnelly, 1999)

2) that teacher development is a process of negotiation between educational theories, teachers' own authentic (local) understanding and authentic (local) practice, which may be illustrated by Allwright's (2003, p.115) closed circle that unites 'Thinking globally, acting and thinking locally'.

3) that the authentic voice and practice of teachers can only be nourished in authentic communities.

Transforming school into a learning community

"Contrived collegiality" may be the best concept to represent the current nature of school communities in Chinese schools. Most of the collegial activities are institutionalized and compulsory, as our study has shown. They are grounded on the extant institutional and educational systems like unified curricula, examinations, etc which function to strengthen the traditional 'technical practice' (Halliday, 1998) rather

than stimulating 'authentic practice'. Within such communities, teachers will not feel safe, for they are always faced with challenges from the institutions, colleagues, and students. Now most schools in China have introduced the scientific management mechanism, which forces teachers into struggle against each other. For example, they have to be evaluated by institutions for their personal promotion; they have to compete with their colleagues for the security of their position in the school, and they hold the responsibility for the students' performance in the examinations. In this way, how could teachers have true dialogues while working together? How could they practise authentically? The following words of two teachers reveal part of teachers' mental tortures in practice.

Lifang: Since my students are going to take the college entrance exam soon, I had no way but to do those reading and listening practice exercises in class.   (Interview Notes on April 7)

Linwei: Sometimes I did come across some ideas but I could not apply it in practice. Because for the senior students examination is considered most important by all. I could not risk my students' future for my personal experiment. (Interview Notes on April 9)

Lifang and Linwei both betray their own authentic understanding to give way to the dominant institutional control. They are doing what they are actually unwilling to do.

What our teachers need is autonomy and constructive collegiality. For the former, the way out might be, as Hargreaves and Fullan (1992, p.16) argue, "to shift the balance of responsibility for teacher development and curriculum development from the centre to the periphery, from administrators to teachers, and from men to women". To achieve this we need to provide enough safe space in which teachers can freely talk about their covert stories. This kind of community must be based on democracy, mutual understanding and joint action. We must be particularly cautious against any violent interventions by institutions and beaucracy.

These three case studies were one enterprise to explore Chinese middle school teachers' professional life. From this research, we already got a snap-shot of their social and institutional constraints in professional development. But we want to state here that the significance of research of this kind lies more in its consciousness raising than what it reveals of individual teachers or schools.

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