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“We Are Left in Limbo!”: Chinese EFL Student Teachers’ Teaching Practicum Experience

Abstract Tensions between vision and reality in the teaching practicum is a significant issue in research and practice globally, but scanty attention has been awarded to research into areas of tension in teaching practice itself. This paper reports on a study that examines a cohort of Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) student teachers’ perceptions of the tensions arising in their teaching practicum in secondary schools. Triangulated research methods were employed for data collection. Reflective papers were employed as the main instrument of data collection, with classroom observation and field-notes used as supplementary sources of evidence for the occurrence of various unexpected difficulties. The overriding cause of this situation appeared to be the foundationalism paradigm that the teacher education program followed. The study highlights the need for teacher education programs to deal with emergent issues by way of critical postmodernist ideologies and make concerted efforts with schools to help student teachers continually adjust their visions in their practice.

Keywords tensions between vision and reality, Chinese EFL student teachers, teaching practicum

Introduction

In most Western countries, professional experience has long been regarded as an integral component of pre-service teacher education (Campbell & Hu, 2010). However, this situation does not apply to China’s pre-service teacher education. Before 2007, the position of professional experience was extremely marginal (2010). The practicum remained unchanged until the national policy change on teacher education in 2007. As Paine (1997) described, the practicum happens in

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the final semester of the teacher education program and generally spans six to eight weeks. There are no designated subjects related to preparation for the practicum. The practicum experience predominantly consists of observation and modeling the practices of the “expert” supervising teacher.

A series of formidable challenges have severely undermined the quality of teacher preparation, such as lack of balance and a weak link between theory and practice, limited practicum schools for increasing numbers of pre-service teachers, inconsistent quality of supervisors, minimal contact between universities and practicum schools (Hu, 2005; Zhan, 2008), limited practicum duration (Guo, 2005; Zhou, 2002), lack of reflective and cooperative practices (Guo & Pungur, 2008), and finally the gulf between university-espoused progressive liberal pedagogies (e.g., cooperative learning, pair and group work, integrated language projects) and school settings with various practical constraints (e.g., large classes, textbook-based, exam-oriented curriculum and school culture; Lin & Luk, 2002).

2007 witnessed the advent of large scale Ministry of Education (MoE) reforms to develop an organized system which can ensure the development of skilled and qualified professional teachers with a sense of social responsibility and a mission of implementing competency-based education (Guo & Pungur, 2008). In order to strengthen the practicum component, the MoE issued *Opinions on Student Teachers’ Practicum and Support for Teaching* and recommended a minimum of a total of one semester practicum for final-year pre-service teachers in national teacher education universities. It urged the creation of “teaching practicum zones” formed by teacher education institutions and a cluster of practicum schools in close geographic proximity. Subsequently in 2009, the focus of reform was placed on tackling the challenge of enhancing the quality of teacher education programs, in particular the link between subject courses and the practicum experience (Campell & Hu, 2010).

However, divergent from the well-conceived goals of the policies, the management of the practicum is still not well established (Campell & Hu, 2010). The practicum remains one process where pre-service teachers spend time in schools observing classroom teaching, assisting the cooperating teacher, taking part in managing student activities and practicing their teaching skills (Fang & Zhu, 2008). What is more, the cultural dissonances between the university and the school give rise to contradictions between the objects of the two activity

systems. The object of the university activity system is to help the student teachers apply their university-taught theories and knowledge to classroom practice, while that of the school activity system is to help school students achieve better learning and examination results (He & Lin, 2013; Tsui & Law, 2007; Wang & Clark, 2014). Therefore, some researchers (e.g., Halstead & Zhu, 2009; Yu & Wang, 2009) argue that in China's current school curriculum reform climate, teacher education faces a challenge in helping student teachers negotiate tensions and conflicts between traditional and new ideological systems in school contexts. The necessity of establishing sustainable school-university partnerships is underscored to help student teachers establish teacher identity (Zhan, 2008).

Against this background, this study aims to place its lens on a group of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) student teachers' teaching practice in school contexts in China to examine what they learned from such school experiences, in particular the unexpected tensions between vision and reality. It focuses on one of the six MoE-affiliated teacher education universities based in central China, which was "expected to set benchmarks in best practice in teacher education and to implement any educational reforms recommended by the MoE" (Campell & Hu, 2010, p. 237). It seeks to pinpoint the areas of tensions experienced by student teachers in their teaching practice, and more importantly capture what they could learn from their "unsuccessful" teaching experiences. It would yield valuable insights on how quality-oriented ideals and practices promoted by the pre-service teacher education programs could be carried out in their teaching practicum, i.e., how EFL teacher education courses could be better linked with the practicum experience.

Informed by this objective, the research questions were formulated as 1) What are the areas of tensions between student teachers' vision and practice in their teaching practice? 2) What are the possible causes for the tensions? The answers to these two questions would go beneath the tip of the iceberg and illuminate the complexity of substantive social, historical, economic, cultural and educational issues in the practicum that need to be addressed to enhance the quality of the practicum. Adopting the critical postmodernist perspective, the study aims to understand the tensions as perceived and experienced by student teachers via "theoretically and historically (re)-constructing its context" (Grossberg, 2013, p. 55), and hence shed some light on the concrete local factors at institutional, socioeconomic and sociocultural levels that shaped the tensions beyond student teachers' expectations.

Literature Review

Positive Impact of the Practicum

Professional experience is recognized as playing a determinant role in teachers' initial education and their early development. Knowledge of teaching is acquired and developed by the personal experience of teaching (Munby, Russel, & Martin, 2001, p. 897). The practicum does not only serve as a bridge between theory and practice in the learning of teaching, but it is the context in which student teachers develop “personal practical theory” (Handal & Lauvås, 1987). Student teachers acquire “artistry” in teaching by engaging in teaching, and by being guided through their experiences through reflection and deliberation around this reflection (Eisner, 2002). This learning experience is a collaborative undertaking with teacher educators, peers and other significant members in their family and social circles (Murray-Harvey et al., 2000).

Given the importance accorded to practice, practice-based teacher education has been widely promoted to integrate theory and practice (Grudnoff, 2011). As a form of “situated and mediated learning from the wisdom of practice,” the practicum is seen as an opportunity to help student teachers acquire quality professional experience, develop strong links between theory and practice, and prepare them for their identity transition (Douglas, 2014; Fang & Zhu, 2008; Shi & Englert, 2008; Beck & Kosnik, 2002; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005). Therefore, many teacher education programs have been implementing organic school-university partnerships to connect courses with field experiences in various forms (Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald, 2009; Cochran-Smith et al., 2012). There is some empirical evidence of the positive affective impact of the practicum on student teachers, e.g., a higher satisfaction level (Reinolds Ross, & Rakow, 2002), a more positive attitude towards the teaching profession (Hodge, Davis, Woodward, & Sherrill, 2002), and a reduced stress level in the practicum (Murray-Harvey et al., 2000).

Tensions in the Practicum and Causes

Ideally in the practicum process, student teachers examine and apply the concepts and strategies they learn in their course in their real context so as to

gain knowledge about their future profession (Shulman, 1987), teaching competence or practical theory (Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005), and gradually assume full teaching responsibility in the field (Darling-Hammond, 2010). However, in reality, the practicum experience is by no means a straightforward process. Research highlights the difficulties inherent in enabling learning opportunities for student teachers in the classroom (e.g., Edwards, Gilroy, & Hartely, 2002). The practicum does not simply involve practicing technical teaching skills in classrooms to attain instructional expertise, but rather it is a stressful cognitive and emotional process of learning to teach, involving a series of concurrent actions and struggles, such as adapting to new cultures, dealing with different relationships and establishing teacher identity (Caires, Almeida, & Vieira, 2012). The practicum more often than not proves to be “a regrettable state of affairs” with little or no value (McIntyre, Byrd, & Foxx, 1996).

Research on EFL pre-service teachers’ teaching practicum covers a range of issues, such as student teachers’ beliefs and perceptions (Raths & McAninch, 2003; Street, 2003), needs and challenges (Nelson & Harper, 2006; Wang & Odell, 2002), mentoring processes (Street, 2004), and identity formation (He & Lin, 2013; Lin & Luk, 2002), etc. Resonant with the general teacher education research literature, tensions between vision and reality have arisen as an overriding issue of concern (Johnson, 1996; Yoon & Kim, 2010; Mtika & Gates, 2009; Smagorinsky et al., 2004). There has emerged a general recognition of the underachievement of expectations owing to a series of unanticipated negative experiences in the “boundary-crossing between two activity systems” (He & Lin, 2013), e.g., unpreparedness for school realities, conceptual struggles about teaching and learning, emotional and psychological stress, lack of support, and various practical constraints (Mak, 2011; Wang & Odell, 2002, 2003; Butcher, 2003). This gap between expectations and realities may cause student teachers’ sense of weariness and “vulnerability” (Evelein, Korthagen, & Brekelmans, 2008), and worst of all, a switch from progressive pedagogies to the exam-oriented pedagogies that are pervasive in schools (Liu, 2005).

Discussions on the causes for the tensions reveal that the crux of the problem was teacher education programs’ disregard for praxis and connection/coherence between campus course study and school practices, and their ensuing limited effort to establish sustainable partnerships with schools. In America, as Featherstone (2007) put it, “ideas and money are rarely spent coordinating what

is learned on campus with what goes on in schools” (p. 210). As a result, as Darling-Hammond (2010) described, “often, the clinical side of teacher education has been fairly haphazard, depending on the idiosyncrasies of loosely selected placements with little guidance about what happens in them and little connection to university work” (p. 40). Similarly, in Germany, Legutke and Schocker-v. Ditfurth (2009) commented that “school-based experience not only appears to be incompatible with academic curricula, but also seems difficult to implement in view of institutional constraints and cross-institutional incompatibility. More often than not the practicum is just an appendage that is unrelated to relevant course work on issues of second language teaching and learning” (p. 213).

The previous research on the teaching practicum has important implications in terms of how to address various problems in the practicum (such as enhancing the connection between theory and praxis, establishing school-based mentoring programs to develop pedagogical knowledge, and overcome context-specific difficulties), however, most of the previous research looks at the whole practicum experience. The tensions occurring in student teachers’ *teaching practice* has rarely been examined closely as a research subject, which deserves more attention for its importance as one of the student teachers’ major responsibilities and a determinant of the quality of their practicum experiences. Therefore, this study is intended to zero in on the practicum of a cohort of EFL student teachers—organized by a nationally prestigious teacher education university in China to uncover the peculiar features of these tensions. The findings generated from the study would help to enrich the literature with new perspectives. Meanwhile, it would provide empirical support for teacher education programs’ endeavors to address one of the major and enduring challenges of connecting theory and practice (Allen, 2009).

Research Context and Methodology

The Initial EFL Teacher Education Program

The pre-service teacher education program under investigation was based in a normal (teacher education) university in central China, one of the six national teacher education institutions affiliated to the MoE. Founded in 1903, the

university has been dedicated to preparing school teachers of more than 60 subjects at junior and senior secondary levels across China. The university consists of 24 schools and departments, and over 60 research centers. Since its establishment, it has trained over 200,000 graduates of bachelors', master's and Ph.D. degrees for different parts of China. In 2011 student enrolment was 30,000 (11,000 of which were postgraduates, and 1,800 were international students). To enhance the pedagogical competence of prospective teachers, the university established 29 teaching practicum zones in 11 provinces/cities for their teaching practicum and teacher research.

The pre-service teacher education program under investigation is based in the English Department of the School of Foreign Languages, which aims to develop EFL teachers who will engage in English teaching at secondary and tertiary levels. Three levels of teacher education programs are offered for pursuers of BA, MA/MEd and Ph.D. qualifications. The department boasts of over 40 full-time teaching staff in four major professional and academic areas, i.e., linguistics, translation, literature and teacher education. Of the over 40 teaching staff, 13 specialize in English teaching methodology and teacher education with master's qualifications obtained locally or from abroad, six own Ph.D. degrees in EFL methodology or teacher education. Various teacher education programs have been delivered full-time and part-time to serve the needs of both pre-service and in-service teacher development within central China and beyond.

The duration of the pre-service EFL teacher education program is four years divided up into eight semesters like any other EFL teacher education programs in China's tertiary institutions. The program follows the learn-the-theory-and-then-practice model. The first three years focus on on-campus courses to develop student teachers' professional skills for their future teaching career, with language development and subject knowledge. The teaching practicum takes place at the start of the 4th year. The coursework includes two major types of compulsory and optional courses: general education (*tongshi jiaoyu*) courses (e.g., Computer Literacy, Advanced Chinese, Physical Education, Moral Standards Development and Fundamentals in Law, etc.) and specialty courses (e.g., Language Development Courses, Linguistics, Pragmatics, Stylistics, Cross-Cultural Communication, English Literature, Translation, English Teaching Methodology, etc.). The total number of required credits is 166, respectively 68 (41%) general education courses, and 98 (59%) specialty courses.

The number of contact hours totaled 3,048, respectively 1,146 hours (38%) for general education courses, and 1,902 hours (62%) for specialty courses. The numbers of contact hours for each academic year were respectively 854 (28%), 824 (27%), 1,021(33%), and 349 (12%). The pedagogies employed by the course lectures are a combination of content-based lectures and group discussions to promote quality-oriented education (e.g., student-centered teaching, task-based teaching, formative assessment, and multi-media technology, etc.).

Up until the time of the investigation, the English teaching methodology course undertaken in the second semester of the third academic year was the only teaching-related compulsory course to integrate theories and practice. The first ten sessions were lecture-based, addressing major theories with respect to English language teaching, including background knowledge of language teaching and learning, context of language teaching and learning, history of ELT methodology, developing language knowledge (pronunciation, vocabulary and structure), developing language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing); and the remaining eight sessions were devoted to students’ micro-teaching. Each student had one opportunity to deliver a 20-minute lesson in a multimedia-equipped classroom. Feedback was provided immediately by the tutor and the peers after each performance to help each student teacher to be aware of strengths and weaknesses in their teaching for further improvement.

The Teaching Practicum

The teaching practicum scheduled at the beginning of the 4th academic year spanned six weeks (from mid-September to early November) before 2009, and has increased to ten weeks since 2010 as a learning opportunity for the student teachers to apply what was learned at university, in particular the English language teaching methods. This increased length is significantly shorter than the MoE-mandated one semester. The practicum comprises tripartite responsibilities: undertaking classroom teaching, carrying out the class representative’s (*banzhuren*) tasks, and conducting educational research. The majority of students are assigned in groups of ten to provincial key senior secondary schools within the province where the university is located, including both rural and urban schools. Each group is assigned a supervisor, who is free from teaching commitments and available to assume the role during the practicum period

irrespective of their areas of expertise. A small minority of students contact placement schools themselves, which are generally based in their hometowns. The remaining small numbers are assigned to junior secondary schools and colleges. For such cases, no supervisors are assigned due to the shortage of staff. Most schools are boarding schools.

As the job descriptions indicates, a supervisor's responsibilities include liaising with cooperating schools and university practicum committees, supervising and revising student teachers' lesson plans, arranging trial lessons, observing student teachers' teaching, supervising and participating in various activities organized by the student teacher groups, completing the supervision manuals, and participating in practicum evaluations with student teachers. The number of visits required for supervisors for schools based in the capital city is a minimum of three to four. Each visit should be at least one hour. Supervisors for schools outside of the capital city are expected to stay at the practicum school for a week. The practicum ends with assessments to select exemplary interns, including self-assessment, peer assessment, cooperating teachers' and supervisors' assessment. This study focuses on the practicum of the 2010 cohort of student teachers carried out from mid-September until late November of 2013.

Research Methodology and Procedures

This study intends to evaluate the teaching practicum via examining student teachers' perspectives about the gaps arising in their teaching practicum to enhance program development and improvement. On the other hand, it also aims to promote student teachers' reflection on dilemmas of teaching practical work, which is crucial in order for teachers to be mindfully and knowledgeably situated in teaching and transforming their actions (Yoon & Kim, 2010). Grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) methods were adopted to build up a theory from the data gathered through immersion in the field.

The data collection took place in two evolving phases. The first phase was carried out to gather information from 20 student teachers the authors supervised with a variety of methods, involving supervisory meetings, observations of student teachers' teaching, field-notes, and 120 postings of student teachers on the school's website. The second one was conducted after the student teachers' return to the university via reflective papers written by 60 student teachers as an

assignment of the Academic Writing course undertaken by the first author. The assignment invited the student teachers to assess critically the whole of the learning process to gain a deep understanding of what they had learned from it. To enhance the quality of student reflection, critical reflection was required to generate thoughtful assessment of critical incidents, concerns and challenges arising from their teaching rather than descriptive accounts of routines in the field. To minimize “researcher effect” (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and ensure the credibility of the data, the importance of being candid was emphasized to the student teachers throughout the data collection process.

Qualitative descriptive analysis (Glaser, 2007) was employed for data analysis. The data from the student teachers’ field experience in the first phase was scrutinized to capture major incidents they encountered and main concerns, which were then categorized thematically. The reflective papers collected in the second phase were reviewed and segmented to identify conceptual categories, or thematic units (Krippendorff, 1980) with regard to tensions in the practicum. The two sets of complementary data were cross-checked to yield conceptual categories. The conceptual categories generated were subsequently subjected to manual frequencies count, rendering the major themes and sub-themes (Marshall & Rossman, 1995), including variation within themes. Theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was achieved after all the diversities in the writings were covered. For the purpose of confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for the extracts in the findings.

Results

Tensions between Vision and Reality

The student teachers had mixed feelings of excitement and trepidation about their teaching practicum before its start. As students from a nationally prestigious university, they were eager to apply what they had learned to school teaching in the practicum. Striking convergence of perceptions on the tensions arose from the reflective papers, including little opportunity to teach, lack of experience in classroom management, and the challenge of implementing quality-oriented pedagogies promoted by the teacher education program (e.g. learner-centered approaches, communicative language teaching methods, constructivism,

task-based instruction) and the current school curriculum reform. Table 1 summarizes the categories and sub-categories of tensions in the practicum.

Table 1 Tensions in the Practicum

Categories of Tensions		Frequencies	Total Frequencies
1. Little teaching opportunity			50
2. Limited experience in classroom management	Managing misbehaviors	35	60
	Giving instructions	12	
	Arousing students' interest	8	
	Raising questions in English	5	
3. Challenge of implementing quality-oriented pedagogies	Implementing student-centered approaches	20	40
	Implementing group work	11	
	Creating an English environment	9	

Little Teaching Opportunity

The student teachers worked all day from 7.20am (some started even earlier) until 10.00pm. Their working time was mostly spent on non-teaching matters, including class representative tasks which required them to be with students at the morning reading sessions, midday self-study periods, evening classes, and night-time dormitory inspection. They needed to squeeze time from their busy schedules to assist their assigned cooperating teachers and their colleagues with various chores. They felt daunted by the prospect of this kind of “stressful and meaningless life.” A student teacher expressed his feelings at a supervisory meeting, which was echoed by his peers. “We are working like servants, marking students’ assignments and exam papers, checking their discipline, giving dictations, checking recitation of texts, and cleaning the office. We got very little opportunity to teach. What’s the point of the practicum?” (Hemiao).

They needed to get permission from their supervisor through an approved trial mini-lesson within their practicum group to teach a class formally, which did not happen until one week after their arrival at the practicum school. Most of them taught two lessons with a few exceptions teaching six where their cooperating teachers were supportive. The perceived reason for being offered little opportunity to teach was the distrust of the cooperating teachers, who assumed that the student teachers lacked teaching experience. The following quote is

representative of the student teachers’ perception about the unwelcoming and skeptical attitude of the schools. “The school teachers were arrogant. They were very reluctant to give us the opportunity to teach because they didn’t trust us” (Hongfeng).

Those cooperating teachers who offered opportunity to teach would revise the lesson taught by student teachers to ensure their students’ good learning outcomes from the lesson. As a student teacher said in her posting, “I was so upset to know that my cooperating teacher re-taught the lesson I had taught. She just didn’t have confidence in me. She didn’t realize that was hurtful to me” (Xiaoshu).

Classroom Management as a Central Issue in Teaching

The student teachers felt the limited lessons they delivered to be “traumatic” experiences “ruined by ever-occurring unexpected disruptions.” “I assumed that all I needed to do was go through a well-prepared teaching plan. However, various inappropriate behaviors constantly occurred in the classrooms and prevented the class from going according to plan” (Wuli).

They felt handicapped in classrooms by various unexpected contextual factors. The students were not interested in English, and considered English as a subject to be tested in the college entrance exams. Their general English proficiency was low and unbalanced. Listening and speaking were particularly weak. The students were bored, reticent, sleepy and disengaged. They worked all-day all year round under exam pressure. The underdeveloped classroom facilities compounded the difficulty in carrying out a lesson smoothly with large classes of 60–70 students. In some classrooms, a blackboard and a tape-recorder were the only resources, which caused the problem of audibility to the students sitting at the back. Besides, the student teachers’ instructional inexperience and their “fuzzy” identity as neither a student nor a teacher added to discipline problems. They had to deal with constantly occurring misbehaviors, such as “chitchat,” “failure to bring textbooks,” “absent-mindedness,” “refusal to work with others,” “reticence to answer questions,” “dozing off,” “teasing,” “mimicking the teacher,” and even “physical aggression among boys.” A student teacher described these common problems in her reflective paper, “Many of us spent much time in preparation, but we were unable to cope with many essential

elements of the job, especially time management, classroom management and relationships with students” (Fucong).

They had mixed feelings about the students’ performance, i.e. frustration by their lack of response and engagement in the class, and sympathy with their stressful life. A student teacher was emotional about this situation, “I had mixed feelings about the students. I felt like losing my temper with them when they gave no response to my enthusiasm and effort. But when I saw them being sleepy and having to study all the time without breaks, I started to sympathize with them” (Meili).

Failure to Implement Quality-Oriented Pedagogies

There emerged a consensus that the quality-oriented pedagogies promoted by the university program and the current curriculum reform, such as the communicative approach to promote students’ language skills, affect and cultural knowledge and learning strategies were almost impossible in the schools. The student teachers attributed the failure partly to the resistance of the exam-oriented students, teachers and the school administrators, and partly to their own pedagogical inadequacy. These hindrances particularly applied to underdeveloped regions, where exam-oriented education was more prevalent. Two student teachers expressed their predicaments in their reflective writing because of the lack of support from their cooperating teachers.

I tried to give more time to students to perform and practice, but the class was still teacher-centered. Their teachers will not bother to spend time making their classes more interesting. They just “pour” knowledge into students as quickly as possible. (Xiaoli)

Teachers don’t value developing students’ speaking because it is not tested in the college entrance examination. Many teachers can’t speak fluent and accurate English themselves. They use Chinese to explain grammatical problems. This is particularly true in small towns, where the economic level is relatively low and the salary level can’t attract many capable teachers. (Simiao)

The general low and uneven English proficiency of the students and their resistance to the student teachers’ use of English made the student teachers’ aspirations wishful thinking.

I used English throughout the teaching process, but I found the students were confused about what I said. Sometimes they even stopped to look up the new word in a dictionary and missed the following part. So using classroom English lost its original meaning and became an obstacle in learning. (Gehe)

Handling group work appeared to be a great challenge for the student teachers who had limited class management skills. Two student teachers reflected on their difficulty in managing group work, “It is difficult to keep the class in order, and make sure that every student is involved in classroom activities. Our inexperience can make it more difficult. We lack improvising skills to deal with emergent matter” (Minchen).

The classroom was so noisy that I could hardly hear what each group was talking about. It was impossible for me to help every group. So when the students made mistakes, but got no proper feedback from me, they sometimes reverted to Chinese. Additionally, I could hardly make every student take part in the group work, which undermined the climate and quality of the group work. Some students were too excitable to work in a group and paid little attention to me, and even could not be stopped. (Yisong)

Causes of the Tensions

There emerged a consensus that the teacher education curriculum was a central cause for the tensions that occurred. The student teachers unanimously agreed that the existing curriculum gave exclusive attention to on-campus theory learning and English skills development, and little attention to teaching experience and practice in real life. A considerable disconnect between the university and school settings and the lack of shared goals were considered to have led to the student teachers’ unfamiliarity with school issues and limited teaching experience. The following quote typically reflects the student teachers’ perspective,

There really exist many problems in the current program. I learned much about English language from the books instead of English teaching. Even now, my classmates always complained that what we learned in the university was just useless in their teaching experience. (Liufeng)

Only having one 20-minute experience in microteaching practice in an artificial teaching environment over the four year period was seen as extremely insufficient for developing their teaching competence.

Besides theoretical knowledge, practical experience is very important in teaching profession. You may know all the techniques of class management or dealing with discipline problems in classes, but when you go into the classroom, you find yourself hopeless in situations you have studied. Thus, you need more experience first in artificial micro-teaching and then in a real classroom atmosphere. (Fenglin)

A common feeling about the short practicum period surfaced, which was that it allowed the student teachers little time to explore and adapt to the school realities, let alone establish a sense of belonging and be a change agent as previously envisaged. As a student teacher said, “The practicum is so short. Within ten weeks, there is a one-week National Day holiday. By the time we got a feel for the school, the practicum was over” (Meihong).

“Drop-and-run” and “swim or sink” appeared to be common supervision practices much criticized by the student teachers. The lack of onsite supervision by university supervisors and cooperating teachers left the student teachers in a helpless state without much pedagogical, emotional and social support. As Xiaohe commented, “Many supervisors just dropped us in the schools and ran. We know they are busy with work back in the department, but we need support, especially when we first arrived there, a completely new environment.” Similarly, the cooperating teachers devoted very little time to supervision because of their busy daily work. Acquiescence was common despite the student teachers’ need for instructional guidance and support. “I rarely met up with my mentor about my practice. I was afraid of asking her questions because she was always busy” (Yufen).

Discussion

This study has yielded a picture of the reality shock that student teachers underwent during their internship. The student teachers were overwhelmed by school realities beyond their expectations. They found themselves in limbo because of their lack of basic teaching skills or ability to apply the ELT methods

promoted by the university in the traditional schools. There emerged a considerable gap between their vision and reality in a range of aspects, such as teaching practice opportunities, teaching competence, autonomy in managing students and using quality-oriented pedagogies, and level of pedagogical and emotional support from their supervisors and cooperating teachers. These unexpected occurrences were interconnected. The student teachers’ limited teaching competence and knowledge about school norms and values led to limited opportunities being offered for teaching practice. Lack of supervision exacerbated the gap and disequilibria in these aspects. Confirming the observations of Graves (2009), the student teachers’ preoccupation with classroom interaction and management emerged as a primary issue. Consistent with previous documentation (e.g., Knezevic & Scholl, 1996; Johnson, 1996; Heydon, Rundell, & Smyntek-Gworek, 2013), their unfamiliarity with students and lack of teaching experience negatively contributed to their instructional inadequacy.

This initial “unsuccessful” experience is common to novices in their first learning stage in the process of acquiring expertise in pedagogy, developing authority and teacher identity. The tensions between vision and reality that surfaced in this study epitomize two inextricable types of professional issues that students teachers will be confronted with, including instructional skills teachers need to develop in time (such as classroom management skills and the adaptive expertise student teachers lacked in this study), and cultural and contextual realities in schools (such as the challenge of implementing quality-oriented pedagogies where there is a conflict between exam preparation and quality cultivation due to various constraints). The study shows that a lack of knowledge of these issues and requisite professional skills and competence severely increases the difficulty of negotiating the shift from a novice focus on teaching performance to a mature focus on student learning, and hinders student teachers’ formation of teacher identity. If these tensions are left unattended to, there might be a possibility of gravitation from quality-oriented conceptions and practices obtained from the teacher education program towards the conservative (pragmatic and exam-oriented) school values within a few years, which has been much documented previously (Grossman, Smagorinsky, & Valencia, 1999; Russell, McPherson, & Martin, 2001).

The causes of the gap may have stemmed from three variables. The first and a

tangible reason might be the lack of attention from both sides given to student teachers' teaching practice. To a large extent, the realities which occur as tensions seemed to have resulted from the nature of the practicum itself. The transience of the pre-service teachers caused various problems, such as a critical lack of knowledge about the students, the learning objectives and thus lack of control, and the lack of transference from the college setting to the experience in the classroom. The school realities where quality-oriented education has been ignored presented considerable challenges to the student teachers who endorse quality-oriented pedagogies in their own teaching. The limited practicum period renders the practicum a frustrating experience, with student teachers' failures resulting in lowered self-esteem and motivation at the very start of their teaching career. The short practicum duration reflects the low priority the practicum has received in the current curriculum.

The second reason might be the lack of shared educational goals between schools and teacher education programs despite their agreement on the paper. In line with the views of Lopez-Real, Law, and Tang (2009) and Tsui and Law (2007), tension and conflicts may have ensued from their different interests, educational philosophies, and status differences (asymmetric relations between them). The collaboration was not a win-win undertaking, i.e. the schools appeared to serve the teacher education program's need of providing practicum site as an extra responsibility added to their own already stressful agendas. Besides, echoing He and Lin (2013), the study highlights the practicum site as a site where tensions and struggles between the old and new pedagogical cultures get played out. The absence of the desirable conditions for new pedagogies in exam-oriented schools (e.g., supportive educational environment, high professional teacher expertise and advanced physical resources) largely hindered student teachers' experimentation with quality-oriented pedagogies. In Steiner and Rozen's (2004) words, the student teachers found themselves indoctrinated into a "countercultural" mistrust of the school system.

The third and fundamental reason is probably the teacher education program's deep-rooted disregard for practical pedagogical knowledge development and professional experience. Much evidence reveals that the teacher education program still follows the rationalist foundationalist paradigm, with the dominance of language and subject knowledge courses, compartmentalized course packages, prevalence of decontextualized transmissive methodologies,

only one artificial microteaching experience prior to the practicum, a significantly reduced practicum period, limited onsite supervision, and the lack of connection between coursework and the practicum, etc. This paradigm simplistically assumes that once pre-service teachers have completed their required course work, they will be able to transfer their knowledge into effective classroom practice (Carr, 2006). It confirms the observation made by He and Lin (2013) that dominant pedagogical discourses are often passed to student teachers as educational canons without a concurrent commitment to encouraging them to problematize and creatively transform these normative pedagogical discourses (and practices) in light of the practical situation of students in schools. The lack of change in values and personal belief systems of the department managers might be a crucial reason, leading to the lack of major change in the teacher education paradigm, the curriculum and the practicum management except for an added two weeks.

The study shows that teacher preparation programs that continue to present a theoretical view of teaching, without recognizing a more realistic one, are in essence sending pre-service teachers into the practicum ill-prepared to learn to teach. There emerged a need to adopt a postfoundationalist epistemology in restructuring the teacher education program, which entails a re-conceptualization of theory as a historically formed context-dependent practice subject to scrutiny, adjustment and evolution, and eventual incorporation in student teachers' practical personal theorizing. There is a need to cultivate a critical attitude towards theory, which requires student teachers to critique, adapt theory in specific contexts, and develop their personal practical theory through creating necessary conditions for theory implementation. This learning paradigm involves a continuous spiral process of self-reflective inquiry on various practical issues in school contexts. Extensive and varied school experience appeared to be indispensable to this transformation process.

Echoing the view of Cohen, Hoz, and Kaplan (2013), this epistemological change requires a broader view of the practicum and designing a new teacher education program embedded in school organizational culture. The emergent tensions may, as productive frictions, provide opportune moments for disillusionment about the realities and iterative and evolving enrichment of their practice. As Engerström (2001) suggested, the contradictions within the school-university partnership activity system are the driving force in the change

of student teachers' identity. The contradictions could catalyze student teachers' critical evaluation of how to use the theoretical and de-contextualized ideas and methods in concrete classroom situations. If incorporated in the methodology course and the curriculum, they might helpfully cultivate student teachers' conditional knowledge and dynamic qualifications (e.g., a greater sensitivity to the complexity of professional learning, a positive experimental attitude and thoughtful responsiveness towards contingencies) to adjust actions recursively, and on the other hand, develop their identity as change agents committed to assuming a collaborative responsibility of questioning traditional practices to explore alternative solutions to overcoming ongoing challenges.

Transformation of the current one-off school experience model can be achieved by supplementing more direct and indirect school experience, such as exchange visits between schools and universities, classroom observations and invited talks given by innovative secondary school teachers, more opportunities of teaching practicum conducted at several stages throughout the four-year program, a pre-practicum school immersion period, alternating periods of 'condensed' and autonomous classroom work and training sequences with university supervisors and cooperating teachers, a full-year extensive practicum period to achieve ongoing professional development, etc. The prerequisite for making such innovations is program providers' regard for clinical school experience and active engagement of tripartite parties (supervisors, cooperating teachers and student teachers) in a range of reflective activities (e.g., classroom teaching, teaching journals, observation of teachers, self-observation, seminar discussion, mentoring, teacher supervision, action research, and teacher portfolios) to help student teachers negotiate and reconcile different conceptions of teaching embraced in universities and schools, and theorize their own specific teaching experiences.

Conclusion

This study highlights the reality shock and professional incompetence experienced by a cohort of EFL student teachers in their practicum. The emergent tension between vision and reality was apparently caused by their lack of familiarity with school realities and limited teaching practice, and fundamentally by the inherent drawbacks of the foundationalist teacher preparation paradigm

adopted by the program, which over-emphasized on-campus theory-oriented coursework, and neglected the coherence and connection between course components and professional learning experience, and the concomitant lack of an extensive authentic development-oriented practicum. The study suggests a need to align the course work and practicum experience with each other. The practicum experiences should be cyclical in nature, i.e., extended in duration and divided into different phases in different school settings to accommodate more reflective practice to optimize connections between theory and practice.

The study confirms that learning to be a teacher involves more than technical knowledge or skill learning. It is a mechanism of occupational socialization and a process by which novice teachers learn the norms and values of the occupation to acquire person-environment fit. Tensions caused by dissonance in the “fitting in” stage can be exploited as good opportunities to help student teachers develop a growing understanding of the complexities of teaching, and productively adjust their vision as change agents committed to coping with instructional, cultural and social challenges instead of succumbing to the unexpected realities. Long-term school-university partnerships are necessary to help student teachers navigate the tensions and incrementally construct their teacher identity in field experience. The realization of this process entails political and financial support at macro and meso levels and the sustained long-term effort of schools and universities. This dynamic process is illustrated in the following Fig. 1.

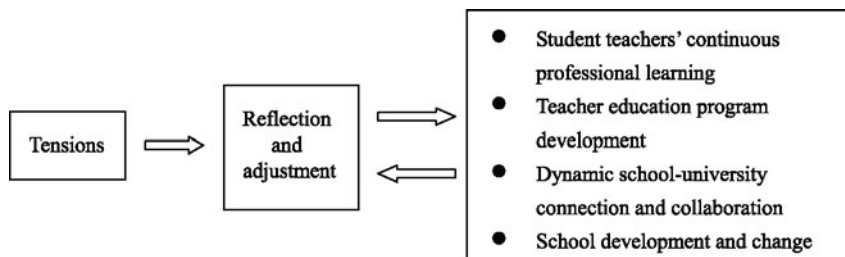


Fig. 1 Process of Responding to Tensions in the Practicum

Unlike earlier doubts about student teachers’ reflection (e.g., Berliner, 1986), the study shows that reflective assignments provide a direct access to the student teacher’s voice and serve as a good instrument to obtain a better understanding of the prospective teachers’ perceptions of the practicum. Therefore, student reflections may be used in future as a tool for evaluation of the practicum as well

as student teachers' professional development. The wealth of information generated about realistic issues in the practicum schools serve as a good basis for teacher education program development, to enable teacher educators and student teachers to have realistic expectations about what the practicum experience will be like and what they can expect to gain from it. This information can be fed back into the program development and thus lead to the enrichment and enhancement of the program. However, this cannot be achieved unless the practicum is seen as an integral component of teacher education.

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