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**“Negotiating Selves”—
The (Re) Construction of Teachers’ Professional Identities
in the Era of Educational Reform:
A Narrative Inquiry**

Yip Pui Lin, Christina

**A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with
the requirements for award of the degree of Doctor of Education in the
Faculty of Social Sciences & Law**

**University of Bristol
January 2012**

Abstract

The study is set within the context where government-led education reforms have moved the teaching community to a new management culture in Hong Kong. Using narrative inquiry, I seek to gain an understanding on how education reforms are shaping the lives and identities of a group of four experienced secondary teachers in Hong Kong.

Through a new construct—attending to teachers' own voices, the data were gathered from teachers through open-ended narrative interviews, focusing on their own experiences and personal values, over a period of two years. Assuming the dual roles of a researcher and a participant in this study, I worked collaboratively with the participant teachers across different school settings, yet closely linked with our experiences, to explore the nature and meaning of our life experiences in the reform context.

While keeping past experiences central to the inquiry, multi-layered life stories among us were connected and new meanings emerged during the research process. The study is composed of interacting levels of narrative accounts which appear in various literacy forms, such as scholarly verbatim, songs, poems, dialogues and personal reflections. Through representation and interpretation of stories in the form of metaphors, as in the use of flower labels for participant teachers' attributes and the parallels of 'The Sound of Silence' teachers experienced, stories lived and told by teachers appeared to become new and 'fluid' experiences to both the researcher and the participants.

The study contributes to an attempt to relate teachers' past experiences, in the form of stories, to their professional growth. The study also enters into the professional

reflections of teachers, contributing to a better understanding of teachers' problems in the era of education reform. By reflecting on our own perceptions, experiences and practices, we are able to understand the construction, transformation and commitment of our professional identities.

Dedication and Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my wholehearted gratitude to many people for their generous support throughout my study. My deepest gratitude goes to my supervisor Dr. Sheila Trahar for her enthusiasm, valuable suggestions and timely assistance. She has made me realize how complex and profound human experiences work in one's life journey and add momentum to my research study. Without her intellectual support and encouragement, this study would not have been possible.

My special thanks also go to my participants, the 'flowers', with whom I have shared my struggles and joys of our life stories. With their encouragement, I was able to turn my research interests into a doctoral research.

I am deeply indebted to my family—my mother, my belated father, my husband, Ming and my daughter, Grace, for their tolerance and steadfast support. I would also like to express my gratitude to my sisters, Sharon, Deanna and Lillian, my brother, Samuel, for their unconditional love and understanding throughout my process of the research. I am greatly impressed by what these lovely people have done to make my dream come true.

Declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

SIGNED: _____

DATE: _____

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Prologue

Striking A Resonant/Sympathetic Chord With The Silenced

A story is not merely a chronicle of events.

A story is an account of events

Set against a landscape of moral values.

McLeod, 1997:153

It was a hectic morning in 1998 when I finally arrived at the Institute of Education (IEd) in Tai Po for my first lesson in language teaching. It was my second Refresher Course for English teachers, which was strongly recommended by the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB)¹. When prompted for the reasons for attending the course in the welcoming session, I was eager to share this reason with others.

'I will be granted an opportunity to take up an immersion course in England.'

It was a convincing reason to others in the lecture room. However, another unspoken reason was the 'calling' from the EMB to raise my '*professional standards*' (Education Commission Report No.7, 1997) so as to be ready for the coming education reform. Finally, the six-week refresher course, like the first one I had attended in 1992, was going to be very relaxing....

¹ The Education and Manpower Bureau (教育統籌局) was formed in 1997 after Britain returned sovereignty of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China. It was renamed the Education Bureau (教育局) in 2007.

To my surprise, some course participants were not as enthusiastic as I had expected. Instead, some claimed that they were more interested in sharing their teaching stories with others there. With my curiosity piqued, I asked one of my group mates, *Kuk*, who became one of the participants in my research, why she took the Refresher Course.

'Well, it is a relief to me coming to Tai Po. It was the environment that attracted me. I guess XXX and XXX have similar reasons. They once quoted that if they wanted some peace and quiet, they would take sanctuary in their studies—taking up a Refresher Course in Tai Po.'

To me, *'seeking sanctuary'* means looking for a refuge from something unpleasant. Were they looking for the same *'thing'* there? Throughout my time at Tai Po I continued to wonder what had happened to these teachers at their schools. Did they just come to 'Tai Po' for a retreat? Were they forced to enrol for the course or were they looking for some kind of change in their lives as teachers? Why were they silenced in their own schools? Would their problems, whatever they might be academically or pedagogically, be resolved after the refresher course? I remained intrigued.

These questions continued to haunt me, even after I finished my course. I did not forget my course mates because we continued to meet and their stories still enthralled me. One lasting impression over the years with these *'comrades-in-arms'* were the comments they made when being asked about the difficulties they experienced in teaching in their schools, especially in the midst of the education reform in Hong Kong.

'You just don't get it. I mean you really don't understand what it is like in my/our school.'

In hindsight, I really did not understand what their experiences meant to them. But I have a clear opinion of how I understand their experiences as a professional teacher and what these mean to me after we have chit-chatted about this and that over the last ten years. I realized that initially I did not have a complete story to draw from all these complexities. When experiencing their ups and downs, laughter and sorrow, traces of resonance echoed in my mind. Teachers, including me, were caught in the throes of a crisis when massive changes were likely to come—as the current of education reforms in Hong Kong was drawing close.

In what follows, I will describe how four English teachers, whom I encountered on one of the professional development courses, generously shared their experiences with me. Through sharing our stories with one another, we came to understand and respect what we had experienced. This also enabled us to realize the significance of striking the same chord as we co-constructed our stories—providing effective support for teachers, who have few opportunities to voice their uncertainties.

Part I

Paving My Research Journey

Chapter One The Research Puzzle

Chapter Two Disturbing The Sounds Of The Silenced

Tracing My Root Of Inquiry

Chapter Three Bridging The Troubled Water

Chapter One

The Research Puzzle

*We achieve our identities and self-concept
through the use of the narrative configuration,
and make our existence into a whole
by understanding it
as an experience of
a single unfolding and
developing story.* (Polkinghorne, 1988: 150)

Introduction

Teachers have been thought of having substantial autonomy in deciding the content of their work and teaching pedagogy. It has also been thought that management culture that emphasises the autonomy of teachers' work could best promote teachers' professional development (Hargreaves 2000). However, societal changes have moved the teaching community towards a new management culture, which has led to teachers being increasingly controlled and monitored. In face of unfamiliar responsibilities upheld in an array of education reforms, there is a need to understand how teachers negotiate their professional identities in the present climate and how they perceive their 'SELVES' in different working environments. This study seeks to gain an understanding of teachers'

professional identity negotiations, through a new construct—attending to teachers’ own voices, which develops as they interpret and reinterpret their experiences through the process of narrative inquiry. The data were gathered from four teachers through open-ended narrative interviews, focusing on their own experiences and perceptions on professional identity in terms of the interrelatedness of their working environment, the professional community and their occupational choices based on their personal values and motivation.

The Identity Puzzle

The symbolic meaning of what I am going to tell you in my thesis will strike a sympathetic chord with teachers who have long been silenced. My encounter with those teachers in the Institute of Education (IEd) was thought provoking. Unlike my first refresher course in 1992, I was unable to connect my prior learning experience with these teachers this time around. The kind of discomfort I felt during the course diminished my original anticipation—to enhance my professional knowledge. The impending education reform in Hong Kong turned out to be the main talking point among teachers. Teachers tended to tell one another stories about their teaching life, reflected on what they did in the past, and imagined where the imminent reform would take them. The fear generated

from their stories was disheartening. To many teachers whom I encountered in the IEd, this fear was also a challenge as the government did not want to breed a community of teachers complaining about their work. Further, if teachers acted autonomously, their behaviour would often be sanctioned and their voices silenced by their employing authorities. It was thus paradoxical to believe that teachers would *'be more proactive and pursue lifelong learning, enhance their professional competence, (and) have a stronger sense of commitment'* (Reform Proposals for the Education System in Hong Kong, EC¹, September 2000) after attending refresher courses organized by the EMB. This brought me to my first area of interest of how teachers' engagement in professional development programmes helps construct, re-construct, or deconstruct their professional identity.

My interest in the puzzles of who we, teachers, were and how we came to be thus developed. In *The Courage to Teach* (1998), Parker J. Palmer observes that *'...good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher'* (Palmer, 1998:10). Within the contexts of uncertainties where manifold educational restructurings of teachers' professional identity were articulated, I perceived incongruities between the externally defined identity of teachers and that held

¹ The Education Commission (EC) is responsible for charting the main educational policies in Hong Kong.

by the individual teachers, including those of us who have various teaching experiences. My prior experiences in attending various types of professional development programmes allowed for such differentiation among us. To follow Epstein's (1978) identity theory, identity is a concept of integration and practice. *'It represents the process by which the person seeks to integrate his (sic) various statuses and roles, as well as his diverse experiences, into a coherent image of self'* (Epstein, 1978: 101). This led me to my second area of interest, how educational policies affect teachers' roles, how teachers perform their duties in the face of an array of changes, and how they negotiate and re-construct their professional identity so as to embrace challenges ahead or survive in the reform context.

According to Choi's (2001) study on prospective primary school teachers in Hong Kong, the professional role of teachers *"was only the concerns of the principals, education officers and teacher educators"* (2001:323) while students and teachers perceived that the *"essential cognitive role"* (2001:323) teachers played was to prepare and explain difficult teaching materials. The teaching paradox was further elaborated in Lai et al's (2005) study in that among high-school students in Hong Kong, teaching is ranked 'third' among the twenty most wanted and most respected occupations but students with low

university admission rates showed more interest in becoming teachers. To investigate identity formation in Hong Kong teachers, Trent & Gao (2009) found that *“identity formation was shaped by multiple trajectories”* (2009:265). Teachers are more likely to draw upon their experiences as students in their previous education or even from their previous career, which help shape their meanings as teachers in the future. That may explain why there has been little inquiry on *“how the biography, personality and previous educational experiences contribute to the meaning process of a teacher with particular reference to the conception of a professional teachers”* (Choi, 2001:323).

Little research has been done on how teachers’ professional identities are transformed in relation to education reforms in Hong Kong. So I felt an urge to understand how we *‘can engage with one another and ... acknowledge each other as participants’* (Wenger, 1998: 149) in a learning community, firstly, in the refresher course for teachers, and subsequently how we develop our professional identity through our practice. Teachers in Hong Kong, including me, lived through a very different period of history when changes in the education system mostly affected students, rather than the curriculum and the professional development of teachers. Teachers have had little experience or knowledge of what would happen to them in the education reform. Worse still, the fear caused by

uncertainties has kept teachers silent because to varying degrees, Confucianism, which sets rules of conduct and principles so as to achieve harmonious relationships with others, continues to influence Chinese adults.

Embracing the Identity Crisis

Reforms have an impact upon teachers' identities, and because these are both cognitive and emotional, create reactions which are both rational and non-rational. Thus, the ways and extent to which reforms are received, adopted, adapted and sustained or not sustained will be influenced by the extent to which they challenge existing identities. (Day, 2002: 683)

Hargreaves (1997) claims that educational changes imposed without considering the emotions and professional lives of teachers create resistance and may be condemned to failure. Similarly, Maragall's (2002) study of the new education agenda also recognized that the most important problem in today's educational system is the crisis that teachers are undergoing in public secondary education. In Choi's (2001) study on Hong Kong primary school teachers, she also argues that "*there is a heightening expectation toward*" (2001:317) teachers and like many other education systems in the world, teacher professionalization is high on the agenda. However, there has been an impression that

teachers fall short of societal expectation in playing their professional roles (Choi, 2001). This resonates with Zhang & Lam's (2008) study on the crisis of Hong Kong teachers' professional identity in the curriculum reform when teachers' personal meanings and their existence were ignored in the reform process. Teachers were often found powerless in the struggle for the reconstruction of their professional identity. In turn, the imminent educational reforms involving the restructuring of teachers' working conditions accentuate the identity crisis.

I understand that every teacher carries with them a different history to their classrooms and lecture rooms. Some of these historical backgrounds have been instrumental in shaping their future, their career choice, and their identity as a teacher. The more I thought about this, the more I realized the potential significances of finding out how teachers' perceptions of their professional identity are constructed or re-constructed in the era of education reform. To unlock this identity puzzle, I would have to explore the impact of educational policy changes on teachers' perceived professional identity and the extent to which the experience/engagement of the professional development programme has changed teachers' professional identity. Since teachers' perceptions are shaped by the values and beliefs they hold about their daily experiences, my adopting a quantitative

approach in my research might not lead to an in-depth understanding of teachers' motives and actions. This understanding has led me to see the significance of addressing personal accounts, including that of mine, in interrogating the broader context, such as the experience of being a student in the past and facing different challenges encountered at different career stages. To strike a resonant chord with my teacher participants, I seek to locate my 'self' as our experiences weave through our stories.

Tapping the Sounds of the Silenced with Stories

The world's earliest archives or libraries, were the memories of women. (Trinh, 1989: 121)

Striking a resonant chord with these 'comrades' challenged me to explore the complicated interaction between the world these teachers lived in and their understanding of that world (Etherington, 2004). Being keepers and transmitters of our life stories (Trinh, 1989), we were able to see the value of sharing what we had experienced. Sharing our stories with others is perhaps the best avenue to free our minds again, refresh old memories, or extinguish undesirable experiences. I was also interested to '*hear their feelings, thoughts and attitudes*' (Etherington, 2004: 75) after my encounter with some of

the perplexed teachers in the refresher course. Four of these teachers were later invited to take part in my study of teachers' professional identities. However, did telling and hearing one another's stories help solve each person's problems? Were teachers willing to co-construct their past with me? Was it the way to make sense of our life experiences? Could the process of recounting our life stories improve understanding of our professional identity?

I had no answer to these puzzling and pressing questions as a teacher, but I saw that to *'listen carefully is to preserve. But to preserve is to burn, for understanding means creating'* (Trinh, 1989: 121). This described vividly what I had in mind whenever we told and listened to our 'stories' between ourselves. I felt teachers' need to 'preserve' their stories, their past experiences, as we have been encouraged to be self-directed and reflexive in our work. While undergoing this process, I, together with other teachers as the audience – would be given a chance to interpret and 'create' new meanings as we process our experiences. This study thus aims to give voice to our experiences and 'disturb the silences' that have developed within us for years. I also saw the opportunity to explore these experiences through my doctoral research using the approach of narrative inquiry. According to many researchers, the underlying premise of narrative inquiry is

'the belief that individuals make sense of their world (most) effectively by telling stories' (Bailey and Tilley, 2002: 575; Bruner, 1990: 13). However, how could I evaluate the stories of these teachers? How could I connect their experiences with mine? As I tried to piece these puzzles together, I realized that the knowledge I constructed out of my past, out of my immediate surroundings, and out of the core of my identity would establish the backdrop for my research. Thus, our collaboration in reconstructing our life stories was conducive to the exploration of some hidden episodes in our minds.

This dissertation allowed me to engage in narrative inquiry as a means to make sense of the world of these teachers by hearing their stories and interpreting the meanings and influences of them through mine. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), *'narrative inquiry characteristically begins with the researcher's autobiographically oriented narrative (and is) associated with the research puzzle'* (2000: 41). This way of conducting research is *'to experience an experience'* (2000: 50) and fits the purpose of my research regarding my puzzles implanted early in 1998, though the teacher participants' narratives were collected ten years later in 2008. Riessman (2008) also claims that narrative inquiry has been used by scholars to study the culture and lives of individuals during times of cultural change and to mobilize marginalized groups and initiate changes.

With this methodology in mind, it is possible for me to look into teachers' professional identity through teachers' stories. This also helps in shaping our sense of 'selves', our career path, our relationships with others, and our future. The more I thought about this, the more I realized that this was a topic worthy of doctoral research. If they said that I 'did not get it', could they help me understand their 'stories'? Most important of all, I wanted to find out to what extent my 'stories' resonated with the wider experience of other teachers.

The 5th Participant—Disturbing My Own Sounds of Silence

*Let her weave her story within their stories, her life amidst their lives.
And while she weaves, let her whip, spur, and set them on fire. Thus
making them sing again. Very softly a-new, a-gain.
(Trinh, 1989: 128)*

I started this journey of understanding with tunnel vision that focused solely on finding out the problems teachers encountered in the education sector in early 2009. As I embarked on the journey of inquiry, I realized that there were more jigsaw puzzles for me to assemble. I had to piece together the puzzle of how time, places, and relationships had shaped who I was as a student and who I was, am, will be, as a teacher. This acted as a backdrop to my interpretation of others' stories. In doing so, I realized that it would be

difficult to turn merely to scientific knowledge generated from what I had learnt in my other Doctor of Education units. Clandinin and Connelly (1995), on the other hand, use the term 'personal practical knowledge' (1995: 7) to explain that teachers' knowledge is generated as a result of their experience as teachers. They describe such knowledge as a *'body of convictions and meanings, conscious and unconscious, that have arisen from experience (intimate, social and traditional) and that are expressed in a person's practices'* (ibid. 1995: 7). As I progressed with my research, I had to reclaim my past life experiences as a student, a student teacher, and later as a professional teacher and a doctoral student. These experiences were constructed and reconstructed in the form of knowledge as I went through various contexts (Clandinin and Connelly 1992), as in my first and second refresher courses.

I have decided to become part of the research because I believe that my history has been integral in shaping my diverse 'selves' which form part of who I am today. The more I know of my past and learn to process the feelings I once had, the more I learn to honour and respect the many 'selves' I have made. During this process, I have come to understand that experience is not static. Instead, it is shifting moment by moment, reshaping my past as well as my present as the research process goes on. My intention to

include my own memories alongside the other four teachers in this study is to present my past as if it were told from the perspective of the present, as did the other participants. I decided to make myself transparent through reflexivity, identifying social situations, which both my participants and I had experienced. In doing so, my stories are intertwined with the contextually rich environments of my past, of the current educational reform context in Hong Kong, and the other social contexts of schools and workplaces of my participants. I believe that in connecting the contextual profile of the educational system in Hong Kong and unfolding its main policy initiatives loaded with historical import, I would be able to interpret and re-present stories collected without privileging others.

When adopting an insider's view of various contexts as well as entering the narrators' experiences, I was led to further research puzzles (Trahar, 2006a). Puzzles about how stories, collected in the form of narratives, with various social; cultural; and personal perspectives, give way to my personal resistance to understanding and how they lead me on a journey of re-discovery of 'selves' and re-construction of 'identities' among those who contribute their narratives. In doing so, I, along with participating teachers, have had to grapple with the influences of our cultural stories, which ultimately reconnected to some of the unspoken experiences which had been hidden for years. I also found myself

not only taking action in collaborating with teachers living this experience by hearing and retelling their stories, but also doing what Richardson (2001) suggests: '*to get personal with the experience*' (2001: 34) and '*standing up for myself*' (2001: 36) as a practitioner and person with the potential to influence practice, policy, and research.

It is not my intent in this dissertation to provide a different version of what teachers experience in teaching. It is my intent, however, to help teachers reconstruct a professional self that speaks to the unknown truths and transform those truths to rediscover the influence of their cultural stories. Hearing and listening through the lens of our cultural selves may also empower participant teachers and even me, as the researcher, to learn how we negotiate with our professional 'selves' as brave teachers and thrive in the education reform context in Hong Kong.

Setting Foot on a Less-travelled Road

Identifying Choices of Re-presentation and Methodology for the Thesis

In achieving this purpose, I have purposefully chosen to use more evocative writing to re-present my personal voice together with the more conventional scholarly voice. There are a number of reasons for this choice. Firstly, narrative inquiry enables me to hear '*stories lived and told*' (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000: 18) by teachers. So, together with

the use of auto-ethnography, which locates my own 'self' and experiences as the starting point of the research, I am able to explore a wide scope of issues while remaining concerned with the broader context in which my participants' and my experiences occurred (Denzin, 1997).

The use of a post-modern framework which focuses on a more critical process of 'reflexivity' (Bleakley, 1999), involves a 're-search', or 'a second look' (Hillman, 1992) of what is being researched. Researchers should not simply take what have been researched as 'given' but as constituted. According to Gergen (2001), *Narrative methods, collaborative methods, auto-ethnography and performance methods are illustrative*" (2001: 3) and using these theoretical lens also helps emphasize local stories and attends to the multiple nature of reality since the analysis was written and represented based on our experiences and interpretations. With this, I would also be able to see the importance of language as a medium for the social construction of what my participants and I considered truth. Representing my personal experiences and the research process in a less 'tidy' or orderly presentation has been the means to achieve this purpose. I have also included several metaphors in the thesis trying to portray the emotions and situations teachers encountered at the time of my inquiry. Within these metaphors, teachers'

personal experiences are seen as components of their identity development. I believe that with more diverse writing genres throughout my thesis, I am able to capture the multi-voicedness of the field texts and structure this reality more fully as my thesis does not seek to impose meaning on the readers, but provides an opportunity for multiple interpretations (Denzin, 1997).

Another aspect which I attempt to acknowledge is the temporal nature of personal experiences, as narrative inquiry events may be seen as ones located over time. An interpretation of these experiences is inevitably an incomplete and constructed re-presentation of the research process, as stories collected may be seen with a past, an apparent present, and an implied future (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). This will then provide both the readers, that is, you, and me the researcher, an opportunity to re-interpret words which may have held a different meaning. My intention is to consciously break away from formal academic writing in an effort to narrate and interpret both my personal experiences as well as those participants' stories in a more accessible manner. Therefore, you will find the use of songs, metaphors, and images throughout my thesis as, like many post-modern researchers, I am learning how to locate myself differently in my writing (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000).

In foregrounding my personal selves with a highly personal voice within this academic research, I attempt to challenge the views on silent authorship and include my own voices as an alternative re-presentation (Sparkes, 2000). This will hopefully make my research more accessible to a wider public than that of the academic community (Richardson, 1994). This approach also resonates well with the tenets of current education reforms in which the government advocates addressing different stakeholders' needs, including teachers, when it comes to changes in education. It is also congruent with my ideas that my thesis, which evocatively describes the experiences of teachers, should not be read passively but should engage you, the reader, to experience teachers' feelings. That is why I have invited you to join me in this journey of 'rediscovery' at the beginning of this chapter. I expect also that at some point, while you are reading or maybe in subsequent thoughts, you will feel the voice of 'awakening' echoing in your mind. Our interpretation and understanding of research is a result of the complex interplay between our previously held experiences or knowledge and the contexts wherein we are situated. This is perhaps the magic that narrative inquiry weaves as the resonance differs every time we come into contact with stories recounted.

I am pleased to say that initially I started my doctoral studies because I needed to have

some other form of a refresher course after I had finished my last one at IEd. I ended the journey by finding the courage of my moral and professional self to tell a version of teachers' experience and give some insights about their experience that seem obvious, yet were overshadowed over time. This is perhaps because we have been 'silenced' for years and we are not challenged to look beyond our cultural selves and get personal.

My Research Journey

*... in the naked light I saw
ten thousand teachers maybe more,
teachers talking without speaking;
people hearing without listening;
teachers telling stories that voices never shared.*

**No one dared disturb—
the sounds of silence....**

**Modified from Simon and
Garfunkel's 'The Sound of Silence', 1964**

I admit that throughout the research process, I have been stimulated by various pieces of aesthetic work, such as poems, songs and even scholarly quotations. As postmodernism lends itself beautifully to an eclectic approach, I have prefaced some chapters with musical or poetic excerpts and some with pictorial images to illuminate aspects of the

chapter as well as my thoughts along my research journey. This also links to the wider context in which teachers can be better portrayed and represented culturally, if not literally.

My thesis is divided into three parts. In Part I—*'Paving My Research Journey'*, there are three chapters. In this first chapter, I have focused on the research puzzle which establishes the background of this study and its purpose. My attention was also devoted to the interconnection between my personal experiences and those of the participants. I have sought to convince readers of the significance of connecting one's own understanding with that of the participants in this study (Habermas, 1975). To achieve this, I chose to listen to the narratives presented and the stories of individuals, including those of mine, in the midst of the educational reform in Hong Kong. In doing so, I am aligned with Geertz's idea that *'Stories matter. So...do stories about stories'* (Geertz, 1986: 377).

In Chapter 2, I have decided to tell how my initial inquiry into the making of teachers led me to reflect on some of my early experiences with different teachers as a learner in the past. Along with this, I had the opportunity to savour some long lost stories involving my family. Prompted by an interest in knowing how we teachers construct our professional

identity in an ever-changing educational context, I believed that the use of narrative inquiry would better capture *'nuances of this living in field texts'* (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000: 91) and better re-present teachers' stories and their past experiences. In threading these stories, I have also had a chance to present how the education scenarios have changed, as I share my own learning and teaching experiences of different incidents.

In Chapter 3—*'Bridging the Troubled Water'*, I present the process I took to tend to my experiences as a teacher before deciding upon narrative inquiry. I then describe how the journey towards narrative inquiry, set within Confucian heritage contexts, has been fraught with obstacles, leading to my self-doubt about the use of this methodology approach. Having grappled transparently with my own queries whether its philosophical foundations are fit for my research puzzle, I realize how this process has helped me explore other teachers' identity and how our stories could be situated within the wider context, resonating with others who have been kept silent in the past.

Teachers' stories collected are then retold in Part II—*'Lending an Ear to Teachers' Stories—Listening to Whispers in the Sounds of Silence'*. There are altogether four chapters. Stories in the form of narrative presentations and metaphors are described,

interpreted, and analysed in Chapters 4 to 7. I also devote my attention to how my participants would be better represented, so some flowers are chosen to portray them. These chapters about my participants are prefaced with a description of the flower which I have chosen, based on my understanding of them. In addition, different patterns and themes common to all stories are identified and analysed in relation to how they recursively informed and helped structure my participants' experiences. To this end, I focus primarily on those stories my participants intended to highlight when they were asked how they negotiated the radical change in their teaching career.

Finally, I close the thesis in Part III—*'Echoes among the Sounds of Silence'* which includes two chapters and an epilogue. I provide a summary of threads identified in Chapter 8, entitled—*'Returning to the Sounds of Silence'*. In doing so, I explore teachers' stories within an 'interpretive framework'. I re-tell these stories, investigating them and clarifying their relationship to the themes identified with those articulated in the literature. It is followed by the *'Conclusion'* in Chapter 9. I reflect on my research journey and summarize the changes I perceive in charting my identities with the stories told and heard between the participants and me. I also offer my admiration to teacher participants in this thesis. In the last section, I also explain the difficulties I have encountered and propose

suggestions for further research using narrative inquiry. In the Epilogue—‘ *The Journey Continues*’, the teacher participants tell the changes they have experienced being involved in this study.

As I take a reflective position and use the teachers’ stories as the basis to make connections with the teaching context, our perceived professional identity and other broader political processes will hopefully emerge from our personal stories. I also invite you, as the reader, to reflect with us on your hidden stories, which you have yet to synthesize with those of mine. Now, let us embark on our journey of discovery together.

Chapter Two

Disturbing The Sounds Of The Silenced—Tracing My Root Of Inquiry

Interpretive research begins and ends with the biography of the researcher.

(Denzin, 2001: 26)

In this chapter, I am going to share my lived story with you, from the beginning when I started dipping into the education community as a learner to the present when I came to this stage of writing stories about others and myself as a researcher. Given the auto-ethnographic dimensions I have decided to adopt, I have to remain transparent with my own teaching and learning beliefs in my research. Therefore, this chapter collects some of the stories of my past in the making of a teacher through conversations with many others, including my parents, my former teachers, and other teachers I met in my research journey. In reflecting on my research journey, I discover that my experience is rooted in the past, extends its influence to the present, and helps portray my plan for the future. This provides me with a chance to live out, to tell and retell my experiences in new spaces as the stories told intertwine with new ones in various contexts. Taking this temporary and dynamic nature of experience, I have formulated my research using

narrative inquiry into the re-construction of teachers' professional identity in this reform-based context.

You may find my stories in the form of narratives being merged with those of others, with those from scholars, and sometimes with my other 'selves' commenting on the issue. The ever-changing and fluid characteristics of experiences also offer an important vehicle for the inclusion of as many episodes as possible in reflecting the context in which I was once situated, triggering more insights as I continue with my writing. Thus, the stories I re-construct here are not presented chronologically but are more aligned with my thoughts as one episode would often lead me to delve further into my past. When undergoing this process of reflection, I have unintentionally disturbed some hidden core issues which have been silenced for years. My stories were collected on the basis of my memories as a student in various learning stages, depicting also the changes in the educational system of Hong Kong.

Looking into the Undergrowth—Autobiographical Roots of My Inquiry: A Teacher in the Making

...if representation is your goal, it's best to have as many sources and levels as possible. Even so, realize that every story is partial and situated. (Ellis 2004: 116)

What I think about my self-image, my personal identity, or myself is very important to my core of existence. It is the cultural and personal values, beliefs and philosophy by which I trace my personal worth; it also influences how I evaluate myself and others.

(Personal Reflection, April 2009)

14th March 2009

It was another Saturday morning! Sitting in an extravagantly decorated ballroom in one of Hong Kong's 5-star hotels with teachers from all over the territory, I watched intently as the passion slowly drained from the faces of these teachers as the PowerPoint presentation flickered. It was in fact the second Saturday in the month when teachers were requested or instructed by their school to attend this kind of 'seminar', as various publishers were eager to present their latest editions of textbooks to be used for the coming school year. This was a common scenario now because the first batch of students was due to enter Senior Secondary 4 (SS4) in the 2009–2010 school year under the education reform. The voices of these teachers were 'swallowed' by the presenter or the

salesperson's presentation. Yet, I saw that their faces spoke volumes of grumbles and the disrespect they had endured ever since the education reform was launched.

I wondered how teachers came to this as I continued to observe their bored facial expressions and uneasy body postures. I was convinced that this kind of presentation was but one of the factors that drained the passion out of the hearts of teachers. It was also a tangible testimony to the fact that inept education policies were undermining teachers' professional identity. Frequent changes in the curriculum and the content materials had eroded teachers' confidence. To worsen the relationship between teachers and government officials, there were reverberating echoes from the government that teachers were unable to do what they were expected to do. Like other teachers in Hong Kong, I had to take up various training courses offered by the Education Bureau (EDB), so as to prepare us, as teachers, for the upcoming education reforms, or to silence our discontent.

As I was thinking about why I had chosen to be a teacher and had come to this stage when I had to 'steal' my time to equip myself with different 'tools', my mind wandered farther back to the time when I had some joyous though disturbing moments as a learner, with my teachers. Did I feel my teachers' discontent? Didn't they have similar experiences? If

they did, why didn't I sense that when I was a student? Was I 'fooled' by their strong survival skills? From my own recollections, my passion for teaching, which I still claim to have, is derived from some passionate teachers whom I admire so much. However, I did not land on this career path with ease when I was confronted with the decision some thirty years ago. I looked at the crystal chandeliers above and I couldn't help drifting off in the middle of the presentation and going back to those days, when I had a chance to reveal to some of my teachers how my old 'self' perceived them as teachers.

The following sections are written as a series of imaginary interviews with my teachers in the past. Each interview records my perceptions of teachers in different education landscapes. Revisiting my past experiences with these teachers also offers me the opportunity to make sense of my biographical roots as a teacher. Throughout the thesis, verbatim accounts of my former teachers, participant teachers, other people and my mental representation of 'self' are presented in different font styles from that of mine. My personal reflections are also presented in separate paragraphs.

Different Versions of Teachers

One is worthy of being or becoming a teacher if one is able to derive new understanding while revising what he has learned. (Confucius, *Analects*, Book 2, Chapter 11)

子曰：「溫故而知新、可以為師矣。」 《孔子》、《論語·為政、第二章、第十一句》

I believe that I am not able to understand all teachers, sometimes, not even myself as a teacher. What I have perceived about the making of a teacher may be captured through ‘cracked lenses’ (Welikala, 2011). However, I do know that the meanings I make out of my lives and experiences with others, including my parents, my teachers, and my colleagues through my memory are worth recording. All these are valuable experiences to me because they serve as some kinds of signposts helping me to better understand my journey to becoming a teacher.

I started my early education in one of the small kindergartens near my flat. I have some fond memories of that place, as most of the time we students were mainly engaged in a great deal of chanting and singing. My mother, on the other hand, told me that the whole family had a terrible time when I did my homework as I cried throughout the process of learning how to hold the Chinese brush. She remembered the teary and sweaty girl crying

at the writing table. My homework book was full of blots and blurs and my father started muttering his discontent.

“Why didn’t your teachers help you finish your work before going home? What did they do in the kindergarten?”

“You have to respect your teachers no matter what they do. Going to school turns you into a woman of great virtue.”

To my father, like many other parents, all my homework then should be the responsibility of teachers. My mother, on the other hand, whispered words of comfort and wisdom softly in my ears.

My mother had been trying to inculcate this message into my mind though I did not utterly comprehend its meaning. I later inferred that my mother’s perception of education and teaching derived from the Chinese traditional belief of Confucianism, which forms the basis of the Chinese jurisprudence and education.

In fact, Confucianism has created an impregnable belief among Chinese which has instilled in those engaged in education a steadfast loyalty to this group of professionals.

There is a Chinese saying, '*Respect your teacher like a father, even if he or she only teaches you one day.*' This Chinese philosophy showcases the authority of teachers, which resembles that of a father, and fathers in Confucian society are like gods. This is natural in my parents' generation as education was not common and was seen as a privilege of the rich. In the 1950s, parents were mostly illiterate in Hong Kong. They had to work hard for a living, especially when they had a number of siblings at home. Thus, they had high expectations of teachers as they did not have enough time and knowledge to teach their children. They relied totally on teachers at school thinking that teachers would take care of them. It was this notion that made me cherish schooling and turned me into an attentive learner at school, but at the same time it silenced me at home whenever I encountered any learning problems, because I realized that being the eldest daughter in the family I had no one to turn to.

To me, my teachers in school would be the sole source of knowledge and the social status of teachers remained high in my mind. My experience has, in fact, been expressed by Lortie (1975, 2002) when he wrote his new preface to his book *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study* (2002):

Teachers have been shaped in turn by their own teachers and by their personal responses to those teachers—such influences stretch over many years. The result is an accretion of views, sentiments, and implicit actions that may be only partially perceived by the beginning teacher.

(Lortie, 2002: xi)

If a picture is worth a thousand words, a good story is worth many columns of statistics. Stories present ideas, conflicts, and, sometimes, resolution. They have depth and dimension, drama and emotion, making them more memorable than data alone.

(Mullan, Ficklen and Rubin, 2006: ix)

'The Young Red Guard' (Red Guardo) (紅衛兵)

It was my story and it is still the story my mother always tells about me in front of our relatives. It began with my kindergarten teacher, Miss Chan. She was young then and she loved playing the piano while she was teaching.

Christina: Miss Chan, it's really great to meet you here again. You are one of the most dedicated teachers I have ever met. You once commented that I was like a young Red Guard when I was telling stories to other kindergarten students. What exactly did you mean by that?

Miss Chan: It was the first impression I got when I saw you standing in front of all your classmates, saying '*Once upon a time, there was...*' You looked like the Red Guards giving orders to people in China; all your fellow classmates were silent and they listened to your stories with awe. That's why I sometimes asked you to help me when I was taking care of the other students.

Christina: I really don't understand why they felt like this. You know, I just learned from you. I practised at home in front of my sisters the way you talked. I also enjoyed helping you as a student assistant when you were busy. You know, I once thought that it would be fun to be a kindergarten teacher. I thought it would be enjoyable to sing and tell stories to my students, though it is now a totally different story for me, as a secondary school teacher. Perhaps you helped sow the seeds of my career. I thought that it was as simple as this in becoming a teacher. How I longed to be a teacher like you at that time. In fact, I considered you as my role model when I first started my teacher training.

This story of Red Guards encouraged me to be more active in class, though I was only about five years old. I recalled telling stories to my parents and sisters when I returned home. I did the same thing when I visited my grandmother who lived in Guangzhou in

China. My uncles and aunties, together with some of their neighbours in the village, always asked me to tell them stories whenever I visited them. I remember being put on a small stool by my uncle, telling them fables and stories I had learnt in my kindergarten. I enjoyed hearing their applause and compliments once I finished my presentation. Now, I realize that they just found that I was cute and lovely as I acted like a young Red Guard, assuming an air of *bossiness*. Due to Miss Chan and my relatives' recognition, I was led to believe that I was able to speak with authority, like the Red Guards in China. My understanding of the qualities a teacher must have is that she must be someone who gives instructions clearly and who is able to capture students' attention in her lessons. This experience leads me to explore whether being authoritative is a core element of a teacher.

Facing the Dilemma—'Two roads diverged in a yellow wood...'

However, my career path as a teacher was not as easy as my becoming a 'Red Guard'. As the eldest daughter in the family, I was caught between choices after my F.5 graduation: should I pursue my Advanced Level studies or find a job? I was academically qualified for Advanced Level studies but my parents hinted that it would be the right moment for me to start my career. Being a teenage girl of seventeen, I had no one to turn to but my form-five teacher, Mrs. Lee.

Christina: Hi, Mrs. Lee, I have to thank you for helping me out with my problems regarding my career choice. Torn between the options offered by my parents, I could only turn to you for advice.

I was overjoyed to see Mrs. Lee again. She was supportive. She gave me the feeling that whenever I had a problem, she would be there offering unfailing support.

Christina: I still remember clearly that you said that there were many opportunities out there if I wanted to pursue my education even though I had to work in the morning. You also advised me to apply for a junior clerk position in the newly established ICAC^[1]. You might not know it, but I had a very serious discussion with my parents and this led to a quarrel between my father and mother. You also suggested that I should also try my luck at one of the colleges of education^[2], which to me was the least probable option. I was not prepared to be a teacher, I mean psychologically. I also had an idea that teachers

^[1] Since its inception in 1974, the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) is committed to fighting corruption through effective law enforcement, education and prevention to help keep Hong Kong fair, just, stable, and prosperous.

^[2] Under the education system at that time, F.5 graduates could be admitted to one of the Colleges of Education in Hong Kong after a series of application procedures, including an aptitude test and an interview. Graduates from the College of Education would be awarded the Teacher's Certificate which enabled them to teach primary school children up to lower secondary school students (F.1–F.3).

were knowledgeable people and they usually speak with authority but I thought I did not possess any of these qualities at all then.

Mrs. Lee: Take it easy, Christina. Finding a job now doesn't mean that you can't study. There are many opportunities out there if you want to pursue your education, say, going to the evening school or working some years before you go back to school... you want to study at university. What about taking some short courses in typing or shorthand so that you can work in an office? Yes...what about the college of education? Are you interested in becoming a teacher? You would become one within two years.

Christina: To be honest, I had no confidence in becoming a teacher at all at that time. I was scared that I would not be able to handle so many things. I found that you were so busy with marking papers, preparing lessons and interviewing parents from time to time. You even had time to take care of my problems. You are indeed very knowledgeable. It seemed to me that every single problem brought to you would be resolved. Besides, I was not eligible for teacher training because I was only seventeen then. The minimum age for application was eighteen years old. With your encouragement, I went home and

told my parents about my decision. I wanted to start working, perhaps applying for a post in the ICAC.

That evening, my parents had a serious discussion with me about whether my father should sign my application for Northcote College of Education. My father was not particularly keen on my mother's suggestion as he thought that I should stop going to school. Our opinions were polarized.

Dad: I think she should get a job so that she can help look after her sisters and brother.

Mum: Well, I think she should go for teacher training and become a teacher after graduation. That's a lifelong career. After all, it is only two years. I will work part time to help her with this.

Me: Can I make my own decision, please? I want to apply for the ICAC. I want to work now because I know that it would be too much of a burden on the family, especially since Sam (my youngest brother) is going to a secondary school next year.

Christina: You know, Mrs. Lee, Mum was agitated. She claimed that it would do me good if I were to become a teacher. Firstly, I would set a good role model for my siblings and I could help them with their homework as well. Most important of all, my mum thought that it was a profession that most people would look up to. To my surprise, I passed the

aptitude test even though I was too young and my mother was overjoyed with the news.

But now as a teacher, I don't feel that I am highly respected by others. Did you feel respected by others at that time? I understood why my mother arrived at this perception because we once had a very miserable experience with one of my class teachers in my primary school.

Mrs. Lee: People in general are respectful to teachers. However, I do feel that teachers should display some sort of quality in earning respect from others, such as being considerate and developing a good relationship with their students. By the way, what happened in your primary school? Why did you have a very miserable experience?

July, 1970—A Miserable Experience

I still remembered clearly the day I received my admission slip for a secondary school after six years of primary education. My parents had tried hard to secure a place for me in my primary school even though the school fees were very expensive. My mother believed that I would be able to continue with my secondary education in the affiliated secondary school which was renowned for its students' excellent academic results in the district. My hands trembled as I found that I was admitted to another school, a new school which was

said to be a ‘sister’ school of my ‘dream’ school. My mother and I went to my class teacher, Miss Cheung, and we had a miserable experience on that day. I really wanted to tell her about my feelings if I had a chance to meet her again.

Christina: Miss Cheung, I admitted that every time you entered the classroom with a stern face, we all reckoned that as a ‘shut-up sign’. Whenever you asked me to read aloud in front of the class, it was a nightmare and I still remembered the chill in my back when you called my name. I got the feeling that you always used your authority as a teacher to silence your students. You were good at maintaining class discipline but I sometimes wondered if you could be kinder and more gentle with us. I even thought that you had hampered my learning to a certain extent. But of course, the fact is I am still pursuing my studies now.

Miss Cheung: As a teacher, I think I should do my best to make sure all my students are able to learn effectively, especially in such an elite school for Band One^[3] students. One way to achieve this is to ensure that they are able to listen attentively in class. Besides,

^[3] There are three “Bands” of secondary schools in Hong Kong and students are allocated to different schools according to their allocation band calculated by scaled internal assessment results starting from the 5th year of primary school and ends with their public examinations in secondary school. Students who are allocated into the Band One (the highest band) are given the choice to attend the best secondary schools while students in Band Three are allocated to less prestigious schools.

there is always a great learning diversity among students. I have to employ the best strategy in different classes. I can't remember if your class had been very talkative then.

Christina: Indeed. I have similar experiences as a teacher. We have to be very flexible in our teaching. By the way, I was sorry that my mother and I went to you on that day. You must have been very busy after the disclosure of your students' results. But my mother was eager to help me, to get a place in our 'dream' school. It was because most of the six-grade graduates in my primary school did not have to undergo the Secondary School Places Allocation (SSPA) as they would normally be allocated to our 'dream' school. That was why my mother tried hard to support the expensive school fees here by working part time throughout my primary education. She thought that it would be an easy process as my three younger sisters could more easily enter the secondary school we dreamt of. But... my mother and I had never thought that it would turn out to be such a miserable one. You explained to my mother that you might not be able to help us and you advised us to go to another school, which you said was a 'sister' school of my 'dream' school. My mother thought that you were very unhelpful and she was angry. I understand her disappointment as all her dreams were shattered then.

Miss Cheung: Christina, what would you do if you were me, especially when you understand that there was no extra vacancy in the secondary school?. If you and your mother kept asking for one, it would only delay your chances in finding a place in some other good schools. So I had to advise you this way, to leave as soon as possible. I even suggested that you should go to the new secondary school, from which you graduated later, right? You stood a better chance if you applied for a place in F.1 there.

I wonder if fate arranged my encounter with these teachers in my early years as a student. I have changed my perceptions of Miss Cheung, perhaps after having become a teacher. In meeting her again, I want to tell her how she helped me in finding a good secondary school in which I enjoyed my secondary education.

Christina: Yes, I was admitted and I had a wonderful time there. I still remember the small number of students at the beginning since it was only a new school^[4] then and I was among the many new Form One students, who were occupying the whole school most of the time. That gave me a feeling of ownership, which later I reckoned to be an

^[4] My alma mater celebrated its 40th Anniversary in 2010.

essential factor in identity formation. This reminded me of my first secondary school

English teacher, Miss Law.

Setting the Scene—Influences of Learning Experiences on Teachers' Professional Identity

I was educated in an examination-oriented and teacher-centred educational system in Hong Kong, during which period we were subject to the colonial rule of the United Kingdom until July 1997. I did not recognize the significance and impact of this kind of education system on me until years later after the handover of sovereignty to the Chinese Government. In the first place, we had no problem regarding the medium of instruction (MOI) during my secondary education. As a colony of Britain, Hong Kong required that all schools have English Language as one of their core subjects together with the Chinese Language and Mathematics. In spite of this, we always had more English Language lessons than the other core subjects. It gave us, as students, the idea that English Language was more important than any other subject, and English teachers earned better pay than other teachers.

The myth about English teachers' 'nobility' was reinforced as the official language of the government then was English. Parents were desperate to send their children to English primary or secondary schools instead of Chinese middle schools. My parents were among those. I still remember that teachers of English Language usually dressed more glamorously. In this context, English Language, being the official language before the hand-over to China's sovereignty, gained more 'social esteem' (Sikes et al., 1991) in the school curriculum even though the first language of the majority of students was Cantonese. This concurs with Sikes et al. (1991) who claim that teachers attribute a different status to different subjects. I wondered how English Language teachers perceived their status and whether they tried to dress up to this perceived rank. Subsequently, English Language teachers were much more respected by students. However, I respect Miss Law, the first English teacher in my secondary education because of her lively teaching approaches.

Christina: Hi, Miss Law. I really have to thank you for your inspiring teaching methods. You are the most respectable teacher I have ever had. My mother kept saying that I was lucky to have you as my first English teacher at secondary school. My parents thought that you were the main channel for me to learn English because they knew nothing

about it. In hindsight, I understand why my mother was so persistent in my choice of English Language as my major in college—she really wanted me to become a teacher of English Language as she thought that I would enjoy better status. You know, this commonly held perception about the status of English teachers has affected me in different phases of my life.

Miss Law: You might be right but I think as a teacher, you have to be interested in what you are teaching. So, whether I am respected or not by parents or students does not bother me too much. However, I do believe that one must earn his or her respect and the passion you invested in your job would certainly pay you well.

Christina: Absolutely. So that's why I still remember your asking us to bring a mirror and a piece of paper with us to your class? We wondered what you were trying to do. But when you started asking us to explore on our own how different phonetic symbols sound with the help of the mirror images of our mouth and the vibration made on the paper, we found that this was tremendously interesting. You inspired all of us.

Miss Law: Thanks for that, Christina. All I wanted to do was to capture your attention in my lessons. According to Second Language Acquisition theorists, there are a number of affective variables, such as a learner's motivation, in determining successful language learning. So, I tried my best to sustain your learning interest.

Christina: As a teacher, I understand what you mean now. I realized that my motive in learning a second language grew stronger at that time because of you. I have never met anyone like you. Though you had a big class then, about 42 students, right, you successfully engaged all of us through innovative teaching methods. Now, we have about thirty something, we find it difficult to sustain their attention even for a small task. I even modelled on the way you taught and did that way exactly with my younger sisters at home. I became more enthusiastic about learning and took more active roles in school. It was the first time I realized the significance of learning something useful and that learning could be fun.

I turned and looked around the hotel ballroom filled with unfamiliar faces, yet I enjoyed their fellowship. I have to admit that under a task-oriented and teacher-centred educational system in Hong Kong, teachers were seen to have absolute power to decide

what and how students should learn at that time. Students are passive knowledge receivers trying to achieve higher academic results at different stages of their education. Many parents thus work hard to support their children and do their best to get their children into reputable schools, as in my case. In order to enhance their children's competitive edge, parents force their children to take extra-curricular classes, such as playing the piano, painting, and swimming. With society's expectations and parents' pressure, few students enjoy learning or genuinely understand the purpose of learning. Unfortunately, I was one of those students during my early years of education. I did not truly understand the meaning of education, neither did I consider taking up teaching as my career. If there was one reason why I never gave up my studies and was able to get into postgraduate studies, it must have been my mother. Her tenacity is the quintessential factor which taught me the value of learning. In writing my mother's story, I also see through her lens how I perceive my role as a teacher.

Emerging from Past Experiences—What Stories Experiences tell...

While reflecting on these early pieces of my learning experience with my kindergarten and primary-six form teachers, I realize that my perception of teachers as a special group of individuals was formed on the basis of my experiences with them. We all inherit our

teaching from our teachers. In relating my dreamy encounters with these teachers, I am able to understand that the reality in the present cannot be separated from the values and interests I hold as an individual, which is formed through my interpretation of these teachers' interpretations of their role as a teacher. These interpretations open a window into my subjective existence as a teacher (Ricoeur, 1976). From this perspective, the meaning of my teachers' experiences cannot directly become my experiences. To be more accurate, it is my personal experiences which are communicated through my interactions with my teachers in the past. This lived experience remains private to me, but the meaning of the experience becomes public (ibid). This process is not stable and in fact it is moving forward as my life journey continues. This also is in accordance with Dewey's (1938) emphasis on the meaning of experiences, experiment, purposeful learning, and freedom in *Experience and Education* (1938).

After reviewing the early stage of my learning experience, I realized that my perception of a teacher's identity came mainly from my parents. My father's complaint about my kindergarten teacher's lack of responsibility revealed the expectation of the public regarding teachers. The miserable encounter my mother and I had with my primary school form teacher triggered many more unpleasant memories, but when faced with the

scenario again years later, having found a chance to narrate and mediate the event and the experience, the misery felt was transformed into a story. The reconstruction of the whole incident and the ‘constructed’ response I got from my teacher were obtained as I interpreted her stories as well as mine. This led to my inquiry of my own ‘self’ as a teacher and how others interpreted their own experiences or stories told to others, including me.

*‘Are teachers today the ontological
equivalent of their parents, their
relatives, their teachers?’*

*‘Do I meet the expectations of my
Principal, my students’ parents,
and the society?’*

I have trodden into this ‘undergrowth’ of teachers, the bulwark of teachers’ professional identity. My encounter with my former teachers captured some of my stories as a learner and challenged me to reflect on my past experiences in the light of newer teaching experiences and fresh considerations as a teacher. This kind of experience is especially crucial to understanding my identity as a teacher during a period of educational reform.

This also led me to look for more encounters with other teachers for better understanding of my ‘self-making’ as I continued my journey of inquiry into teachers’ identity.

Understanding teachers’ personal and lived experiences as teachers in the era of educational reform has also allowed me the privilege of investigating our professional and personal lives in search of the roots of our professional identity. Lending an ear to their stories has helped present information gleaned from their lived experiences or stories, which I will include in other chapters. In the following chapter, I will present the journey I have taken to come to this research method—narrative inquiry— and how this approach helps ‘bridge the troubled water’ in the education reform context. I am also pleased to have a chance to look into the depth of the ‘self’ I have been playing throughout these years as a teacher and to be joyfully joined with my participants and you, my readers, who accompany me in various phases of my research journey.

Chapter Three

Bridging The Troubled Water—Narrative Matters

BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATER

When you're troubled, feeling tired,
when tears roll in your eyes...

Come and sit by my side,
I will dry them all.

When teaching gets rough,
and voices just can't be heard...

Like a bridge over troubled water,
I will soothe your silences with stories.

When you're straining at the leash,
when you're panic-stricken,

when your voices fall on stony ground.. I will comfort you,
I'll share mine with yours.

When the powers of darkness reign,
and no one can feel your pain...

Yes, like a bridge over troubled water,
I will ease your pain with stories.

Modified from Paul Simon's

'Bridge Over Troubled Water' (1969)

Reflecting on “Bridge over Troubled Water”

The song “Bridge over Troubled Water” was written by Paul Simon in 1969. He said its theme was about providing comfort to a person in need. I have chosen this song and modified some of its lyrics because they describe some of my own experiences and discoveries in developing this inquiry and its methodology. At times, while wandering through a maze of complex yet insightful philosophical works, I experienced some travails and desperately needed somebody to comfort me. This beautiful song also represents the soothing effect of narrative inquiry when I go through the reflexive *“collaboration process between the researcher (myself) and her or his (my) subjects”* (Moen 2006: 6).

You, the reader, will surely draw your own conclusions from the stories and interpretations espoused and presented in this chapter. To start, therefore, I shall share with you how I embarked on a journey of discovery through my engagement with various scenarios in my life. This will be followed by a theoretical discussion to establish the rationale for my methodological approach. I invite you to join me on this journey of understanding postmodernism and narrative inquiry.

Navigating my Route of Inquiry

It took me almost a month to compose my literature review on narrative inquiry and professional identity. The journey was lonely and confusing, but I eagerly anticipated the stories of my participants, as well as what they were not saying. After sending the drafts of the chapters to my supervisor, Dr. Sheila Trahar, I looked forward to her comments. I was reading the ideas of Moen (2006) on the use of narrative when my daughter approached me.

“Mom, do you know how to chart a scattered diagram for statistics?”

My daughter was working on her research methodology in her university. She had gathered some statistical information on her topic, which was about the Internet participation of young people in Hong Kong. My impulse was to say,

“Sorry, I’ve never worked on such a method and please don’t confuse me with your figures.”

If I trawled my experience, I would only come up with a qualitative research approach, which I used for a previous thesis; content analysis, for my language studies; and a

quantitative approach, for my other course work.

Realizing that I was a bit inconsiderate, I turned to her Excel file and tried my best to explain it to her. Seeing my problem, my daughter gazed at my computer and asked sympathetically,

“How’s your thesis?”

“Well, perhaps I am too focused on my reading, so that I can’t see the wood for the trees at the moment. But it’s coming fine. I’m waiting for my supervisor’s comments.”

“Here it comes,” she said as the mail icon popped up in my screen.

“Yes, it’s my supervisor’s mail.”

“Thanks anyway, talk to you later,” she said as she left for her room.

Seeing Through a Postmodern Lens and Wrestling with Interpretations

My heart was racing when I opened my supervisor’s mail. It happened every time I received her comments—for two reasons: I was sure that she would help me build on my knowledge on narrative inquiry and I was anxious to know if I was on the right track. She

wrote:

"I think that you write very well, clearly and accessibly. There are of course a few minor language errors but these can be picked up at a later stage. In Chapter 4, you certainly demonstrate understanding of narrative. However, my concern at the moment is twofold."

"What is my problem? Have I really understood what I have been reading about narrative inquiry? Did I mix up 'narrative inquiry' with 'narrative analysis'? And is there a difference between 'narrative analysis' and 'analysis of narrative'? Oh, my God, I'm all mixed up now!"

I struggled to regain focus and continued to read. To make things comprehensible, my supervisor explained to me that I had to be much more transparent about the process and I should not be 'absent' in the stories I had collected.

I had to admit that my study explored and interpreted mainly the experiences of teachers who had been marginalized in a specific educational context in Hong Kong; the theoretical assumptions of a postmodern lens play an important role in this narrative inquiry of teachers' identity. Lyotard (1984) argues that we have to cease to believe that the narratives of metanarratives adequately represent and cover us all. We have to become alert to differences, diversity, and the incompatibility of our aspirations, beliefs,

and desires (ibid, 1984: xxiv). After clarifying the first aspect, I continued to read.

“Similarly there seems to be another disjuncture with your methods - particularly with your use of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. It is not that a narrative inquirer would never use those methods, more that they do not often fit the purpose of the research, nor the relationship that the researcher has with her participants.”

My thesis deals with teacher identity, but how am I going to plan for it? According to Moen (2006), using a narrative is one of the best ways to structure people’s experiences and dialogic interactions with others and the world. Teachers, like most other storytellers, create narrative descriptions about their experiences and attempt to make sense of the behavior of others (Zellermayer, 1997). Recognizing the significance of smaller local narratives, Lyotard (1984) also concludes that knowledge should be locally determined. Thus, my use of teachers’ narratives has an added benefit: The stories and voices of this marginalized sector can now be made public. In using the multiplicity of voices, beliefs, and approaches to analyze the reality, I have to include what my participants say, what they do not say, and what they do. The “multivoicedness” of the narratives also helps organize our experiences of the world while we construct and reconstruct our identities (Moen, 2006).

Defining the Concept of “Truth” and “Memories”

While still figuring out what constituted the legitimacy of my work, I remembered the comments of Michael,¹ one of my colleagues. Because he had demonstrated an interest in my research, I had shown him the prologue, which I had written long before I started my analysis. After reading a few lines, he unleashed his merciless criticism.

“Is this a thesis that you are writing?” he asked, incredulously.

“Well, I’m using what is called narrative inquiry. It allows the researcher’s voice to be included ...”

He interrupted me, saying,

“I’ll never use this kind of style in writing an academic paper. Maybe I’m out of fashion or you’re too postmodern. I’m not being offensive, but see, I don’t like the use of conversations in academic studies. It pretty much looks like a story, I mean, fiction. Or is it a biography? You have a lot of descriptions on your own feelings and ...”

He said it sternly, like a teacher, moving his index finger along the lines of his student’s assignment. For a brief moment, I was numb with anger.

¹ The names of the participants, their colleagues, and students are pseudonyms to protect their identity.

"OK, Mr. Michael, it is the reconstruction of meaning, rather than 'truth' that you expect. There is no singular truth of a situation. For each participant, what we know as the 'truth' is contextual and these 'truths' will resonate for others who have similar experience."

I tried hard to keep my cool. Seeing my agitation, Michael relented and said more gently,

"I'm just wondering why you have to choose auto-ethnography, or what you call narrative inquiry. What's the point? Have you ever considered your defense in the committee? I admire your energy and perseverance, but why do you have to dig into your memories to look for resonance?"

I was keen on defending my decision and explained impatiently:

"I think you have to agree with me that memories may be culturally determined, as we construct our memories within a particular context; it is a social construction. By using the narrative methodology, participant teachers are provided with an avenue to recount their experiences in the form of stories. I want to re-present what they have experienced in a readable format. Or perhaps, I just want to get my thesis done and earn my doctoral degree. End of story, Michael."

"Calm down, Christina. I think I got what you meant. You try to dig deeply into somebody's life experiences and then you write down his or her story."

"What I am doing is more complicated than that. It's like combining the typical question-and-answer interviews with my sharing of personal experiences with

the participants. During this process, we also reflect on the process of our communication as I respond to the participants' revelation of their personal details. Of course, I also aim to understand these stories, as you say. I'm sure this will do me good as well ..."

"Of course, if you pass your viva. That's VERY good!"

"That's one thing. The other thing is that I am also telling my own story while I re-present their stories. This will provide an avenue for doing something meaningful for yourself and the world." (Ellis 2004: xviii)

Unknowingly, I was quoting what Ellis (2004) said about auto-ethnography. I was rather shocked by my persistence in defending the method, which was spurred by the criticisms from the people around me. Exhausted, I logged off my computer and decided to go to old Mr. Leung for a massage.

The Revelations of a "Masseuse"

Mr. Leung is a partially blind but experienced masseur. His regular patrons call him Ah Leung, which pleases him, as he considers it a sign of friendship. I visit him from time to time, especially when I am exhausted, when I need to lay my head snugly in the massage bed, close my eyes, and immerse myself in contemplation. Many unresolved issues float up in my mind as a kind of "*continual unfolding in which the narrative insights of today*"

(Clandinin and Connelly 2000: 166) appearing chronologically as events of tomorrow.

The physical comfort I derive from the “therapeutic” massage shares equal billing with the mental reflection it affords me. It is a process through which I seek to construct or reconstruct my other “self.” Such a “movement” *“in direct experience is an alteration in the qualities of objects and space,”* enables me to gain *“an aspect of this qualitative change (Dewey 1934, 1958: 207).”*

Because I was diffident about my work, I aspired for another evolution or “change” at old Ah Leung’s parlor. As I stepped into the room, I was titillated by the scent of flowers that permeated the whole place. I greeted him as usual and rolled onto the bed. I was longing for a spell of rest and tranquility. I felt his fingers begin to knead my back.

“Ah!” I heard myself say, as the massage intensified. I felt myself drifting off.

“How’s your thesis going?” Ah Leung asked. “Your neck is very stiff.”

I gave him a soft sigh, half asleep.

“Are you busy with your interviews?”

I felt my neck tighten. I get irritated when people bombard me with questions about my thesis.

"I have not yet sorted out everything ..."

"So, you need your microphone and recorder, right? I think all I need to get my job done is my hands," Ah Leung interrupted me. "They are the only tools I have."

"I do, but not all the time. Sometimes, we'd just talk about our daily lives. It is the 'phenomenon' that I am more interested in. I treat every meeting we have as a period of storytelling, as we humans are storytellers. We 'lead storied lives' (Clandinin and Connelly 2000: 2) and, therefore, the study of their narratives, I mean their stories, is to analyze how humans experience the world."

"I am curious about how this is done. Do you write a memoir of encounters with your research participants?"

"Right. How am I going to do this? I really don't know for sure. But I do know that we collaborate to construct and re-construct our stories in which we play roles both as storytellers and characters in our stories. Through 'stories lived and told' by us, we make sense of our experience (Clandinin and Connelly 2000: 2). I also develop a good relationship with my research participants."

My voice was muffled, as I was speaking through the face hole in the bed. I took a deep breath and tried my best to speak clearly.

“While reflecting on our stories, I am also seeking to find the impact their stories had on me as a teacher.” (Trahar, 2002)

“So, you have no plan on what you are writing? That’s what I do sometimes. I rely on my instincts.”

“I thought you said that it is your fingers that guide you through the process?”

I was glad to have initiated the sudden “onset.”

“I do rely on my fingers, but I rely more on my experiences in getting my job done. I was taught to start with a patient’s neck and shoulders. But I don’t really follow all the steps in the prescribed sequence. My patients tell me their problems, and I then figure out the best way to help them relax within the given time. I bet yours is different. You are writing serious stuff and you definitely need a PLAN.”

Ah Leung dissected the issue with surgical precision. A visible shudder swept over my body as I felt the chill in my backbone. I was trying hard to remember some of the materials I had read last night. Yes, I had to admit it was a real struggle for me to move away from the linear approach and come up with some kind of “messiness” in writing. Moreover, the protean nature and attitude required in narrative inquirers (Connelly, 2003) perplexed me. However, as the research process went on, I found that the process of explaining my research participants’ stories progressed thematically. I raised my head

a bit to defend myself but quickly decided to duck back into the hole to compose my explanation.

“There is a way to do it. I’ve learned to take ‘field notes.’ Field notes can be descriptive and reflective. Descriptive field notes record the objective part of the data—the stories or the factual verbatim accounts of my friends. Reflective field notes, on the other hand, record my thoughts and perceptions on what I have collected. These subjective notes describe what I think, what my friends mean, and what they likely refer to. These field notes come before the draft of the story and before the plotline is devised.” (Ellis 2004: 117)

I was in the middle of clarifying things when another query landed on me.

“You record teachers’ stories, right? So why don’t you just write a book about yours or the teachers’ memoirs on teaching? Why go through all this trouble? What makes them different?”

Ah Leung would not be dissuaded from asking about my methodology—my weakest link at this moment. I felt pain all over my body and my legs. I rallied my last bit of conviction after the “sharp blow” had hit me.

“Good questions. But my friend, when I’m writing about my friends’ stories, I am also in the ‘field’ at some point. I mean, I don’t just tell the stories; I have to interpret them, too. I also have to understand and hybridize them—like integrating the newly constructed stories of the teachers into stories of myself.”

My enthusiasm for the topic gathered momentum as I continued. I was, in fact, moving to the “how” of my research (Heidegger 1927: 72).

“The aim of my study is to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of daily experiences to the teachers by asking about the experience before they have tried to categorize it. In doing so, I am trying to construct rich interpretive descriptions of the experiences of my participants’ lived time, lived space, lived human relationships, and lived body. So, in my study, I will ask my participants to relate their past experiences when they were learners, their lived experiences as teachers, and their plans for the future. This will allow the teachers to ‘narratively’ understand their experiences in response to changes in the educational context.” (van Manen, 1990)

I felt the tension ease up as I “lectured” Ah Leung. I felt his hand on my sore legs. As my mind began to drift, I heard a distant voice commend my “hard” work.

“Yes, this is exactly what we think about Narrative Inquiry. It is the best way of representing and understanding experience. Experience happens narratively. Narrative inquiry is a form of narrative experience. Therefore, educational experience should be studied narratively” **It was the rationale of Clandinin and Connelly.** (2000: 18-19)

I had been reading their work these past days, and I was not sure where this testimonial came from. I opened my eyes and saw Ah Leung patting my left leg gently.

“Wake up, ma’am. Time’s up. Are you alright?”

"Yeah. I'm sorry, I must have been dreaming just now," I said, embarrassed.

"Indeed you were. You slept like a log."

Ah Leung went out of the room. Alone now, I sat up, trying to recall what I had gone through in the last hour. I turned from side to side and moved my head backward and forward. My animated discussion with Ah Leung had been a dream. Was my "problem" solved? I drank some water and left Ah Leung's parlor. The sunlight was blinding but I did not mind. I was feeling quite relaxed and uplifted.

I heard my inner voice pipe up as I headed for the university library.

"Yes, I'm going to be a social scientist who will write to research and, at the same time, do research while I write. I think I will acquire the initial information from my participants and inform them of my research framework. Before the interview commences, I will encourage them to select pseudonyms for themselves, though we have mutually agreed upon the flower labels assigned to them. I will apply the conventional Chapter One - Introduction, Chapter Two - Literature Review, and Chapter Three - Methodology, but I will wait and see how my lived experiences help me through before I finalize the title for each chapter. Of course, I will have my participants' stories in another chapter, probably Chapter 4. I will also interpret or re-interpret these stories, including mine, in another chapter, according to the themes that emerge from the narratives collected. The concluding chapter of the research will contain the insights gained from the stories collected."

When I arrived at the library, I was eager to find out if the books I requested were available. I finally got Etherington's "Becoming a Reflexive Researcher" (2004). I went home trying to jot down everything I had experienced today in my reflective journal.

Demystifying Dialogic Analysis

I took the bus, as it was before rush hour and I could probably get a seat on the upper deck. There were very few people on the bus and I chose a seat near the window—a rare stroke of luck. I looked down on the street, watching people hurry across streets, chase after buses, and speak as though in pantomime because I could not hear them.

I suddenly recalled what I once read in Clandinin's book. Every person needed to be understood, but they were like the pedestrians on the street: I could not understand them as individuals. Why were they in a hurry? What was the couple talking about? These should all be understood in relationship and in a social context. If anything striking happened or if I were inspired by anything I saw, I would tell my daughter and my students; I might even write it down in my diary. In doing so, I might have interpreted what I had seen and translated it to my audience. These newly created stories do not

simply comprise verbally expressed dialogues, but also emotionally charged meanings subordinated to my interpretation.

I began to see myself talking to my participants in a café. Our encounter, in the form of interviews, would lead into an interactive process, representing a newly established relationship that is constituted dialogically. Riessman (2008) presumes that when we speak, we are like performers; thus, the narratives involved can be analyzed as scenes, positioning them within the greater context of the story. To understand and analyze my participants' stories, I have to consider the context and the concept of time—both the past and the present. Hence, as a researcher using narrative inquiry, I should not merely record the indigenous view of our shared life-world, but also present the interviewer and the interviewee's interactive assessment and response to stories told.

Embarking on a Narrative Journey—Defining My Tools for Analysis

MAKING CONTACT

I believe
The greatest gift
I can conceive of having
from anyone
is
to be seen by them,
heard by them,
to be understood
and touched by them.

The greatest gift
I can give
is
to see, hear, understand
and to touch
another person.
When this is done,
I feel
contact has been made.

~ Virginia Satir ~ (August, 1976: i)

Who is Tending to (Y)our Experiences?

In “Making Contact,” Virginia Satir explains that the greatest gift one can give to others is to see, hear, and understand them. As a storyteller and researcher, I found that the most rewarding moments were those in which my participants and I shared our experiences. I

did wrestle with discomfiture at times. One such occasion was when Michael, my colleague, criticized my style of writing. Another was when I dreamt that Ah Leung, the masseur, had grilled me about my hypothesis, proof, methodology, and so on. The study was a long and arduous journey until I came to Hart (2002), who contends that as a narrative researcher, I am like a storyteller “*seeking meanings that may help us to cope with our circumstances*” (Hart 2002: 155). In order to attend to our experiences, we have to make new meanings out of these espoused experiences. Our historical experience influences the present “self” and projects the new “self” into possibilities in the future. Narrative inquiry, as a methodology, sits within the interpretive research paradigm that seeks to understand subjective experiences by focusing on the stories that recall these lived experiences.

Being the Writer of “Narratives” and “Stories” for My Participants

The terms “narrative” and “story” have been used interchangeably in literature. A story may be seen as the closest a person can come to an experience, as he, she, or others tell it (Clandinin and Connelly, 1994). Stories are also considered a person’s identity derived from his or her culture. The story allows us to construe who we are in terms of “self” and

gives us a sense of unity with common beliefs in terms of culture (Gudmundsdottir, 1991).

In this thesis, the participants' recounted experiences as learners and teachers will be referred to as their "life story" and the research inquiry, the "narrative." My participants tell me their stories, and I, the researcher, describe and interpret these through the writing of their narratives and use of narrative inquiry.

Inspired by Richardson's critique, I came to realize as I began writing my field notes that throughout the research process, analysis and interpretation were intertwined. In hindsight, I also realized that from the very first time I assigned the flower label to represent my participants, my writing had taken shape. While I was tracing and categorizing the data I collected, I was also engaged in reflection, which led me to the use of song images and other metaphors throughout the thesis. All these revealed the way I thought and interpreted my participants' narratives. This reflective process also sparked more insightful interpretations and representations, which drove me to delve further into my experiences. To acknowledge some of the shared narrative themes identified in my ongoing conversations with my participants, I had incorporated discussions of pertinent theoretical insights throughout my thesis rather than separating them into literature review chapters. For the same reason, my comments and discussions were interwoven

throughout the text. In doing so, I deviated from the conventional way of writing, which is focused, problem-centered, linear, and straightforward (Richardson, 1994).

I was also influenced by Richardson's notion of using sociological analytic writing—"the collective story," which "gives voice to those who are silenced or marginalized" (Richardson 1997: 22). According to her, the collective story not only speaks of the storytellers' past, but is also about their future and social change.

By emotionally binding people together who have had the same experience ... the collective story overcomes some of the isolation and alienation of contemporary life. It provides a sociological community, the linking of separate individuals into a shared consciousness. Once linked, the possibility for social action on behalf of the collective is present, and therewith, the possibility of societal transformation (Richardson 1997: 33).

As I was gathering field notes, my participants and I were drawn closer to each other by our stories—the lived experiences. The process of sharing our lived stories triggered the conscious experiences and the multiple selves inside. This tended and refined the tangled and unspeakable experiences.

Embarking on the Narrative Journey—Rationale for Narrative Inquiry

According to Silverman (2001), quantitative and qualitative research methods have their advantages and disadvantages. The value of a research method, however, should be judged in relation to what it aims to find out. This study intends to find out how teachers' perceptions of their professional identity have been constructed or reconstructed in the era of education reform, in which professional development activities are highly recommended. Since perceptions are concerned with the values and beliefs they hold in their daily experiences, adopting a quantitative approach may not lead to an in-depth understanding of teachers' motives and actions. The key research questions in this study (such as "What impact do policy changes in education have on teachers' perceived professional identity?" and "To what extent has the experience/engagement of the professional development program changed teachers' professional identity?") focus on the participants' life experiences and the meanings they draw from them. The qualitative narrative approach, being "*a set of interpretive material practices that make the world visible ... (and employ practices that) transform the world*" (Denzin and Lincoln 2003: 4), helps bring together divergent views and create new understanding and insights in teachers' changing lives every day.

The Narrative Inquiry Approach and Research Process

One way of describing narrative inquiry can be described as a methodology based upon collecting, analyzing, and re-presenting people's stories as told by them. (Etherington 2004: 75)

Narrative inquiry is a systemic approach that seeks to understand subjective experiences by focusing on the stories that recall these experiences. As a methodology, it is nested within the interpretive research paradigm, which honors subjectivity and reflexivity.

While I was revealing and re-presenting personal experiences, I was also giving others the opportunity to understand how the events were experienced. With this approach, I would be able to explore a particular time and focus on finding meaning about a specific issue—the education reform context in Hong Kong. With interpretive research, I would be able to produce thick and rich accounts that reveal my participant teachers' experiences and extend our understanding of the issue discussed.

To begin my narrative research, I adopted the approach proposed by Clandinin and Connelly (1994). I defined narrative inquiry as an approach that involves a transition between three sets of questions—from field experience to field texts, field texts to research texts, and finally, research texts to the research account. I took down notes and

kept journal entries, and expanded them for discussion with my research subjects whenever I had any queries. Selected entries became my field texts, which also served as my basis for investigating my own issues. The key features of the authentic and discursive learning generated by the analytical process can be elaborated on and become the cornerstone of ongoing changes and research improvements. In such cases, narrative is viewed not only as a method for research, but as a key principle of learning and self-improvement as well.

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) also claim that the narrative research approach is both the phenomenon and the method characterized by three underpinnings or claims. When teachers or research subjects tell their stories, they are neither isolated from nor independent of their context. On the contrary, they are trying to connect their experiences (stories) to their social, cultural, and institutional setting (Wertsch, 1991). In the literature on the narrative research approach, three bases or claims are found (Moen, 2006).

(The first claim is that) **human beings organize their experiences of the world into narratives. Second, narrative researchers maintain that the stories that are told depend on the individual's past and present experiences, her or his values, the people the stories are being told to, the addressees, and when and where they are being told. The third claim ... concerns the multivoicedness that occurs in the narratives** (Moen 2006: 5-6).

Following this line of thought, I have at least three reasons for choosing narrative inquiry in my research. Firstly, the researcher is able to capture complex human experiences through the narratives of the research subjects in various social gatherings, and unfold the process by which individuals assign meaning to these experiences through the stories they tell. Besides, having developed a degree of friendship over more than ten years, my participants and I tell and retell our stories both for ourselves and others in various academic and social contexts. This also implies that the perspectives we employ in our storytelling constantly change, as we gain new experiences from various dialogues with other people. This “insider’s” view of the cultures in which these stories are told (Polkinghorne, 1995) is valuable to me as a narrative inquirer, especially when the stories are relevant to my teaching career. Teachers’ experiences of the world are continuously being constructed and reconstructed, transmitted as authentic and personal small narratives (Heikkinen, 2002). This matches Moen’s second claim that the reality is not static and is dependent on the individual’s past and present experiences. Being the researcher, I am able to make sense of the narratives in terms of my life experiences and background (Bruner, 1984), since the participants and I are related in various situations. There is a common ground for both parties to generate authentic dialogues and experience sharing—the third reason I chose this approach.

As the narrative approach is situated within the qualitative or interpretive method (Gudmundsdottir, 2001), I am also able to sustain interactions between the individual's beliefs and experiences from the past and present, and future external voices. The process of claiming a multitude of voices also helps me reflect on past experiences by connecting them to various social contexts. Above all, I have become a theorizer: Instead of looking for an answer, the theorizer rethinks what he/she has taken for granted in the inquiry. This process allows me to step back, describe, reflect, and analyze, and spurs me to inquire further and reinterpret their way of knowing. An inquiry into their experience enables me to actualize my way of knowing, which helps sustain the process of professional development throughout my career.

The suggestions of Moen (2006) on the collaborative nature of the researchers and the research subjects also summarize my intention to opt for the narrative approach. She states that one of the main characteristics of the narrative research process is "*the collaboration process between the researcher and her or his research subjects*" (Moen 2006: 6). She regards the participants as *research subjects* and *collaborators* rather than informants—the traditional term. She also claims that the three main issues to be addressed in doing narrative research are "*the relationship between the researcher and*

her or his research subjects, ... how a narrative is developed from an experienced and orally told story into a written text and ... the hermeneutic or interpretive nature of narrative research" (Moen 2006: 6). In this case, the collaborative, dialogic nature of the relationship between the researcher and his/her subjects should be well developed. A nonjudgmental attitude (Fetterman, 1998) and equality among participants are crucial in narrative inquiry. Moen further suggests that the ideal in this case is that the researcher and the subjects reach a joint intersubjective understanding of the narratives that occur during the research process (Clandinin and Connelly, 1990). All these criteria comprise the backdrop of my study, as my relationship with the research subjects is beyond question. The only issue may be in the validity and the credibility of the narratives recorded. This will be dealt with in the following section in this chapter that discusses the limitations of the study.

Furthermore, I aim at bringing to the fore my personal experiences and the intensity of the teachers' reflections in order to better understand the essence of their identity transformation. Thus, a narrative approach fits the purpose. According to Moen (2006), using a narrative is one of the best ways to structure people's experiences and dialogic interactions with the surrounding world and others. In doing so, teachers, like other

storytellers, create narrative descriptions about their experiences and make sense of the behavior of others (Zellermayer, 1997).

I also perceive that as a research approach, narrative inquiry combines theoretical reflection, data gathering, and analysis. “*What distinguishes narrative as a mode of inquiry is that it is both the process—a narrator/participant **telling** or **narrating**—and the product—the **story** or **narrative** told*” ([emphasis in original] Kramp 2004: XX). I also agree with Conle’s idea that narrative inquiry suggests “*the interdependence of content and form, of product and process, of ends and means*” (Conle, 2000b: 192). Following this line, Bruner (1991: 20) points out the need for narratives—“*The human mind cannot express its nascent powers without the enablement of the symbolic systems of culture.*” Narratives are part of the symbolic systems of culture. Like many others who are doing narrative work, I will review both oral and written stories told by individuals within their cultural contexts. I will also look for data in the individual signs and culturally shared tools that are, in fact, part of the process of constructing narratives.

Limitations—Ethical Issues to Be Considered

... traditional notions of reliability simply do not apply to narrative studies, and validity must be radically reconceptualised (Riessman, 1993: 65).

Validity

Interviews are a narrative inquiry's main source of data, and they help elicit stories. However, according to Mishler (1986), "*Treating responses as stories opens up many complex analytic problems, and, of course, it represents only one of a number of approaches to issues of meaning*" (Mishler, 1986: 67). In narrative work, the interview process itself calls on participants to make sense and create meaning from their experiences. Mishler (1986) sees interviewing as a "*form of discourse between speakers*" and argues that "*ordinary language competence shared by investigators and respondents is a critical but unrecognized precondition for effective research practice*" (Mishler, 1986: 7). In an interview, the "*meanings of questions and responses are contextually grounded and jointly constructed by interviewer and respondent*" (Mishler, 1986: 33-34). The co-construction that occurs during the interview makes it crucial that I remain constantly reflective on my role in the construction of the narratives. Even the co-construction of the questions is negotiated once the interview is in process. The

ambiguity and complexity of language in a question are not the only things affecting the response. In fact, Mishler asserts that the way in which “*interviewers and respondents attempt to ‘fit’ their questions and responses to each other and to the developing discourse*” helps resolve any ambiguities in the questions, whether they are simple or complex (Mishler, 1986: 47).

The co-constructed nature of interviewing and the analysis is a vital aspect of the narrative inquiry process. Narrative inquiry research is an exploration for both the researcher and the participants. As the stories are told, the meanings are put together by the interviewer (myself) and the interviewee through the interaction within the interview setting. Further interpretation occurs in the analytical and representation processes. “*Regardless of the type of narrative inquiry undertaken, the current critique calls attention to the researcher’s presence and why it must be taken into account from the start*” (Alvermann, 2000: 8). However, Clandinin and Connelly (1994) warn that “*when we become characters in their stories, we change their stories*” (Clandinin and Connelly, 1994: 422). So when we, as researchers, are presenting our participants’ stories, we must consider “*how our research texts shape their lives*” (ibid. 1994: 422) in representing their stories.

Language Issue

Another area that had to be tackled was the language employed in the field notes. Initially, I had a little difficulty figuring things out. Qualitative research is different from quantitative research in that it seeks to represent the diverse perspectives of participants' experiences through a variety of approaches and methods (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Flick, 1998). In addition, qualitative research supports a "*research paradigm in which the subject is also co-researcher, being actively and openly involved,*" bringing along his or her own worldviews, paradigms, or set of beliefs (Reason and Rowan, 1981: 20).

Being non-native speakers of English, my research participants and I conversed in Cantonese, the spoken language of Hong Kong teachers. Thus, maintaining accuracy in representing teachers' views and perspectives in English is challenging. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the language we speak is not the same as the written form of the Chinese language. In other words, when I was listening to my participants' narratives, I responded in Cantonese, but when I recorded my field notes and wrote my analysis in my journal, I used English. Thus, while reviewing what I had written in my journal, I had to modify phrases and turn to other vocabularies to better represent the narrators' intended meanings. The process of redrafting and revisiting the field notes

often started another cycle of member check—inquiring of my participants if I had represented their meanings accurately. Furthermore, in eliciting meaning from what I recorded, I have to deal with meanings and discourses to come up with precise and valid translations (Jootun, McGhee, and Marland, 2009).

Did I change what happened in their stories? Yes, I did change the words, and I might have altered the stories, but I retained what I believed to be the gist of their stories. What may have changed is the way the stories were presented. The conflicting language issue seems to be problematic, yet it was worth taking the trouble because it helped refine my analysis. Besides, the participating teachers also found the process useful. They tended to listen objectively to the stories they recorded and become more reflective throughout the process. Often, they would remark on what they had said from a new perspective, which they claimed to be very thought-provoking.

Trustworthiness

Unlike quantitative research, a qualitative research does not have any charts and numbers to validate itself. Mishler (1990) claims that our *“social worlds are endlessly being remade as norms and practices change, it is clear that judgments of trustworthiness may*

change with time, even when addressed to the 'same' findings" (1990: 420). So rather than generalizing findings for all participant teachers or for all educational contexts, I focus on whether my re-presentations make sense to my participants. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that in order to gain credibility of a study, rigorous research methods including prolonged engagement with participants, persistent observation and member checking should be conducted.

Besides credibility, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest providing "*the data base that makes transferability judgments possible*" (1985: 318). As a researcher, my responsibility is to produce thick and sufficient descriptions that allow readers or other researchers to make sense of my interpretations. In this research, for example, it is made possible as co-construction is found throughout the inquiry with both the researcher and participant teachers' strong interaction throughout the research process. I also attempted to give accounts on the changes in the educational policies in Hong Kong owing to some of the political changes Hong Kong experienced in the past. This, hopefully, will stop me, as a narrator, from taking over dominance in your interpretation of our narratives, our experiences.

Another challenge I encountered in doing this research rests on participant teachers' willingness in confiding their stories to me. Since I came to know these teachers in an educational context when we were all participants of a refresher course, we had no idea about one another's qualifications or teaching experiences. Some were quite hesitant in relating their stories especially since most of the interviews touched on some sensitive issues about their serving school and their previous experiences. Thus I had to be meticulous when I was doing the interview, trying to embrace my 'participant values' (Guba & Lincoln, 1994: 115) and sharing my own experiences with them. The following sections record my line of thought in dealing with these restraints.

Lending an Ear to Our Stories—Listening to Whispers in the Sounds of Silence

I AM ME

... I own everything about me ---

my body, including everything it does;

my mind, including all its thoughts and ideas;

my eyes, including the images of all they behold;

my feelings, whatever they may be ---

anger,

joy,

frustration,

love,

disappointment,

excitement;

my mouth, and all the words that come out of it,

polite,

sweet or rough,

correct or incorrect;

my voice, loud or soft;

and all my actions, whether they be to others or to myself.

I own my fantasies, my dreams, my hopes, my fears.

I own all my triumphs and successes,

all my failures and mistakes ...

~ Virginia Satir ~ (August, 1976: 7-8)

Collecting Stories...

As indicated in an earlier section of this chapter, the purpose of this study is to examine how teachers negotiate their identities in the era of educational reforms. The data analysis and interpretations were not only guided by my research questions, but there was also a need for a methodological approach which could explore the intricate nature of teachers' professional identities over a prolonged period of time. Informed by the literature on teacher professional identity, I started to approach teachers whom I encountered in the refresher course. The teachers who consented to participate in the study varied in age and teaching experiences. This kind of purposeful sampling allowed me to focus on the professional development courses these teachers had taken and the differences in their teaching experiences. The data were obtained in 2008 and 2009 by open - ended narrative interviews with the individual teachers to collect both their stories about their teaching experience and their broader life histories. This served to seek a better understanding of teachers' stories "*located within the socio-historical context of Hong Kong*" (Tang & Choi, 2009). The interviews covered, for example, their pre-teaching experiences, their professional development and future expectations concerning their work. Some policy documents concerning educational reforms and teachers' development were examined so as to grasp a better picture of teachers' professional lives in relation to the teaching

context. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for later analysis. The data were analysed applying thematic analysis (Patton, 2002), focusing on teachers' perceptions and experiences on different elements concerning their identities. Owing to the amount of data collected each time as some of the interviews lasted for over two hours, I also looked for patterns and common elements that recurred across different interviews. Together with the collaborative and dialogic interactions between us, I was able to note down and interpret what was heard and observed with better understanding.

In this study, I also wanted to examine how my "self" and the participants' "selves" would construct and reconstruct our professional identities in a critical context, wherein the pendulum of government policies has swung against teachers. It is also a time in which Hong Kong's education sector is undergoing unprecedented changes in its curriculum. I attempted to untangle this knotty situation by studying my past experiences. In doing so, I delved into my personal practical knowledge (Connelly and Clandinin, 1985) and the role of human experiences in acquiring conceptual knowledge of oneself throughout my learning and teaching process. While I was reliving my experiences and researching this puzzle, I was also doing a narrative inquiry with four other English teachers, lending an ear to their voices or "whispers" as I tinkered with similar puzzles in their lives.

***So close to each other in nature, yet so far from each other through experience.
(Confucius, *Analects*, Book 17, Chapter 2)***

子曰：「性相近也，習相遠也。」 《孔子》·《論語·陽貨·第十七章·第二句》

The four participants in my study were English teachers in secondary schools in Hong Kong. My interaction with them began when we enrolled in the same English Language Refresher Course organized by the Hong Kong Institute of Education (**IED**). Inspired by the work of Clandinin and Connelly (2000), I was convinced that making inquiries into teachers' narratives was a good starting point in understanding the teachers' experiences. Stories collected in unstructured interviews would produce rich and indeterminate recounts of our experiences, which could be used to study how we construct our professional identities. I have used metaphors to better represent my interpretations of their stories, as well as their original meanings. These four participating teachers are compared to the "Four Gentlemen" in China, who are represented by different flowers: peach blossoms, orchids, chrysanthemums, and bamboos. The metaphorical representation using flowers came about as we found ourselves sharing similar teaching beliefs when we first met in the refresher course. Since we are all females, we jokingly called ourselves the "Golden Flowers" (which was, in fact, a lady's band years ago).

As I searched for the representational metaphor for my participants, I came to realize how our past shaped our being and engagement with others. This also formed our present practice and would affect our future. These related stories were inextricably intertwined in our lives as learners and teachers. From these co-constructed stories came the possibility for us to create space for new links to compose new “stories to live by”—the narrative term for identity construction (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Connelly and Clandinin 1999).

While listening to my participants’ conversations and reflections, I found various threads of continuity that weaved through our teaching lives. I was also drawn to significant past experiences that I tried to link with my current practice. In selecting key stories from individual biographies, I tried to shape the research text in a manner that would best depict their ideas and professional development. The narratives introduce the lives and personalities of my participants, who shared their memories, experiences, fears, and hopes in their careers. Within stories retold, these teachers portrayed the construction and reconstruction processes of teacher identity, and their pursuit of professional knowledge. In the chapters that follow, I present an organized overview of each participant’s early family background, school experiences, and resilience to the current education reforms. I

also use metaphors and quote verbatim from scholars to better represent my interpretation of their recollections and teaching beliefs.

Part II

Lending An Ear To Teachers' Stories:

Listening To Whispers In The Sounds Of Silence

Chapter Four	Mei's Story
Chapter Five	Lan's Story
Chapter Six	Kuk's Story
Chapter Seven	Cheuk's Story

Chapter Four

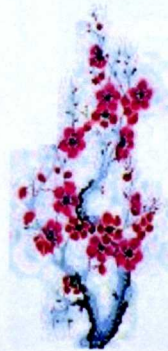
Mei's Story

High on the Rocky Terrain Confronting Blusterous Tempest and Sleet With Zest and Felicity As Plum Blossom in Winter

Reflections on the Plum Blossom

Since the Song dynasty (960-1279), the Plum Blossom, Bamboo and Pine, have been considered the “*Three Friends of Winter*” because they remain green in the cold season, when most other plants are dormant. Chinese culture attaches many symbolic meanings to the Plum Blossom. Because the tree bursts forth with flowers at the end of the year—a time when other flowers wilt—the Plum Blossom is a symbol of winter. It also epitomizes courage, hope, and the indomitable character of the Chinese, as it stays strong throughout the severe winter frost, all the way to spring. The flower is also admired because it thrives on leafless, seemingly lifeless branches.

In this chapter, Mei recounts some of her toughest times in teaching, and how she lived through them with enthusiasm. Her strong personality and tenacity in her beliefs resemble the resiliency and courage of the Plum Blossom.

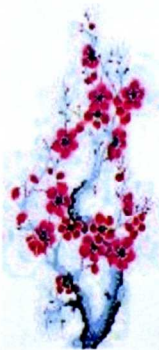


Mei as a Person

Mei is an experienced secondary teacher of the English language. She started teaching in Tai O, Lantau Island, one of Hong Kong's outlying islands. I find it hard to believe that someone would be willing to commute from urban Kowloon to rural Tai O every day. She is now teaching at her fourth school in suburban Kowloon, which is still far away from the hub of the city. Mei had always acted as the group leader during our Refresher Course of English, liaising on every project and presentation.

Before I invited Mei to participate in my inquiry, we had met for some kind of professional sharing. We talked about my studies, and to my surprise, without any prompting, she was sharing her stories in teaching and her thoughts on being a teacher while educational reform sweeps Hong Kong. Her narratives were full of metaphors and interesting ideas.

Owing to our friendship, Mei agreed to participate in my research without hesitation. I then emphasized that we would collaboratively tell our stories so that we may learn from one another. I conducted two interviews with her, each lasting over two hours. It was wonderful to have Mei in my journey of inquiry. I have also included my voice in



response to her moving narratives in a different font so as to share my experiences and comment on her stories.

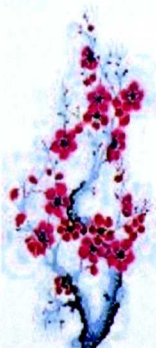
Mei's Past Experiences and Teaching Beliefs

In the first interview, we talked about our experiences as learners. According to Mei, she was very diligent in her youth, adding that she became a bit naughty as she got older. She was the eldest daughter, and had two sisters and one brother. Mei described the pressure of her parents' growing expectations, pretty much like my case. Being the eldest daughter as well, I strove for excellence because my parents said I should be a good role model for my younger sisters. However, Mei's story differed from mine with regard to the cause of the pressure.

"My parents were keen on looking after my studies. They sent me to tutorial schools, hoping I could attend university after my AL examinations. I understand that it was quite a financial burden to them, so I worked very hard, trying not to disappoint them."

Mei as a Conscientious Learner

Mei said she did very well at school, always landing in the top ten of her class. She and her parents thought she would do well in the public examinations. She dreamed of being



admitted into the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Yet, it seemed that to her mother, Mei's excellence in school was not enough.

“Though my parents were not well-educated, they knew that only education could boost me to the top. ... My mom even hired private tutors. She once spanked me for being unable to solve a very difficult mathematical question from my tutor. I was so upset that day, I cried my eyes out. Later, I found that my legs and arms were covered with bruises.”

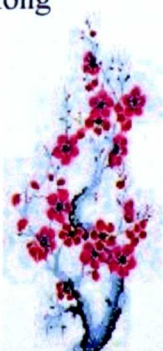
“Luckily, my mom did not do this to me even though I failed in the mathematics test. But I am sure your mom felt bad after having done that to you.”

“After this incident, I became reticent in school, especially when it came to answering questions. That explains why my report card described me as a quiet, industrious student. It was not until secondary school that I started to become more outspoken. I had come to realize that to appease my mom, I had to produce good academic results through hard work.”

Mei's story about her early schooling showed the key role education played at that time.

Parents always hoped that their children would work hard and get good marks in school.

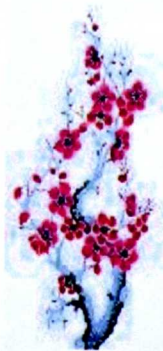
In the 1970s, there were only two universities to choose from: The University of Hong



Kong and The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Thus, graduates of secondary school had a tough time gaining admission into either. The other existing institutions were not granted full university status until the 1990s: The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, The Hong Kong Baptist University, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, and The City University of Hong Kong (mid-1990s); The Open University of Hong Kong (1997); and Lingnan University (1999).

While listening to Mei, I was able to give meaning and coherence to my experience (Bruner, 1990) when I was a student. It also helped me construct my knowledge, including my sense of self or identity (McAdams, 1993; Miller, et al., 1994) as I recalled my days in secondary school. Also, the reaction of Mei's mother to her unsatisfactory performance summoned my own unhappy memories, though these were in stark contrast to hers.

-
- When I was a 14-year-old at F.1, I was doing my revision late into the night. A little before midnight, my father came home in a very sour mood for having lost in mah-jongg. He lost his temper when he saw me, as I was supposed to be asleep. He overturned my table filled with textbooks and homework, ranting that it was useless for girls to study. In fact, he had been nagging at my mom for

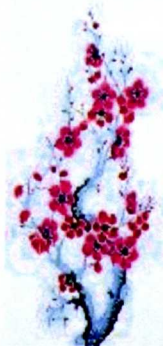


allowing us to continue with our studies. Our uncles' children started working in factories after graduating from primary school—when they were about 14 years old. I was scared that I would no longer be allowed to study. My dream was to finish at least my F.5 studies. That incident is probably why I pursued higher education even after I had got my qualifications for teaching. I finished two degrees within six years. I have always remained serious about my studies. That night, I sobbed quietly while my mom tried to pacify him. I felt bitter whenever I thought of this. It was Mei who brought this memory to the surface, after I had kept it buried deep down for so many years. It was also at this moment that the event became “meaningful because of its (their) placement in a narrative” (Riessman 1993: 18). By meaningful, I mean that I am able to connect this event with what subsequently happened, including my struggle to further my part-time studies and how I cherished each opportunity to study. I have discussed this incident with my sisters, mom, and even my daughter, but I have never been able to “stitch” this and other incidents or memories into a meaningful episode. (Reflective Journal)

.....

Mei's First Teaching Experience: Being a Premature Teacher

In my first interview, I also asked if Mei remembered any incident that influenced her feelings about being a teacher. Mei paused, sipping her coffee as if she were savoring each of her life's snapshots. It happened in her last year at secondary school, she said. She



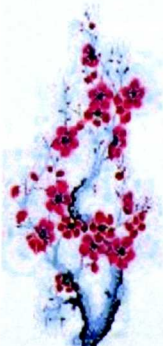
had thought of becoming a lawyer, but to her and her family's dismay, the results of her Advanced Level Examination results failed to get her admitted to the university.

"It was indeed the turning point of my life. ... My parents and my relatives were astounded to hear of my failure ..."

"You had other options, though you may have been at a loss initially. I turned to my teacher for advice after my certificate examinations results were disclosed. I am glad I talked to her before I made a decision."

I interrupted her to clarify things. I asked whether she had considered other choices. Mei said she was too nervous and flustered at that moment, and regretted it.

"I chose a short cut. I applied for the College of Education so I could finish my studies within two years. ... I tried to reassure myself that after saving up enough money for some years, I could continue with my studies. I saw this as a win-win situation, so I applied to study in the Sir Robert Black College of Education."

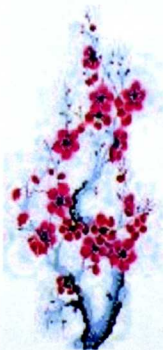


Mei explained why she turned to the college of education even though she was confident of doing better in a second attempt at the A-Level Examinations. She recounted how she discovered her hidden talent—teaching.

“After my AL examinations, one of my teachers recommended me to teach in an evening school. Because I was top of my class, I was deemed capable of teaching. ... When I first entered the classroom, everybody thought that I was one of the students. When I moved to the teacher’s desk, they were shocked to realize that I was their English teacher.”

“Were you scared in your first lesson? I had a similar experience when I taught in an evening school, but I was already teaching in the morning then.”

“I freaked out, but since many of them were of my age, we soon mingled well. After a few days, I found that the students were very respectful. They had very simple goals—to complete their Form Five and obtain a certificate. I was moved by them and it was a rewarding experience. ... I also worked as a private tutor for junior form students. But I didn’t want to earn “easy money.” One time, I told the mother of my student that I was quitting my job because her son relied too much on me. The nine-year-old boy did not do any work before I arrived. He expected me to help him with all kinds of assignments. I believed that by staying on, I would be spoiling him, so I resigned from my tutoring. ... I have to thank God for giving me these

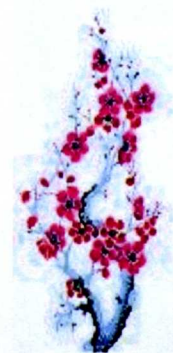


opportunities to take up teaching in various contexts. I had no intention in becoming a teacher in the first place; thus, these initial teaching experiences were really useful to me.”

Mei’s early teaching experiences in various contexts showed her she was fit to become a teacher, but what happened later in the college was an eye-opener.

Mei’s narrations evoked memories of my first interview in Northcote College of Education and how I ended up in the teaching field. Unlike Mei, who was glad to have been given an interview in the college of education, I was reluctant to take up teacher training. I recorded the differences in our teaching journey in my reflective journal.

-
- I was only 17 years old when I finished Form Five. When I received a letter from the college of education asking me to come for an interview, I rummaged through all my closets, looking for a decent dress to wear. Seeing that I did not look mature enough to be “credible” as a teacher, my mom bought me a dress and a pair of ladies’ shoes. I received the acceptance letter a few months later. My mom insisted that I apply for accommodation in the hostel. At that time, the hostel at Northcote College of Education was located on Sassoon Road in Pok Fu Lam, at the western end of the Southern District in Hong Kong Island. The area is associated with affluence. My mom said this would be a great opportunity for me



to broaden my horizon because I was a teacher-to-be. To her, a teacher should be a Miss Know-All. That is why being a teacher is a respectable career.
(Reflective Journal)

A Prelude to Her Profession

Unlike me, Mei thought that life unfolded as part of God's plan, as she had become a Christian in the college of education. Mei was content with her performance and considered it the turning point of her life. She was a bit unsure, though, whether she would make a good teacher. I remarked that she was levelheaded and made rational choices, but Mei said I had not yet seen her other side. She discovered it while training to be a teacher.

Being Kindled at the College of Education

It took Mei quite a long time to collect her confused thoughts about studying in the college of education.

"I was not sure I really wanted teaching to be my life-long career. At that time, many people held the view that a person only entered the college of education if he or she did not qualify for a university. I soon found myself doing quite well. I started taking part in drama productions and even

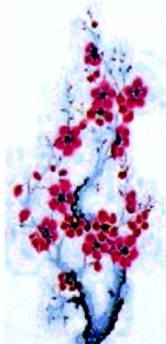


became the Chairperson of the Student Union. With my confidence bolstered, I started enjoying college life. In doing drama, I gained a better image of myself: Whereas in the past, I was uncompromising and rigid, I learned to be more resilient and forgiving. After taking up various roles in drama productions, I learned to put myself into the shoes of others, including the crewmembers in various sections, such as lighting, sound effects, and props. Cooperating and compromising with others were crucial to a good performance.”

“I think this is the real ‘Mei’ I came to know in the refresher course. You are always full of confidence. You ...”

Mei cut in earnestly, saying that though she did not know Christ at that time, she felt in retrospect that God had given her the strength to readily accept what was granted to her.

“While studying, I was glad to discover that I had begun to fall in love with teaching. It was not the dull and monotonous job I had in mind before. I became aware that I liked it better by the day. The sense of mission took root and grew in me. Through my teaching practice and the activities I organized for the Student Union, I realized that learning didn’t take place in classrooms alone. There were many other sources where one could learn. This has affected me greatly as a teacher and mother of two. In college, I also learned to be a righteous person, never mind whether people still



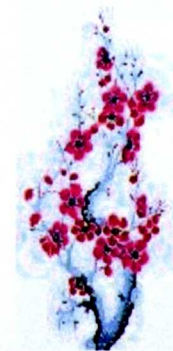
consider graduates from the college of education as belonging to the low-end group of teachers.”

I nodded thoughtfully, as my thoughts drifted back to the time my principal commented on my status as a Graduate Mistress. He was once disdainful of my first degree because I did not attain it in any of the universities in Hong Kong. He then concluded that even if I qualified for English Panel Head in the school, it would be difficult for him to convince others to promote me to that position. I was dumbfounded. I wanted to argue that my master’s degree came from a university in Hong Kong, but my moral rectitude restrained me. My aim was to become a teacher—a well-respected teacher. How many of the numerous graduates from the college of education would feel embarrassed about being college graduates? How many of them have been unfairly hindered from promotion? I still wonder...

Fighting for One’s Beliefs

As I was recalling some of my experiences, Mei leaned forward and talked animatedly.

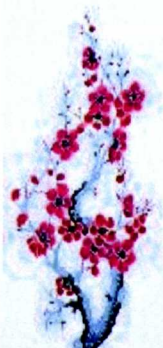
“I was lucky to come to know a group of good companions working as a team in the Student Union. We believed that graduates from colleges of



education should be granted the same appreciation given to graduates from Hong Kong universities. At that time, university graduates donned graduation gowns for the ceremony, but graduates from the college of education did not. We felt we deserved official recognition from the government even though we only received a certificate. Since we were professionally trained to be teachers, we deserved to have graduation gowns on our 'big' day. As Chairperson of the Student Union, I wrote our principal about our demands. It was a long haul and sometimes we thought of giving up. But with determination and cooperation, we succeeded. Starting from our batch, graduates had the 'right' to wear graduation gowns."

"It's a pity I graduated before this happened. I also thought it unfair to be made to graduate without a graduation gown."

"But it was difficult to alter people's perceptions of graduates from colleges of education. To this day, teacher training at the Institute of Education is still considered a last resort for students who fail to qualify for a degree course in a university. I have tried to convince my students to think otherwise. You know, this is a paradox. Education aims to provide quality teaching for students, but the best or more proficient candidates are often not enticed to join. Those who want to become teachers seem to be 'outcasts.' Worst of all, people generally do not respect teachers from the IEd. Those who graduate from the university could easily go into teaching if they can't land a good job. All they need to do is take The Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE),



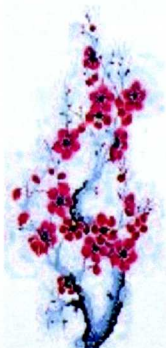
which they can complete in one year if they study full-time or in two years, part-time. In contrast, we were trained for two to three years, during which we also had to undergo several modules of teaching practicum.”

“You’ve a point, Mei, but in my school, some teachers have actually worked in other sectors before taking up teaching.”

“That happened to me as well. I was very tired after teaching in Tai O for a year, so I went to another girls’ school that is well received by parents. After another year, I again quit to help my friend with his business. Within a few months, though, I realized that the world of business was not for me. ... This was a very valuable experience. I could not have seen the differences between teaching and other careers if I had stayed put in the teaching community. Now, I have no regrets. I am sure that I love teaching more than anything else. I am proud to say that I have chosen my dream job!”

Mei said that talking of her memories helped release some of her pent-up sufferings.

Through the narrative process, she sought “to collect data to describe ... lives” (Marshall & Rossman 1995: 86), and the process also enabled her to restore and reconstruct her life in a meaningful manner (Richmond, 2002). Mei recalled several other incidents about her early teaching career. One was so significant to her that she insisted I highlight it in my dissertation.



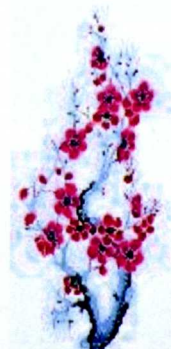
A Bird without Wings in the Era of Education Reform

Mei emptied her coffee cup, leaned back with a sigh, and asked:

“Would you be content with what you’ve got at the college? I was always thinking that I was like a bird without wings, unable to fly high like the other ‘birds’ in the sky, that is, teachers with a degree. It was a painful experience. My husband comforted me and said, half-jokingly, that he would support my studies overseas. ... That was in 1993. I went to Norwich in England for one year, where I studied education, majoring in TESOL. After I returned from England, I started teaching in this school, which is my fourth school.”

Mei’s eyes blinked back tears, saying that she never thought she would get the chance to study abroad.

“I thank God for paving this career path for me, though it is a bit winding. Before I went to England, I had no idea about the benchmark examination for teachers of English in Hong Kong, which was one of the initiatives to be launched in educational reform. When I returned to Hong Kong, I learned that I was exempted from the examination. At that time, all my colleagues and friends who were teaching English were under severe pressure to pass the examination. How ironic it would be if the teachers of English failed the English Benchmark Examination. How would they face their students if it



happened? This was the biggest joke the Education Bureau had ever played on teachers. I was also lucky to have met all of you ‘beauties’ in the Refresher Course.”

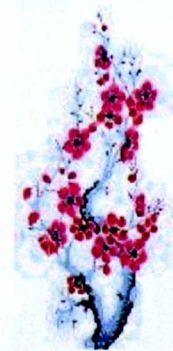
Yes, it is my belief that destiny puts us together. These “beauties” whom I met in my professional journey have inspired me a lot. They shared their teaching philosophy and experiences with me and encouraged me to chase my dream, to keep going when I was lost and unsure of my future. To me, they are like beautiful flowers lining my path. The “scent of flowers” has enlivened some of my boring times and lifted my spirits, especially when I needed encouragement.

Envisioning Her Future—A Fantasy or Illusion?

Teaching with Her Heart

In our second interview, Mei and I talked mostly about our teaching experiences, although she began with some of the precious moments she had with her family. She added that she treated her students as if they were her children.

“Many years ago, Andy, one of my students, told me that his girlfriend was pregnant. He was about 15 or 16 years old then. He asked me for advice, saying I was the only one he could trust. Guided by my maternal instinct, I



told him to inform the girl's parents and his parents immediately. ... Later, he went to the US to study. After graduating from university, he married that girl with whom he had a relationship earlier ... Whenever he is in Hong Kong, he and his wife and daughter pay me a visit. Sometimes, I do feel that I am my students' 'mother' and that I have the responsibility to guide and help them when they need me. ... From my students, I learn how to handle my own children. I feel so much pity for those of my students who don't have anyone to share their problems with."

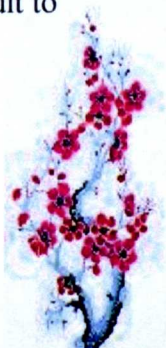
Is there anyone so wise as to learn by the experience of others? (Voltaire)

I totally agree with Mei. We learn not only from our own experiences, but also from what others have experienced. With regard to teaching, Mei tried to swing me to her beliefs. She advised me to take care of my health. She said I should not go on with any academic or serious studies; instead, I ought to spend more time enjoying my family. We differ in this aspect, but I understand why her perspective is such.

Learning without thought is labor lost; thought without learning is perilous. (Confucius, *Analects*, Book 2, Chapter 15)

子曰：「學而不思則罔、思而不學則殆。」《孔子》、《論語·為政、第二章、第十五句》

Mei supports learning without pressure, though we both agree that it would be difficult to



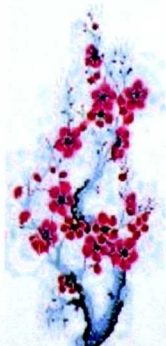
achieve this. It would be much easier to teach our students to learn with the right attitude. What about teachers? In the midst of the educational reform in Hong Kong, teachers are urged to progress along with the initiatives. However, they are overwhelmed by the magnitude of educational reform. Many call it a beast that devours the teachers' time and identity. How did Mei respond to this "theory"?

"I definitely agree with the views of Kuk (another participant) on further studies. I didn't want any professional studies after my first and the degree I got from England because I don't want to be 'fluky.' I want to be really serious about my studies. I have been passing on my philosophy for learning to my children and students. ... However, at this moment, I have too many roles to play. I have to be a responsible mother and housewife, and a genuine teacher to my students. How will I be able squeeze in further studies?"

Committing yourself is a way of finding out who you are. A man finds his identity by identifying. (Author Unknown)

I sensed frustration in Mei's voice. Was she caught in a dilemma?

"I feel apologetic to my students for not performing my duties well, which is why I don't want to be promoted to a senior position. I am fully committed to my existing roles now, and cannot take on any extra duties or professional

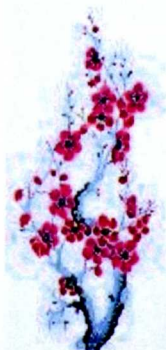


development courses run by the Education Bureau. In pursuing further studies, you have to submit a long composition at the end of the course. In-between, you are given tons of homework. I don't find that advantageous to my students or me; I'd rather spend my time preparing my lessons. I only attend courses to keep abreast of developments in the curriculum."

"So, you are afraid of handing in assignments?"

"I just think that it's not worth the effort. ... I am confident about my teaching in view of my experience, as I have been teaching Form Five for many years now. To have to shift to another syllabus is unbelievable! These officials or educators out there never understand how much work a language teacher has. We barely have time to prepare our lessons due to administrative work. I feel so exhausted. ... (pause) I do want to take up a master's degree, but I don't have the energy for it. Let me tell you of an incident as an example. I teach English Drama. When drama lessons are scheduled, I try to minimize the strenuous lessons for that day so I have more time to prepare for the drama lessons. ... I expend lots of energy in running a drama class, though I enjoy doing it. The most rewarding moment comes when you see your students enjoying your lesson."

"Our school has tried to contract out the drama workshop so that teachers would not have so much work to do."

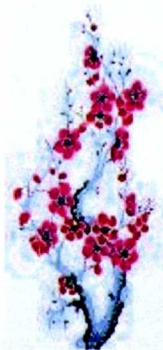


“My English Panel Head once discussed that with me. But since I was trained to be a drama teacher in the college, I think I should take up this responsibility. Besides, it lets me keep track of my students’ progress and integrate what I have taught them in the regular lessons into the drama lessons. After all, the purpose of including drama in the normal curriculum is to help students to express their emotions in English. This also improves my relationship with my students. They learn to treat me as a partner when we are acting out different roles. They also realize that I always stand by them when they need me.”

Mei—the Faithful Servant

Mei appeared to be much happier after she had retold her stories of her students. I then asked her what she thought would happen to her in the near future. She pondered my “serious” question then spoke solemnly:

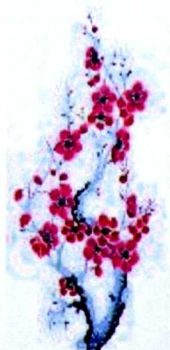
“Christina, I still think that health is the most important issue. When I had an operation a couple of years ago, I thought, ‘Who is going to take care of me as much as I do?’ I don’t want my friends comforting me while I am in the hospital, struggling desperately to survive. I choose to live a happy life but I do see that I am not that happy inside. I don’t know what is gnawing at me inside. I’m rather gloomy about my future. Once, my friend in the fellowship



comforted me and said, 'The tears you have shed are valuable to God, so keep it up.' "

Based on her recollections, I find that Mei enjoys teaching. She also explained how her belief in Christianity influenced the way she looked at things and how she treated her career and life. She repeatedly said that if God placed her in these roles, she should treasure the time she has been given to teach and influence others. Perhaps I am also one of the lucky ones placed in her hands.

I think the metaphor of the Plum Blossom aptly depicts Mei's journey. She was constantly pressured by her family while she grew up, and felt very insecure, like plum blossoms wavering in blustery gale and sleet. Yet, she is able to give her students her best—with zest.





Chapter Five

Lan's Story—From Skepticism To Fear /Voices Of Dissent

In Murky Mountain Deep

Trailing Subtle Fragrance Hither and Yon

Genuine and Pristine

As Orchid in Spring

Reflections on the Orchid

The orchid has many pleasing characteristics that make it one of the best-loved plants in the world. The flower symbolizes perfection, wisdom, and thoughtfulness in some cultures; and virtue and morality in the Chinese culture. It has also been likened to a queen because it exudes nobility and elegance. Sometime in 500 B.C., Confucius (551-479 B.C.) compared the beautiful orchid to the virtue of education:

*A solitary Orchid stands adorning the side of a mountain,
Perfumes the air even in the absence of appreciation.
A true scholar, learned in morality and philosophy,
Is always a gentleman, even in the absence of wealth.*

Among the participants, Lan (the Chinese word for orchid) personifies the uniqueness and wisdom of the teaching community as a whole. She has steadfastly strived for excellence in the era of educational reform, despite the uncertainties and disappointments she encountered.



Lan's Past Experiences and Teaching Beliefs

Lan as a Learner

I would not call her an “ABC” (American-born Chinese), but her behavior and perception are very different from those of the average teacher. Lan said she and her family left Hong Kong when she was about ten. Her earliest school memories are of the years she spent in the US, although she recalled snatches of primary school life in Hong Kong. She had to adapt to the new environment in the US, such as not wearing uniforms to school and speaking a foreign and unfamiliar language—English. Yet, she had fond memories of the teachers she first met there.

“Since I was in Primary Three when I left HK, I knew pretty much about Cantonese, but not much in spoken English. The class was small, and the teachers there were able to give me generous attention. The classes in Hong Kong are large, and I had a tough time adjusting during my first years of teaching here.”

For Lan, teaching implies caring for students by establishing individual relationships with them. She has even “borrowed” this approach for her lessons.

“Unlike teachers in Hong Kong, teachers in the US don’t call you by your full name. For example, they call you “Nancy,” not “Nancy Wong.” I’m



doing this to my students now, and they feel some sort of intimacy in the classroom. We are just like friends. At least, this is what I believe. In the US, teachers sometimes give each other nicknames, and no one gets upset. Hong Kong teachers don't have such a sense of humor; they always put on angry looks. Sometimes, I feel they are too harsh on their students."

Lan tried to make sense of her "self" as she navigated through the different contexts: primary school in Hong Kong, elementary school in the US, and the school where she is currently teaching. Her parents had decided to leave Hong Kong due to perceived political uncertainties at that time, and she was grateful that they did. She averred that through her schooling in the US, she acquired a better grasp of various issues, including education.

According to McAdams' life story model (1993, 1996, 2001), identity emerges in adolescence and is narratively formed by reconstructing past and present experiences, and adding to them anticipated (future) experiences. Lan's identity takes shape in the evolving self-story that she recounted. Her narrative forms a personal psychosocial construction of self in which the cultural context of her life is embedded and given meaning (Bruner, 1990; McAdams, 2001). According to McAdams (2001), "*Identity is*



not an individual achievement but a work of (and in) culture. In a sense, the person and person's social world coauthor identity. Identity is a psychosocial construction"
(McAdams 2001: 116).

Lan as a Person

Lan is married and has a daughter and son, both university students in England. I asked her why her children were not educated in Hong Kong. She replied that her children were better off in the UK, though she admitted to being reluctant about the idea initially. She attributed this mindset to her family's settling in the US when she was young. Lan reiterated that her happy memories of the US have had a strong impact on her view on education.

"I think my children should not be spoon-fed like the students in my school. ... I don't want them to suffer because of examination pressure. Looking back, my husband and I realize that this is the very difference between liberal and 'spoon-feeding' education. We want our children to be independent learners and think critically. I don't mind not seeing them and not being able to take care of them when they were only 15 or 16 years old. ... You know, I am not like some of my colleagues here who think of sending their children overseas only when they fall behind with their



schoolwork in Hong Kong. I firmly believe that education is the most important thing for youngsters. Take me as an example: If I had not been given the chance to study abroad, I would not have realized the meaning of education.”

Lan asserts that studying overseas widens one’s horizons. More importantly, she enjoys the “privileges” of an expatriate, although she is proud of her Chinese ethnicity. She placed strong emphasis on the complex but authentic working environment, where she could enjoy the company of other local teachers, in the Hong Kong context.

Lan as a Teacher—How Lan Expresses Herself in Her Pedagogical Tasks/Responsibilities

“On the first day I reported for work, the principal summoned me after classes to tell me of the positive impact that I could bring to the school. She said she hoped I would inspire both teachers and students to converse in English. She also assumed that I and the NET from the US would work congenially, as we likely had common topics to share. I couldn’t agree with her, as I would find it uncomfortable to speak to my colleagues in English. She considered me American, but deep inside, I am 100% Chinese. I do speak English, but most of the time, I converse in Cantonese, though I may have forgotten some Chinese words.”



“What about your students?”

“Of course, since they are my students in English, I want to speak to them in that language.”

Lan was definitely bothered by the incident, something that would not have bothered me and many other teachers. Her reaction indicates how different teachers under the same roof regard their profession. Our conversation also reveals how misunderstanding can come from this incongruence.

“Lan, you don’t have to be so angry. It is common for principals to impose some kind of accepted behaviors on teachers. What she probably wanted you to do was speak English whenever you were in the campus. That’s pretty fair.”

“No, no, no, that’s not the point. I am employed because my English proficiency qualified me to teach. ... What did they expect me to be, a working partner or personal tutor? It poses more pressure on me than you might have expected. My role is to perform my teaching duties. In doing so, I will gladly share my experience as a student in the US and as a teacher in Hong Kong. But I cannot take up two identities at the same time—that of a native-speaking English teacher who will enhance the school’s prestige and that of an ordinary teacher. That is tantamount to



exploiting my previous experiences and identity ... though I know I was actually employed because of this.”

“But you do stand a better chance to be employed because of your experience. You can’t do away with this factor.”

“You are only partly right. I am sure that I can find a job in Hong Kong merely on the strength of my teacher’s qualifications. I have been employed as a Graduate Mistress because of this, and I teach the senior forms. However, if the school tries to improve its image by sending me on ‘road shows’ because I speak fluent English with a Chinese face, I should not be given the title of being a teacher. They can call me a ‘program coordinator’ or ‘English facilitator.’ As such, I can do away with my teaching and marking duties. ... Don’t get me wrong, I love teaching and I do love to speak in English with my students, but I doubt whether my job title provides the professional identity I am entitled to. I was quite disappointed with how I was perceived by the principal and other staff members and have been trying to change their prejudice. I call it prejudice because I am just like any of you: I took up teaching, undergo the same kind of refresher courses, attend seminars, and submit to a yearly review. Unfortunately, people treat me as a very different teacher, albeit without my consent. I don’t know how to deal with this as I find myself more and more incompatible with the environment.”



Lan shared with me other stories that, she insisted, played a part in sapping her passion for teaching. Some were about how she was mistaken for a NET (native-speaking English teacher) in professional workshops, while many were about how she struggled to work in harmony with others. She wondered if other teachers in her school considered her an ordinary English teacher or if they took her for a NET in disguise. If such was the case, Lan said rhetorically, she would have had different terms of employment and would have been free to conduct all kinds of English activities for her students.

“Thanks, but No Thanks”?

“I consider it my duty to help my students understand different kinds of cultural activities. Our students are less exposed to worldly issues, possibly because they live in an underprivileged district in the territory and are crammed with all sorts of subject matter. ... I’ve tried to enhance their exposure by making use of some festivals throughout the school year. I started with the Mid-Autumn Festival, which is highly valued in Hong Kong. I asked my students to conduct interviews with the teachers in school, asking them about their favorite food and the things they enjoyed doing during the Mid-Autumn Festival. The response was great and, most important of all, I created a learning atmosphere among my students. Naturally, I then planned some activities for Thanksgiving Day. Unlike in the previous festival, some of my colleagues were indifferent to the idea of



having students write 'Thanksgiving Slips,' which I intended to post around the school. I was furious, especially when one of my students came to me crying because she was rejected by most of the teachers to whom handed Thanksgiving slips. Some teachers had simply said, "No thanks, I'm busy." Others were more insensitive, saying it was not their business, as they did not teach English."

This unfortunate incident discouraged Lan from initiating other activities. She felt she was not respected by other local teachers even if she was employed under similar terms. Worse, she found it hard to share her opinions with her colleagues, so that she gradually felt marginalized.

Stories Evoking Stories—What Cultures Say

Lan's brief account reveals various beliefs held about teachers in Hong Kong because of their differences in background. In terms of qualifications, some teachers hold a bachelor's degree and a postgraduate diploma in education called Graduate Master/Mistress (GM), while those who graduate from the colleges of education hold a teacher's certificate called Certificate Master/Mistress. In my case, I have been working with more than ten NETs in my school. Not all NETs are happy working in Hong Kong,



though, because of cultural differences. It may take them some time to get used to the new teaching environment and some of the bureaucratic procedures, such as filling out evaluation forms for their subject, conducting peer observations among teachers, and attending professional sharing and meetings, which are very often not conducted in English. Local teachers, on the other hand, think that NETs are granted more privileges and lighter teaching loads due to the nature of their contracts. (NETs have to help organize different kinds of English activities for their students.) Some local teachers complain that they are not fairly treated compared with the NETs.

I was also shocked to hear what Lan thought of the government's attitude towards NETs; she was looking at the picture as though she was an expatriate teacher. The following story records how she interprets the term "professional identity".

"I had a very strange feeling about the definition of professional identity here, especially that of a NET. The most annoying part of the whole thing is that NETs are not even considered teachers or professionals employed by the government of Hong Kong because of their expertise, which is their knowledge in teaching English. It seems that they are hired for their ability to speak the language. That's why you think I stand a better chance to be employed—because English seems to be my first language. I do not mean



to boast of my knowledge; I only want be given the same kind of respect that is allotted to local teachers. Local teachers are not to blame; the fault is in the government or, to be more precise, the Education Bureau. Imagine, even the local textbooks call them NETs.”

“What does it have to do with professional identity? How would you like them to be addressed then?”

“To be honest. I’m quite uncomfortable with the term ‘NET.’ They are actually teachers—of the English language. One time, an instruction written in one of the examination papers said something like, ‘Your NET is asking you to write about ...’ This is a stereotype. ... In some government documents, local teachers are addressed as ‘LET,’ for ‘local English teacher.’ Why don’t they simply call everyone English teachers or teachers of the English language? Their knowledge and status as teacher are undermined. They should be acknowledged as ‘stakeholders’ in this language in their official website and circulars. How do you expect students to respect their teachers when the government is not respecting them in the first place?”

“I have never thought of the impact of calling them NETs. I respect all the NETs I’ve worked with. I don’t understand why this bothers you.”

Lan’s issue has remained unresolved, as NET is still widely used in textbooks and



examination papers to identify their special status or to distinguish them from us (LETs).

However, I started addressing the NET at my school in meetings and in papers as Mr. or Miss something. Though I did not ask if they shared Lan's opinion, I sense that they are happy with this subtle change. Because of my inspiring encounter with Lan, I was shocked when some of my friends complained about the irrational behavior of their NET at school. Perhaps, before grumbling, we should be better informed about how the expatriate scheme was initiated in Hong Kong.

History of NETs in Hong Kong

The NETS (native-speaking English teachers) Scheme was first launched in a smaller scale in 1987 as the Expatriate English Language Teachers (EELT) Scheme. Schools that were affiliated with expatriate missionaries participated. The NET Scheme was introduced again in 1998. In theory, the scheme is a "*language improvement program*" (Lai 1999: 215). The NETs are employed to assist LETs in enriching the English language learning environment at schools and enhancing the teaching and learning of English with linguistically and culturally authentic materials and resources (EDB web page, 2009). Some 700 NETs were to be recruited from overseas to teach English in Hong Kong's secondary schools. Under the scheme, every secondary school is entitled



to hire up to two expatriate English teachers. However, due to the scarcity of NETs, the target was not met. This perhaps explains why some NETs find the working environment in Hong Kong too demanding for them to even want the job in the first place.

What is expected of NETs? According to the Director of Education (1998), the Education Department mentioned little beyond the duties of being an English language teacher. Like many other NETs, Lan is expected to cooperate with local teachers, use the local textbooks, and most important of all, fit into the local system (Johnson & Tang, 1993; Boyle, 1997). In short, the government expects the NETs to act as resource persons. However, since language and culture cannot be taken as two independent entities, it is impossible to expect expatriate teachers to bring only their language with them and leave their cultures at home.

Lending an Ear to LETs

With regard to the perceived differences between local and expatriate teachers, other local English teachers whom I met in the refresher course had these stories to tell.



T1: Our NET complained that he couldn' t stand the workload at school. He applied for a week' s sick leave, with the psychiatrist' s medical proof. I planned some co-teaching with him, but I will now have to change my plan. Worse still, my students expect to have some oral practice before their final examination. I may have to ask him for extra tutorials after school.

This instantly elicited a chorus of complaints among the other teachers in the group.

Others promptly aired similar gripes.

T2: Would this have happened if it were a local teacher? Absolutely not! We care so much about our students' academic results. Last year, before my AL students had their home-study, I was terribly sick. My doctor said it was probably due to work pressure, but I did not ask for sick leave. Instead, I even kept some of my students after school for examination skill practice. I only had a rest during my Easter Holiday.

T3: You mean teachers in your school do not apply for sick leave on such occasions? You should get a rest if you are sick. That' s not the case in my school. Often, one, two, even



five teachers at a time apply for sick leave; some have had rest for more than three days. When that happens, we have to substitute for them. I once conducted seven of the eight lessons in a day because many teachers were absent. I wish I had blonde hair.

T 4: I think NETs are overprotected. People say the school would be blacklisted in the coming year if the NET complained about such things as receiving unfair treatment or being asked to render duties other than those specified in his or her contract. In my school, the NET doesn't have to go to staff meetings and other professional development programs. It is extremely unfair. They should come and see how things are in the school. Besides, they should take every opportunity to learn more about the students.

On top of perceived cultural differences, some local teachers think that NETs do not understand the miserable conditions LETs have to cope with, such as large classes, a lengthy syllabus, and unfinished administrative duties. Lan perceives that despite her educational background, she has been assigned the duties of a NET. In reality, she has been given the teaching load of a local teacher, but with an unreasonable demand attached: to publicly converse with others in English. Meanwhile, she has observed that some local



teachers readily accept NETs as colleagues. In fact, she thinks it will be harder to cope with the changes that will be brought by educational reform.

Lan as a Meliorist—Surviving the Crisis

When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves. (Victor Frankl)

When Lan was asked what she thought of the educational reform, she groaned that she was particularly uncomfortable with the frequent changes she had encountered.

“I have experienced waves of educational changes in the past 16 years—one after the other. I have not had a chance to take a break. Let me cite a few examples. They proposed the ‘communicative approach’ in 1993, then the ‘task-based approach.’ A little later, we scrambled to learn the new technology and had to attain the advanced level in Information Technology. We also had to pass the Benchmark Examination for English teachers. ... On top of all these, the curricula for various subjects were changed. ... Now History, Geography, and Economics have been merged into a new subject called Integrated Humanities. If they found the syllabus for a certain subject too long, they should have consulted teachers first and screened out some parts instead of compressing the three subjects this way.”



“Now they are also proposing another new subject, Liberal Studies, which I think even teachers are unfamiliar with. We have never studied this.”

“That’s another hurdle for teachers. I do not oppose any changes but what is the reason for all these changes? Teachers do not initiate these changes themselves. We have never been consulted about this though we are frontline educators. Now as I look back, I think these changes don’t serve their purpose. The gist of all improvements lies in teachers’ effective integrations of content materials and classroom strategies.”

Change in all things is sweet. (Aristotle)

I am sure Lan will be able to tackle these changes, but teachers would feel more comfortable with who they are going to be and what they are going to do. According to Wenger (1998), in times of rapid changes, teachers’ identity cannot be seen as a fixed one. The teachers’ identity is seen as a *“learning trajectory”* (Wenger 1998: 149) which defines who teachers are according to where they have been and where they are going.

Lan seems to respond to this positively.

“I don’t want to perish in the midst of a crisis. Everybody seems to be afraid of the coming reform. How many teachers in your school have left



because of this? ... You know what I did? I went to the department head and proposed a series of oral programs for junior form students after school. I came up with the idea because having only one oral lesson a week is unrealistic. I strongly believe that one's oral proficiency is acquired through practice in authentic situations. Besides, it would be difficult for a teacher to attend to every student in, say, only 40-something minutes of oral lessons a week. By my proposal, I could avoid involving other teachers the way I did in the previous Thanksgiving activity. I was grateful that my department head allowed me to organize this on my own. I wrote the program plan and started implementing it along with some junior form teachers. We interacted well, and did some sharing and evaluation each time. I enjoy this more than our department meetings, in which we just listen to what others report. We seldom interact with one another and have professional discussions on ways to improve our teaching methods. I'm also happy that my students enjoyed and valued the oral activities I organized for them."

Do not go where the path may lead, instead go where there is no path and leave a trail. (Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1803-1882)

Lan's new teaching approach validates the definition of identity as "*a relation between the local and the global*" (Wenger 1998: 149), where teachers define who they are by



negotiating local ways of belonging to a broader understanding of the discourses. She has, in fact, tried out yet another approach in her lessons.

“I was not trying to be revolutionary, but the next thing I did was change some of the other pedagogic practices. For one, I did not read out punctuation marks when I was doing dictation. This raised an uproar among other English teachers, and I couldn’t understand why. To me, it was necessary after the oral program because by then, students could already tell from the teacher’s intonation what punctuation mark to use. After all, it is awkward to keep saying ‘full-stop’ or ‘comma’ while reciting prose. My students found this challenging. I also noticed that it improved their comprehension and reading abilities, as shown by the results of their examinations.”

Lan believed that the other English teachers were sincere about ensuring a valid transmission of knowledge to the students. However, she could not understand why they strongly rejected her suggestion. She swore to herself that she had to initiate changes if she wanted to remain in this career. She also believed that teachers should be granted the autonomy to do what they think is right for their students. I was impressed by Lan’s resolution in the face of obstacles. I think that such a radical act requires not only courage,



but also an understanding of the subject matter, and the essential learning process undergone by a student.

“Christina, if we don’t change, we aren’t really living. If I didn’t come back to Hong Kong, I would never grow. I might just be an ordinary housewife in America, taking care of my kids. I find myself more useful here and what I have learned could earn me a living. So, why should I shrink from my duties as a teacher? In fact, I have other plans in mind. I’ll tell you about them later.”

Flourishing Talents in Foggy Mountains with Pure, Pristine, and Subtle Fragrance

Lan—the Facilitator

Lan is an eloquent orator and a good listener. She keeps encouraging me in my work through e-mail and is eager to know the progress of my thesis. In one of her e-mail messages, she told me about what she was doing lately and left me awed.

Hi, Christina,

How’s your work? Do you need any more stories? I’ll be more than happy to help. Just give me a call if you need me. Well, let me update you with some bits and pieces of my stuff. I’m still teaching



in the same school, but I'm planning for some change. Guess what it is. No, I'm not quitting my job. You know me well. I won't give up my work. I'm a typical career woman, a caring teacher, a virtuous wife, and good mother. The story is that one day, I met my schoolmate from the USA in one of the 'book fairs,' though they call that a seminar. She is working as an editor in one of the well-known publishers, providing textbooks to secondary schools. She told me that business was good because of the New Senior Secondary (NSS) curriculum. She said that they were desperately in need of experienced teachers to give them ideas and opinions in writing new books for the NSS students. She wanted me to help her but I don't want to quit my job. After some thought, I have decided to help them as a part-time consultant. I don't care much about the pay, but I have to ask the school for permission if I have to receive any salary. I talked to the Principal and my department head, and they all encouraged me to give it a try. So, you see, I'm going to spend more time on gathering ideas for the new curriculum. I just love this challenge. I've been collecting a lot of authentic materials for my students' oral program. Now, I'm able to modify them and use them again and most important of all, I can get moving and I can see the whole picture in a better perspective. I mean, I can see what a secondary student would learn from her junior form to her senior form. Isn't this great? I hope you will give me some ideas in the future.



Lan's stories are always heartening and impressive. Unlike the other participants, Lan did not plan to become a teacher when she was in the US. Determined to overcome the drudgery of teaching, she took the initiative to work beyond what she later called her "scope of responsibility." In spite of resistance from her colleagues, she went against the norm and translated her belief into pragmatic approaches.

I did not think that Lan would continue teaching in the face of all those odds. After teaching for 16 years and reflecting upon her experiences as a teacher in an unfamiliar context, Lan realized how her commitment had helped her surmount obstacles and generate enthusiasm in teaching. She has a high regard for her job and you can hear the passion in her voice. I suddenly felt grateful for having a friend like Lan, whose "fragrance" permeates the air as she strives for perfection

Chapter Six

Kuk's Story

Below the Cloudless Sky, Reflecting in Peace and Tranquillity Unperturbed and Serene As Chrysanthemum in Autumn

Reflections on the Chrysanthemum

The Chrysanthemum is passionately adored by Chinese people. In celebration of autumn, September is welcomed with “Chrysanthemum Day” in China. The flower, one of the “Four Gentlemen of China”—the others are the plum blossom (winter), orchid (spring), and bamboo (summer)—is an auspicious symbol of abundance, wealth, cheerfulness, and optimism. It also symbolizes nobility because it blooms on cold autumn days and flourishes in chilly winds, when most other flowers have begun to fade.

The combination of beauty and strong character in the Chrysanthemum make it ideal in the eyes of Chinese scholars and, therefore, popular among the Chinese people. Confucius once suggested using the celebrated flower as an object of meditation.

Kuk, the third participant in this research, owns some of the virtues that are attributed to the flower. More importantly, she demonstrates allegiance to and faith in teaching.



Kuk's Past Experiences and Teaching Beliefs

Kuk—the “Village Teacher”

Memory... is the power to revive again in our minds those ideas which after imprinting have disappeared, or have been laid aside out of sight.

(John Locke, 1847: 102)

Kuk means chrysanthemum, a pseudonym that my participant herself chose. The interview with her began with flashbacks of her experiences as the third of four children born to a lower-class family.

“I came from a lower-class, very traditional family. My father was a cleaner and my mother was also a worker. My grandpa, who lived with my family, looked after us. We lived in a kind of village house in Tai Po, a remote and primitive area in Hong Kong. We were very close to one another. However, my happy childhood ended when my father died in a car accident.”

“Do you remember your dad?”

“Of course, I do. He loved me most because I was hardworking and diligent. I was always at the top of my class. When I was still small, my dad would put me in his lap, playfully reading the newspaper to me. He taught me my first Chinese word, though he did it for fun, as he was not



sufficiently schooled.”

Kuk is a very scrupulous teacher. From her narration, I could tell that in her early years, she was trained to be a planner. She always aimed for perfection in her presentation at the refresher course, as well as in her teaching.

“Of the four siblings, I was the cleverest. My father loved me because I got high marks in school. In contrast, my grandpa never praised me because to him, boys were more important than girls. He closely adhered to Chinese tradition, wherein girls would leave the home once they get married, thereby contributing nothing to the family.”

I was curious to know whether Kuk was married at young age. With a mischievous look on her face, she said she was married to teaching. She then told me of her toy blackboard.

“My grandpa got me a blackboard from somewhere in the garbage nearby to serve as a toy. He got me some chalk as well. Every day, I wrote down on it all that I had to do, including my housework and homework. I had a long list of work to do but I didn't mind; I understood my mother's great difficulty in providing for the whole family when my father died. I was willing to help her even though I was only a young girl.”



“You were very disciplined! It must have been the blackboard.”

“I guess so. My mom locked us up, but we could actually go out if we wished. However, kids were much more obedient and simple-minded in those days. We didn’t have a TV set until I was in Primary 6. Thus, all we could do at home was role-play. I was particularly interested in playing teacher or student, using the only toy-thing we had—the blackboard. I had a strong sense of achievement when I acted the part of a teacher in front of my neighbors, and tried to teach other children in our village. At the same time, I was also happy whenever I crossed out or wiped off the list that I had already finished doing for the day.”

Kuk’s narrations about her childhood depicted a merry and harmonious relationship among her family members. Though her grandpa sometimes treated her as a “domestic helper,” her assiduity earned her his grudging recognition. Kuk claimed that she was not at all annoyed by her grandpa’s extremely conventional outlook. She knew the world was changing and women would eventually prove their value to the world.

Kuk—the Grateful Learner

Kuk said she was lucky to have had good teachers throughout her education. She remembered various details in her early school life.



“My teachers loved me, especially when I was in kindergarten. They said I had a lovely chubby face. A teacher in kindergarten once suggested to my mom that she would take me to the US to ease our family’s burden. At that time, it was common practice for poor parents to give away their children in the hope of giving them a better future. My mom refused.”

“So did your dad, right? I wonder what my father would have done if my family were offered this opportunity.”

“Don’t be silly. The kindergarten in which I studied was run by a Catholic parish. My teachers were so nice, they visited my family after school from time to time, bringing with them food and toys. I thus got the impression that teachers were kind and generous, that they were good people. In primary school, I also had good and knowledgeable teachers. I wanted to become one of them. In fact, teaching was the work I dreamed of ever since I planned for my future. I am not a complicated person; I have not changed my mind since then.”

“Did you discuss this with anyone? I had a very perplexing moment when I came to the decision.”

“Everyone knew that I would become a teacher one day. My career path is really straight.”



I found that we basically had similar experiences, though Kuk seemed to acknowledge them with less grousing. We both started our matriculation studies before we were enrolled in the college of education. My father once complained about having to pay for both matriculation and teacher training in the college within two months. According to Kuk, her family was more supportive in this respect.

“I did not do well in my A-Level Examinations, so I applied for a degree course in social work in City University, and a certificate course in one of the colleges of education. When I was accepted by both the university and one of the colleges of education, I got confused. I turned to my mom for advice. My mom said, ‘You want to become a teacher, right?’

“Parents want their children to have a stable job, a professional career, such as teaching or medicine.”

“That is very true. My mom and other family members lacked education, so she hoped I would bring honor to the clan; she was proud of my achievements. My family was greatly relieved when I was admitted to the college of education. As for me, I was definitely inspired by my teachers in kindergarten, and primary and secondary schools. I also wanted to help the young children in my village with their homework. I liked to do that even while I was still a secondary student.”



Kuk and I settled on teaching as a career initially on the strength of our mothers' advice. We were also aware of the prestige, respect, and power judgments associated with a professional occupation (Dreeben, 1970). After graduating from college, Kuk taught at a primary school for three years, then transferred to a secondary school. She gave an interesting account of her decision to do so.

“My life at the primary school was really relaxing because I taught in the morning session; I could take a nap in the afternoon. Also, because I was new, I was not given many duties. I had no clubs to chair and didn't have to take up extra-curricular activities. After some time, I realized I had no achievements and my English was not improving. I didn't want to stagnate all the way to retirement so I hied off to a secondary school.

Being the eldest in the family, I was used to giving commands to my sisters and my youngest brother whenever mom was not at home. Kuk's story reminded me that I used to unleash on them my passion for teaching.

“I did enjoy teaching, I mean helping, my sisters with their work ...”

My voice tapered off to a whisper when I realized I was admitting my dominant role among my siblings. To my surprise, Kuk's response was affirmative.



“I am not surprised; your voice carries authority. You sometimes look like a commander. Remember the time when we were doing our project at the institute? You were our mastermind. You took the lead in our discussion session and sometimes even helped organize our individual work.”

“That’s because that was the second time I was taking such a professional course. I knew what was going on and what the expectations were.”

My encounter with these teachers was a critical experience for me. My husband said it was the turning point of my life, as he saw how it boosted my self-confidence. I might not have noticed it then, but I now realize how our conversations have influenced my identity construction (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007). I do not know if there was a perceptible change in my behavior that my husband picked up. But as Kuk and I recalled our days at the Institute of Education, I understood *“how moments of transformation ... were made possible”* (ibid: 158).



Embarking on a Perturbing Journey

Treading on a Tightrope, Besieged by Fear

Kuk and I started indulging ourselves in fond memories of the institute.

“I really appreciated our encounter. We had no conflict of interest and even developed a long-lasting friendship.”

“Yeah, I agree with you. It was common to hear the other teachers talking about the micro-politics at their schools.”

“I hate such dirty tactics. I don’t want to be a pawn that others use to their advantage. I’ve always wanted a chance to get out of my school. Being in the company of malicious colleagues was quite stifling. I felt terribly sick of their vicious remarks.”

Kuk was getting agitated by her own fiery speech and broke a toothpick on the desk in a fit of anger. She admitted that as a teacher, she was not as lucky as when she was still a student. Her colleagues had been very mean to her. Kuk suffered from her emotional problems. After teaching for some years, her health was turning bad. She later had an operation because of ovary infection.

“Those were some of the darkest moments in my life. When I informed the school that I had an infected ovary and would apply for sick leave soon, a



colleague remarked that women were likely to have such problems if they didn't want to have children. I was totally annoyed and hurt! I don't know how long it was before I was summoned to the principal's office."

"Did it help? Did you have any friends around you then?"

"I told some of my colleagues how I felt, but it was useless. At the principal's office, I told her the whole incident in between sobs, but I don't think it helped either. I don't quite remember what she said to me, as I was overcome by emotion. I regret having lost my composure."

Kuk's eyes turned red, though the incident had happened years ago. I pitied her and wondered why she did not reveal this in our gatherings. I later found out that she was striving to reach a new identity...

Reliving in a Teaching Landscape

Our conversation was a valuable experience. Kuk realized how her personal knowledge was formulated and how it was influenced by her past experience, which interacted with her present and guided her future actions (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988). Kuk was able to retell her stories in a new way (Clandinin and Connelly, 1995).

"I was buried by tons of sarcastic remarks around me. I swore to myself I



wouldn't stay in this evil place any more. This was 2007, and the desire to resign burned in me throughout the year. I started to think that nobody appreciated my existence at the school and that I had no hope for promotion. I forsook my goals. After a long deliberation with my husband, I quit later that year. I felt relieved when I made up my mind to resign. In fact, I think my quitting was a blessing in disguise for me."

I was glad Kuk was free from her afflictions. She seemed to have gotten over her grief.

"Christina, I have to thank you for helping me say this out loud again, in front of somebody. I did write down in my blog what happened to me, but I deleted it immediately because I was afraid of offending someone. It sounds silly, but it served me well in those days. I think this will also take me to another level. I don't feel the pain anymore; it seems the wound has healed."

"Definitely. That's why you have to speak out your thoughts. You need to have your voice heard. You said what happened to you was a blessing in disguise, right? And I think this shows how our conversations bring out this new meaning to you and how you see yourself now."

While I was transcribing my interviews with Kuk, I realized *"how explicitly co-constructed conversations can evoke stories that create meaning"* (Etherington



2004: 39). Kuk described how she coped after her resignation.

“I didn’t really leave my teaching career after my resignation because I am engaged in other forms of teaching in various contexts now. I’ve become an English teacher—you may call it a tutor—in my church. I am in charge of the English Enhancement Program for F.1 to F.4 students. I also work as a substitute teacher in some schools. I am even teaching F.6 and F.7 students now.”

I felt Kuk’s sense of satisfaction and achievement.

“I am really contented with what I’m doing now. Firstly, I have been entrusted with senior forms. This would never have happened in my old school. They thought that I wasn’t qualified to teach senior forms since I graduated from the Institute of Education. The highest form I was allowed to teach at that time was F.2.”

Embarking on a Self-discovery Journey

Kuk as a Keen Learner

Kuk began her professional enhancement while she was teaching at her old school. She complained that she was marginalized there because she was not a graduate mistress (GM). She then recalled why she started her degree course in the IEd.



“I don’t want to take up a professional course simply because I need some sort of qualification to help me move upward, that is, get promoted. I once considered taking the Benchmark Test for English teachers, but then I thought it was ridiculous. Firstly, we were allowed to teach because they thought that we were qualified. Then under societal pressure, they give us the benchmark test. I think I should do something for myself, not for the government. I mean, I should acquire a professional degree to shut them up. I don’t have to be benchmarked again.”

She started her part-time degree course in 2004. Kuk confessed that she then regretted her rash decision, as she had a very difficult time at the beginning of her studies.

“I went to IEd three nights a week, sometimes including Saturdays. I once worked hard with my paper, trying to meet the deadline, but I got stuck at certain part. I threw tantrums and locked myself in my house, not answering any phone calls. This scared my mother, as she could not get in touch with me for three days. Anxious, she called while I was teaching at school. I regretted causing her to worry about me—all because I took up four modules at one time.”

“Poor you! It’s really hard to study part-time, especially for teachers.”

I have undergone similar hard times during my part-time studies for the last ten years.



“Yes, pretty hard, physically speaking. I once thought of giving up my studies, but I found that the experience was satisfying. I did enjoy my time. I mean, the experience was awesome. I particularly cherish the experience of being a learner again. I did make mistakes, but I tried to rectify them. The sense of achievement in completing a piece of work is gratifying. Sometimes, my husband wondered why I had to work until 2:00 a.m. just because of a piece of part-time study assignment. I am a very rigid and meticulous person, and I take my work seriously. I usually drafted and redrafted my work until I felt that it was perfect. It was tiresome, but I did enjoy it.”

Like Kuk, I also spend extra time refining my draft chapters. I am particularly careful about this research, as I have never been engaged in serious studies such as this one. I always wonder if people understand my work as a doctoral student. I send some draft chapters to my supervisor, then I decide to redo them. Why did I keep finding mistakes every time I read my writing? It was a daunting prospect, and the pressure hung heavily on me, my family, and people who tried to help me. In my last dissertation workshop, I mentioned my dream of working idealistically. The presenter stated that there was no perfection in the world. The moment you finished your work, something new could emerge. She advised me to be true to my work. Indeed, I once thought of quitting my



studies, especially when I had too many roles to play and there was too little time to figure out each step to take.

I reflected on what I was told in the workshop. My questions had raised a brief discussion among some participants, even after the meeting. One participant, who followed the grounded theory approach in his thesis, said he was interested in my approach. He even asked me if I had thought of including pictures in my writing. I was grateful for his suggestion and was greatly reassured about my direction. More importantly, I was pleased that narrative inquiry fits my exploration of the identities of teachers.

Blooming in a New Landscape—Catching an Eye-opening Experience

Kuk's broad smile brought me back from my musing.

"I met very good friends along my journey of studies, though. I could never make bosom friends at my school but I found good companions in my studies. It was indeed an eye-opener for me. We shared our experiences and difficulties. They are all experienced teachers and we discussed many of the worst-case scenarios we had encountered. We all worked hard on our assignments and examinations. That was the happiest time I have ever



had in my career.”

“Those were some of the fondest memories we had, right?”

“Yeah, we were able to voice out our feelings in a much more comfortable environment. On top of that, we truly felt the sense of being teachers. We worked as a team and our common goal was to get the job done or the problem, solved. We tried our best to find the solutions to various issues raised in the lessons. They were real issues, not the kind of administrative work we have to accomplish at school. It is not merely something of practical use, but more about how it helps shape a real teacher.”

“Absolutely! I think that’s the motive that drives us to move forward and that’s why we both keep studying until now.”

Kuk as a Thanks-giver

Kuk’s revelation was inspiring and resonated with my idea of professional development. The same old question came up again: Should teachers be professionally trained before they go into actual teaching? As I was preparing the field notes of Kuk’s interviews, I thought of how teachers’ knowledge and professional expertise could affect their professional identity. Kuk was grateful for discovering her new “self”



because of her pursuit of professional knowledge in the Institute. She was also eager to tell me about some of her teaching experiences from a different perspective.

“I had many unforgettable experiences in other schools. I once taught in a school with Indian, Pakistani, and Filipino students. Though I didn’t understand their languages, I enjoyed teaching and coaching them. They were all very naïve and felt no pressure about learning. I found myself more engaged in my job. But I also had some very difficult times.”

First Encounter with a SEN (Student with Special Educational Needs)

“Once, when I was working as a substitute teacher, a student abused me with foul language. My heart sank, but I did not scold or punish him. The boy kept shouting and this scared some of the other students. I acted professionally, which I still think was the best thing to do. I calmed down the other students and asked the monitor and monitress to immediately report the case to the office and to the school social worker. I continued to teach, keeping an eye on the incensed boy. I was told later that the boy was autistic. I wonder why other teachers didn’t tell me about this. Was it because I only worked temporarily there?”

“The EDB is emphasizing its policy to place students with SEN in ordinary schools so that they can benefit from integrated education. In my school,



teachers from different subject panels have to take up training courses in handling these students.”

“That’s the problem. As a substitute teacher, should I take up these training courses? I know from the EDB’s website that there are different levels for teachers to achieve. If they are proposing the principle of “one curriculum framework for all,” is there any “one policy for all teachers” who would like to take up teaching in different situations?”

Kuk seldom got angry, yet her voice rose a few decibels as she continued.

“As I gather experience in teaching different students and in different kinds of schools, I find that teachers should be equipped with the necessary knowledge to handle various types of problems, be they about students’ learning or teaching effectiveness. I think I am now a more ‘mature’ teacher in that I am more confident of myself and more capable of handling unexpected incidents in the classrooms.”

As I reread what I had transcribed about Kuk’s professional development, I began to grasp the significance of this kind of “re-storying” experiences for teachers’ personal and social growth (Clandinin & Connelly, 1991, 1995, 2000). Kuk appeared to be more confident and assertive than before about her beliefs. I was glad to feel the “power” in



her speech.

Blossoming into a Teacher with Nobility of Purpose

Kuk—the Contributor

Kuk said her perseverance in her studies made a world of difference. She enrolled in a degree course from 2004 to 2007, while she was still teaching full-time. However, she quit her job after she finished her studies due to the change in her perception of teaching. She told me how she interpreted her identity as a teacher then.

“In the past, my colleagues’ remarks made me feel small. Now, I earn respect through my work. Besides, I have become a more useful person and can, therefore, be a better contributor. Back then, I had no time to look after my mother, nieces, and nephews. I need to help my nieces and nephews because their parents are unschooled and busy working. Now, I have more time to spend with them and help them with their homework. It is indeed a very gratifying job—being able to help every single member of the family. One of my nephews is going to secondary school this year. I am so happy to have helped him. I also help his parents handle all sorts of government documents, such as an application for tax reduction and applying for accommodation in the public housing estate. I find myself a much more useful person now.”



“I am now more focused on what lies ahead. I have been so obsessed with my work that I have neglected my family and many other aspects of life, such as enjoying the beauty of nature. I have found a way that suits my interest in teaching without interfering with my family life.”

“Have you thought of continuing your studies, say, taking up a master’s degree?”

I admitted that I was still obsessed with the significance of having a good qualification. I subconsciously revealed this through my conversations with other teachers, thinking that they were all seeking to rise in their careers.

“Some of my friends also encourage me to continue with my studies. But my husband thinks that I might not be able to manage too big a workload. I understand why he discourages me. He himself has had some terrible experiences at work. My husband was assuming the post of discipline teacher and found his workload pretty heavy. He decided to negotiate an arrangement with the principal. However, the principal asked him to consider his request carefully or he could be demoted. My husband was quite upset about it. At my suggestion, he took up a Master’s in Liberal Studies—a new subject in the curriculum. He once claimed that this was his “asset.” He plans to move to another school because his school will likely be closed down soon. He’s a changed man, saying that he loves



studying. He used to be a workaholic who only paid attention to his career; now, he even encourages me to read more journal articles on philosophy and psychology. I'm glad that he has found a better purpose in life."

Her face glowed as she described her husband's experience, which made it her experience, too. I am certain that Kuk is no longer perturbed by her previous setbacks.

When asked about her plans, she said:

"I once thought of getting a full-time teaching job, but the moment didn't last, as I was afraid of 'falling' into the deep dark hole again. It has been two years since I retired and everything is fine with me."

"What about studies?"

"I have no intention to further my studies at the moment. I once read the 'Recruit' page on the newspaper to see what my qualifications could fetch me besides teaching. I realized I wasn't interested in anything but teaching. In fact, I'm still very interested in news or TV programs about education or teaching."

This was recorded in our last interview almost a year ago. Kuk is extremely busy of



late, taking up substitute lessons, tutoring in her church, and designing English worksheets, exercises, and teaching notes, which she plans to share with us all. In her last e-mail, she wrote:

“Hi, everybody, I’m now working on some teaching aids for one of the elective modules in the NSS curriculum—teaching English with Short Stories. Please tell me what English readers your school is using, and I’ll make a Powerpoint presentation for that. ... Keep in touch.”

Like Chrysanthemums, Kuk is now living in tranquility. Her push for perfection may have been a burden in the beginning of her professional journey, but she has emerged unscathed from those difficult times and embarks on her new journey.

I know that Kuk perceives the change in her professional identity as a teacher after her early retirement. Her perceptions of a teacher’s identity have shifted with her experiences in different times and group dynamics.

I have no intention to generalize Kuk’s narratives or compare them with mine and those of others. Rather, I want to understand and make sense of teachers’ professional identity in terms of the meanings Kuk brings to it from her experiences (Denzin &



Lincoln, 1998). While interpreting her stories, I also realize why Kuk chose Chrysanthemum for her pseudonym. Her *clarity of thought under the cloudless sky* is best revealed by the confidence she radiates in her narratives.



Chapter Seven
Cheuk's Story
In the Heat of Summer,
Standing Tall Against Torrential Downpour
Pliable Yet Robust
As Bamboo in Summer

Reflections on the Bamboo

China boasts the world's largest variety of Bamboo species. In traditional Chinese culture, Bamboo is a symbol of oriental beauty, simplicity, and humility. It also represents the spirit of summer. When a storm blows in, the Bamboo bends with the wind, then resumes its upright position when the storm has passed. Its ability to cope with adversity without being rigid is compared to the qualities of a scholar.

Thus, the Bamboo is considered to be a gentleman, possessing the virtues of integrity and flexibility. Su Dongpo, a famous poet in the Song dynasty of China, said, "*Man can live without meat, but he will die without bamboo.*" This explains why the plant is used in every phase of Chinese life and is the most popular subject of Chinese paintings.

By her stories, Cheuk demonstrated her ability to cope with adversity. Her strength, resilience, and modesty—qualities of the gracefully sturdy Bamboo—are definitely admirable and inspiring.



Past Experiences and Teaching Beliefs

Cheuk as a Learner

Born to a Christian family, Cheuk claims to be a naturally happy person. *“I think everything is determined by God. I don’t bother with what people say about being successful. My story is its own testament of success.”* When I met Cheuk at the English Refresher Course 12 years ago, she had just started teaching at an EMI (English as the medium of instruction) secondary school, which was also her mother school. Before that, she had taught in a primary school.

Cheuk is a graceful lady with 25 years of teaching experience. She lived with her parents, two elder sisters and a younger brother when she was young. She has a very good relationship with her family. Her earliest school memory was framed by her growing up with her two sisters in the same kindergarten. She grinned as she reminisced, her eyes twinkling.

“It was not really fun, materially speaking. I never owned a new set of stationery, my uniforms were hand-me-downs. I once cried over the dirty uniform and sat on the floor. Usually, my mother’s last resort was to threaten me that my teacher would fetch me and bring me to school.”



Cheuk admitted that her family, particularly her mother, shaped the way she looked at professional teachers and their behavior. When asked if she was afraid of teachers because of this, she said she never really thought about it. For her, teachers are “powerful” people, and she has great respect for them. She also told me she had done well at school and liked taking dictation. *“My mother would read out passages to me and my sisters for revision. I felt a sense of achievement in getting all the words correct. My sisters and I were always competing among ourselves, so I worked very hard.”* Cheuk relished the harmonious relationship she had with her sisters.

She was also eager to please her teachers to earn the lovely stamps they stuck on exercise books. Though Cheuk was far too young to understand the meaning of education at that time, she did have a positive feeling about teachers. She admitted that some of her teachers had been successful in *“setting up the teaching/learning context so that students are encouraged to react with the level of cognitive engagement”* (Biggs, 2003: 56) so as to meet their teaching objectives. She thus believes that “happy learning” is the most important factor in effective education. This falls into one of the four factors which Biggs and Moore (1993) identify to be supportive for good learning: having appropriate motivation. This further reinforces one’s meaningful learning experience as the



individual learner feels the need to engage “*the task appropriately and meaningfully so that the student tries to use the most appropriate cognitive abilities for handling it*” (Biggs, 2003: 14).

Falling Short of Expectations—Blurring the Boundaries of Quality Teachers

Unfortunately, one of Cheuk’s most emotionally powerful stories was about her “*harsh and extremely ruthless*” teacher in primary three. Her face turned very sober when she recounted how the teacher had reprimanded her publicly for having forgotten to bring her school fees; in fact, the reason was her father’s late paycheck.

“She said that I shouldn’t have delayed the school’s administrative work by holding back the money. I was humiliated in front of the class, and confused as well, wondering why a knowledgeable teacher like her would speak to her students that way. I was a responsible student and she knew that because she had chosen me to be the monitress. Shouldn’t Chinese scholars behave decently? I told myself I wouldn’t act like she did if I became a teacher.”

“Definitely not! Teachers in our society have an unwritten code of conduct that frowns on such behavior.”



I quickly reacted to Cheuk's remark not only out of sympathy but also because of my image of a teacher based on the interaction between my experiences and background (Holland et al., 1998; Tickle, 2000). Her story reminded me of similar miserable experiences with some of my teachers (as related in Chapter 2). When I was transcribing our conversations, the beliefs of Knowles (1992) and Nias (1989) came to mind—that teacher professional identity is formulated based on a teacher's image of self. Our identity as teachers can thus be seen as the interconnection between the meanings we attach to ourselves and what others perceive from our social practice.

Cheuk shifted her position and continued with her narration about this teacher. During one lesson, her teacher was infuriated when Cheuk's leg almost tripped her, and proceeded to blame Cheuk's "*ungracious*" behavior on her parents' ignorance.

"Rage boiled up inside me at her rudeness. Sobbing quietly, I looked through my tears at an elegant woman in a refined dress who was spewing evil words at me—the 'child' she once trusted and assigned duties to. I felt so powerless. It was ignoble of her to behave like a wild woman."

I asked her what finally made her pick up teaching.



“I was lucky to have very good teachers in my secondary school. Miss Leung, my English teacher, used innovative methods to teach us English pronunciation. I became very confident in my English. ... I chanced upon Miss Leung in a corridor during my last year in secondary school. She asked about my studies and what I planned to do after graduation. I suddenly realized that I admired her work and I wanted to become a caring and respectable teacher like her, so I told her I wanted to become a teacher.”

Cheuk’s stories reveal her concept of a “bad” teacher and, implicitly, of a “good” teacher as well. According to Tsui (2003), teachers all have gained the experience of being a student and such experience has evolved within them a perception of what a teacher should do and what a teacher should not do, depending on their experience. To her, professional training does not guarantee a good teacher—in other words, one who is considerate and caring to his/her students. Several other secondary teachers positively and negatively influenced Cheuk’s perception of teachers and teaching. Her past experiences with teachers have reinforced her view that teachers should be “passionate” about their job. Such teachers are considerate to their students and allow their profession to permeate all aspects of their lives. There was also an idealized vision of herself as a teacher in these thoughts. This is reflected in Tsui’s (2003) suggestion in that “(t)eachers’



knowledge shapes their classroom practices, but their classroom practices in turn shape their knowledge, as they reflect on their practices after the action, and they come to a new understanding of teaching”(Tsui, 2003: 65).

Cheuk as a Teacher

Man proposes, God disposes. (Gem Ministry)

Since Cheuk lived quite close to me, we met often for brief tea breaks and grocery trips. On one hot and gloomy afternoon in early May, Cheuk recounted how she began her career.

“That was a bad financial year when I graduated from my secondary school. Many graduates flocked to the college of education. I had no idea about teaching, but I did like kids. ... I enjoyed living in a hostel and going to fellowships. I had a lot of space and private time there, unlike at home, where I always had my siblings around. It was during this period that I realized my mission as a teacher. I was spiritually inspired by the words of Jesus—my teacher. I came to understand that the ‘bad’ teachers I had experienced did not know what teaching was about. I resolved to act professionally and responsibly as a teacher, and be tolerant and caring.”



She said that this was her transition from ignorance to an understanding of the role of teachers. Cheuk was an inspirational speaker in the refresher course. She came across as a confident person. During our project meetings at the institution, she articulated her understanding of the policy documents of education and their connection with her work at school. She had other defining experiences that framed her “self” as a teacher—stories about her “real” teaching at school. At times, I truly wondered if God’s work had indeed made her unique.

When asked why she took the course as soon as she started teaching in a secondary school, she explained that she would be able to better prepare herself with updated teaching strategies. However, the course fell short of her expectations. Cheuk explained that she would have liked to have more professional sharing among us.

“I cherished the time we shared our teaching experiences and how we tackled various obstacles. The fact is, we just don’t have time for this kind of professional sharing at our own school. We need a venue to talk about our schoolwork, students, and opinions about government policy.”



Her remarks gained resonance among teachers in our gathering. Everybody started to talk about the educational reform and how we survived in times of changes. However, I was more concerned with how our teacher identity mirrored our teaching strategies.

"I am sure we all acquired something after the refresher course. Our understanding of each other's teaching practices, which we compared mentally, often affirmed or reaffirmed what we have been doing at our own school."

I am aware that any reconceptualised notion of our professional identity *"requires the formation of a community whose members can engage with one another and thus acknowledge each other as participants"* (Wenger 1998: 194).

Cheuk as a Discipline Teacher—Assuming Pastoral Duties and Fighting Discipline Battles

"The best teachers teach from the heart, not from the book." (Cheuk)

Cheuk has been a discipline teacher in a Band Two^[5] school since 1995. After having

^[5] Band Two schools are considered to have less capable students because of their lower internal assessment results.



taught for ten years, she was assigned to functional posts at school; shortly afterwards, she was promoted to Discipline Teacher. She said she believed in adopting a kind of pastoral approach in carrying out her duties as a discipline teacher.

“There are times you will be tested. Once, a student in F. 3 challenged me, saying that if God was forgiving, why was he given a demerit for being late five times. I explained to him that in God’s words, punishment is a merit in disguise, and they had to know why they were punished in order to improve themselves in the future. ... They didn’t understand me. I wouldn’t give in because I didn’t believe in punishing my students. Even when I did punish them, I would allot time in my Religious Lesson and explain to them with words from the Bible. I think this helps me with my teaching. After ten years in the Discipline Team, I was transferred to the Counselling Committee. The new discipline teacher told me the students believed they were better behaved because of me. My students had made me their role model. As a discipline teacher, I think fostering good habits among my students would be more effective than punishment. This is my belief: to teach with your heart.”

Cheuk was sure that she had a good relationship with her students. She said that though she was adamant about complying with certain teacher qualities, she was willing to learn



more, especially during the education reform. Compared to my journey as a teacher, I think Cheuk's has been much easier. She attributed her success to God's work on her.

However, Cheuk surprised us with the news that she had decided to apply for early retirement. When we asked why, she told us some of her experiences in the last few years.

Cheuk as a Reformer—*Meeting the Unmet Demands*

According to Cheuk, teaching in her alma mater is a formidable task. In our initial meetings, she was a bit hesitant to talk about her school, but I promised to get her approval for everything I wrote about her school before presenting it in my final work. Relieved, she revealed her arduous efforts in overcoming her problems at work. Cheuk confessed that she once hesitated about returning to her mother school to teach, and decided to ask her former class teacher for advice.

“My former form-teacher said that I should be mature enough to make my own decision. She also said that if I were recruited, it would not be simply because I was an old student, but rather because I outdid my competitors. Her words reassured me of my capabilities in teaching in a secondary



school, and of course, I was more than happy to work in a more familiar environment.”

The First Demerit—Transgressing Unspoken Rules

The following story illuminates a number of recurring problems and explores the potential for transformation that exists among teachers situated in a so-called familiar context. Cheuk had given me an overview of her “self” and her experience in working with a group of people whom she had known, respected, and understood as “teachers” but not as the “colleagues” they had become. Cheuk had remained somewhat skeptical about her abilities to adapt to teaching in a secondary school, but found it harder to adapt to unexpected situations which had never bothered her before she took up the offer.

Since Cheuk was a discipline teacher in her first school, she was naturally invited to assume similar duties at her mother school. She believed that it was also because she was a school prefect while still a student. She readily accepted the responsibilities. However, things did not turn out as she expected. The story began with the first demerit she was supposed to issue to her student for not wearing the blue jacket specified in the school regulations.



“The boy came to me in recess time and told me his mother couldn’t afford to buy the school jacket in September because she had spent most of the money on new books and the new uniform. He also explained that his father’s payday was at the end of the month, so he would probably have his jacket on the following month. His story reminded me of my younger days—not having enough money to pay the school fees.”

“I don’t think a demerit should be given to students owing to their poverty! But I can clearly see your dilemma in handling the situation. If I were you, I would tell the Discipline Head that it was the student’s first year in secondary school and he was not yet used to the school rules.”

“I went to the Discipline Head Teacher, one of the most respectable teachers when I worked as the school prefect in her Discipline Team. Her instructions were precise and she was passionate about teaching students a moral life. I hoped she would understand my student’s situation. She responded that we should be strict to all Form One students so that their learning would be on sound footing. She also asked me if I had verified from his parents if the story was true. I was upset. It was quite ruthless of her to think that my student was only using poverty as an excuse. I didn’t know how to explain to my student and inform his parents about the demerit I was supposed to issue. I suddenly realized how my new role had changed my perception in carrying out my duties. As a school prefect, I had no qualms about implementing my authority to ‘charge’ my



schoolmates with their 'mistakes.' Now, as a discipline teacher, I was torn between what I once believed was right and my sense of fairness, which pushed me to defy convention."

"I started questioning the school's regulations, of which I was once a faithful supporter. I wondered if I was smart enough to handle this type of issue. In the end, I did not issue a demerit form and phoned his parents to explain the situation. They were very grateful and promised to buy their son the jacket as soon as possible, as he had to be kept warm in school. The parents later wrote a letter of appreciation to the school and the Discipline Team for granting their child a second chance. I was summoned to the principal's office, where I was chastised for not strictly following the general principles of the Discipline Team. He said that I was lucky the parents chose to respond mildly. I found it humiliating to be 'advised' in this way. As a discipline teacher, I should have had the discretion to decide between the 'rights' and the 'wrongs.' I felt that I was only given the title of a discipline teacher, not the autonomy to act as one. I tried to comfort myself by thinking that this was an isolated incident and I should not compromise my beliefs."

Scaling New Heights in Adversities

Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall. (Confucius)



Cheuk first told us the “demerit” story at a social gathering with a group of teachers after a seminar. Everybody, including some discipline teachers from other schools, was amazed with her boldness in acting against the principles of her alma mater. Cheuk seemed unperturbed by our spontaneous feedback. However, during my interview with her two months later, she bared her real feelings.

“I was very depressed after the ‘demerit’ incident. I found myself very stupid in front of my (former) teachers, I mean, my colleagues. It seemed to me that they were all working as a team and I was not a part of it. I was greatly discouraged and thus became less outspoken. When I started at my job, some of the senior teachers who had been my subject or class teachers teased me that I still looked as I did when I was one of their students in the old days. I took that in stride as a kind of casual conversation. But after the incident, their remarks no longer sat well with me. I either simply smiled or I just walked away without saying anything. Soon, some teachers asked me if there was anything wrong. I dared not say anything. In time, even my teaching was affected. I began to doubt my decision to teach in my mother school. Although I liked teaching, especially in secondary school, I now had a strong desire to leave. A colleague, who had come to this school two years before I did, found out about my problems and advised me to take up professional studies so that I would not be burdened by such negative emotions. She had finished her master’s degree in her spare time. I



discussed it with my family and decided to take up my master's degree in education. The same colleague once told me that a person's intrinsic worth lies in his or her desire to acquire more knowledge, which she thought was essential to teachers."

According to Cheuk, this was how she found her genuine "self"—the most beneficial experience she had in her teaching career. She sensed the changes as she progressed with her studies. Once more, she attributed it to God's will.

With over 20 years of teaching experience, Cheuk is quite warm to the idea of student-centered learning. She suggests that students be taught according to their potential, regardless of the subject. After teaching in her alma mater for some time, Cheuk felt it was time to plan for her future. She already had a master's degree in education, so she naturally decided to get more professional training, this time on the curriculum, and applied for the refresher course on English.

"I had to give myself a break after teaching for so many years. I wanted to find out what new pedagogical strategies they were proposing. My attitude is not negative, though I'm a bit captious."



Teachers are drawn to the refresher course for various reasons. One is the chance to attend an English Immersion Course in English-speaking countries, such as England, usually during the summer holidays. I attended the Immersion Course in England in 1989 and the experience was amazing! It reminded me of my college life in Northcote—an authentic learning environment of English—so much so that I applied for the course again in 1998. However, I was not given the opportunity to take part in the immersion program in England that year. The government officials declared that government revenue would be better spent on those who had not had a chance yet. Based on my observation and interviews with most of the course participants, many of them were also attracted to the refresher course because of the immersion program in England. Nevertheless, I cannot deny the significance of the refresher course. Cheuk has summed up what most of us had in mind.

“When I first attended the course, I was overwhelmed by the amount of work I had to do. No teacher would like to jump out of the frying pan into the fire. (All teachers nodded their heads.) Remember the first lesson we had on teaching methodology? It was merely a flashback of what we were doing at school. The lecturers overlooked the diversity of our students. ... I think the most beneficial part of the course is the exposure one gets, seeing what the world looks like—I mean the real world—with real teachers and



your real stories about students. Teachers should be able to see that they are not alone.”

Cheuk as a Mentor

Exploring the old and deducing the new makes a teacher. (Confucius)

I couldn't have agreed with Cheuk more. Teachers with a number of teaching experiences, like Cheuk and myself, find that we have been too busy with a lot of teaching duties and administrative work. We would like to understand what other schoolteachers deal with and how they handle with similar situations. The refresher course brings teachers together and gives them the opportunity to narrate and justify what they have been doing, and reflect on it. However, many teachers are reluctant to attend refresher courses, claiming they already have professional training. Cheuk told us this story:

“I am the first teacher in my school to take the refresher course. Since I was once a student there, I found it embarrassing to ask if other English teachers had taken the similar course. So, I seldom talk about my experience about the course. It happened in 2004, when the government imposed more controls on the qualifications of English teachers. My Panel



Head asked the teachers in the panel to take the Benchmark Examination. I was exempted because of my master's degree in linguistics. One of the senior teachers, who was once my English teacher there, complained to the Principal. She confided to me later that she did not want to take the Benchmark Examination because she was too old to take it. She also believed that her teaching experience in English was a strong testimonial of her expertise."

Stories within Stories ...

Cheuk said a lot of gossip circulated in the school. Teachers, including those in other panels, started to inquire who had taken the examination. She then discovered one of her colleagues weeping at her desk. She used to be Cheuk's English teacher. The colleague complained of being under too much pressure lately.

"She confessed that she had taken numerous professional and educational training courses in the past. She told me she planned to retire when her son graduated from the university—in four to five years. She was afraid of failing the examination, which meant that she either had to retake it or quit her job. She did not want to further her education because she was afraid of the coming education reform. She said that she had to prepare for the New Senior Secondary curriculum which would be launched in 2009. She was caught in a dilemma. Having been her student before, I never doubted



her expertise as an English teacher. She was hardworking and enthusiastic about her work. I truly pitied her. I tried to reassure her and proposed taking the Benchmark Examination together because I needed her help in brushing up with my English.”

The Benchmark Story

Cheuk really wanted to give the test a try, not because of her teacher, but because she wanted to prove to herself that she was a “qualified” English teacher. She also wanted to see if the various forms of professional training undergone by her former teacher did qualify her to teach. They both passed the benchmark test.

“Both of us were satisfied with our results and we sent the certified result slips to our principal. My former teacher said she noticed a strange expression in our principal. I was more than happy because I had proved to myself what I once believed.”

This story illustrates the teacher and student dualism experienced by Cheuk in her mother school. She had proposed to take the Benchmark Examination with her former teacher because she recalled episodes when she was still the teacher’s student. The story also shows how a teacher’s identity, as experienced by the senior teacher, can be threatened



by gossip, regardless of the person's confidence and experiences. Cheuk said she was not surprised that they had both passed, but was shocked that the senior teacher resigned immediately after their results were disclosed. I asked Cheuk if her colleague's decision had affected her. My question took her unawares. After a pause, she said, *"I have never thought of that but since you ask, I do think there's some kind of connection here."*

Indeed, Cheuk applied for early retirement after teaching for a couple of years. She is now a "freelance" teacher, as she calls herself, but not a substitute teacher. She has no teaching contract with the school she is working for. She is now teaching Religious Studies two days a week in her mother school. She considers this as God's blessing because, being a Christian, she enjoys teaching biblical knowledge. But most important of all, she says, it is because

"... [I] can teach with my heart. With God's words, I feel I'm more powerful in my teaching. Besides, I find myself taking up another identity, I'm like an old schoolmate of my students. This is exactly what I cherish most. I am not constrained by any examination syllabus and I can try out any of various teaching approaches—the one that best suits the theme of the lesson, like having role-plays and listening to hymns. Sometimes, I even bring my students to the rooftop for a prayer. ... There is much more freedom in what



you plan to do with your students. I never had this positive feeling before, and I find it ironical that one may never experience the essence and joy of teaching until one quits and looks at it as an outsider.”

At the moment, Cheuk is enjoying her life as a different kind of teacher. Her professional development did not stop when she stepped out of the teaching community. She is, in fact, planning to attend other courses relating to pastoral studies.

It was when I looked at her as she left the café, her lean shadow undulating in her wake, that I decided to name her “*Cheuk*,” the Chinese name for bamboo. I thought of her determination and resilience in being able to grow strong like the Bamboo during the “*torrential downpours*” in summer.

In Cheuk’s stories, I was able to experience how one’s identity could be made complex. Cheuk was confused by her preempted understandings of how and what a teacher should act, in a familiar context—her own secondary school, which she thought initially would be an advantage. Cheuk told us how challenging and uncomfortable it was to be a teacher in her mother school. She faced criticisms from her former teachers, whom she dared not contradict at the beginning. When she sorted out how her multiple selves worked, she



was able to shine. Her stories would perhaps be best understood with this quotation by Wenger (1998: 158): “*Our membership in any community of practice is only a part of our identity.*”



Part III

Echoes among the Sounds of Silence

Chapter Eight Returning To The Sounds Of Silence...

Chapter Nine Conclusion

Epilogue The Journey Continues

Chapter Eight

Returning To The Sounds Of Silence...

The phrase “experiencing the experience” is a reminder that for us narrative inquiry is aimed at understanding and making meaning of experience. This is the baseline “why” for social inquiry. Why use narrative inquiry? Because narrative inquiry is a way, the best way we believe, to think about experience.

(Clandinin and Connelly 2000:80)

Experiencing the Experience...

Conle (2000) claims that narrative inquiry has moved, since 1980s, from being a research tool to becoming a vehicle for teacher development. Experiential narratives enable teachers to “*become better acquainted with their own story*” (Conle, 2000:51) and the process of narrative is as important as its product (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). I embarked on my research journey first with an intention to find out how teachers’ professional identities were formed, but with my own voice becoming increasingly strong as the research continued, I perceived the construction of narrative accounts of experiences as a perfect medium for the study of personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1985). Through conceptualizing what I gathered from my participant teachers, various modes of interpretations in the form of images and verbatim quotations from scholars were used to name and represent what I saw and heard. Unlike conventional practices, I thus needed to develop my own way to illustrate my understandings of my studies and employ images for what was being studied and for how it was represented. My dreamy encounters with my former teachers aptly explained the ‘temporal fluidity’ (Conle, 2000) and showed some of these critical changes over

time. It also highlighted environments which made particular stories possible and whose interpretations were offered. This also allowed the ‘open-endedness’ (Conle, 2000) of stories told and opened up empathy for others’ situations. Another example of such unconventional writing was seen in my dream conversation with Ah Leung, the masseur, which showed my engagement as a researcher in the inquiry. The links between life lived and the research process showed how my whole person was profoundly implicated. This is a stark contrast to approaching my ‘subjects’ with a recorder followed by a series of statistical manipulations and comparison of their responses.

To explicate my thoughts, I also used images throughout the study. In Part I—Paving My Research Journey, I used a winding bridge as the backdrop of the pages in Chapter One, the Research Puzzle, to illustrate my confused state of mind when I came up with the identity puzzle. This was a big contrast to Chapter Two, Disturbing the Sounds of the Silenced—Tracing My Root of Inquiry, on which a broad wide road leading to a grassy land on a sunny day was used as the backdrop of the pages. My interpretations and understandings of my previous fond memories regarding my roots of being a teacher made this explicit to my readers. It was a chapter written and read with nostalgia and hope. My line of thought changed as the research journey continued in Chapter Three, Bridging the Troubled Water—Narrative Matters. Inspired by the soothing effects narrative inquiry may evoke as participants recounted their stories, I employed another pictorial representation, a bridge above a stream of running water, to demonstrate my understanding of this.

In Part II—Lending an Ear to Teachers’ Stories, the flower images of plum blossom, orchid, chrysanthemum and bamboo were used in these teachers’ stories. A brief introduction of the flower prefaced each chapter, to give readers a clear understanding of the features of each flower and the qualities of each teacher while they were reading their stories. These images I utilized gave an “*invitational quality*” that would occasion vicarious experience for readers (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990:7-8) and hopefully prompt more stories among us.

What our Stories tell?

Teachers adapt their roles in the face of an array of changes to survive in the context of reform. To address the puzzle of how they do it, I have explored the meanings derived from the experiences of four female teachers and my own. I have employed a dual approach in which metaphors are used to illuminate alternate representations together with existing literature, and provide a rich and diverse understanding of teachers. “The Sound of Silence,” a hit song of Paul Simon (1964), represents the impasse that teachers are experiencing in the reform context. It parallels the metaphor used to describe the scenario of “*talking without speaking*” while the other party is “*hearing without listening*”. The position that teachers find themselves in resembles the situation described by “*writing songs that (are) never shared*” and “*no one dared disturb the sound of silence*” during the educational reform era. This inspired me to write about the complexities with our own voices and to unfold untapped stories of four other English teachers. While I am re-living my stories and researching the puzzle, I am also pulling out threads in our stories to piece together the research puzzle in the study. This final chapter explains how our shared stories were interpreted using thematic analysis.

I have spent the last couple of years probing my participants' interwoven personal experiences and professional practices. Several themes emerged as I recorded their stories alongside my reflective journal, thus making our "selves" visible without favouring a particular story. In writing these themes in detail, I saw that though we shared similar beliefs about teachers' professional identities, our lived experiences were articulated quite differently. However, most of the participants summoned warm memories of their youth when they interacted with their teachers.

Connecting Prior Interactions with Personal Teaching Beliefs

My study aimed to develop an in-depth understanding of how a small group of teachers in Hong Kong negotiated with "themSELVES" in constructing their professional identity in the educational reform context. Some questions perplexed me: What storylines guided their negotiation? How did language help construct or mediate their experiences? To what extent did their stories attest to their identity formation? Would I be able to capture much of their lived experiences and storied practices? Based on the ontological and epistemological perspectives informing narrative inquiry, I understand that:

The use of narrative in educational research is that humans are story-telling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world. (Connelly and Clandinin 1990:2)

The approach thus also contributed to collective interpretations and constructions of professional identity from our perspectives as learners and teachers. I also agree with

Knowles and Cole (1994) on how narratives of teachers' identities are embedded as personal, historical, and cultural life history stories. This naturally explains why our personal beliefs are comprised of prior experiences in our families and schools, and with our teachers. Similarly, Knowles (1992) and Knowles and Holt-Reynolds (1991) state that personal beliefs are critical to the biography one constructs about one's self as a teacher.

I found strong evidence in the stories of my participants that they all carried with them myriad personal beliefs about teaching and the attributes of teachers. Personal beliefs filtered their understanding of their own teaching practices, which also affected the negotiation process of their "selves" as teachers. Our perception of teachers, good or bad, was conceived at an early stage, through our interactions with former teachers. Despite the occasional miserable experience, all my participants recalled positive encounters with their former teachers that influenced their identities as teachers. Likewise, each of them gave credit to teachers who became their role models. Mei, for example, was encouraged by her teachers to teach in an evening school after her Advanced Level Examination. *"Because I was top of my class, I was deemed capable of teaching,"* she recalled.

Mei was glad that her teacher taught with her "heart" and was considerate. Her teacher thus inspired Mei to try out teaching, which unveiled her potential for it and helped boost her confidence. She thus applied to the college of education.

Similarly, Lan's earliest learning experiences in the US inspired her identity formation in Hong Kong later. She recalled that

"Unlike teachers in Hong Kong, teachers in the US don't call you by your full name. For example, they call you "Nancy," not "Nancy Wong. ... I'm doing this to my students, and they feel some sort of intimacy in the classroom."

In short, Lan was keen to use her teachers in the US as her models because they suited her teaching approaches even in a different context. Her childhood experiences as a learner shaped her interpretation of teacher identity.

Cheuk had positive words for her form teacher who had embarrassed her. She wondered, *"why a knowledgeable teacher like her would speak to her students that way."* Yet, despite the teacher being harsh and inconsiderate to her students, Cheuk still considered her strengths as a teacher and respected her.

The impact of Kuk's experiences with her kindergarten and elementary teachers was also informative. She asserted that she had been lucky to have met good teachers throughout her education. She said that

"teachers were kind and generous, ... they were good people ... and knowledgeable. ... I got a feeling that I wanted to become one of them. In fact, teaching was the work I dreamed of ever since I planned for my future."

It was obvious that Kuk's beliefs and images of teachers and teaching had been built on her prior educational experiences with teachers. She may have had an identity

framework of teachers before she took up teaching, and her perception of teachers' attributes had been implanted in her mind ever since she was a kindergarten student.

I was also lucky to have met a kind-hearted form teacher in Form Five. She came to me in my dilemma and presented various options to choose from.

FT: "What about taking some short courses on typing or shorthand so that you can work in an office? ... What about the college of education? Are you interested in becoming a teacher? You will become one in two years."

She probably does not know that her advice inspired me to go for teaching. I found her very understanding. She anticipated that my parents might not like the idea of my pursuing further studies after five years of secondary education. She persuaded me to apply for "grant and loan" if I was accepted in the college of education.

In connecting our prior experiences and interacting with our teachers, we all found our way into the teaching community. Moreover, we used that initial teaching framework to filter our interpretations of our teaching practices. Thus, our teacher identity was developed as our "lived stories" unfolded.

Negotiating for New-Selves—Dancing with Relationships

Learning how to teach is a protracted process. I asked my participants for their early childhood stories relating to teachers so as to secure an initial identification with a teaching role based on their prior experiences. Using their narratives, I plotted an initial image of their "selves" as teachers. I discovered that a high degree of their understanding of teachers was interpreted via their interactions with others. Teachers

develop their professional knowledge while interacting and building relationships with people they encounter. My participants revealed that their encounters with parents, colleagues, students, and other teachers affected their understanding of themselves as teachers. The stories they recounted sharpened their understanding of themselves and their role as teachers. Their professional knowledge development was thus closely linked to “talking” with others, the observation of other teachers’ performance, and the emulation of the success of veteran teachers. Within the contexts of ongoing interactions with others, teachers strengthened their personal and professional knowledge, thus evolving their teacher identity.

My story illustrates the development of professional knowledge. My father and mother held contrasting perceptions of a good teacher. My father was critical of teachers, believing that they should be able to take care of their students without troubling the parents (Chapter 2). On the other hand, my mother was deferential to teachers, as she considered them knowledgeable (unlike her) and authoritative persons who could be entrusted with her children. Her obsession with Confucianism empowered her concept of teachers; I later realized that this greatly influenced my choice of research topic. Long before I started my doctorate, I kept asking myself whether I was good enough in the eyes of my principal and students, and if being a teacher was doomed to be an arduous task. I remember that in my youth, mother had said:

“You have to respect your teachers no matter what they do. Going to school turns you into a woman of great virtue.”

She was afraid that I would disrespect my teachers or cause trouble at school and thus be deprived of the chance to study. Her words also had a profound impact on me when I chose a career after my secondary education. I was overwhelmed by my image of a teacher, so that when my mother urged me to apply to the college of education, it daunted me. I wrote this in my diary:

“Being a teacher is a respectable career but it would be too difficult for me to become a knowledgeable person like my teachers.”

My mother, of course, did not understand the feelings I harboured. Obsessed with divergent concepts of teachers, I finally acquiesced and got myself admitted for teacher training into one of the colleges. The identity of a teacher has been encapsulated in my understanding and personal knowledge since then; it has also become a vital part of my evolving teacher identity. Sometimes I wonder if my urge to further my studies is a consequence of the preoccupation with teacher identity that my mother instilled in me. I also cannot shake off my father’s remarks on the role of teachers. I am sure that he influences the way I teach, and I do treat my work with extreme caution. The Teacher’s Handbook issued by my school, which I took very seriously, refined my idea of what a professional teacher should do.

Mei’s narrative on the problem of Andy, her student, epitomizes the significance of interaction with others. A passionate teacher, Mei was unable to separate her person from her occupation. Andy, unmarried, had gotten his girlfriend pregnant. He confessed it to Mei, who considered herself a mother of her student.

“Guided by my maternal instinct, I told him to inform the girl’s parents and his parents immediately.”

Andy’s problem reminded her of the importance of family education and how she should handle her children’s issues. A teacher cannot leave professional morals and beliefs at the door when he/she returns home every day. Teachers bring with them the work of educating even when they are with their families. Our considerations for students consume us day after day. Mei reiterated:

“Sometimes, I do feel that I am my students’ ‘mother’ and that I have the responsibility to guide and help them when they need me.”

Mei’s commitment to help her students is a testimony to the vital link between her personal fulfillment and social responsibility as a teacher. Her personal and professional development involve her daily interaction with students and others. Such interactions molded her professional self as she looked for ways to adjust her life and routines—a dynamic process that shaped her professional identity.

The incidents both Mei and I experienced at home and school are common, especially among female teachers. The line between mother and teacher blurs once one is appointed as the form-teacher of a class. My participants also recalled the significance of collegial support. Cheuk had a very different encounter with her colleagues, some of whom were her former teachers. Her narrative in *“Scaling New Heights in Adversities”* and *“Cheuk as a Mentor”* explained why she pursued her professional development and later took the Benchmark Examination for English teachers. A colleague of hers once said that *“a person’s intrinsic worth lies in his or her desire to acquire more*

knowledge”—an essential characteristic of teachers. It was this statement that motivated Cheuk to further her studies.

“I want to find out what new pedagogical strategies they are proposing. My attitude is not negative, though I’m a bit cautious.”

Cheuk later thanked her colleague for being supportive and encouraging. In another memorable experience, her former teacher hesitated to take the English Benchmark examination. Cheuk was sure that her teacher-colleague would pass the examination, and *“never doubted her expertise as an English teacher. ... She was hardworking and enthusiastic about work.”* Cheuk was exempted from the examination because of her Master’s degree, but just to prove that she was eligible, she joined her teacher in taking the examination; they both passed it.

This story illuminates the dual nature of Cheuk’s identity as one of the alumni previously and now as a teacher teaching at her mother school. The story also shows how gossip harmed her former teacher’s identity despite her confidence and experience. Cheuk’s pursuit of professional knowledge and later, her decision to retire early appeared to have been greatly influenced by her colleagues. However, Cheuk’s narrative also reveals that becoming and remaining a teacher involve connections with her “self” and other people. Apparently, interacting with other relationships makes up part of a teacher’s identity.

Kuk shared her thoughts on negative interactions with difficult colleagues. Her miserable experiences interacted and fused with ours. It was the effect of telling and

reliving her stories that guided her future actions (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988). Reflecting on the stories told by other teachers, Kuk addressed the protracted conflicts with her colleagues from a new perspective. These “*co-constructed conversations can evoke stories that create meaning*” (Etherington 2004:39); they helped her turn the negative experiences into a positive driving force. Though she eventually quit her job, she claimed that she is “*really contented with what (she is) doing now.*” Being a substitute teacher has given her wider exposure, as it enables her to teach in different schools and in higher forms. She believes this could never have happened at her school. She said that the change has boosted her confidence and refueled her passion for teaching.

The Decisive Role Passion Plays

In addition to the anticipated preconceptions of a teacher’s image and an ongoing search for professional knowledge developments, I also discovered another decisive factor sustaining teachers’ efforts in the negotiation of their professional identity. In starting the search for a new identity, I assumed that an identity already exists and is built on certain occupational strategies that define the entry of the profession and negotiate the power and rewards based on one’s expertise (Clarke and Newman 1997:7). My participants had been teaching for a number of years, so that they were experiencing the changes in educational policies when my research took place. This was a time when our previously held beliefs of teacher identity were being shattered. Union leaders of professional bodies, academics, and individual teachers opposed the government’s new version of professionalism. There seemed to be no singular version,

as each of these groups claimed to be acting in the best interests of teachers individually and collectively (Sachs, 2001).

When asked about the definitions of “professionalism” and “professional identity,” my participants stressed that these were “achieved,” not “given.” A teacher’s professional expertise, job commitment, and fulfillment were of paramount importance to them. This concurs with what Furlong *et al.* (2000) say about professionalism.

The three concepts of knowledge, autonomy and responsibility central to a traditional notion of professionalism, are often seen as interrelated. It is because professionals face complex and unpredictable situations that they need a specialized body of knowledge, if they are to apply that knowledge, it is argued that they need the autonomy to make their own judgements. Given that they have autonomy, it is essential that they act with responsibility—collectively they need to develop appropriate professional values. (Furlong, et al. 2000: 5)

However, with the emerging reform agenda in Hong Kong, the School-based Management (SBM)^[6] and Key Performance Measures (KPM)^[7] challenged the traditional concept of teacher professionalism—in issues such as teachers’ qualifications, autonomy, and responsibility. Teachers could hardly make curriculum and pedagogical decisions without bearing the required responsibilities or making reference to the outside world. My participants’ pursuit of professional knowledge and

^[6] School-based management (SBM) framework was implemented to improve the standards of teaching and students’ learning outcomes through concerted efforts of key stakeholders, the leadership and commitment of frontline educators. This helped pave way for the implementation of the Incorporated Management Committee (IMC) in 2011.

^[7] Key Performance Measures (KPM) are constructed on the basis of Performance Indicators for Hong Kong Schools (PIs), which cover four domains of schoolwork with 23 items. The domains include Management & Organization, Learning and Teaching, Student Support & School Ethos and Student Performance.

commitment to their work showed me that they had a strong passion for teaching; they even said teaching was their dream job. Lan, for instance, refused to quit even though she was offered other job opportunities related to education.

Mei: *Now, I have no regrets. I am sure that I love teaching more than anything else. I am proud to say that I have chosen my dream job!*

Lan: *No, I'm not quitting my job. You know me well. I won't give up my work. I'm a typical career woman, a caring teacher. ... I met my schoolmate from the US. ... She wanted me to help her (with her business,) but I don't want to quit my job. After some thought, I have decided to help them as a part-time consultant.*

Kuk: *I got a feeling that I wanted to become one of them. In fact, teaching was the work I dreamed of ever since I planned for my future.*

The teachers' narratives contain the concentric element of professional identity—teacher passion, which comes from their heart and is reflected in their pursuit of professional development and identity formation. This concurs with what Palmer says in his book, *The Courage to Teach* (1998): “*Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse*” (Palmer 1998:2). He further suggests that teaching should be considered a reflection of the teacher's self. “*The self is not elastic—it has potentials and it has limits. If the work we do lacks integrity for us, then we, the work, and the people we do it with will suffer*” (ibid:16).

The passion for teaching of Mei, Lan, and Kuk has earned them the respect of their students and colleagues. In my case, I have realized that my desire to excel in both my

professional development and teaching illustrates my own passion. This element has become a part of who we are and it is impossible to separate it from our identity as teachers. That also explains our courage to embrace unpredictable changes in the era of educational reform, as we sought new venues for constructing our teacher identity.

Embracing Obstacles

To most people, teaching is a stable job. My mother thought that by being a teacher, I would bring “face” to other clan members. Similarly, her mother believed that Kuk “*would bring honor to the clan*” and was proud of Kuk’s teaching achievements. When asked to compare teaching with other professions, the participants aptly associated it with the status and material advantages it brought them. I believe that this is common in Hong Kong, as teaching had been considered a stable and rewarding occupation before the introduction of reforms. The teachers and academic community seem to share the definition of “professionalism”: A teacher’s primary responsibility is to deliver the subject matter effectively in a classroom and maintain class discipline. This consensus of a teacher’s professional identity suggests that teachers should perform in ways that favour the government and the circumstances of the moment. This concept was further reinforced when the biggest institutions—the colleges of education, which train teachers in Hong Kong—focused on the teaching of instructional tools and classroom management.

At the college of education, we had to do teaching practice. Student teachers were very much concerned with the type of schools they were assigned to since this affected their performance. In a school of good banding, whose students are diligent and disciplined,

delivering the subject content is easier, and more instructional tools could be tried out. A school of lower banding would doom student teachers to failure, as most of the time, they would have to take care of the students' discipline. Like other pre-service teachers at that time, I was instilled with a set of behaviors for proper professional decorum. These set beliefs are said to be "*biographically embedded private theories which are generally taken for granted*" (Bullough and Gitlin 1994: 78).

The pace of educational reform in Hong Kong has been accelerating since 2000, and the initiatives have placed teachers in significant roles. The success of such initiatives would depend, at least in part, on the level of match between teachers' perceptions of their role as teachers, and the demands of the reform policies. Teachers have begun to sense a very different definition of professionalism in the previous decade. The discrepancies we found in defining our "selves" as professionals have created more problems in the formation of our professional identities. Helsby (1995) quoted a very similar situation in England in 1990, wherein the range of favored characteristics associated with "professionalization", *such as pay, status, or autonomy*, contradicted those that were related to "professionalism," *such as dedication, commitment, and highly skilled practice (my emphases)* (Helsby 1995:318). In Hong Kong, the incongruity was a result of the government's attempts to use a very different "professional" discourse to implement its policy via educational reforms. Among other things, the government set up the continuing professional development framework (CPD), School Management Initiative (SMI), and Quality Assurance Inspection (QAI). These were later regarded as strategies for teacher control to address teacher redundancy.

Our perceptions of role identity became especially vulnerable when English Language teachers experienced the shift in sovereignty in 1997. One particular element that concerned Hong Kong English language teachers was the MOI (the medium of instruction) issue—whether to use English or Chinese to teach core subjects in secondary schools. The changes in the status of the English language are having profoundly negative effects on English teachers’ professional identity. Some key factors also led to more anxiety, insecurity, and ambivalence among teachers. These included the falling standards of students’ English proficiency, the introduction of English Teachers Benchmark Examination, the implementation of internal self-evaluation, and independent external school review (ESR). More emphasis was placed on the “performance” of the school based on an externally prescribed benchmark set by the market agenda and other stakeholders, such as members of the SMC and parents. This cooled our passion for teaching, as more and more “hurdles” were placed in our path. Teaching was like *“a struggle among different stakeholders over the definition of teacher professionalism and professionalism for the twenty first century ...”* (Whitty, Power, and Halpin 1998: 65). A new mandated discourse on professional identity is set to promote the devolution and decentralization of power among teachers. This puts us within the corporate management model (Brennan, 1996), in that as professionals, we have to *“meet(s) corporate goals, set elsewhere, manage(s) a range of students well and documents (their) achievements and problems for public accountability purposes”* (Brennan 1996:22).

Lan complained about the educational reforms, which she has undergone in her last 16 years of teaching.

"To cite a few, they proposed the "communicative approach" in 1993, then the 'task-based approach' for teachers. Soon we flocked in to learn the new technology and had to attain the advanced level of Information Technology. English teachers then had to pass the Benchmark Examination ..."

However, Lan did not give up, and the reforms even stoked her passion.

"I don't want to perish in the midst of a crisis. Everybody seems to be afraid of the coming reform. How many teachers in your school have left because of this? ... You know, what I did? I went to the department head and proposed a series of oral programs for junior form students after school."

Lan's story in *Surviving the Crisis* is not rare among the participants in this study. Kuk's narrative about how she resisted the perturbing micro-politics she encountered in her school showcases another type of obstacle. She once said that teaching in her school was like *"treading on a tightrope."* She found it *"suffocating"* and *"just couldn't breathe properly"* in front of her *"malicious colleagues."* Those could very well be the darkest moments of Kuk's life, but she chose to keep silent and voice no complaints against her colleagues. She was afraid of offending others, so she simply wrote down what had happened in her blog, read it aloud to herself to release her sad emotions, and then deleted it. She said it sounded silly but she felt *"much at ease in relating to"* others what had happened to her before. She even thanked me *"for helping (her) say this out loud again, in front of somebody."*

The obstacles that the participants faced, be they political mandates or personnel issues at school, even increased their passion for teaching and enabled them to address the

issues with grace and confidence. Another common thread among my participants is the unquenchable thirst for knowledge.

The Infinite Search for Knowledge

To gain knowledge quietly, to learn without losing interest, to instruct others relentlessly, indeed, what difficulty for me?

(Confucius, *Analects*, Book 7, Chapter 2)

子曰：「默而識之，學而不厭，誨人不倦，何有於我哉？」《孔子》、《論語·述而》、第七章、第二句

I had a harrowing experience when my primary six form-teacher derisively turned down my mother's request for a secondary place for me (Chapter 2). Before this incident, the thought of having no chance for education had never occurred to me. My mother had kept telling me this:

"No matter how hard life will be, I will try my best to send you to the best school."

My mom kept her word. She took home clothes from factories nearby and sewed them at night after everybody was asleep. She wanted to stay home and look after the family and our studies instead of working out in a factory—a very common setup in Hong Kong during the 1960s. Buoyed by my mom's positive attitude toward education, I had a feeling that my hard work at school would pay off and I would be admitted in a university, even though that was quite rare for many youngsters at that time. This was largely due to the educational policies made before and after 1997.

Pre-1997 period. Before the turnover of Hong Kong's sovereignty to China in 1997, Hong Kong's policy makers tended to look to western countries for educational reform blueprints (Dimmock and Walker, 1998). Educational policies before the 1980s focused on coping with student numbers, and quantitative and logistical concerns. A critical development occurred in 1978: the introduction of nine years of compulsory education and the provision of F.1 secondary places to about 90% of the age cohort. The aim was to establish a system of mass education to support Hong Kong's post-industrial economy, which was needed in a knowledge-based society. Some people also believed that by making education available to all, the society would become more stable.

Post-1997 Period. After several decades of promoting nominal education policies, the Hong Kong government turned its attention to improving the quality of education, which dominated education policy in the last decades of the 20th century. With an explosion of knowledge about brain development, cognition, and learning theory in relation to student motivation and achievement over the past 25 years (Lynch, 2000), the Special Administrative Region (SAR) government shifted to documentation, focusing on knowledge-based educational reform initiatives from school management, to teacher education.

Changes swept through the education sector, directly affecting administrators and educators. The Education Commission Report No. 7, best known as ECR7, made recommendations on Quality School Education (QSE) in April 1996, which spelled out educational initiatives and introduced a framework that would assure the quality of education. Soon after the change of sovereignty on July 1, 1997, the first Chief

Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of China (HKSAR) expanded investment in basic education through a 7.6% increase in concurrent expenditure. This included the establishment of the Quality Education Fund (QEF) and School-Based Management (SBM), now called School-Based Initiative (SMI), and a review of the educational system. Another suite of initiatives, which focused on improving the quality of teachers, was implemented. These included requiring all newly recruited teachers to acquire degree status and upgrading graduate-master/mistress (GM) posts in primary schools. The third group of reforms dealt with the language enhancement issue by introducing the Native-Speaking English Teacher Scheme (NETS), developing the Putonghua curriculum, and establishing language benchmarks in English, Chinese, and Putonghua.

These two-pronged reform initiatives addressed (1) the administrative and managerial aspects of schools and (2) the curriculum, teaching, learning, and assessment. Although these two dimensions of the policy were purportedly discrete, the government's intention was clearly anchored on the quality culture of education. However, research on implementation around the world indicates that many educational reforms designed to improve the quality of education have been rhetorical at the school and classroom levels (Fullan, 1991). The same happened in Hong Kong, where a number of studies documented the gap between the intentions of policy makers and the actual implementation in schools (Morris, 1996; Adamson, *et al.*, 2000). A study of over 1,000 teachers in October 2000 showed that over 77% felt that "*frequently changing education policies caused the most pressure*" (Chan, F., 2002).

Quantity vs. Quality. My participants underwent these educational initiatives while teaching in schools of different cultures. Although they seldom mentioned the pressure created by the educational policies, we all understood that our schools and teachers had been tremendously affected by the changes. The looming crisis that teachers first encountered was the shift from quantity to quality.

This shift was due to a number of interrelated reasons. The introduction of nine-year compulsory education meant that students reaching the eligible age were guaranteed access to schooling up to Secondary 3, irrespective of their background. Complaints mounted from the commercial sectors and higher-education institutes regarding the falling standard of English of both students and teachers, and their deteriorating performance. This focused the government's attention on a higher standard of language proficiency and a concern about improving the economic competitiveness of Hong Kong. The move was also perceived as a means to reassure the residents of the new governing body's efforts to secure the political stability and prosperity of Hong Kong following the change of sovereignty.

Mei's metaphor in "*A Bird without Wings*" underscored the importance of a university qualification for teachers during that period. Mei questioned her own identity as a teacher, especially when she was not sure whether she would be able to continue her studies. Due to her financial problems, she initially had to give up the idea, and she used this metaphor to describe the dreadful experience:

"I was like a bird without wings, unable to fly high like the other 'birds' in the sky. ... It was a painful experience."

Mei and I were educated in one of the four colleges of education, which provided teacher training for students during our time. It was ironic, therefore, that graduates from these schools were deemed unqualified to teach English unless benchmarked. The situation was aggravated when more and more university graduates flocked to the teaching community due to the soaring unemployment rate in other sectors.

MOI Issue. The forthcoming issue on the medium of instruction (MOI) recommended in EC^[81] Report No. 6 made things even worse. The policy was formally promulgated in September 1997; implementation was to start on the 1998-1999 school year. What ensued was a deluge of complaints from school principals and teachers. A confirmation to use Chinese as the medium of instruction might imply that the students were incapable of having lessons conducted in English. The government's *Guidance for Secondary School September 1997* stated that 85% of the students had to be proficient in English if the school wanted to opt for English as the medium of instruction.

Implementing the Benchmarks for Teachers. Language teachers were impacted by another education initiative—the Benchmark Examination. As a follow-up to the recommendation in ECR6, a widely represented English Language Benchmark Subject Committee (ELBSC) was set up in late 1997. The committee was composed of language educators, officers from the Education Department and the Hong Kong Examination Authority, etc. The only body that was excluded from the committee was

^[81] EC refers to the Education Commission which was set up in February 1984 as a non-statutory body advising the Government on the overall development of education and currently on monitoring the progress of the education reform in Hong Kong.

the Professional Teachers' Union (PTU), fomenting considerable opposition from serving teachers.

The benchmark exam includes formal written tests on Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking; and a performance test—Classroom Language Assessment (CLA)—wherein a teacher's actual classroom performance is rated. *Notwithstanding the outcry from the teaching community, all new teachers were required to meet the benchmarks starting from school year 2000-2001. By the end of 2005, all serving language teachers had to meet the benchmark.*

My participants did not criticize the language policy, though it had a strong impact on teachers. From their responses, however, it was obvious that their professional pursuits were being dragged down. Mei decided to “fly like the graduate teachers.” Lan said that she could not afford to become complacent about being exempted from the benchmark examination just because she was a graduate teacher. She continued to look for revolutionary teaching ideas. She designed new oral programs for her students and changed the old pedagogic practices on dictation lessons. Unlike other teachers who were wallowing in the language crisis, Lan sought paths to progress; her new “self” revealed her passion for teaching. She demonstrated her commitment to a life of learning when she applied for the refresher course for teachers—*where we first met.*

Kuk had a disheartening experience at her last school. She was forced to retire early when she found that she was marginalized for lack of qualifications. She was not a

graduate mistress and so she desperately hoped for a “new” qualification, which would give her a new professional identity.

“I don’t want to take up a professional course simply because I need some sort of qualification to help me move upward, that is, get promoted. ... I think I should do something for myself. ... I should acquire a professional degree ...”

She started her part-time degree course in English Teaching in 2004 and had lessons in the Institute of Education after school, three evenings a week, sometimes including Saturdays. She was so exhausted she almost suffered a nervous breakdown, throwing tantrums and locking herself up in her house. Kuk regretted the incident, which scared her mother and terribly embarrassed her. However, she managed to survive, thanks to her passion for what she was doing. Her hunger for knowledge almost killed her, yet in hindsight, she thought she was lucky to have taken the course.

“I earn my respect through my work. Besides, I have become a more useful person and can, therefore, be a better contributor. ... I am now more focused on what lies ahead. I have been so obsessed with my work. ... I have found a way that suits my interest in teaching without interfering in my family life.”

Kuk’s story showed how she negotiated the scenarios she encountered and bred a new identity and satisfaction out of her job. Nobody persuaded her to retire at a young age. People may conclude that she was not strong enough to survive the micro-politics at school, yet her struggle to improve and overcome difficulties after leaving the teaching community cannot be denied. She was able to overcome the negativity and pain inflicted by her past experiences; her narratives showed that she was no longer

perturbed. Spurred by her passion for teaching, she adapted her previous teaching aids to the new curriculum and she was even willing to share her “products” with us!

Cheuk was eager for lifelong learning. She said that she had to better prepare herself with updated teaching strategies, so she went for various refresher courses for teachers. However, she complained that the courses did not meet her expectations. What she cherished most was the time we shared our teaching experiences.

“The fact is we just don’t have time for this kind of professional sharing at school. We need a venue to talk about our schoolwork, students, and opinions about government policy.”

Encouraged by one of her colleagues, Cheuk furthered her studies after 20 years of teaching and obtained a Master’s degree. She agreed with her colleague that “*a person’s intrinsic worth lies in his or her desire to acquire more knowledge.*” Her determination to improve was brought to the fore by her decision to take the Benchmark Examination with a colleague (a former teacher of hers). In spite of her early retirement, she continued to teach as a substitute teacher, or work “*freelance.*” Thus, we were not surprised when she made up her mind to attend other courses relating to pastoral studies, as she believed that they would benefit her as a Christian. Now, she has more chances to contact her students as a substitute teacher and can focus on more ministries at different schools.

In this era of increased accountability and standardization, the enthusiasm for teaching is constantly changing and developing. Teachers must have the passion and

perseverance to attain certain goals in life. As a researcher, I have learned from my participants' experiences. I also realized how we affected each other by our interactions through our stories, which included our negotiation with our "selves" and governmental expectations. The need to equip oneself for lifelong learning is particularly crucial in Hong Kong, "*where academic standards are constantly being refined as our world changes*" (Darling-Hammond 2005:358). However, like my participants and many other teachers, I am used to "*new prescriptions, new mandates, and new policies*" (Clandinin and Connelly 1995:32) after having taught for more than 20 years. To passionate teachers like my participants, political pressures merely act as propellers. We live out our daily teaching experiences and foster an educational landscape of hope that cultivates an obsession for learning. Though some of my participants have left the teaching community, their passion remains contagious and permeates like the scent of flowers; a passion acts as a catalyst for teachers to work out new identities in the changing world.

Creating our Personal Voice and Identity—Sharing Echoes in the Wells of Silence

I chose four flowers to represent my participants based on their teaching experience at different phases of their career. Their narratives revealed some of their hardest moments—when they had to strive hard to "survive in inappropriate flowerbeds," where situations smothered their grievances. Extreme stress had driven some of them to the brink of a nervous breakdown (Kuk). Some recast their thinking (Mei and Lan) to "weather the storms," such as the increasing demands from the public. During this

process of “self-discovery,” we were able to see how our personal beliefs shaped our professional growth.

All four participants were female English teachers from different secondary schools in Hong Kong. These teachers are in different phases of their careers; the years of teaching experience they have logged varies as well. My interactions with them began as early as 1998, and these evolved in several directions as the study progressed. I was first intrigued by their intentions in taking up the professional development program. As friendship developed, I found their stories interesting and similar to mine in spite of our different learning and teaching experiences. I remember how earnest they were when I invited them to be part of my research, even though they were unsure of my topic. They all appreciated the idea of being involved in a structured study and were willing to provide information which would further my investigation on teachers’ professional identity. I conducted lengthy individual interviews, which were often punctuated by tearful stories. I also held group interviews, which were actually more like social gatherings and professional sharing, and I observed their reaction and behaviour. The interpretive group activity opened doors to other forms of social interaction between my participants, in which their professional identities were conveyed in a different arena.

I have mentioned in an earlier section that the metaphor “Sound of Silence” represented the lack of communication between teachers due to their heavy workload. Teachers, including myself, have been looking for venues where they could vent some pressure and air their personal voice. One of the reasons Mei, Lan, Kuk, and Cheuk enrolled in

the English refresher course was to find sanctuary; I, on the other hand, wanted to better equip myself as a teacher. Yet, we never disclosed our genuine reasons for our study leave. When my participants were asked why they chose to study in the Institute of Education instead of other institutions or universities, they turned reticent. Only after our friendship had taken root did they reveal that they liked the environment in Tai Po. They said the area was scenic and thus attractive to them. I realized that hidden reasons lurked beneath which never found their way to their personal voice. I was glad to provide the missing bridge for their conscious experiences of the self.

In making sense of the different meanings of women's voice, Hayes (2000) uses the metaphor "*voice as identity*" to illustrate how women use their voice to express their identities. As I unraveled my participants' stories, I was able to explore the identities reflected in what they said and the ideas they expressed. Cheuk confessed that because of the "demerit" incident at her mother school,

"I was greatly discouraged and thus became less outspoken. ... I began to doubt my decision to teach in my mother school."

It was also through Kuk's story that my youthful passion to teach my younger sisters came flooding back. I became more confident after taking the refresher course. It was only after having talked with my husband, then Kuk, that my identity as a teacher was confidently formed.

However, the study also indicates that as members of oppressed groups, Kuk, Lan, and I chose to remain silent, or suppress our voice when confronted by the oppressive

nature of social and cultural expectations from our parents, teachers in our youth, and colleagues. Cheuk was confused about the roles of teachers when she was openly reprimanded by her teacher despite her having been assigned the duties of a monitress. Similarly, I queried my existence when my primary teacher refused to help me gain admission to my dream secondary school. Therefore, the narratives suggest that we often use silence as a means of self-protection and to avoid expressing our own emotions. This is backed by a cultural factor under Confucianism in which “*Silence is the true friend that never betrays*” (Confucius). The Chinese believe that “silence is golden,” and the more you talk, the more mistakes you will make. That explains why teachers’ voices are seldom heard and shared. One of my participant’s narratives uncovers another way of developing a teacher’s identity: through voice. Mei was quite outspoken in the fight to allow graduates from the colleges of education to wear gowns. Such a privilege was purely symbolic, but it doubled as a manoeuvre in which she implicitly asked for identity recognition. Mei claimed that because they were “*professionally trained to be teachers, (they) deserved to have graduation gowns on (their) ‘big’ day.*”

There were times when the participants demonstrated their identity in multiple dimensions in various contexts. Cheuk’s narrative about issuing a demerit to her student in her mother school as a discipline mistress contradicted her belief in assuming a pastoral approach in coaching students. She was also confused when she realized how her “*role had changed (her) perception in carrying out (her) duties.*” When she realized that her acts were incongruous with her principles, she “*was torn between what (she) once believed was right and (her) sense of fairness, which pushed (her) to defy*

convention.” This echoes the idea advanced by Hayes (2000) idea that “*as individuals, we have diverse identities that are expressed differently in different situations*” (Hayes 2000:98). Through narratives, the teachers in the study presented themselves as different persons in different social groups and working communities. Our self-image as professionals may thus become very context-dependent.

Therefore, I conclude and recommend that teachers should be granted more opportunities to develop their own voices in establishing positive professional identities—if we want “the flowers to grow more vigorously.”

Chapter Nine

Conclusion

We need to re-narrate the past. We need to tell the past and its stories in ways that allow us to disrupt conventional narratives and conventional history. (Denzin 2008:119)

My Transformative Experiences

My research puzzle developed from an experience I had with teachers in my second refresher course, not from some theoretically informed research questions (Phillion and He, 2008). I began my study with stories with my former teachers, vivid reminders of how I perceived a teacher's identity at a young age. However, this "*causal linkage of events in a narrative ... known only retrospectively within the context of the total episode*" (Polkinghorne 1995:8 cited Trahar 2011:48), has given me an opportunity to understand "*the new episode*" (ibid) gained from 30 years of teaching, and now, from researching. The meaning I have assigned to these stories, based on my retrospection, continues to develop. It contributes to a new understanding of the environment I am working in and to influence the people I encounter. Our stories seem to end here, yet I am sure that revisiting some of them will evoke more resonance, or perhaps new stories, as we move on in our journey of self-discovery.

Charting New Identities

My own narratives have shown me that my life history is similar to those of Mei, Lan, Kuk, and Cheuk; in fact, like many other "flowers" in Hong Kong. The writing of my

own story was an educative experience. It has also opened the possibility that new meanings and transformational potential can emerge from experiences which have previously been held negative and perplexing. Through an interpretive process based on our personal and professional meanings, our teaching beliefs, images of “selves,” and metaphors that better represent our emotions are all central to the construction of our professional identity.

In recognizing our narratives and our professional lives, I have become more sensitive to my professional experiences and more receptive to the diversities among us. The research process also made me realize that much of what I once took for granted may actually be reverberated within the stories of my participants and many others in the teaching community.

The research journey of my participants was accompanied by a parallel reflexive journey of my own. This enhanced the lens through which my research puzzles were analyzed. My participants and I were able to form multi-layered stories which were made up of personal and evocative narratives—stories which were intricately meshed into a web of interaction. As I ventured into the “undergrowth,” which I once explored, using a faulty compass, I was bemused by my own perceptions and images of teachers. These had been implanted during my early education. Treading the “undergrowth” was like navigating uncharted waters filled with pain and stress. I was once the protagonist of a conflict with a senior colleague. When I passed the benchmark examination, I received no encouragement from the principal, only scorn. I felt vulnerable and bruised

after hearing the principal's shocking revelation about my qualifications. It became more and more precarious to venture forth because of an absence of "identity." I have been reticent about these "secret" stories, fearing they would be too insignificant and trivial to produce resonance. More importantly, where and how could I articulate my feelings? Having been lost in the "labyrinth," I became disenchanted with the educational system, which espoused the use of rubrics and a number of certificates to measure performance. It was only when I came to narrative inquiry that I was forced to articulate my own personal experiences; my beliefs and values rose to the surface, to be examined and re-examined for identity construction. It was also through this inquiry that I found the time and space to unfurl my stories and those of my participants, coaxed out of silence by moments of reflection and self-discovery.

Strengths and Limitations

There are many ways to examine how a teacher's professional identity is constructed and reconstructed. I chose a narrative inquiry approach because I grew increasingly aware that the stories we have about our teaching and identity reflect what these mean to us. The internal narratives and dialogues show how our selves respond to educational initiatives and how we interpret the evolution of our professional selves. These dual lenses enable me to unfold multiple perspectives on the meanings teachers have made of their experiences. This has also added new understandings to teachers' professional development. Though our voices have been silenced for a number of reasons, the narrative approach provides a venue where our inner discourses (the story we tell to ourselves), intersect with the socially disclosed discourses (the stories we tell each

other). Through the interplay in our conversations, experiences, and reflections, we came to a new understanding of our professional identity. As the research proceeded, the participants, the researcher, and hopefully, you and other readers, collaborated and negotiated with new concepts that led to this research text—a collection of voices which are narratively represented.

The sampling process of teacher participants from diverse backgrounds has strengthened the study through recognising differences in experience. With the inclusion of my-self as participant so as to secure both insider as well as outsider perspectives has also strengthened the interpretive process, allowing diverse insights gained from participants' experiences.

The study, however, is limited in that the inclusion of only four teachers' voices suggests that many more differing perspectives were not included. The findings are therefore limited to this particular group of teachers who are closely related to the researcher, such as teaching the same subject—English, and having chosen the same refresher course, thus experiencing similar challenges in the teaching context.

Where Stories lead us to...

In terms of future directions for research relating to teachers' professional identity, further exploration of a more comprehensive group of teachers from diverse backgrounds, especially those teaching different subjects, having different teaching

experiences, would be helpful in addressing the diversity of experiences of teachers in surviving the education reform context in Hong Kong.

In view of the scarcity of research done on expatriate teachers in Hong Kong, the use of narrative inquiry may be seen as particularly appropriate for NETs in Hong Kong who have different cultural backgrounds. There has also been relatively little emphasis on the experiences of male teachers, whom I think may remain even more reticent when it comes to telling their experiences. I recommend that a comparative study investigating the experiences and shifting identities for male and female teachers would shed further light on difficulties among teachers in constructing teachers' professional identities. This would strengthen approaches in running professional development courses for teachers of different genders during the education reform.

A Salute to “Flowers”

As the research progressed, I was also greatly impressed by the metaphors my participants employed to express their emotions. I came to realize then that we are made of our lived experience, and that is the way we identify and are identified. My relations and interactions with Mei, Lan, Kuk, and Cheuk also gave me a sense of who I was. Likewise, their experiences and narratives inspired me to use flowers in presenting them to the readers. We once called ourselves the “Golden Flowers” but never chose a single one to represent us. The image of flowers lingered in my mind as I started observing these teachers from episodes and significant experiences they had related to

me. I only told them about the flower labels after I had finished writing their stories based on my interpretations of their lived experiences and mine.

Yes, teachers are like flowers which need a fertile “flower bed” before they can fully bloom. I was persuaded by my former principal to work in his school. He presented to me good reasons for my choice, and cited the optimal reason—the immediate vicinity of the MTR^[9] station. As for my participants, some thought they had “landed” on the right “flower bed” until they got into trouble with their colleagues, while some were marginalized by because of their lack of qualifications. Yet, in reviving these experiences through our narratives, we began to make sense of the complexity of the construction of our professional identity.

I was also impressed by my participants’ unwavering efforts in scaling new heights though they were confronted with varied adversities. They are like flowers who, year after year, survive chilling winters, such as the currents of educational reforms launched in the last decades. Most importantly, though small in number, these teachers accentuate the process in which one constructs a storied teacher identity. The narrative inquiry fills the gaps, allowing teachers to talk, cry, explain, and weave threads of lived experiences into meaningful stories of themselves.

^[9] MTR refers to the Mass Transit Railway, which was established in 1975 by the MTR Corporation as an urban metro system to help meet Hong Kong’s public transport needs. It claims to carry an average of 4 million passengers every weekday.

Epilogue

The Journey Continues

In my last e-mail to my participants, I thanked them for their help and asked them if they would like to put an endnote of their stories. Here are the excerpts of their replies.

Mei: *Thanks for giving me a chance to construct meanings and organize my experiences. I wish I could have more chance to reflect on what has been buried in our piles of exercise books. ... Thanks again!*

Lan: *I have never processed my thoughts verbally, which were once shaped as an inner speech to me. They helped me go way back through my very first concepts of self, which I think also express, my long hidden personal and cultural stories.*

Kuk: *Thanks for being my audience. I think you help impart the continuity of my stories and provide evidence and validation of many of my unresolved uncertainties.*

Cheuk: *Reminiscing about my old days in my childhood helped me to see my true “self,” which we always talked about in our gatherings. ... I think that’s not the end of our stories, right?*

My study has to conclude here but I know for sure that our life continues. Mei, Lan, Kuk, Cheuk and I will continue our teaching in various contexts. Our journeys are never-ending and our fragrance as flowers will continue to permeate every corner of our classrooms, season after season. Our lives will also continue to blossom into “identities” that we are proud of. Perhaps, we should remember that we may not be the best teachers, but we are always striving to be better teachers.

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