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# **Exploring the Special-grade Teachers' Professional Development at Chinese Schools**

Lei Wang

## **Abstract**

This research aims to explore the special-grade teachers' professional lives. Being a unique phenomenon in the Chinese context, the title of the special-grade teacher represents not only a high level of professionalism but also a top honour. With only a tiny proportion of the teacher population getting awarded the title, the specific group of teachers is of great research value, since studying them can help us better understand what makes such outstanding teachers.

The objectives of the research are to identify the key characteristics that they possess, demonstrate the external factors that influence their professional development, delineate their professional developmental paths and discuss the problems that they encounter after they become the special-grade teachers. Drawing on narrative inquiry, the research generates the findings based on the data analysis collected from face-to-face semi-structured interviews with 16 special-grade teachers and a range of documents.

In terms of the research findings, ten key characteristics of the special-grade teachers are identified, including showing care towards their students, maintaining positive relationship with students, applying student-centred teaching, and so on. Besides, ten external factors that influence the special-grade teachers' professional development are revealed. They are divided into three types which are key individuals, critical incidents

and environmental factors. Moreover, I find three professional developmental stages, the task-led, the transitional and the notion-led stages, of the special-grade teachers. Furthermore, I demonstrate four realistic problems that they experience, such as the excessive amount of work, the lack of professional support and so on.

This thesis concludes by making recommendations to the policy makers, practitioners and researchers in the areas of policy improvement and teacher education. Implication of this research can be applied not only to the work of the special-grade teachers, but also to a wider range of teachers.

# **Exploring the Special-grade Teachers' Professional Development at Chinese Schools**

**Lei Wang**

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

School of Education

Durham University

2020

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### **Declaration**

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

In China, there is a group of teachers called “*teji jiaoshi*”. According to the official document of *Selection Rules of the Special-Grade Teachers* (1993) issued by Ministry of Education (MOE) of the People’s Republic of China, *teji jiaoshi* is an honorary title, and this group of teachers is described as “a teacher of exemplary virtue”, “a model devoted to nurturing students”, and “an expert in teaching”. In a general sense, they have gained outstanding achievements in teaching and learning, educating, as well as in leading teaching and learning as teacher leaders; and they enjoy the special government subsidy. *Teji jiaoshi* can be directly translated into “the special-grade teacher”. The title of special-grade teacher embodies one type of the highest level of teachers’ professionalism in China, while for the majority of teachers, becoming a special-grade teacher seems to be an unachievable target in that very few can be awarded the special-grade teacher by the educational authorities. My research highlights the group of special-grade teachers and explore their professional development.

In this chapter, I first give an introduction of the background to this study, and then I describe my rationale and purposes. After these, I state the research aims, objectives and questions. Last, I display the organisation of this thesis.

## 1.1 Background to the study

Since the special-grade teacher is only an honorary title, rather than a tier in the system of professional title in China, it caused great confusion at both academic and practical levels. In academia, some suggest that the special-grade teacher is a title at the top of the professional rank. For instance, Qian et al. (2017) describe the teachers’ professional rank as ranging from junior-level to special-grade teacher and point out that teachers

with honorary titles tend to be those with higher professional ranks, such as special-grade teachers. It is evident that they include the special-grade teachers as one of the professional titles. Likewise, in S. Liu et al.'s (2016) cross-sectional study about the impact of learning-centred leadership on teacher professional learning in mainland China, they list the professional rank from non-ranked to special-grade teachers. Obviously, they view the special-grade teacher as a professional title, too. However, many oppose the view and propose that the special-grade teacher is only an honorary title while not a professional title (e.g., He, 2012; Salleh & Tan, 2013; F. Wang & Cai, 2005). In practice, many headteachers and school teachers also regard special-grade teachers as the highest level in the professional title system (T. Li et al., 2017; Z. Zhong, 2016), although it is misunderstood. This confusion has resulted in many problems among the special-grade teachers and others. Therefore, it is necessary to give an introduction to the Chinese professional systems.

### 1.1.1 The Chinese system of professional titles

The system of professional titles is the fundamental system for evaluating and managing professional and technical staff (J. Li & Xue, 2020). It is rooted in the Chinese bureaucratic system. X. Zhou (2004) suggests that with its "elaborate, all-encompassing nature" (p. 156), the bureaucracy seems to leave no one unaccounted for. From the leader of the country to the typist working for the government office in a town, so long as one is a formal employee who is subject to the administration of the government system, he or she is included and regulated in the bureaucratic system. Besides, if one is a cadre or professional in a government-owned organisation, he or she is also part of the bureaucratic system.

As X. Zhou (2004) further introduces, there are two separate career tracks in the bureaucratic system, the administrative ladder and the professional ladder. Progression in the Chinese bureaucracy moves along either the administrative or the professional

ladder. For evidence, in 1955, the State Council officially brings in the salary system that is aimed to uniformly apply to all government employees. On the basis of the salary system, it is a hierarchical system with 30 administrative (salary) grades covering all the positions in the bureaucratic system. Two points are made clear about the grade system. First, it is constructed along a ladder of administrative ranks, and second, within each rank, more refined grades are made for differentiation and promotion. Shortly after the introduction of the salary system, a professional rank system mirroring the national administrative system across all various sectors is enacted. It is designated for all the professional specialty areas, such as engineers and teachers.

Based on this overall background, teachers are professionally ranked according to their work experience and teaching expertise (Qian et al., 2017), which is largely connected with their salaries (Lu Wang and Lewin, 2016). In fact, there is a system of professional titles for teachers in China. It plays a significant role in teachers' work, as it is concerned with many aspects of the teachers, such as appointment, duties, remuneration and assessment (Ding, 2015). China also has a teacher honour system which consists of honorary titles at different levels to commend the teachers' excellence, such as Model Teacher, Backbone Teacher, Leader of Subject, and so on (Song et al., 2013). A review of the two systems in in the next two sections helps to understand the context of the research.

### 1.1.2 The system of professional titles for teachers

Establishment of the system of professional titles for teachers is evidenced legally in China. Teachers' Law of the People's Republic of China (1999, p.23) states, "The state shall implement a regime for teachers ['] duties. the specific terms of which shall be stipulated by the State Council". Further, as specified in *Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China*, "The State shall establish a uniform system for the professional titles of teachers engaging in compulsory education. The professional titles



of teachers shall be classified into primary, intermediate and senior titles.” (MOE, 2009a, Article 30). The 9-year compulsory education refers to the six years of primary education plus the three years at the junior high school. Hence, according to the law, a system of professional titles is stipulated to establish in primary and junior high schools. Moreover, the system of professional titles is also demanded in higher education. *Higher Education Law of the People's Republic of China* notes, “A system of professional titles shall be instituted among teachers in higher education institutions” (MOE, 2009b, Article 47). These show that the system of professional titles is stipulated by law at different levels of education in China.

The development of the professional title system for primary and secondary school teachers in China basically goes through three phases. The first phase is from 1986 to 2008; the second from 2009-2015; and the third from 2015 onward. In 1986, the State Education Commission published the *Proposed Regulation on the Duty of Primary and Secondary School Teachers*, signifying the formal establishment of the system of professional title. The Proposed Regulation involves three main parts which are the regulation of the duty system for primary school teachers, the regulation of the duty system for secondary teachers and the implementing advice for the two systems. Apparently, the two systems are set up separately for primary and secondary schools, and each system has four levels which are, from the lowest to the highest, the third-grade teacher, the second-grade teacher, the first-grade teacher, and the senior-grade teacher. A certain number of people can be awarded these titles. The basic salary of teachers is paid based on the levels of duty. The higher their levels are, the more they get paid. However, even if two teachers are at the same level, with one from a primary school and the other from a secondary school, they will get paid differently. The secondary school teacher gets paid more than the primary school teacher. In practice, the senior-grade teacher in primary school is equivalent to the first-grade teacher and the first-grade teacher in primary school is equivalent to the second-grade teacher. The same applies to the rest of the levels (T. Li et al., 2017).

The system of professional titles is practiced at multiple levels of education, as illustrated in official statistics published by MOE. Specifically, MOE (2018a; 2018b; 2018c; 2018d; 2018e; 2018f; 2018g) confirms application of the system in pre-primary, primary, junior secondary, regular senior secondary, secondary vocational, special and higher education, as they list the numbers of full-time teachers working at these levels of education by professional rank. Although the numbers are meant to be shown by professional rank, many of them are listed by professional titles. It is worth noting the difference between professional titles and professional ranks. Indeed, although professional titles and ranks are closely related, they are slightly different from each other. Y. Zhao et al. (2008) make it clear that teachers' professional titles awarded by educational authorities indicate their rank. For example, while the 3rd grade primary is a specific professional title, the junior serves as a professional rank (Li Wang, 2014).

In 2009, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security (MOHRSS) and the MOE collaboratively develop a new system of professional titles for primary and secondary schools, in order to deal with such problems as unreasonable setting of professional levels, unscientific evaluation criterion and incompatibility with the personnel system of the public institutions. The idea is piloted in some parts of Jilin, Shandong and Shaanxi provinces and is made into a new system, based on the experience from the pilot. Table 1.1 illustrates the corresponding relation between the former and the new levels of titles.

As demonstrated in Table 1.1 (see the next page), since the reform of the professional title system in 2015, the former third-grade teacher and second-grade teacher in primary school as well as the third-grade teacher in secondary school are all combined into the new third-grade teacher. The former first-grade teacher in primary school and second-grade teacher in secondary school together are regrouped into the new second-grade teacher. The former senior-grade teacher in primary school and the first-grade teacher in secondary school become the new first-grade teacher. The senior-grade teacher remains the same, while the most important change is the addition of a new

professional title called *zhenggaoji*, and it sits at the top rank. In this way, the two different systems of professional titles for primary and secondary education are merged into one, which corresponds to the professional ranks of sub-junior (*yuanji*), junior (*zhuliji*), middle (*zhongji*), sub-senior (*fugaoji*) and senior (*zhenggaoji*) in the uniform system.

Table 1.1 The corresponding relation between the former and the new levels of professional titles

Professional Titles (1986)		Professional Titles (2015)
Primary school	Secondary school	
		<i>zhenggaoji</i> Teacher
	Senior-grade Teacher	Senior-grade Teacher
Senior-grade Teacher	First-grade Teacher	First-grade Teacher
First-grade Teacher	Second-grade Teacher	Second-grade Teacher
Second-grade Teacher	Third-grade Teacher	Third-grade Teacher
Third-grade Teacher		

### 1.1.3 The teacher honour system and the special-grade teacher

The teacher honour system is developed to improve the situation of low social and economic status that they have long been in (Song et al., 2013). In the tradition of Confucianism, propriety is fundamental, and respect for teacher and a high value for education are of foremost importance. Teachers have been idolised in cultures filled with the Confucian tradition. This is reflected in the traditional Chinese phrase, such as “heaven, earth, sovereign, parent and teacher” (*tian di jun qin shi*, 天地君亲师). The phrase is put forth by Xun Zi who is deemed “the greatest Confucian philosopher after Confucius and Mencius” (Ko & Adamson, 2011, p. 375). According to F. Zhong and Zhu (2016), Xun Zi views teacher as important as the other four elements of the phrase and should be placed on the same status as the four. As Ko and Adamson (2011) interpret, these are the five most important things that people have. Moreover, influenced by

Confucianism, the Chinese have a great respect for older people in general. It is worth noting that the Chinese term for “teacher” is *laoshi*, which is literally translated as “old expert” (Salleh & Tan, 2013), or in a different way, “venerable teacher” (Ko & Adamson, 2011). Both translations embody a sense of respect in the term itself.

However, they did not have high social or economic status in ancient China, despite the strong respect that teachers enjoyed. Thus, they were a group of socially underprivileged individuals, since the prestige of being teachers did not necessarily redeem them high social status. Although their role bears great political, religious and moral implications as preservers of harmony, they sat at the bottom of the ladder of social advancement. Most of them only achieved the “Flowering Talent” (*xiucai*), a rank that showed that they were educated to a certain level, but it was not enough for them to be able to work in the prestigious civil service. As they were badly paid, many left the profession and made a living in other ways. Given the low status of teachers for long, the government took measures to change the situation. One measure is to award titles to teachers, which began in the 1950s when all school teachers were honorifically called “people’s teachers” (*renmin jiaoshi*). Another measure is to set up the teacher honour system in recognition of academic and pedagogical performance of individual teachers as well as professional collectives at national, provincial, municipal, and school levels (Ko & Adamson, 2011). The special-grade teacher is one of the titles in this system.

It is usually believed that the title of the special-grade teacher was not initiated until 1978 (W. Han & Liu, 2013; He, 2012; Qiao et al., 2009); nevertheless, there is ample evidence that shows that the title was first introduced in 1956 (L. Jin, 2012). At that time, owing to the phenomena of low remuneration, low status and low quality of teachers, the Ministry of Education (MOE) drafted *The Report about Improving Primary and Secondary School Teachers’ Remuneration and Social Status*. In connection with wage reform for the national educational system, Beijing selected 32 special-grade teachers that year and offered them a special increase in their salaries. This was followed by

another three times of selection of the special-grade teachers in 1959, 1960 and 1963. By 1966, there were 42 special-grade teachers in total. The trial in Beijing served as a practical basis for the formal establishment and implementation of the institution of the special-grade teacher nationwide. However, the policy paused, as the Cultural Revolution began (F. Wang & Cai, 2005).

In 1978, Deng Xiaoping, the then-Vice Chairman of the Communist Party of China, started the economic modernisation drive and accepted that education was key in implementing this policy. He also recognised that in the wake of the Cultural Revolution, teachers had the issue of low morale. Hence, he made crucial indications during the national conference of educational work. As he stated, the salary system of primary and secondary school teachers needed to be examined; proper measures should be adopted in order to encourage individuals to engage in the educational cause for their lifetime; and exceptionally excellent teachers can be made the special-grade teachers. In response to Deng Xiaoping's speech, the MOE and the State Planning Commission issued *Interim Provisions on the Selection of the Special-grade Teachers* (in abbreviation, *Interim Provisions*), marking the official introduction of the institution of the special-grade teacher. In June 1993, based on comprehensive consultation, the State Education Commission (now renamed the MOE), the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security and the Ministry of Finance revised the *Interim Provisions* and published *Selection Rules of the Special-Grade Teachers*. In the same year, *Teachers' Law of the People's Republic of China* was enacted, and it stipulated, "Titles of honour shall, in accordance with relevant state regulations, be conferred upon teachers who make major contributions." (Teachers' Law of the People's Republic of China, 1999, p. 26). Up to the end of December in 2011, there are 12,001,841 full-time teachers in the country, with 18,417 of them, 1.5‰ of the population being in-service special-grade teachers (F. Wang & Cai, 2005). Evidently, the special-grade teachers are the best teachers in the Chinese context.

## 1.2 Rationale for the study

I select the special teachers as the subject of the study based on my curiosity about and my recognition of the importance of the profession of teacher, as well as my consideration about my future career orientation.

### 1.2.1 Curiosity about teacher

Until now, I still remember one of my teachers who taught me English about a decade ago. Slim and handsome, he was always full of passion and inspired me much in my English language study. I spent hours in learning new vocabulary and reading articles every day, and I really enjoyed studying the subject of English mainly because of him. In comparison with other teachers, I knew that he was unique. Yet, I was not able to elaborate on his characteristics. For many years, I have been curious about what makes a great teacher. With this question in mind, I carry out the doctoral study to find out the answers.

### 1.2.2 Recognition of the importance of the profession of teacher

In China, teachers are widely praised as “engineers of human soul”. At the academic level, the significance of the profession of teacher and the weight that it carries is reflected in different studies. For instance, while Andy Goodwyn (2020) describes teacher as a “highly skilled, demanding and fundamentally vital profession”, Auguste et al. (2010) identify the effectiveness of the classroom teacher as the most important controllable factor in an education system. At the policy level, the policy document of *Opinions on Comprehensively Deepening the Reform of the Teaching Force Development in the New Era* calls for the utmost importance of the work of teachers to be fully recognised (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China & The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2018). Admittedly, the importance of the profession of

teacher is too high to ignore, especially for those who hold an interest in the field of education.

### 1.2.3 Consideration for future career development

I have long been interested in engaging in educational work, and being an excellent teacher is obviously an appealing option for me to pursue. In relation to this piece of research, identifying the characteristics of the outstanding teachers can set an evidence-based standard for me to reach in my future professional role. Besides, researching the factors that influence the teachers' professional development is beneficial to me because having been aware of the effect of the different factors, I can try to take advantage of the favourable factors and avoid the adverse ones in the practical work, thereby gaining more smooth development. Moreover, learning the professional developmental paths of the special-grade teachers can help me understand the hardships that they have overcome, which paves the way for me to become an excellent educator.

## 1.3 Significance of the study

Indeed, the special-grade teachers stand out from the ordinary teachers and gradually become excellent educators with key characteristics. Meanwhile, multiple factors affect their professional growth, and they go through particular professional developmental paths. If the characteristics, the influencing factors and the developmental paths can be revealed, they can potentially contribute to teachers' professional development and teacher education. Moreover, they encounter different problems after they become the special-grade teachers, and making the problems explicit is helpful for policy improvement. For these reasons, I conduct the research to address these issues.

## 1.4 Research aim, objective and questions

The research aim is to investigate the special-grade teachers' professionalism in China.

Evans (2008, 2014, 2019) defines professionalism as:

[W]ork practice that is consistent with commonly-held consensual delineations of a specific profession or occupation and that both contributes to and reflects perceptions of the profession's or occupation's purpose and status and the specific nature, range and levels of service provided by, and expertise prevalent within, the profession or occupation, as well as the general ethical code underpinning this practice. (Evans, 2008, p. 29)

The substances of professionalism consist of three constituent components: behavioural, attitudinal and intellectual. The behavioural component refers to what teachers physically do in their work; the attitudinal component involves the attitudes the teachers hold to their work; and the intellectual component is teachers' knowledge and understanding towards their work, including their knowledge base, as well as the nature and degree of their reasoning and analyticism that they apply to the practice. I would look at special-grade teachers' professionalism both as a group and as an individual, and describe and interpret their behaviour, attitude and wisdom in their practice.

The objective of this research is to explore special-grade teachers' key characteristics, the influencing factors on their development, their professional developmental paths and the practical problems in their professional lives. The following four specific research questions guide my research:

1. What are the key characteristics of the special-grade teachers?
2. What are the crucial external factors influencing the special-grade teachers'



professional development?

3. What are the professional developmental stages of the special-grade teachers?

4. What are the existing problems in the practice of the special-grade teachers' work after they achieve the award?

I employ narrative inquiry in this research. The answers to the four questions can enable me to gain a deeper understanding of the unique phenomenon of special-grade teachers in the Chinese context.

## 1.5 Organisation of this thesis

This thesis unfolds in eight chapters. It begins with an introduction to the whole thesis in Chapter 1 that provides a brief background of the topic and rationale for the study. It sheds light on the significance of the study and presents the aim, objective and questions of the research. Chapter 2 reviews the research on the special-grade teachers in the Chinese context first and then the research on the best teachers in the world. It also includes a review of the research on effective teaching in the internationally context, and it ends with critical comments on the existing literature and the current research focus. Chapter 3 deals with the methodological issues. It starts with consideration of philosophical issues and moves on to the research approach of narrative inquiry. Besides, it describes the processes of sampling selection, data collection and data analysis. Ethical issues are also addressed. Chapters 4 to 7 serve as the findings to the research questions. In turn, Chapter 4 identifies the 10 key characteristics of the special-grade teachers, and Chapter 5 summarises the 10 influencing factors in three types on the special-grade teachers' professional development. Chapter 6 delineates the three stages of their professional developmental paths, and in Chapter 7, the problems existing in their practical work are unveiled. Chapter 8 discusses the implications and applications of the research findings with a conclusion to the study in Chapter 9 in the end.

## Chapter 2 Literature Review

The literature review began by a search of the literature regarding the special-grade teachers using the Chinese term “特级教师” which can be translated as “the special-grade teacher” as a keyword on the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI, cnki.net) website. Through reading and skipping through the abstracts of and the main bodies of the articles on CNKI, I found dozens of articles and divided them into types. Articles of the first type were written based on the research outcomes of national-, provincial-, and municipal-level research projects, while the second type were the rigorously structured and well-reasoned reflective articles. From the articles, I found that the Chinese term was translated into various English terms. Many used the term “special-class teachers” (X. Fan, 2015; L. Jin, 2012; S. Liu et al., 2016; Qian et al., 2017), and many others chose the term “special-grade teachers” (Peng et al., 2014; Salleh & Tan, 2013; Song et al., 2013). While these two terms were most frequently seen, other terms were also found to be in use, such as “special rank teachers” (Ko & Adamson, 2011; Marton, 2006), “super-grade teachers” (M. Li et al., 2017), “superfine teachers” (He, 2012; F. Wang & Cai, 2005; S. Zhang, 2012;), “master teacher” (Fan et al., 2015; E. Y. Zhang & Adamson, 2007) and “a teacher of special classification” (W. Han & Liu, 2013). While all the different terms refer to the same group of teachers, for the sake of convenience and consistency, I select the term “special-grade teachers” to represent the specific group in this research. Using these English terms as the keywords, I found relevant articles in different databases, such as Wiley, Springer, Taylor & Francis, JSTOR, Google Scholar and so on. Then, from the reference lists of the articles, I identified more studies on the special-grade teachers. In total, I selected and read about 100 books and articles, which provided me with a relatively comprehensive cognition of the research on group of the special-grade teachers.

Next, I used “excellent teachers”, “outstanding teachers” and “expert teachers” as the keywords in search of the literature, and I gained another approximately 100 relevant

books and articles. While reading them, I sorted out the definitions of the best teachers from the official documents of Australia, the UK, and the USA, which enriched my understanding about the qualities of the best teachers. I also learned the history and features of the research on expert teachers, expert teaching, and expertise. In order to gain an in-depth comprehension of the work of the special-grade teachers, especially of teaching which is apparently the main job of teachers, I read literature that observed the teachers' work from different angles. I picked out the materials of the most relevance to my research and studied them profoundly.

Through reading and examining the literature, I gained a sound grasp of the present situation of and the existing knowledge in the research field. Incorporating my research purpose and interest, I made clear my research focus. Based on the focus, I read and collated the literature on aspects, such as teachers' learning, teachers' professional development and so on. Last, I made the choice of the theoretical perspectives underpinning my research, and both the theoretical perspectives and the relevant literature on expert teachers formed the theoretical foundations of the research.

Hence, as illustrated in Figure 2.1, the chapter of literature review consists of four sections. In the first section, I look at the research on the special-grade teachers in China. Specifically, I demonstrate the positioning of and the selection rules for the special-grade teachers, according to the official documents of the government. I present the understanding of the connotations of the special-grade teacher and the *zhenggaoji* teachers by comparing and contrasting the two titles. I also summarise and elaborate on the three features of the research on the special-grade teachers. In the second section, I pay attention to the research on the best teachers and effective teaching internationally. Since there is a gargantuan body of literature on the topics, I only include the most relevant and representative studies that are worth referring to in the section. In the third section, I provide the critical comments and research focus, and in the fourth section, I elucidate several theoretical perspectives underpinning the research.

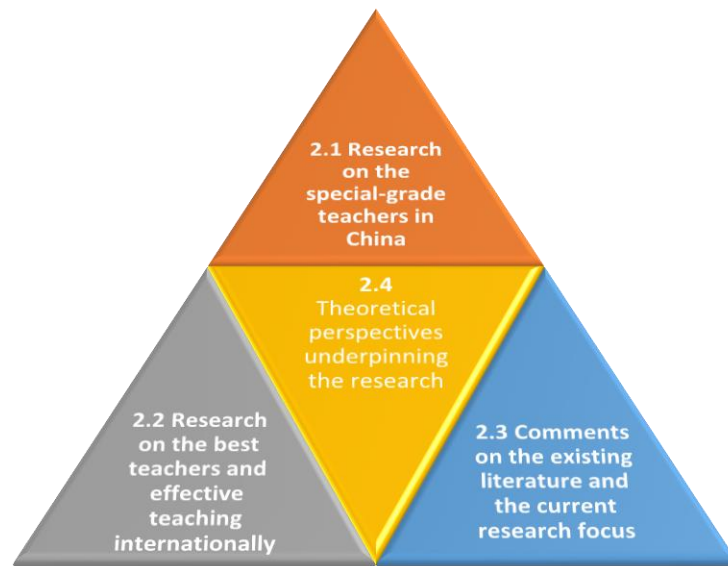


Figure 2.1 The organising structure of the literature review chapter

## 2.1 Research on the special-grade teachers

### 2.1.1 “Special-grade teachers”: a unique title in the Chinese context

In the introduction chapter, I have displayed the background of the Chinese professional title system and the teacher honour system. It is known that scores of researchers, school leaders and teachers have mistakenly identified the special-grade teacher as highest level in the Chinese professional title system over many years (T. Li et al., 2017; Z. Zhong, 2016). It was not made clear to them until the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security (MOHRSS) and the Ministry of Education of China (MOE) jointly issues the Guidance on Deepening the Reform of the Professional Title System for Primary and Secondary School Teachers in August 2015, when *zhenggaoji* teacher is added to the system and becomes the highest level among all the professional titles for primary and secondary school teachers. In essence, the *zhenggaoji* teacher is deemed similar to professorship in Higher Education. It is then that they realise that the special-grade

teacher is not equal to the *zhenggaoji* teacher. To further grasp the differences between them, I draw on the documents from the government to clarify.

### **2.1.1.1 Specific regulations about “the special-grade teachers”**

To deepen the understanding about the special-grade teachers, I look at some key aspects, such as the significance, the scope and the requirements, of the title at the policy level. I translate several items of the *Selection Rules of Special-grade Teachers* (1993), as these points can provide a general picture about the specific group of teachers.

- Significance of selection: It encourages the vast number of primary and secondary school teachers to engage in the educational cause in the long term, further improves their social status and commends those who have made extraordinary contribution to teaching and educating.
- Connotation of the title of special-grade teacher: “the special-grade teacher” is a title with professionalism and advancement that is aimed to commend the exceptionally excellent primary and secondary school teachers. The special-grade teacher is supposed to be a teacher of exemplary virtue, a model devoted to nurturing students, and an expert in teaching.
- Scope of application: Teachers at secondary school, primary school, nursery, normal school, blind-deaf-mute school, teacher training school, vocational secondary school, teaching research institutes and off-campus education institutes.
- Requirements of the special-grade teacher:
  1. Adhering to the basic line of the Party, loving the socialism motherland and being faithful to the educational cause of the people; earnestly implementing

educational guidelines; and consistently and exemplarily performing the duties of teacher, imparting knowledge and educating people and being a model of virtue for others.

2. Holding the senior rank at primary/secondary school. Possessing systematic and strong theoretical knowledge and abundant teaching experience; and being proficient in professional work and rigorous in scholarship with notable outcomes of educating and teaching. Or having prominent expertise and abundant experience in the aspects of work of ideological and political education and of class teacher and achieving notable results; and being bold to innovate or having distinguished results in pedagogical research and textbook construction in the reform of educating and teaching. Having prestige in the local community of education.

3. Making notable contribution to enhancing teachers' ideology and politics, cultural and professional work level and ability of educating and teaching in training.

- Required number of Selection: The selection work of special-grade teacher should be conducted in a planned and regular way. In each province, autonomous region and municipality, the total number of in-service special-grade teachers is generally controlled within 1.5‰ of the population of primary and secondary school teachers. The main focus of selection is the primary and secondary school teachers working at the frontline.
- Remuneration: The special-grade teachers enjoy the subsidy of special-grade teachers, 80 Chinese Yuan per person per month. They continue to enjoy the same amount of subsidy after retirement.

(Translation of the selected items from the document *of the Selection Rules of Special-grade Teachers*, 1993)

Apart from these, the policy also regulates the selection procedure, management and so on. Noticeably, the 14<sup>th</sup> article in the document points out that based on the Selection Rules, the educational administrative departments in each province, autonomous region and municipality can lay down specific measures of selection and management of the special-grade teachers, with consideration of the actual situation in the area. Thus, different places introduce local policies, according to their specific situations, while the selection cycle, organisation and procedure vary. To exemplify, Gansu, Heilongjiang and Yunnan select special-grade teachers biennially, whereas Tianjin, Zhejiang, Shandong and Guangdong do it once per four years. Most of the other provinces and cities hold one selection in every three years. Meanwhile, the selection rules are detailed locally. The key indicators in the majority of the local policies centre around the six aspects which are lofty professional virtue, exquisite art of teaching, nurturing students cordially, strong research as well as guiding abilities, and meeting the requirement of professional rank and in-service duration.

#### **2.1.1.2 “Special-grade teachers” and “zhenggaoji teachers”**

Having reviewed the title of the special-grade teacher from historical and policy perspectives, I highlight the confusion caused by the title, especially when it is compared with the *zhenggaoji* title. According to the “Review and Selection Criteria of Primary and Secondary Senior Teachers (Duties)” (2015), same as the special-grade teachers, the *zhenggaoji* teachers are asked to adhere to the Communist Party, love the country and be faithful to the educational cause of the people, which are termed the basic requirements. Besides, there are five aspects of specific requirements for the candidates of the *zhenggaoji* teacher to meet. For the first aspect, teaching and educating people, main items involve working at the frontline of educating and teaching for the long run, playing the role of mentor and guide in promoting the students’ healthy growth, completing such work as class teacher, instructor and so on extraordinarily, and having outstanding outcomes of teaching and educating people. For the second aspect, curriculum teaching, main requirements include having profound theoretical basis and subject knowledge, systematically mastering the curriculum system of the subject taught,

possessing curriculum and teaching leadership, and forming unique teaching style, distinguished teaching thoughts and exquisite art of teaching. In terms of the third aspect, research on educating and teaching, main points encompass having the ability to host, guide and lead the research of educating and teaching in the teacher's own or a certain subject area, gaining innovative outcomes in educational thought, curriculum reform, teaching method and other aspects and applying widely to teaching practice, and playing a demonstrating and leading role in implementing quality education. With regard to the fourth aspect, influence, key elements involve enjoying a very high profile in the field of teaching, being an expert in educating and teaching widely recognised by the peer, and making outstanding contribution to instructing and developing the first-grade, second-grade, third-grade teachers. In reference to the fifth aspect, educational background and experience, it requires teaching as a senior-grade teacher for 5 years after gaining a Bachelor's degree or above.

In the past 30 years, the outstanding school teachers are awarded the special-grade teachers, enjoying government subsidies. In many people's mind, the special-grade teacher seems to be replaced by the *zhenggaoji* teacher, since the introduction of the latter. Yet, other people make a sharp distinction between the two titles, just as Bao (2011, p. 63) states, "In my opinion (just an individual view), the title of 'special-grade teachers' is a political honour, and it is the similar as Labour Model or Advanced Element, since it is not reviewed by the academic committees in different levels, and naturally, it is not an academic achievement. In the application for the *zhenggaoji* teacher, there is no reason to receive 'a privilege of being given exemption from the examination', and no more than unrealistic guess that some people profess that the title of the special-grade teacher is equivalent to that of *zhenggaoji*." In fact, in the reform of professional title system, the special-grade teacher is still positioned as an honorary title, without being made part of the professional title system. This gave rise to the negative emotions of the group of special-grade teachers, as the *zhenggaoji* teacher, in a sense, becomes the more favoured goal to achieve than the special-grade teacher for the excellent teachers. Such background information builds a good ground for understanding the



group of special-grade teachers deeply in this research study.

## 2.1.2 Research on the special-grade teachers in the Chinese context

Through reading research on the special-grade teachers in the Chinese context, I categorise the literature into three topics: (1) the analysis of the structure of the special-grade teachers, (2) the research on developmental phases and (3) the research on characteristics.

### 2.1.2.1 The analysis of the structure of the special-grade teachers

Among the research reviewed, the most comprehensive one with the richest data is believed to be the project entitled “Research on current situation, management and policy improvement of the special-grade teachers” (Z. Zhong, 2016). The research project is authoritative to a certain extent, as it is conducted by Beijing Institute of Education and is entrusted by the Department of Teachers’ work of the MOE. Its data come from the local education authorities in 31 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities. The research suggests: since 1978, 38,000 teachers have been awarded the special-grade teachers in the whole country. Up to the end of December in 2011, there are 18,417 in-service special-grade teachers nationwide, accounting for 1.5‰ of the population of the full-time nursery, primary and secondary school teachers. The five places with the largest proportion of special-grade teachers are listed in the Table 2.1 (see the table on the next page).

The place with the highest proportion of the special-grade teachers is Beijing, with 3.2‰ of the teachers there being the special-grade teachers. The other top ranked places include Shanghai, Tianjin, Ningxia and Henan. Besides, Tibet becomes the one with the lowest proportion of the special-grade teachers among all the places. The other 25

places have a proportion between 1.0‰ to 1.9‰.

Table 2.1 The top five areas with the largest proportion of special-grade teachers (selected from Z. Zhong, 2016, pp. 81-82)

Province, autonomous regions or municipalities	The number of in-service special-grade teachers	The number of the full-time nursery, primary and secondary school teachers	The proportion of the special-grade teachers
Beijing	402	125893	3.2‰
Shanghai	360	126577	2.8‰
Tianjin	240	88996	2.7‰
Ningxia	171	66788	2.6‰
Henan	2096	975902	2.1‰

With regard to gender, 57.30% are male while 42.70% are female. For age distribution, most (82.62%) of the in-service special-grade teachers centred around 41 to 55 years of age, and 39.74% of them are at 46 to 50. In terms of the age of their award, they are mostly awarded between 36 and 50 years of age, with some (38.32%) between 41 to 45, some (24.59%) between 36 and 40 and others (22.75%) between 46 and 50. Concerning the subjects that they teach, Chinese language and mathematics teachers take up the largest proportion, with 29.50% for the former and 26.11% for the latter. While the special-grade teachers in physics, chemistry, politics and English language account for 8.09%, 7.66%, 7.66% and 7.38%, respectively, the proportion for other subjects sits between 0.39% and 3.07%. There is no huge difference in the subject distribution across different places. As for whether the special-grade teachers assume administrative roles, more than half (61.10%) undertake middle-level administrative roles or above. Amongst them, 18.50% are head teachers, 18.65% work as deputy heads, 19.24% serve as middle-level leaders, and the rest (4.71%) assume other administrative roles. Additionally, 11.77% work as leaders of their subject groups or year groups. This research provides us with a

fairly comprehensive understanding about the distribution of the national special-grade teachers.

In addition to the research project above, other scholars carry out in-depth research on the local special-grade teachers in certain areas, which helps me learn the information about the selection of the special-grade teachers. For instance, He (2012) did a study with 702 special-grade teachers who gained the title over six times of award since 1980 in Jiangxi Province, and reflected on the structure and professional development of the group of special-grade teachers. The factual numbers are summarised in the Table 2.2 below:

Table 2.2 The personnel changes among the special-grade teachers up to the end of 2011 in Jiangxi Province (He, 2012)

	the numbers awarded	retirement or dismissal	going out of the province	the numbers of the in-service
1980	31	31	/	0
1991	96	96	/	0
1999	90	72	7	22
2005	101	18	7	65
2007	151	5	4	142
2011	233	0	2	231
Total	702	222	20	460

As Table 2.2 illustrates, the number of applicants for the award has increased over the 31 years. By the end of 2011, there are 460 in-service special-grade teachers in the province, with 231 that is almost half of the population getting the title in the sixth award. According to the Selection Rules of the Special-grade Teachers issued in 1993, the selection ratio rises from 5‰ to 1.5‰. This may partly explain the reason of the

increased application.

He (2012) also finds five main features of the group of teachers. First, the special-grade teachers mainly work at primary and secondary schools, while there is a huge difference in the proportion of them working at the pre-school, primary and secondary school levels. According to the situation of the in-service special-grade teachers, the teachers at the secondary school level (including junior-high, senior high and vocational-high) account for 76.5% of the population, while those at the primary school and pre-school levels only form 22.6% and 0.9%, respectively. At the secondary school level, most of the special-grade teachers (64.6%) teach in senior-high, whereas only 11.9% are in junior-high. Second, the distribution of the subjects of teaching is uneven. Among the in-service teachers, 241 are Chinese language and mathematics teachers, accounting for 52.6%, more than half of the population. Physics, foreign language and chemistry are also the popular ones, as 11.5%, 9.7% and 8.6% of the special-grade teachers teach the three subjects respectively. In total, 379 are in these five subjects, making 82.4% of all. In comparison, not many are biology, history and geography teachers, and those in music, physical education, art and nursery education are fairly rare. Third, regarding age, the proportion of middle-aged and youth teacher has enhanced over time. The average age of the special-grade teachers has shown a decreasing trend. As Figure 2.2 below displays, the proportion of the special-grade teachers at 45 and below start to exceed that of those over 45 years of age from 2005 onward.

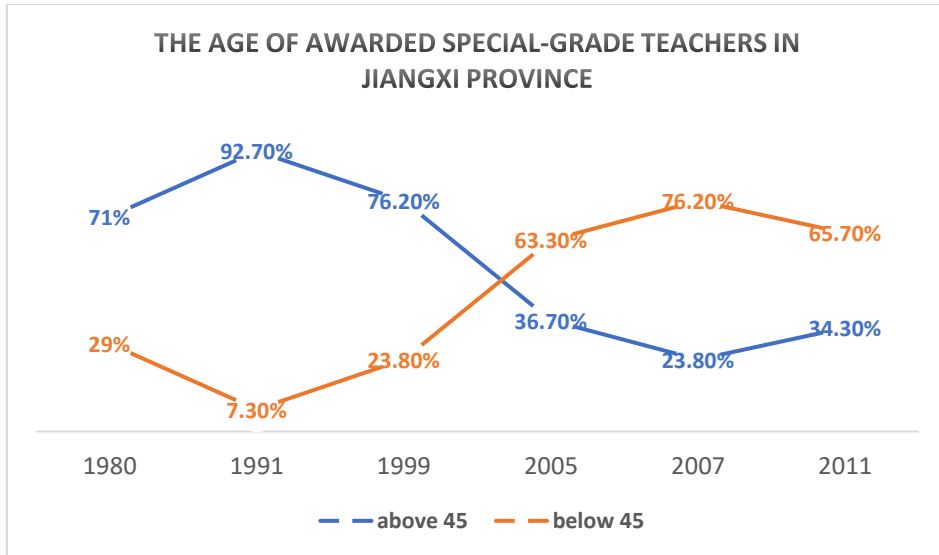


Figure 2.2 The age of awarded special-grade teachers in Jiangxi Province

(modified from He, 2012)

Fourth, the gender difference of the special-grade teachers becomes more balanced, as shown in Figure 2.3 below. Still, there are more male than female.

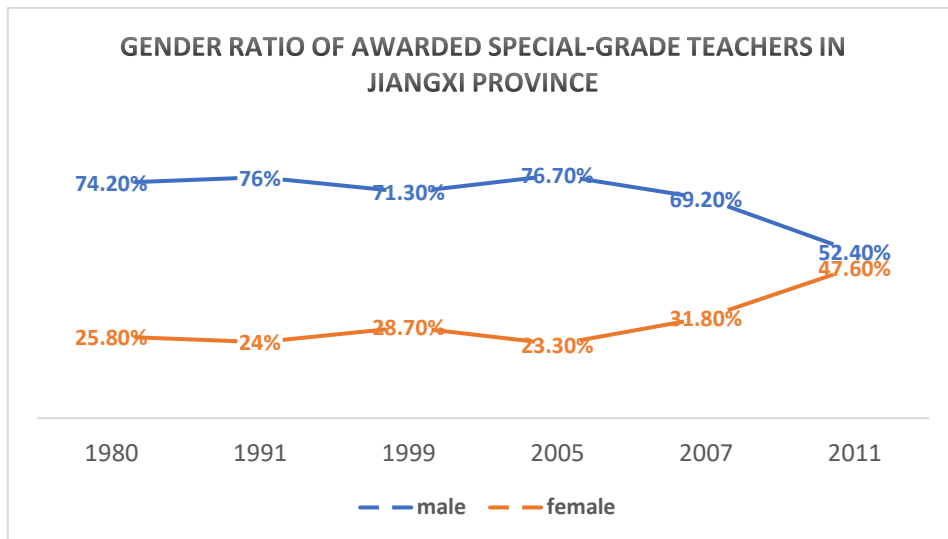


Figure 2.3 Gender ratio of Awarded special-grade teachers in Jiangxi province

(modified from He, 2012)

Fifth, as Jiangxi Province stipulates that “from 2004, the number of applications for teachers at the teaching and research institutes and off-campus education institutes as well as head teachers at primary and secondary schools cannot surpass 10%”, the proportion of school leaders and teaching and research staff applying for the title of special-grade teacher drops. Overall, He’s (2012) research on the group in Jiangxi Province essentially delineates the major features of the structure of the special-grade teachers nationwide. To exemplify, Wu and Kong’s (2010) analysis of the structure of the special-grade teachers in Tianjin confirms these features, meaning that the features of structure in Jiangxi Province represent the situation in some parts of the country.

Peng et al. (2014) reviews the cases of 986 special-grade teachers in Guangdong Province and identifies six main features. First, for the distribution of age, most of the special-grade teachers sit in the age group between 41 and 50, accounting for 62.7% of the population. Amongst them, the teachers between 46 and 50 years of age take up 33.8%, while those between 41 and 45 make 28.9%. Only 3 teachers were under 35, with the youngest being 32-year-old. Second, from the perspective of age, 62.8% are male while 37.2% are female, showing that male special-grade teachers are approximately 1.7 times of their female counterpart. This contradicts the situation that among all the teachers at the primary and secondary school nationwide, the number of female teachers significantly outweigh that of male teachers. Third, in the 21 cities within the province, the special-grade teachers are distributed very unequally. While Shenzhen and Guangzhou have 19.5% and 12.8% of the special-grade teachers, only 1.8% to 5.5% of them are in other cities. This is related to the outflow of the special-grade teachers to the better economically-developed areas. Fourth, in regard to subjects, Chinese language and mathematics are the two subjects that most of the special-grade teachers teach, with 26.9% for the former and 22.8% for the latter. The two combined account for 49.7%, indicating that almost half of the teachers teach the two subjects. English language teachers form 8.0% of the population, and physics, politics and chemistry teachers make approximately 7.0% each. The average proportion for teachers

in other subjects is under 4.0%. These findings are consistent with that of He's (2012) research. Fifth, the number of special-grade teachers doubles the number of the primary school special-grade teachers. Sixth, compared with teachers, management leaders make up an excessive proportion. As data suggest: the heads, including head teachers and deputy head teachers of schools, Party branch secretaries, and director and deputy director of education bureaus, account for 39.4%; the middle-level leaders, including director and deputy director of schools, subject group leaders and year group leaders, take up 29.9%; while only 30.7% are teachers without leadership roles. This result is in line with the Chinese cultural tradition, *xue er you ze shi*, translated as "officialdom is the natural outlet for good scholars".

To sum up, these studies present some common features that the number of application and selection of the special-grade teachers has increased, while the proportions of teachers in different subjects and year groups varies. Moreover, more and more young and middle-aged teachers are awarded the special-grade title.

#### **2.1.2.2 The research on the professional life phases of the special-grade teachers**

The second theme of the research on the special-grade teachers in China is their professional life phases. As a group of the best teachers in the Chinese context, the professional life phases of the special-grade teachers should keep to those of the normal teachers. Many studies on teachers' life phases can be seen in the literature, such as Jia's (2002) "seven phases" (preparation, adaption, rapid grown, plateau, stability, fade and retirement); Cheng's (2006) "five phases" (adaption, growth, maturation, plateau and transcendence); Dong's (2010) "four phases" (exploration, growth, maturation and plateau); J. Li's (2009) "three phases" (novice, proficiency and expert) and so on. Impressively, some studies take the special-grade teachers as the subjects. Such research divides their development into several phases and lists the features of each phase. I draw three models as examples to demonstrate the research.

#### Model 1: The developmental phases of the special-grade teachers' virtue in rural areas

Hu and Wang (2012), based on a research project planned by the MOE in China, propose that the development of virtue of the special-grade teachers consist of three phases. The first phase is "dedication to work" which is the basis of one's virtue and culture. It is shown in loving the motherland, abiding by the law, being faithful to the educational cause of the people, respecting and sincerely loving the students, being ready to be poor, valuing the profession and honour of being a rural-area teacher, and earning the love and esteem of the students, trust of the parents and recognition of the society. The core point of this phase is respecting and loving the students. It is not only an immense power of education, but also the most effective approach to education. To be specific, it is manifested in three aspects. The first aspect is respecting the dominant position of the students in the rural areas and being patient, caring and attentive to them. The second aspect is being strict with every rural-area student and paying attention to the gain and lose of the students. This builds a foundation for the future development and prospect of them. The third aspect is recognising the value of existence of the rural-area students as independent individuals. This is achieved through respecting the differences in their academic results, abilities and personalities, and caring their mood life and emotional experience.

The second phase is "specialising in work" which is the deepening of one's virtue and culture. It refers to constant comprehension and enhancement of the teaching approach and people-educating approach. The special-grade teachers improve and develop themselves in their work, creating their own value. On one hand, they respect the science of education and follow the rules of education. They are scientifically minded and discerning in pursuit of the effective, educational, innovative, interesting, emotional and artistic sides of classroom teaching. From a developmental perspective, they work to facilitate the development of the students' abilities. On the other hand, they focus on developing and strengthening their own characters so that they can educate and guide



the students with their sound characters. In the process of improving their virtue and culture, they pay attention to small things and consciously resist various kinds of outdated ideologies and moral behaviours. Besides, they try to act with integrity, behaving the same way as they think all the time.

The third phase is “contentment in work” which is the sublimation of one’s virtue and culture. In this phase, the special-grade teachers are able to understand in depth the gaps in the situations of learning, teachers and schools between the rural-area and urban-area education, as well as the differences between the education in China and that in well-developed countries. Based on this understanding, they situate themselves in the actual situation of the students and develop the students accordingly. They pursue the sense of accomplishment, worth and sublimity in spirit, rather than just personal fame and wealth. They are hence deemed the creators of personal professional happiness.

#### Model 2: L. Jin’s professional developmental phases of the special-grade teachers

In L. Jin’s (2011) study of the special-grade teachers which is part of the educational science planning in Jiangsu Province, he reveals three phases forming the professional development of the special-grade teachers. Respectively, the three phases are the adaptation phase, the crucial phase and the breakthrough phase. By the adaptation phase, he refers to the period of time when the special-grade teachers have just embarked on their career of teacher and are starting to adapt to the teaching and educating work with the guidance and assistance of other individuals or organisations. In this phase, the temporal demand or fad, critical incidents and individuals, the area and school, and the length of the phase all exert significant influence on the special-grade teachers’ professional development. Amongst all of these, the temporal demand or fad is of particular importance because it gives rise to temporal opportunities. While in every momentous temporal opportunity, successful individuals emerge. L. Jin draws Wei Shusheng, a well-known special-grade teacher in China, as an example. When there

needed a reformer in an educational reform, Wei catered to this temporal demand by virtue of his innovative teaching methods and became the reformer. This provided a historic ground for his later development into a special-grade teacher.

The second phase refers to the sixth to the tenth year of a teacher's career and is called the crucial phase. This originates from Zhang's (2009, cited in L. Jin, 2011) comparative study on the developmental environment and crucial developmental phase of the special-grade teachers and other teachers. It suggests that if some rich and effective stimulus is offered to a teacher in the second phase, certain talent will be better developed and will as a result become an advantage of the teacher. If, however, the teacher misses the phase, the development of the talent may be restrained. Teachers are believed not to connect their professional knowledge to the teaching practice of the primary and secondary schools until they have accumulated basic and teaching experience for approximately ten years. Thus, whether the external stimulus can help and develop the teachers effectively becomes a pivotal factor in deciding whether they can shorten the adaptation and crucial phases.

The third phase, known as the breakthrough phase, refers to the time when the teachers have experienced the plateau period of professional development, in which they have broken through the barriers, such as being self-complacent, making no attempt to progress, job burnout and so on, and in which they are ready to enter the best status of the job of teacher. It is normally between 20<sup>th</sup> year and the 30<sup>th</sup> year and in the age of 40 to 55 of the teachers. According to Fang's (2011, cited in L. Jin, 2011) research, in some sense, a reason for the fact that most of the teachers are unable to become special-grade teachers may be that they cannot break through the plateau period throughout their professional lives. In this phase, innovative spirit and ability appear to be the key characteristics of the teachers. They will personalise their teaching styles or modes, starting to form their own teaching and educating ideologies and perspectives. Also, they will try to gain fruitful teaching and research outcomes exerting influence

both inside and outside their schools, as they are eager to have a sense of accomplishment. They hope to exercise their potential and develop their features so that they can become the outstanding ones among the peer.

Model 3: S. Yang's professional developmental phases of the special-grade teachers

S. Yang (2015) views that the growth of the special-grade teachers consists of four phases which are the career-beginning phase, the professionally-developing phase, the job-motivating phase and the spirit-transcending phase. First, similar to L. Jin's (2011) idea, the career-beginning phase is known as the adaptation phase, normally spanning from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> year of career. It is the initial period of time when they teachers enter and adapt to the job of educating and teaching. The key points in this phase are constant learning and thinking, as they can enhance the appreciation of education. S. Yang (2015) also highlights the significance of handling the temporal demand, as this affects the height of professional development of the special-grade teachers and determines the length of the first phase.

The second phase is the professionally-developing phase, a crucial period of time usually starting from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> year. A focus of this phase is designing a good plan of professional development and adhere to it in practice. The third phase is the job-motivating phase, meaning the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 26<sup>th</sup> year of career. In this phase, the special-grade teachers devote themselves wholeheartedly to the job of education. Based on their professional development plans, they pay attention to the actual needs of the schools and the students. They motivated and reflected on themselves in order to make breakthrough in their professional development. With their effort, they move a step closer to the award of the special-grade teacher.

The fourth phase is the spirit-transcending phase, referring to the 27<sup>th</sup> year onward. The

characteristic shown in this phase is innovative spirit and ability, the teachers' teaching styles and modes become personalised and they start to form their featured educating and teaching ideas gradually. The teaching and research outcomes are rich and of high quality, influencing others beyond the school, the district and even the province. They are eager to gain a sense of accomplishment, making greater contribution to the cause of education and standing out from the crowd.

To sum up, it is a lengthy process for every special-grade teacher to develop professionally. They need a great deal of time to accumulate experience and overcome hardships. The pace, efficiency and level of the special-grade teachers' professional development rely on how smoothly they get through each phase.

### **2.1.2.3 The research on the characteristics of the special-grade teachers**

The third research focus is the research on the characteristics of the special-grade teachers. Xinping Chen (2013) studied a number of the special-grade teachers and summarised six distinctive characteristics of the group by means of observing and interviewing them. The first characteristic is mentality. On one hand, they are idealistic, positive and optimistic. Particularly, they view teaching as a kind of undertaking, valuing their self-development; they take difficulties as honing, see setbacks as tests and deem failure a new starting point; and they are positive in making the class full of passion, ensuring that the students grow up healthily and happily and enabling themselves to gain constant progress. On the other hand, they have a mild state of mind. To be specific, they aim high, neither being stuck in the hustle and bustle of the town, nor being disturbed by the complicated social matters; they can enjoy solitude and teach every lesson well; and they can pay full attention to caring every student and communicate with the students democratically. The second characteristic is action. They deeply understand that teachers are responsible for the mission of imparting knowledge and educating people. Sometimes their work is filled with trivial things, troubles and

setbacks, but this does not affect the special-grade teachers, as they are extraordinarily hard-working and dedicated. They observe the students and research the lessons attentively, they excel in learning. They try to become mentors of the students. The third characteristic is cooperation. They are very good at establishing healthy and positive interpersonal relationships with school leaders, colleagues, students, parents and other social members. In their work, they can put themselves into others' shoes, understand respect and are adept in cooperating with others. They are aware that the growth and quality development of the students is not a teacher's product of labour, but a collaborative outcome of the effort of groups of teachers, parents and social positive forces. They excel in utilising the differentiated resources of the teachers by letting them complement one another in order to enhance the teaching practice. In this way, they can be developed into expert or research-oriented teachers.

The fourth characteristic is teaching idea. Specifically, they are bold in innovating, as the pioneers and thinkers of educational practice. They have great attainment of subject education and know the updates of the educational scientific research within the subject. They are familiar with the latest outcomes of teaching theories and practice domestically and internationally and possess very strong abilities of subject teaching or educational practice. Besides, they are able to lead high-standard educational scientific research independently and are good at summarising practical experience into theories. In the long-term practical educational and teaching activities, they form their distinctive educating and teaching styles and methods, based on their own experience and reasonable inspection. The fifth characteristic is outcome. They are adept in reflecting and diligent in practicing. In the process of shifting their work mode from experienced-based to expertise-based, they experience a host of valuable teaching and research activities and thus gain a myriad of honours in teaching and educational scientific research outcomes. These outcomes are mainly presented in published monographs, papers and research projects. Additionally, they are also demonstrated in experience-based articles, informal essays, dairies, cases, reviews of lessons, test evaluation, debates, planning, courseware, teaching materials, videoed lessons and so on. The sixth

character is social responsibility. They realise that the fundamental significance of educational work lies in advancing and optimising the development of the society through cultivating eligible social citizens. Hence, teachers work to serve for the needs of others and of the society, and social responsibility becomes their motives for work. It continuously provides them with passion and power, and this sense of responsibility can help them overcome adversities in their lives, thereby keeping them in the educational work.

W. Gu (2015) draws the special-grade teachers in the area of Yangzhou in Jiangsu Province as subjects of research and identifies their characteristics in six aspects from two dimensions, virtue development and people cultivation. Virtue development involves three aspects: faith, dedication to work and character. Educational faith constitutes a source for the special-grade teachers' stable and constant work motivation. It is embedded in their personal values and is a kind of devotion, belief and sustaining toward education formed in the whole process of educational activity. It is manifested as a conscious, upward and perpetual educational power in the process of virtue development and people cultivation. It reflects the special-grade teachers' basic views of the aim, value, principles and approaches of educational practice, directly controlling their educational behaviours. The faith of the special-grade teachers is demonstrated in the persistent pursuit of educational thought different from others, unique understanding about the essence of education, autonomous confirmation of educational thought, and embrace of knowledge and truth.

The second aspect, dedication to work, belongs to the intrinsic and spiritual moral character. It is the specific reflection of the special-grade teachers' sense of responsibility, sense of mission and spirit of dedication. It is an important measure of one's love of the profession of teacher and one's status of devoting oneself to virtue development and people cultivation. The dedication is shown in the special-grade teachers' conscientious attitude toward work, broad and selfish love toward the

students, perseverance in refining teaching, patience in rigorous scholarship, meticulous commitment to educating people. Character, as the third aspect, refers to an image of teacher that the special-grade teachers build. It is a kind of soundless, underlying, immense and impelling educational power. It is a distinctive character gradually cultivated in the long-term educational practice and also a core element of delivering teaching and establishing interpersonal relationships successfully. The special-grade teachers are special, since they are both a teacher of knowledge and a teacher of moral standard. They not only open the students' door of mind using their own academic attainment, but also guide their mind by means of their charm of character. It is displayed in the soul-to-soul communication, mind-to-mind integration and character-to-character dialogue in the process of virtue development and people cultivation. It reflects the noble character, vigorous demeanour of teacher and traceless outcome of educating people.

People cultivation also includes three aspects: culture, wisdom and style. Viewing from the aspect of culture, the special-grade teachers are the voluntary constructor and defender of educational culture. Through improving their cultural qualities and taste, they make sense of the educational culture that they advocate. This determines how far the special-grade teachers can go and how much they can achieve in people cultivation. The special-grade teachers are special for their role in value guiding as part of teacher culture. They maximise the spiritual and cultural needs of the students at different levels, and insist on inspiring the students' mind, expanding their knowledge base and enriching their spiritual world with the advanced culture. They enhance the students' humanistic quality and eventually realise every student's all-round development. The second aspect, wisdom, refers to the practical knowledge and skills that transcend traditional knowledge formed in the long-term educational practice. The special-grade teachers' wisdom is embodied, as they all have distinctive and individualised educational views, as they hold unique educational cognition and pursuit for with corresponding educational approaches and methods, they possess relatively strong resource awareness and resource processing ability, as they are good at discovering and

activating resources to design educational and teaching scenarios, and as they effectively utilise resources to understand and react reasonably to the scenarios. Particularly, they excel at leading the students to work on their superior intelligence. Style, as the third aspect, refers to the quest for excellent teaching standard and teaching art, based on the special-grade teachers' own strengths and characteristics as well as the developing situation of the students' quality, guided by their internalised educating and teaching ideas. Through long-term accumulation of practice and experience, they form their unique teaching styles. The special-grade teachers' style not only demonstrates their unique self-image in teaching and educating, but also highlights their superiority over others in certain aspects.

Overall, W. Gu (2015) studies the special-grade teachers' characteristics from the two dimensions which are virtue development as the core of education and people cultivation as the aim of education. He reveals the pursuit of the special-grade teachers at the spiritual and practical levels. Apart from these two relatively comprehensive pieces of research, other researchers also shed light on the teaching characteristics of the special-grade teachers. To exemplify, X. Fan (2015) probes into four Chinese language teachers' approaches to forming their styles of speech in class and finds that they develop their own unique speech styles through refining their language, reading widely and being good at reflecting. Other articles in this category can be hardly deemed rigorous research, as most of them are just inspiration- or reflection-based articles, written by means of classroom observation, teaching research activities and listening to reports.

Other research about the special-grade teachers involves particular research on their current status of work (H. Li, 2010), factor analysis of their professional development (Lai et al., 2015) and playing their demonstrating and guiding role (Y. Liu & Han, 2012) and so on. Despite the scarcity of such research, they are of high relevance to and provides some useful clues for my research.



## 2.2 Research on the best teachers and effective teaching internationally

### 2.2.1 The titles and qualities equivalent to the special-grade teacher

Given that the special-grade teacher is a special case existing in the Chinese educational context, the equivalent titles at a similar level are different across different countries. To name but a few, there are the Advanced Skills Teacher, Master Teacher, Leading Teacher, the Chartered Teacher, the Highly Accomplished Teachers, Outstanding Teachers and so on (Andrew Goodwyn, 2017). These teachers are recognised and rewarded for the quality of classroom teaching and student results. In essence, these titles are closer to the *zhenggaoji* teacher in the system of professional titles in China, since they belong to the top level of the system in the different countries. Drawing on the description of the best teachers in different contexts can help me to examine the special-grade teachers from different angles.

#### 2.2.1.1 The Australian Model

In the past 30 years, Australian government took measures to retain excellent teachers in the classrooms through a feasible long-term career structure that is well paid and rewarding. In the late 1980 and early 1990, an Advanced Skills Teacher (AST) programme was initiated with the aims of establishing a career path for classroom teachers and differentiating skills within the profession (Francis-Brophy, 2017). This programme was implemented with different localised policies at the state level. Recently, the shared national professional standards for teachers involving four career stages were enacted. In each stage, the standards consist of three domains of teaching: (1) Professional Knowledge, (2) Professional Practice, and (3) Professional Engagement, as well as seven standards:

1. Know students and how they learn.
2. Know the content and how to teach it Refer to the Standard at each career stage Professional Practice.
3. Plan for and implement effective teaching and learning.
4. Create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments.
5. Assess, provide feedback and report on student learning Professional Engagement.
6. Engage in professional learning.
7. Engage professionally with colleagues, parents/carers and the community.

(Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011, p. 4)

Among the four career stages, the standards for Lead teachers can better match with those for special-grade teachers in China. 37 specific descriptors display the lead teachers' professional performances, which are summarised by Francis-Brophy (2017, pp.103-104) as follows:

#### Lead teachers

- Lead teachers are recognised and respected by colleagues, parents/carers and the community as exemplary teachers. They have demonstrated consistent and innovative teaching practice over time. Inside and outside the school they initiate and lead activities that focus on improving educational opportunities for all students.
- They establish inclusive learning environments that meet the needs of students from different linguistic, cultural, religious and socio-economic backgrounds. They seek to improve their own practice and to share their experience with colleagues.
- They are skilled in mentoring teachers and pre-service teachers, using activities that develop knowledge, practice and professional engagement in others. They promote

creative, innovative thinking among colleagues.

- Lead teachers apply skills and in-depth knowledge and understanding to deliver effective lessons and learning opportunities and share this information with colleagues and pre-service teachers. They describe the relationship between highly effective teaching and learning in ways that inspire colleagues to improve their own professional practice.
- They lead processes to improve performance by evaluating and revising programs, analysing student assessment data and taking account of feedback from parents/carers. This is combined with a synthesis of current research on effective teaching and learning.
- Lead teachers represent the school and the teaching profession in the community. They are professional, ethical and respected individuals inside and outside the school.

Comparing the two sets of standards for Lead teachers in Australia and special-grade teachers in China, two different points are observed: on one hand, the requirements for special-grade teachers put the emphasis on the political aspects, such as love of their motherland, the Communist Party and socialism; while on the other hand, mentoring pre-service teachers is not an essential requirement for the special-grade teachers.

#### **2.2.1.2 The UK Model**

In England, the professional standards for teachers are classified into five career stages from 2007. The highest rank is entitled Advanced Skills Teachers (ASTs), which was imported to England from Australia in 1997 (Andrew Goodwyn, 2017). The ASTs should not only possess the professional attributes, knowledge and understanding and professional skills at the lower stages, but also the distinguishing expertise shown as follows:

- Be willing to take on a strategic leadership role in developing workplace policies and

practice and in promoting collective responsibility for their implementation in their own and other workplaces.

- Be part of or work closely with leadership teams, taking a leadership role in developing, implementing and evaluating policies and practice in their own and other workplaces that contribute to school improvement.
- Possess the analytical, interpersonal and organisational skills necessary to work effectively with staff and leadership teams beyond their own school.

(Training and Development Agency for Schools, 2007, p. 7)

The standards for ASTs described above are quite different from those of special-grade teachers. For the special-grade teachers, the more important thing is whether they are proficient in professional work and rigorous in scholarship with notable outcomes of educating and teaching practice, rather than the skills of teamwork and collaboration.

Another important institute in England who provides the standard for the excellent teachers is the Chartered College of Teaching, which was transferred from the Royal Charter in 2017. For gaining the Chartered Teacher Status, teachers need to develop their understanding of the three areas and 15 items, shown as below:

#### ✧ PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE

A Chartered Teacher:

1. has and maintains deep knowledge of subject area or area of specialism.
2. has a critical understanding of subject- or specialism-specific pedagogy.
3. has deep knowledge of the most effective pedagogical approaches and how children and young people develop and learn.
4. understands how to design, implement and evaluate a range of assessment types.
5. has knowledge of education trends, debates and policy.

✧ PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

A Chartered Teacher:

6. maintains a productive classroom environment with a culture of learning.
7. plans excellent lessons and lesson sequences.
8. delivers excellent lessons and lesson sequences.
9. ensures that all children and young people learn and make progress.
10. works effectively with others to provide appropriate academic and pastoral support.

✧ PROFESSIONAL BEHAVIOUR

A Chartered Teacher:

11. critically evaluates and reflects on their own practice.
12. is committed to engaging in relevant, career-long professional learning.
13. exhibits collegiality by supporting, and learning from, others.
14. demonstrates high standards of professionalism.
15. engages critically with research and evidence.

(Chartered College of Teaching, n.d.)

For each item, five specific indicators are identified to define its nature. The standard provides me with a useful framework to define and research special-grade teachers' professional knowledge, understanding, skills and expertise.

In Scotland, three sets of standards, including those for provisional and full registration, for career-long professional learning, and for leadership and management, were developed to serve for teachers' professional learning and development (The General Teaching Council for Scotland [GTC], 2012). Among these standards, the Standard for Career-Long Professional Learning is equivalent to the requirements for best teachers, since this standard supersedes the Standard for Chartered Teacher, which was defined as that for the best teachers about ten years ago by Scotland GTC. Hence, it is valuable

for my research to look at their insights for the expert teachers.

The standard comprises three sections: (1) Professional Values and Personal Commitment; (2) Professional Knowledge and Understanding, Professional Skills and Abilities; and (3) The Professional Actions in Career-Long Professional Learning. For the first section, professional values are regarded as the core of the standards, and they are defined from the aspects of social justice, integrity, and trust and respect. As for the professional commitment, two items are identified:

- ✧ Engaging with all aspects of professional practice and working collegiately with all members of our educational communities with enthusiasm, adaptability and constructive criticality.
- ✧ Committing to lifelong enquiry, learning, professional development and leadership as core aspects of professionalism and collaborative practice.

For the second section, the standard sets professional knowledge and understanding from six key areas: (1) pedagogy, learning and subject knowledge; (2) curriculum and assessment; (3) enquiry and research; (4) educational contexts and current debates in policy, education and practice; (5) sustaining and developing professional learning; and (6) learning for sustainability. Teachers are expected to “develop deep, critically informed knowledge and understanding to enhance skills and abilities”. For professional skills and abilities, teachers are expected to develop and apply their knowledge, skills and expertise in their practice through enquiry and sustained professional learning.

For the third section, professional actions in relation to six key areas described above are illustrated in detail, such as understanding and applying the principles of curriculum and assessment design to address changing educational needs; and developing skills of

rigorous and critical self-evaluation, reflection and enquiry including how to investigate and evidence impact on learners and professional practice. This standard provides very high criteria for teachers' professional learning in their career. Every teacher can enter a lifelong learning journey with the standard but might never arrive at the end.

### **2.2.1.3 The US Model**

In the US, a not-for-profit professional organisation, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), has developed the standards for accomplished teaching since 1987. Through a peer-reviewed assessment, a National Board Certification, an advanced professional certification for Pre K-12 educators on a voluntary basis, can be awarded to the teacher. Its standards are comprised of five core propositions: (1) “[t]eachers are committed to students and their learning”; (2) “[t]eachers know the subjects they teach and how to teach those subjects to students”; (3) “[t]eachers are responsible for managing and monitoring student learning”; (4) “[t]eachers think systematically about their practice and learn from experience”; and (5) “[t]eachers are members of learning communities” (NBPTS, 2001, pp. 8-10). Each has specific performance-based criteria. For example, the criteria for the first proposition include:

- Accomplished teachers base their practice on the fundamental belief that all students can learn and meet high expectations.
  
- Accomplished teachers understand how students develop and learn. They consult and incorporate a variety of learning and development theories into their practice, while remaining attuned to their students' individual contexts, cultures, abilities, and circumstances.

(NBPTS, 2001, p. 8)

This model comprehensively and specifically describes accomplished teachers' characteristics and evaluation criteria. Compared with the documents for the special-

grade teachers, this is truly a set of professional developmental standards, rather than managerial requirements.

### 2.2.2 Research on the expert teachers in the international context

No country is found to use the term “the expert teacher” as a title to describe their best teachers (Andrew Goodwyn, 2017), while a large amount of research regarding the best teachers, teacher expertise and expert performance does involve the term (e.g., Berliner, 1986; Everhart et al., 2013; Findell, 2009; H. Y. Kim et al., 2013; Meyer, 2004; Schempp & Johnson, 2006; Sharpe & Hawkins, 1992; Tsui, 2009; Wolff et al., 2016, Yazdanmehr & Akbari, 2015; and so on). Besides, Sorensen (2017) proposes that the term “the expert teacher” can preferably be replaced by “a teacher with expertises”. The studies on the expert teachers provide me with rich literature to refer to and drawing on them help me to locate my research in the broad context.

Given that the meanings of the term “expert” are varied depending on the contexts (Bucci, 2003), a review of the experts and expertise enables us to grasp what they stand for in different domains. According to Ericsson (2006, p. 3), expert is defined as “one who is very skilful and well-informed in some special field (*Webster’s New World Dictionary*, 1968, p. 168)”, and expertise is viewed as the characteristics, skills, and knowledge that make expert stand out from those who are new and inexperienced. Chi (2016) believes that there are two research approaches to expertise. One approach is to compare experts with novices, while the other approach is to investigate how the outstanding individuals perform in their field of expertise. In order to gain some insights to underpin my research, I review three aspects in this section: (1) research on experts in comparison to novices, (2) a prototype view of expert teaching and (3) research on the development of expertise.



### **2.2.2.1 Research on experts in comparison to novices**

Experts are believed to possess superior knowledge in their domain of expertise, and the knowledge constitutes the difference between experts and others (Ericsson, 2006; Lachner et al., 2016). Berliner (1986, 1994, 2004), integrating his team's own research with other relevant research (e.g. Glaser 1985; Glaser & Chi, 1988), verify and put forward 12 propositions about the experts, which are:

1. Experts excel mainly in their own domain and in particular contexts.
2. Experts often develop automaticity for the repetitive operations that are needed to accomplish their goals.
3. Experts are more sensitive to the task demands and social situation when solving problems.
4. Experts are more opportunistic and flexible in their teaching than are novices.
5. Experts represent problems in qualitatively different ways than do novices.
6. Experts have fast and accurate pattern recognition capabilities. Novices cannot always make sense of what they experience.
7. Experts perceive meaningful patterns in the domain in which they are experienced.
8. Experts may begin to solve problems slower, but they bring richer and more personal sources of information to bear on the problem that they trying to solve.
9. Experts make more inferences from and assumptions about the information presented to them than do novices.
10. Experts are more evaluative than are novices.
11. Experts, compared to novices, attend more to the atypical or unique events than the typical or ordinary events in the domain in which they have expertise.

12. Experts appear to be more confident about their abilities to succeed at instructional tasks than are novices. (Berliner, 1994)

Another research about characteristics of expert teachers is from Hattie (2003), who reviews and synthesises more than 500,000 studies, and finds that the expert teachers can be distinguished by the characteristics classified in five dimensions and 16 attributes from the novice and the experienced teachers. I put these findings in Table 2.3 below:

Table 2.3 The characteristics of expert teachers

Dimensions	Attributes
A: Expert teachers can identify essential representations of their subject.	<p>A1 Expert teachers have deeper representations about teaching and learning.</p> <p>A2 Expert teachers adopt a problem-solving stance to their work.</p> <p>A3 Expert teachers can anticipate, plan, and improvise as required by the situation.</p> <p>A4 Expert teachers are better decision-makers and can identify what decisions are important and which are less important decisions.</p>
B: Expert teachers can guide learning through classroom interactions.	<p>B5 Expert teachers are proficient at creating an optimal classroom climate for learning.</p> <p>B6 Expert teachers have a multidimensionally complex perception of classroom situations.</p> <p>B7 Expert teachers are more context-dependent and have high situation cognition.</p>
C: Expert teachers can monitor learning and provide feedback.	<p>C8 Expert teachers are more adept at monitoring student problems and assessing their level of understanding and progress, and they provide much more relevant, useful feedback.</p> <p>C9 Expert teachers are more adept at developing and testing hypotheses</p>

	<p>about learning difficulties or instructional strategies.</p> <p>C10 Expert teachers are more automatic.</p>
D: Expert teachers can attend to affective attributes.	<p>D11 Expert teachers have high respect for students.</p> <p>D12 Expert teachers are passionate about teaching and learning.</p>
E: Expert teachers can influence student outcomes.	<p>E13 Expert teachers engage students in learning and develop in their students' self-regulation, involvement in mastery learning, enhanced self-efficacy, and self-esteem as learners.</p> <p>E14 Expert teachers provide appropriate challenging tasks and goals for students.</p> <p>E15 Expert teachers have positive influences on students' achievement.</p> <p>E16 Expert teachers enhance surface and deep learning.</p>

The three systematic and robust reviews are very valuable because they incorporate a tremendous number of empirical studies and delineate what the expert teachers look like. They indeed provide research-based evidence to help me investigate the special-grade teachers.

Additionally, there emerge a great amount of research on the expert teachers in recent twenty years. For instance, Tsui (2009) carries out a case study on four ESL teachers in Hong Kong and unveils a series of “distinctive qualities” that distinguish the expert teacher from the novice and experienced non-expert teachers. First, the expert teacher possesses the ability to integrate various aspects of teacher knowledge to bring about effective learning. For instance, the expert teacher combines the learning objectives, organisation of learning and the students’ interests properly in their teaching act, while the other teachers often pay attention to one aspect at the expense of another one. Second, the expert and the novice teachers differ in the way that they respond to various contexts of work. Third, the expert teacher can be distinguished from the non-expert

teachers in “their capability to engage in conscious deliberation and reflection” (p. 21). Specifically, the expert teacher is capable of making explicit the tacit knowledge learned from experience and making individual interpretations of formal knowledge in their own practice.

Meyer (2004) undertakes a comparative study among six teachers on their conceptions of the concept of prior knowledge and reveals that the expert teachers are more fully aware of the role of the students’ prior knowledge and make better use of it in teaching than the preservice and the first-year teacher. Castañer et al. (2013) compare four expert and four novice PE teachers in their research and show that the former takes better advantage of certain gestures and space than the latter. The authors suggest that proper application of communicative styles influences the teaching processes positively for all teachers. Wolff et al. (2016) pay attention to teachers’ visual expertise. The research indicates that the expert teachers focus on the areas where there is relevant information, whereas the novices’ attention is relatively scattered across the classroom. Besides, while the former is believed to be more knowledge-driven, the latter emerges to be more image-driven.

Sorensen’s (2017) research on seven expert teachers in the UK unveils a model of teacher expertise which encompasses seven elements: expertise as journey, reflective practitioner, focus on outcomes, commitment to teaching, being yourself, belief that all can achieve and dialogic practice. This model refers to Sternberg and Horvath’s (1995) prototype model which is based on the assumptions that there is no uniform standard for the expert teachers and that it is possible to define them from multiple critical dimensions. It provides an alternative for me to study the special-grade teachers. In the next section, I introduce the prototype model.

#### **2.2.2.2 A prototype view of expert teaching**

Drawn upon Sternberg's (1985; 1986) triarchic theory of human intelligence and research on the differences between experts and novices in a variety of domains, Sternberg and Horvath (1995) put forward a prototype of the expert teacher, including three features: knowledge, efficiency and insight. Knowledge contains three types, content, pedagogical and practical. They point out that experts possess larger amount of knowledge than novices, and the experts' knowledge is better organised in the form of scripts, prepositional structures, and schemata, which are able to automatically be invoked to solve problems in actual situations. This partly results in the second feature of the expert- efficiency.

Efficiency means that "experts can do more in less time (or with less apparent effort) than can novices" (Sternberg & Horvath, 1995, p. 12). This is resulted from three reasons. The first is "automatization". On one hand, experts' well-organised knowledge structure, as described above, permit them to efficiently access and then to apply the knowledge. On the other hand, as the expert teachers deal with more information per unit time, or the same amount of information but at a lower level of cognitive effort than do the novices, they gain more time and energy to observe meaningful patterns in the stream of ongoing events, thereby improving their efficiency. The second involves how the experts use their higher order and executive processes. They tend to spend longer time to understand and define the problem than the novices, and avoid making hasty decisions. In the process of solving the problem, they monitor the ongoing solution attempts, ensuring accuracy and redefine the problem. These actions fit with "metacomponents" in Sternberg's (1985) human intelligence theory, involving the mechanism of planning, monitoring, and evaluating ongoing efforts at problem solving. Thirdly, the experts are more self-aware and reflective than the novices, and expand their knowledge and competence in solving new problems. These elements above make them become developed professionals.

In terms of insight, experts tend to create novel and appropriate solutions to a particular

problem. One reason is that they are able to see into the problem deeply, and the other is that they master the skills of producing creative ideas and solutions. These are believed to be characteristics of expert teachers. The processes of insight at problem solving involve the skills of "selective encoding," "selective combination," and "selective comparison" which are developed by Sternberg (1985). The prototype expert teachers are those who excel in these skills and are insightful in teaching.

In sum, Sternberg and Horvath (1995) define the expert teacher's characteristics based on psychological theories. Their work provides not only a useful perspective to observe expert teachers but also indicators to evaluate their performances. However, Sternberg and Horvath (1995) suggest that, when distinguishing experts from experienced non-experts, we should acknowledge the diversity of expert teachers, and pay attention to "the absence of a set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient features of an expert teacher" (p. 14). These two points are helpful because they remind us to see an expert teacher in a flexible and reasonable way.

### **2.2.2.3 Research on the development of expertise**

Schempp et al. (2002, p. 105) state, "Expert teachers are made, not born". The development of expertise of expert teachers needs a progressive process. Dreyfus (2004) describes a model of adult skill acquisition, which can be used to examine the special-grade teachers' professional developmental path from the perspective of expertise development. The model is divided into five stages: novice, advanced beginner, competence, proficiency and expertise. In the first stage, it is important for novices to recognise decomposing context-free features of the task environment, on the basis of which, they take actions according to the given rules. As the experience is accumulated, the novices better understand the relevant context and notice and learn new aspects, which demonstrate that they enter into the advanced beginner stage.

In the competence stage, the performers feel overload in that too many relevant elements and procedures need to be recognised and followed. Through learning and practicing, they gradually know how to restrict themselves to only a few relevant features and aspects, seek rules and reasoning procedures, and take actions appropriately. In the proficiency stage, the performers tend to take a holistic view to look at the situations they encounter, rather than by rules and principles, and the intuition is prominent. Experience plays a decisive role in making a proficient performer. The last stage is expert level. The experts are fully aware of their goals and make themselves clear how to achieve the goals. The distinguishing feature between the experts and proficient performers is to see if they can make subtle and refined discriminations in given situations. Berliner (1994, p. 17) states that this five-stage theory of development “has heuristic value for thinking about educating and evaluating teachers” and is verified by the research conducted by him and his colleagues.

In sum, the research on expert teachers has a solid foundation, especially from the psychological perspective. However, through reflection on teacher expertise, Schoenfeld (2011) believes that the conceptual models that the researchers use influence what they see and take precedence, and suggests focusing on expert orientations, goals and resources simultaneously to put the field forward. In addition to research on expert teachers, I move to effective teaching research in the next section to gain some insights for my research.

### 2.2.3 Research on effective teaching internationally

Another branch of research relevant to the research on the special-grade teachers is the numerous studies of effective teaching and the reviews of the studies (Gorard et al., 2016; Hattie, 2009; Husbands & Pearce, 2012; Ko & Sammons, 2013; Muijs & Reynolds, 2018; Muijs et al., 2014; and so on). Coe et al. (2014) describe effective teaching as something that “leads to improved student achievement using outcomes that matter to their future success” (p.2). Although there is no agreed definition of effective teaching,

the research on effective teaching reflects the core value and benefits of the teachers' work and demonstrates the features of good teaching from different angles. This offers certain referential significance for me to investigate teaching, the central job of the special-grade teachers. Now, I present two empirical studies and two research reviews. The former provides me with the dimensions from which I observe the special-grade teachers' classroom teaching and the latter helps me to grasp the existing evidence of the research on effective teaching, so that I can gain some clues to research the special-grade teachers in the end.

#### 2.2.3.1 Hay McBer's model of teacher effectiveness

Based on the analysis of the data from questionnaires, classroom observation, in-depth interviews, focus groups and the collection of personal and school documents, Hay McBer (2000) formulate a model of teacher effectiveness that have a significant influence on student progress. The model consists of three factors which are teaching skills, professional characteristics and classroom climate. Specifically, teaching skills are those "micro-behaviours" that the effective teachers constantly show in their teaching. They include such behaviours as involving all students in the lesson and using differentiation properly to challenge all students in the class. Totally, 35 such behaviours are clustered in seven titles of High Expectations, Planning, Methods and Strategies, Pupil Management/Discipline, Time & Resource Management, Assessment and Homework. These teaching skills can be observed through lesson structure and flow, as well as the degree of student engagement.

Professional characteristics are seen as deep-seated patterns of behaviour. They are the way that the teachers do the job and relate to self-image and values, the traits or how the teachers habitually approach situations, and the motivation that drives performance at the deepest level. 16 characteristics are found to contribute to effective teaching and they fall into five clusters which are Professionalism, Thinking, Planning & Setting, Leading and Relating to others. Hay McBer (2000) create a dictionary of professional



characteristics in which each characteristic is defined succinctly. It is found that the outstanding teachers display these characteristics more often, in more situations and to a higher degree of intensity than the effective teachers.

Classroom climate refers to “the collective perceptions by pupils of what it feels like to be a pupil in any particular teacher's classroom, where those perceptions influence every student's motivation to learn and perform to the best of his or her ability” (ibid., p. 27). Effective teachers create supportive learning environments with their knowledge, skills and behaviours to maximise the students' learning opportunities from nine dimensions: Clarity, Order, Standards, Fairness, Participation, Support, Safety, Interest and Environment. Classroom climate is deemed an output measure to evaluate how the students are motivated to learn. The other two factors, teaching skills and professional characteristics, are what the teachers bring to their jobs. The three factors differ in nature but are interacted and complementary.

Hay McBer (2000) conclude their findings that “pupil progress is most significantly influenced by a teacher who displays both high levels of professional characteristics and good teaching skills which lead to the creation of a good classroom climate” (p. 34). They also make it clear that the differences between effective teachers and outstanding teachers are on the classroom level. Effective teachers create learning environments which develop student progress by deploying their teaching skills and a myriad of professional characteristics, while outstanding teachers create an excellent classroom climate and achieve superior student progress “largely by displaying more professional characteristics at higher level of sophistication within a very structured learning environment” (p.9). They suggest that teachers do make a difference for student outcomes.

### 2.2.3.2 Creemers and Kyriakides' dynamic model

Based on Educational Effectiveness Research (EER), Creemers and Kyriakides (2006, 2010) propose a dynamic model which defines eight perspectives and five dimensions to look at effective teaching at the classroom level. The definitions or main points of the eight perspectives are described as follow:

- ✧ Orientation: teacher behaviour in providing the objectives for which a specific task or lesson or series of lessons take(s) place and/or challenging students to identify the reason for which an activity takes place in the lesson
- ✧ Structuring: achievement is maximised when teachers not only actively present materials but structure it by: (a) beginning with overviews and/or review of objectives; (b) outlining the content to be covered and signalling transitions between lesson parts; (c) calling attention to main ideas; and (d) reviewing main ideas at the end
- ✧ Questioning techniques: teacher behaviour of asking questions and attempting to involve students in class discussion.
- ✧ Teaching modelling: teaching and learning activities that help pupils to use strategies and/or develop their own strategies which can help them solve different types of problems
- ✧ Application: teacher behaviour in providing needed practice and application opportunities
- ✧ The classroom as a learning environment: teacher contribution in creating a learning environment in his or her classroom, involving teacher-student interaction, student-student interaction, students' treatment by the teacher, competition between students, and classroom disorder
- ✧ Management of time: teacher behaviour in maximising engagement rates to create an efficient learning environment
- ✧ Teacher evaluation: teacher behaviour in gathering information to identify the students' needs, and evaluate their own practice

The five dimensions involve frequency, focus, stage, quality and differentiation. Combining each perspective and dimension formulates an indication, which serves as an

instrument to evaluate teacher behaviours. For example, For the “orientation” perspective and “frequency” dimension, the number of orientation tasks and the duration of each orientation task can be observed; For the “application” perspective and the “quality” dimension, two indicators can be formed: one is the degree of the complexity of the tasks in relation to the content covered in the lesson; the other is whether the application tasks are used as starting points for the next step of teaching and learning. In this way, the authors identified the practices that effective teachers demonstrate in their teaching. For instance, effective teachers tend to ask different types of and different difficulty level questions and give various feedbacks to meet the students’ learning needs and help them engage in class discussion; effective teachers provide students with sufficient opportunities to apply new knowledge and skills by using seatwork or small group tasks; effective teachers create efficient learning environments to maximise engagement rates by ensuring orderly classroom atmospheres. This model offers a useful conceptual framework and specific indicators to examine teacher behaviours in the classrooms, which can be employed in observing special-grade teachers’ work at the data collection stage of my research.

### 2.2.3.3 Goodwin and Hubbell’s model of good teaching

Based on Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) researchers’ review involving over 1,500 research study, Goodwin and Hubbell (2013) identify three features, totally 12 practices, which highly effective teachers demonstrate. The features include:

- (1) Challenge their students. Great teachers set high expectations for all students, challenging them with instruction that develops critical-thinking skills.
- (2) Create positive classroom environments. Great teachers develop positive rapport with students, creating engaging classrooms that motivate learning.
- (3) Are intentional about their teaching. Great teachers are clear about what they’re trying to teach and deliberately use a broad repertoire of instructional strategies to help

students accomplish their learning goals.

For the first feature, the specific practices include using standards to guide every learning opportunity; helping students set personal learning objectives for each lesson through translating standards into specific learning objectives for students, communicating and personalising learning objectives in the light of students' learning needs; demonstrating clear performance expectations by offering rubrics for each important assignment, communicating performance criteria with students, and using the criteria to challenge them; and measuring students against high expectations.

In terms of the second feature, effective teachers design and undertake their lessons with interesting tasks, mysteries and puzzles and providing learning choices to arouse and maintain students' interests; they care about each student, show their own personalities and enthusiasms for learning in class, and interact with every student meaningfully; aiming to encourage effort, they connect feedback to students' learning objectives, and provide timely and formative feedback as well as concrete and tailored guidance to each student; they create a supportive environment and let them feel safe and respect by making and implementing the rules, and correcting students' misconducts to ensure that they do right things and do things right.


As for the third feature, effective teachers protect their instruction time by deliberately planning, establishing routines and procedures and working with the instructional leaders to avoid wasting time; they help students to develop deep knowledge by connecting prior and new knowledge, finding coherence in their learning, and concentrating their thinking on deep knowledge; they regard them as coaches to help students master knowledge and skills by using frequent checks for student learning and providing deliberate practices; they discuss with students in class, assign writing assignments to them, and provide explanation problems to help them to apply and

extend knowledge.

Goodwin and Hubbell's (2013) model focuses on very specific and concrete teaching behaviours to present 12 touchstones of good teaching from three perspectives. In comparison with Creemers and Kyriakides' (2006) dynamic model presented above, it is a useful supplement for me in observing teachers' instruction in the research.

#### 2.2.3.4 Coe et al.'s review of what makes great teaching

Very recently, Coe et al. (2014) selected a range of research studies containing teacher behaviours, knowledge, approaches, methods, skills, and practices that fulfilled the criteria of being well-defined, implementable, measurable and linked to gains in student outcomes, and found that six elements contributed to student progress with different degrees of evidence, as shown in Figure 2.4:



<b>strong evidence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• (pedagogical) content knowledge</li><li>• quality of instruction</li></ul>
<b>moderate evidence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• classroom climate</li><li>• classroom management</li></ul>
<b>some evidence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• teacher beliefs</li><li>• professional behaviours</li></ul>

Figure 2.4 The findings of the literature review about the components impacting student outcomes (adapted from Coe et al., 2014)

Specifically, effective teachers are knowledgeable in their subjects, and are able to evaluate the students' understanding to the content and thinking methods. They excel in effective questioning techniques and use of assessment; to secure high quality teaching, they keep an appropriate pace for reviewing previous knowledge, presenting new learning in small steps, offering scaffolds for difficult tasks, and providing the students with sufficient time to practice relevant skills. For the classroom climate, they are sensitive to the students' needs, maintain quality teacher-student interactions, and attribute student success to effort rather than ability; and they create a classroom atmosphere to demand more, but recognise students' self-worth. They make good use of lesson time, classroom resources and space; they use clear rules to manage students' behaviour to maximise the learning.

For the two components which only have some evidence of impact on student outcomes, teacher belief involves teachers' subjective theories about the concept of learning and the nature of teaching, as well as the reasons and aims behind their practices. For example, highly effective teachers of numeracy believe that almost all pupils can become numerate, so they selected teaching approaches in which all pupils are being challenged and stretched, not just part of the pupils; while less effective teachers think that pupils' ability is varied and it is important for pupils to remember a range of facts and standard methods, so they prefer teaching, practising and applying standard methods rather than the alternative more efficient methods (Askew et al., 1997, cited in Coe et al., 2014, p. 21). In terms of professional behaviours such as developing professional practice, supporting colleagues, and liaising and communicating with parents, some evidence is identified. For instance, the strategies of enhancing teachers' professional learning "must focus on and be measured against student outcomes", "require some input from school leaders" and "involve, ideally, collaboration with peers", and so on (Timperley, 2008, cited in Coe et al., 2014, p. 41).

It is worth noticing that “good quality teaching will likely involve a combination of these attributes manifested at different times; the very best teachers are those that demonstrate all of these features” (p. 2). Therefore, the six components described above are just a useful framework to look at effective teaching, but how these attributes co-create effective teaching in different situations need to be under investigation.

Apart from the four models, other studies investigate the best teachers from different angles. For example, Thompson et al. (2008) made a survey among 101 K–12 public school teachers and 271 African American high school seniors to explore the outstanding teachers’ characteristics, and six qualities were identified by both groups, including: explain things well, make the course work interesting, give extra help, patience, fairness, and challenge students academically. This is an interesting study because it provides the perspectives from both the teachers and the students. For instance, more students believed that friendliness is important while more teachers took more concern about humour. Duffy (2002) believed that the outstanding literacy teachers are those “who are pedagogically competent while also being psychologically strong enough to use professional knowledge in creatively resourceful ways” (p. 332). Outstanding teachers must be independent thinkers. Being independent thinkers means that they possess awareness and capacity of making the best choices, altering their environments and taking the right actions. Besides, Duffy suggests that an outstanding teacher should be defined professionally and psychologically.

With the rapid development of technology, on-line teaching will be a trend for all the teachers. Brinthaupt, et al. (2011) draw on Bain’s work on the core characteristics of exemplary college teachers, and further identified three dimensions for the best online teaching practices, including (1) fostering student engagement; (2) stimulating intellectual development; and (3) building rapport with students. For the first dimension, best teachers engage in establishing a community of learners through enhancing student-to-faculty and student-to-student interaction, using humour wisely and

strategically, and making full use of on-line resources and tools such as videos, chats, podcasts, wikis, blogs and discussion forums. For the second dimension, the best teachers select engaging and authentic content by using technology, generate provocative acts, questions and statements, and reflect on students' inaccurate and incomplete preconceptions or mental models to improve the students' intellectual development. For the third dimension, the best teachers build and maintain good relationships with the students by identifying and accommodating the students' needs, using introductory video or self-disclosure resources, and providing individual feedbacks on assignments and activities. This research provides another perspective to see what the best teachers do in the ages where video gaming, social media and the internet filled people's daily life, which might be a good supplement to understand the teachers in the new era.

## 2.3 Comments on the existing literature and the current research focus

In the previous two sections of the chapter, I have demonstrated the historical development and selection requirements of the titles of the special-grade teacher and the newly-introduced *zhenggaoji* teacher. I have also shed light on the standards of the best teachers in Australia, the UK and the US. Besides, I have reviewed the Chinese native research on the special-grade teachers and the international research on the expert teachers and effective teaching. The literature is valuable for me to situate my research. However, there exist several issues worth commenting on. In this section, I reflect on the features and limitations of the literature as well as my gains from the literature.

### 2.3.1 Comments on the research on the special-grade teachers

The research on the special-grade teachers is basically limited to the studies undertaken



by the native Chinese researchers. It has four main features. Firstly, the number of empirical studies is too low. In search of the Chinese literature, although scores of articles involve the special-grade teacher as a subject, most of them describe a particular special-grade teacher's stories, achievements and teaching wit, present his or her skills in classroom organisation or a lesson design in the form of teaching case, or demonstrate other teachers' analysis and praise of his or her teaching after observing a special-grade teacher's lessons (Meng, 2007). They aim to provide a model for other teachers. In some sense, it is a kind of propaganda more than research. Qiao et al. (2009) state that such research accounts for 70% of the total. If we limit the scope of the literature review to the scrupulously structured reflection-based articles and empirical studies only, there are not many studies on the special-grade teachers, and the empirical ones are extremely lacking. Secondly, the content of research is not rich. The body of knowledge regarding the research on the specific group of teachers has not been established. In the small number of scrupulously structured reflection-based articles and empirical studies, the content of research belongs to the three types: first, the analysis of the structure of the special-grade teachers across different areas, second, the research on the professional developmental phases of the special-grade teachers, and third, the research on their professional characteristics. The first type of research mostly utilised questionnaire as a method of research. It is largely rigorous and enables readers to gain a relatively comprehensive understanding about the basic structure of the special-grade teachers. In the rest two types of research, although most of the research projects are sponsored by different authorities, the researchers rarely specify the size and source of the sample and the data collection and analysis methods. The research findings appear to be personal reflection and subjective judgement.

Thirdly, in the limited number of empirical studies, the research methods are not diverse, as questionnaire serves as the main research method in most cases. Rigorous and systematic studies can rarely be seen. Fourthly, some researchers have inaccurate understanding about the position and remuneration of the special-grade teachers as well as their differences from the *zhenggaoji* teachers. This can potentially mislead other

researchers and practitioners. Some researchers, such as L. Jin (2012) and Qiao et al. (2009), summarise seven problems of the research on special-grade teachers, including limited research content, simple research methods, researchers' insufficient competence, implausible research findings, confined research vision, small sample size, and biased research attitude. The problems basically reflect the current situation of the native research on the special-grade teachers. Apparently, it is necessary and beneficial to see more systematic and rigorous empirical studies on the group of the special-grade teachers. The systematic and rigorous research process is demonstrated in Chapter 3

### 2.3.2 Comments on the research on the best teachers internationally

Given that the special-grade teacher is a unique phenomenon in the Chinese context, the literature in English rarely highlights this group. Since the special-grade teachers are the most excellent group of teachers, the international equivalent is the best teachers in different countries. Thus, I read the requirements and standard of the best teachers in Australia, the UK and the US, compare and contrast among them. In the meantime, I refer to the literature regarding the research on expert teachers and effective teaching. For the review of literature, I have two gains. First, most of the empirical studies on the expert teachers' characteristics and developmental phases as well as on effective teaching rigorously identify and describe the characteristics of the best teachers from the macro to the micro level. At the macro level, they define the characteristics from the perspectives of professional values, professional knowledge, professional practice and so on. At the micro level, the expert teachers display a range of expertise performances. For example, some researchers find that they spend a large amount of time in introducing the rules of the class at the beginning of academic terms, and others show that the effective teachers demonstrate clear expectations of performance by offering rubrics for each important assignment. The large number of studies provide a valuable body of knowledge, enabling me to gain a relatively comprehensive and profound understanding about the professional performance of the best teachers. Second, the cross-field research from a psychological perspective lasting for several decades unveils features of the developmental phases of human expertise. This helps me to identify,

based on theories, the developmental stages of the special-grade teachers, through which they grow from novice to expert teachers. This also enables me to better understand the professional developmental journey of the special-grade teachers.

However, the research on the best teachers shows three limitations. First, most of the research confirms the characteristics of the expert teachers by comparing them with the novice teachers or experienced non-expert teachers from the researchers' own perspective. In some sense, the researchers take the experts as the research subjects. Based on their response to certain situations, the researchers examine the differences between the expert teachers and other teachers in the professional knowledge, skills and practice. In this way, the researchers, being an expert in the field themselves, inevitably identify the distinguishing characteristics of the expert teachers from their own perspective. Very few researchers find the difference of the expert teachers from the expert teachers' perspective. Second, among the research on the expert teachers' professional developmental phases, researchers rarely examine the process starting from the very beginning of their careers to the time that they become the expert teachers. I am interested in understanding the following issues: for certain individuals or groups of expert teachers, what factors influence their growth into expert teachers; how the developmental course gradually unfolds; what kind of ups and downs lie in their developmental course; and how they adjust themselves when they are stuck in unfavourable situations. Yet, little research is found to shed light on these issues in the existing literature. Third, some research suggests that the identification and requirement of the expert teachers are varied in their studies. For example, some studies (e.g., Sorensen, 2017; Tsui, 2009) include the expert teachers according to the head teachers' endorsement. While the findings of the research are valuable to a certain extent, the reliability and validity can be challenged due to the inconsistent standard. Taking into account the three limitations, I ponder and decide how I situate my research in relation to the existing literature, which I elucidate in the next section.

### 2.3.3 The focus of the current research

Based on the comments above, my research intends to fill the gap from four aspects: Firstly, I have special-grade teachers as a group and as individuals at the same time to present their lived experience holistically. This differs from other research in two aspects. For the first aspect, in the journey of their professional development, since the school environment, the teachers' culture and the conditions of the students are not identical across the cases of the special-grade teachers, their educational notions, individual characteristics and professional practice developed in different situations are likely to be varied. In this research, I first take each special-grade teacher as a case in which I extract their professional characteristics and developmental features, and then compare and contrast the commonalities and differences among the cases. Last, I identify the common features of the group and present the unique characteristics of the representative cases. For the second aspect, the existing research on the expert teachers tends to produce its findings based on the comparison between the expert teachers and the novice teachers. However, as the teachers developed in different environments and are influenced by their individual experience, their responses to the same phenomena are different. Hence, my research investigates the special-grade teachers' professional characteristics and developmental features by studying their professional development from their entry to the profession to the time of my interviews so that my research findings are produced based on their idiosyncratic personal experience over the many years.

Secondly, I employ narrative inquiry to guide my research so that I can pay full attention to the special-grade teachers' perceptions from their own perspectives. This provides a different angle to enrich the relevant literature. Thirdly, very rare research involves the in-depth description of a particular expert teacher' professional development from his or her novice to expert stages. Thus, it is hard to gain an understanding of an expert teacher's developmental experience in full, especially in their highs and lows of life. Therefore, some representative cases are selected to display the special-grade teachers' professional developmental journey in the research. Fourthly, I engage myself in a

systematic and rigorous research process to produce robust and trustworthy research findings which contribute to the body of knowledge about the special-grade teachers.

## 2.4 Theoretical perspectives underpinning the research

Centering around the research focus, apart from the literature described above, several selected theoretical perspectives, including experiential learning and adult learning, professional learning and development, and the knowledge bases for teaching and pedagogical content knowledge are selected to underpin my study.

### 2.4.1 Experiential learning and adult learning

One of the most influential scholars studying the experiential learning theory is Kolb (1984), who drew on John Dewey's, Kurt Lewin's, Jean Piaget', Lev Vygotsky', William James's, Carl Jung's and others' works and summarised six important propositions underpinning the experiential learning, namely:

1. Learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes.
2. All learning is re-learning.
3. Learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world.
4. Learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world.
5. Learning results from synergetic transactions between the person and the environment.
6. Learning is the process of creating knowledge. (Kolb & Kolb, 2013, pp. 6-7)

Based on these propositions, Kolb (1984, cited in Kolb & Kolb, 2013, p. 7) defines learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of

experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience.” They further explain, “Grasping experience refers to the process of taking in information, and transforming experience is how individuals interpret and act on that information.” They suggest that the experiential learning theory “is a dynamic view of learning based on a learning cycle driven by the resolution of the dual dialectics of action/reflection and experience/abstraction”, as shown in Figure 2.5:

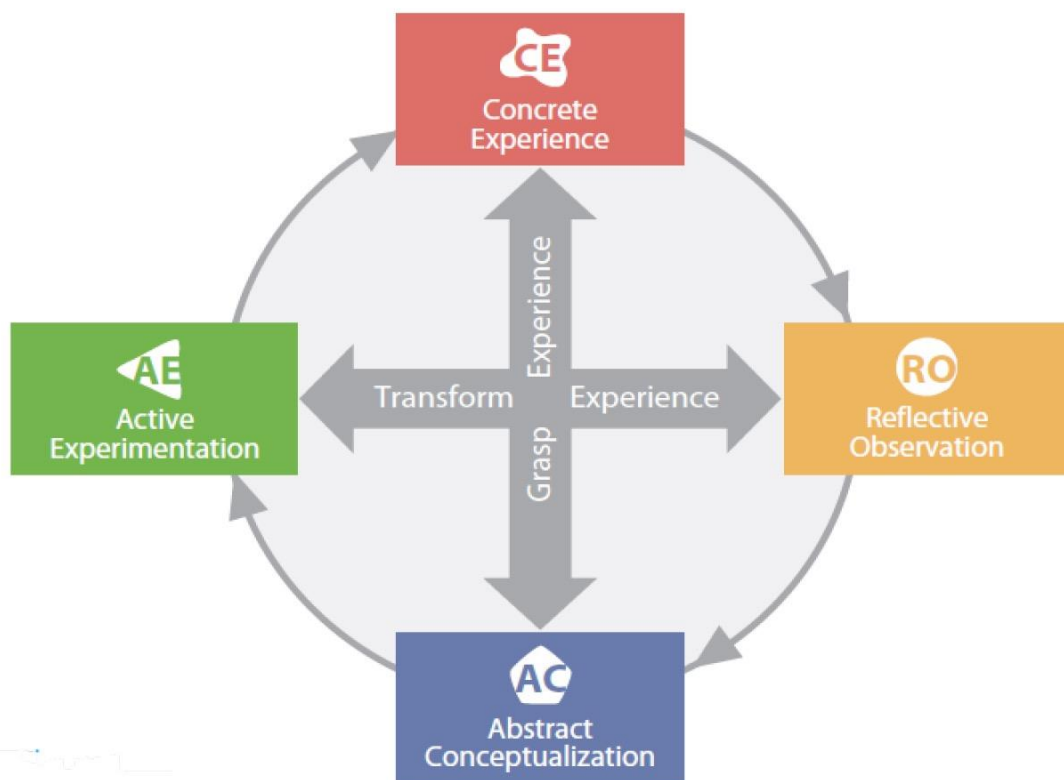


Figure 2.5 The Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb & Kolb, 2013, p. 8)

Specifically, grasping experience involves two learning modes—Concrete Experience (CE) and Abstract Conceptualization (AC), while transforming experience includes another two—Reflective Observation (RO) and Active Experimentation (AE). They believe:

Learning arises from the resolution of creative tension among these four learning modes. This process is portrayed as an idealized learning cycle or spiral where the learner “touches—all the bases” experiencing (CE), reflecting (RO), thinking (AC), and acting (AE)—in a recursive process that is sensitive to the learning situation and what is being learned. Immediate or concrete experiences are the basis for observations and reflections. These reflections are assimilated and distilled into abstract concepts from which new implications for action can be drawn. These implications can be actively tested and serve as guides in creating new experiences. (Kolb & Kolb, 2013, p. 8)

Kolb’s theory presents an ideal model of learning process, which is largely “concerned with the learner’s internal cognitive processes” (Mcleod, 2017, para. 3). However, Jarvis (2004, p. 102), a scholar in the field of adult learning, argues that the model “is an over-simple description of the learning processes” in light of his own empirical research. He defines learning as “a combination of processes whereby whole persons construct experiences of situations and transform them into knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs, values, emotions and the senses, and integrate the outcomes into their own biographies” (p. 111). From the perspective of possible learning situations, Jarvis (2004) divides the learning into two types, intended and incidental, and classifies the situations as formal, non-formal and informal ones. Altogether, there are six combinations among them:

As displayed in the Figure 2.6, Box A refers to formal education and training that takes place in educational or bureaucratic organisations. Box B represents the ongoing learning that is achieved in such places as the workplace, community, and so forth. In this type of learning situation, the learner is sometimes mentored. Box C involves both learning in daily life and self-directed learning. This type of learning is undertaken when, for instance, we decide to teach ourselves how to use a computer application. It can be in the form of individual learning or part of a group project. Box D indicates incidental learning that happens in formal situations. It might not always be something educational, but something that the planners of the learning experience did not expect. To exemplify, it could be someone suddenly feeling that the teacher is not as knowledgeable as he or

she originally thought, someone finding that the classroom is poorly designed, or someone realising that or she or he was not taken as an autonomous individual by the carer, and so on. Box E as well represents incidental learning situations in non-formal learning environments. Box F indicates daily learning, which is perhaps the most common situation in the fast-changing societies. In this type of learning situation, we tend to find ourselves in new situations and have to learn to adapt to or cope with any difficulties. If we were unable to respond to the situations swiftly, we often have to plan our learning and as a result, the situation switches to Box C.

<i>Type of situation</i>	<i>Type of learning</i>	
	Intended	Incidental
Formal	A	D
Non-formal	B	E
Informal	C	F

Figure 2.6 Possible learning situations (Jarvis, 2004, p. 107)

In terms of the types of learning, Jarvis (2004) identifies at least eight types: (1) incidental learning about self through non-consideration and rejection; (2) preconscious knowledge learning, e.g., unconsciously memorising the face in the crowd; (3) preconscious skills learning, e.g., unconsciously adjusting our actions; (4) basic skills learning without reflection; (5) memorisation; (6) reflective cognitive learning; (7) practice learning; and (8) contemplation. The first three types are incidental learning,



the middle two do not involve reflection, and the last three are reflective learning. In fact, at times, even though when we are situated in a learning environment, it is possible that we do not learn because of no motivation or without experiencing disjunction, which is the moment in time when we recognise that “the situation has become problematic” (p. 107). Thus, the processes of learning appear more complicated than Kolb’s experiential learning cycle.

For Simons and Ruijters (2004, p. 4), learning is defined as “implicit or explicit mental and/or overt activities and processes leading to changes in knowledge, skills or attitudes or the ability to learn of individuals, groups, or organisations. These can under certain conditions also lead to changes in work processes or work outcomes of individuals, groups, or organisations”. At the same time, they suggest that both the process and the outcome of learning are classified as explicit or implicit and put forward four modes of learning: EE (explicit processes-explicit outcomes), EI (explicit processes-implicit outcomes), II (implicit processes-implicit outcomes) and IE (implicit processes-explicit outcomes). They state:

When learning processes are implicit, people do not realise that activities they are undertaking or processes they are involved in, can or will lead to changes in knowledge, skills, attitudes and/or learning ability. Awareness of learning processes (thus explicit learning processes) can arise before, during or after the activities and processes. Sometimes this awareness does not arise at all. When learning outcomes are implicit, people do not realise what they (have) learn(ed) during activities such as working, playing or problem solving. Awareness of learning outcomes can also arise before, during or after the activities or processes mentioned. And again, sometimes the awareness of learning outcomes does not arise at all. In that case, learning remains fully implicit. (p. 7)

These four modes of learning illustrate its complexity, and reminds us to think about the

teachers' learning from both the processes and the outcomes, as well as the nature of the knowledge as explicit or tacit, the latter of which might be hard to capture either in the practice or in the researching situations.

#### 2.4.2 Professional learning and development

Vygotsky (1978, p. 90) points out:

Learning is not development; however, properly organized learning results in mental development and sets in motion a variety of development processes that would be impossible apart from learning. Thus, learning is a necessary and universal aspect of the process of developing culturally organized, specifically human, and psychological functions.

Based on their practical experiences in teaching, researching and consultancy on professional learning and development, Simons and Ruijters (2004) present a three-stage model of professional learning that contributes to the long-term professional development across different domains. The three stages are elaboration, expansion and externalisation, which construct in accordance with their definition of "learning professional". They argue that the term "professional" is too static due to the needs for collective and multi-perspective learning beyond the boundaries of disciplines and professions, as well as the emphasis of innovation in the present, and suggest that the term "learning professional" can be used instead of "professional" as "a more dynamic concept of the professional" (p. 3). In the first stage (elaboration), the learning professionals are able to elaborate on their work competencies by learning from and in practice by means of implicit learning, and making implicit learning outcomes explicit and so on. In the second stage (expansion), they can expand their theoretical knowledge base and insights by learning from and in research in an explicit way. In the third stage (externalisation), they know how to externalise their practical and theoretical insights,

which is a way of contributing to the development of the profession and/or to team and organisational learning. Besides, they apply different forms of learning to develop themselves at different stages such as theoretical learning, critical learning and inquiry learning for the second stage, and producing publications and providing lectures and workshops for the third stage. It can be seen that Simons and Ruijters's definition of learning professional highlights the outcomes of learning and their contribution to the wider communities.

Simons and Ruijters's emphasis on the outcomes of the learning echoes Evans's (2011) definition of the term "professional development", which is defined as "the process whereby people's professionalism may be enhanced, with a degree of permanence that exceeds transitoriness" (p. 867). From the perspective of micro-level professional development, Evans (2019, p. 8) describes the process as:

[T]he enhancement of individuals' professionalism, resulting from their acquisition, through a consciously or unconsciously applied mental internalisation process, of professional work-related knowledge and/or understanding and/or attitudes and/or skills and/or competences that, on the grounds of what is consciously or unconsciously considered to be its/their superiority, displace(s) and replace(s) previously-held professional work-related knowledge and/or understanding and/or attitudes and/or skills and/or competences.

Therefore, the outcomes of professional learning and development can be knowledge, understanding, skills, competences and attitudes.

For the profession of the teacher, Kelly (2006, p. 506) defines teacher learning as "the process by which teachers move towards expertise", and the basis of teacher learning is

reflection (Korthagen, 2017). The importance of reflection in teacher professional development has been verified by numerous studies. As for the content of reflection, Gimmet et al. (1990, cited in Day, 2004, p. 112) put forward three kinds of reflection:

- *Technical*: as an instrument to direct or control practice. This may be used to improve the efficiency of the 'delivery' of existing prescribed curricula but not question its value
- *Deliberative*: as a means of choosing from a range of alternative views and practices of teaching
- *Dialectical*: as a means of transforming by reconstructing practice within concepts of social justice and emancipation.

For the approaches of reflection, Day (2004) divides the teachers' reflection into four modes: (1) preparation for what must be done to get by, which refers to a type of reflection "limited to feedback of experience by self on self" (p. 120); (2) critical incidents; (3) autobiographical reflection; and (4) action research. Through different kinds and modes of reflection, teachers develop themselves. The outcomes of professional learning and development usually reflected in the improvement of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), which is defined as "a type of knowledge specifically possessed by expert teachers" (Park & Oliver 2008b, p. 812). I move on to PCK in the next section.

### 2.4.3 The knowledge bases for teaching and PCK

With regard to what knowledge teachers should possess, Shulman (1987) offers the definition of "the knowledge base" and proposes seven categories that form the minimum knowledge bases of the teachers. The knowledge base is defined as "a codified or codifiable aggregation of knowledge, skill, understanding, and technology, of ethics and disposition, of collective responsibility – as well as a means for representing and communicating it" (p. 4). The knowledge can be represented as three forms:

propositional, case and strategic. Propositional and case knowledge can well guide the teachers' work while strategic knowledge comes into play when the principles or rules conflict and it is an instrument to distinguish craft from profession (Shulman, 1986). The seven categories include:

- ✧ content knowledge;
- ✧ general pedagogical knowledge;
- ✧ curriculum knowledge;
- ✧ pedagogical content knowledge (PCK);
- ✧ knowledge of learners and their characteristics;
- ✧ knowledge of educational contexts; and
- ✧ knowledge of educational ends, purposes, and values, and their philosophical and historical grounds.

Impressively, Shulman believes that PCK "is of special interest because it identifies the distinctive bodies of knowledge for teaching", and "[i]t represents the blending of content and pedagogy into an understanding of how particular topics, problems, or issues are organized, represented, and adapted to the diverse interests and abilities of learners, and presented for instruction." (p.8) Later on, following Shulman's idea of PCK, other researchers construct different models in the light of their beliefs or of the findings from empirical studies, mainly in the maths and science domains (Depaepe et al., 2013). Some researchers adopt Shulman's original definition but modify the components of PCK. For example, Ball et al. (2008) build on Shulman's work that PCK is "a kind of amalgam of knowledge of content and pedagogy that is central to the knowledge needed for teaching" (p. 392), and define "mathematical knowledge for teaching" as "the mathematical knowledge needed to carry out the work of teaching mathematical" (p. 395). Based on their empirical study, they refine the mathematical knowledge for teaching that covers two domains: subject matter knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge. The former includes three sub-components: (1) common content knowledge, (2) horizon content knowledge, and (3) specialized content knowledge; and the latter also involves three aspects: (1) knowledge of content and student, (2)

knowledge of content and teaching, (3) knowledge of content and curriculum. Their work nearly totally follows Shulman's idea, on the basis of which they construct a practice-based theory.

Nevertheless, other researchers (e.g., Grossman, 1990, cited in Ball et al., 2008; Marks, 1990) expand the definition of PCK and re-formulate the constituent parts of PCK. For instance, Turner-Bisset (1999) draws on the literature and her own doctoral study's evidence and believes that PCK is "of an overarching knowledge base comprising all of the knowledge bases" (p. 47). It involves 11 aspects: (1) substantive knowledge, (2) syntactic knowledge, (3) beliefs about the subject, (4) curriculum knowledge, (5) knowledge of contexts, (6) knowledge of self, (7) knowledge/models of teaching, (8) knowledge of learners-cognitive, (9) knowledge of learners-empirical, (10) knowledge of educational ends, (11) general pedagogical knowledge. These 11 knowledge bases are represented as sets, and PCK is the amalgam containing all of these sets. Marks (1990) bases an analysis of a mathematical case and identifies four constituents of PCK: (1) knowledge of students' understanding, (2) knowledge of media for instruction, (3) knowledge of subject matter, and (4) knowledge of instructional processes. These proposals seem to present a static view of teaching knowledge, since they do not indicate how these different components interact and develop in practice.

For science education, Park and Oliver (2008a, p. 264) put forward a comprehensive working definition of PCK as "PCK is *teachers' understanding and enactment* of how to help a group of students understand specific subject matter using multiple instructional strategies, representations, and assessments while working within the contextual, cultural, and social limitations in the learning environment". They identified five major components of PCK, including (1) orientation to teaching science, (2) knowledge of students' understanding in science, (3) knowledge of science curriculum, (4) knowledge of instructional strategies for teaching science, and (5) knowledge of assessment of science learning, and construct a pentagon model of PCK, as demonstrated in Figure 2.7:

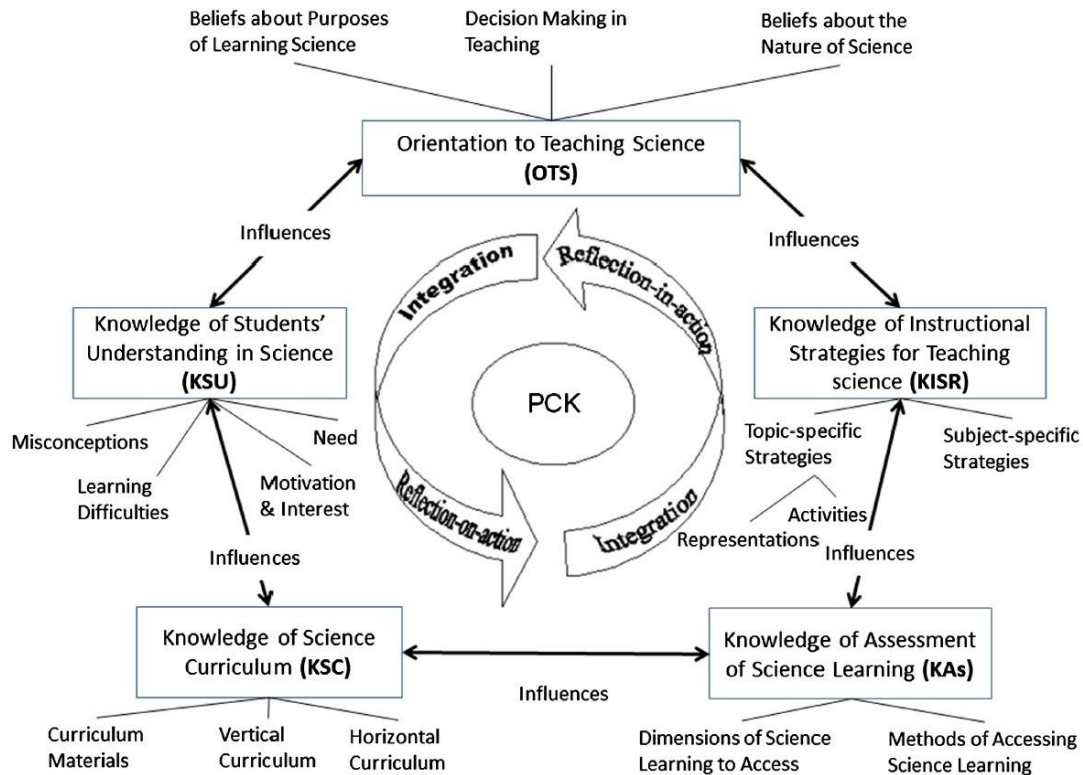


Figure 2.7 Pentagon model of PCK for teaching science (Park & Oliver, 2008a, cited in Park & Chen, 2012, p. 925)

They believe that PCK is an integration of these components. More importantly, their study illustrates how a teacher's PCK is developed and what factors impact the its development. Their findings are as follows:

- (a) PCK development occurred as a result of reflection related to both knowledge-in-action and knowledge-on-action;
- (b) teacher efficacy was evident as an affective affiliate of PCK;
- (c) students influenced the ways that PCK was organized, developed, and validated;
- (d) teachers' understanding of students' misconceptions was a major factor that shaped PCK in planning, conducting instruction, and assessment; and
- (e) PCK was idiosyncratic in some of its enactments.

Besides, they found that the aspects of non-cognitive attributes such as teacher beliefs and teacher efficacy contribute to a teacher's PCK development, which is what Shulman (2015) identified as the limitations of the original PCK formulation. Overall, this model provides me with a dynamical perspective to look at teachers' knowledge.

Reviewing the literature about PCK in Chinese, I found that it has been a highlight in the Chinese context recently. Three features can be addressed: first, the studies cover the teachers in different subjects such as Chinese language (e.g. Xin, 2019; S. Zhao, 2021), maths (e.g. X. Han, 2021; Huang & Zhang, 2019), chemistry (e.g. H. Yang et al., 2020; Xie & Jiang, 2021), STEAM (e.g. H. Zhang & Xie, 2021), music (e.g. X. Wang, 2017; Yin, 2021) and P.E. (e.g. Liang, 2021), and different sectors, including in the pre-school (e.g. Cao, 2020; Yi, 2021), as well as in the primary (e.g. X. Gu, et al., 2019; K. Zhou & Chen, 2021), secondary (e.g. B. Yang & Shi, 2021; F. Zhang & Zhan, 2018) and vocational (e.g. C. Liu and Song, 2021) schools. Second, the majority of researchers focus on one or several dimensions of the PCK underpinned by one or some theoretical frameworks, and they hardly involve the establishment and argument of the PCK theory. However, Chen Xiangming, a famous scholar in China, look at teachers' knowledge from the perspective of practical knowledge and formulate many useful insights (e.g., Xiangming Chen, 2020; Wei & Chen, 2017). Third, case studies are chosen as the main research method to generate the findings. In sum, although the PCK theories mostly put the attention on the integration of the subject content knowledge and other aspects, they provide me with some insights to examine the development of the special-grade teachers' PCK as both knowledge and skill over time from novice to expert teachers, and this would guide my study.

In this chapter, I have reviewed the literature on the special-grade teachers in the Chinese context and the expert teachers and effective teaching in the international context. I have gained a deeper understanding about how the expert teachers are defined at the policy level, based on those standards in different parts of the world and



from the research evidence in various studies. I have also presented critical comments on the existing literature and identified my research focus, which helps me to situate my research more precisely in the wider context. Last, different theoretical perspectives have been selected to underpin my research. In conclusion, the theoretical sights displayed in this chapter have laid a strong foundation for my research.

## Chapter 3 Methodology

This study aims to investigate the key characteristics that the special-grade teachers possess and the developmental paths through which the special-grade teachers develop themselves. The following four research questions guide my research:

1. What are the key characteristics of the special-grade teachers?
2. What are the crucial external factors influencing the special-grade teachers' professional development?
3. What are the professional developmental stages of the special-grade teachers?
4. What are the existing problems in the practice of the special-grade teachers' work after they achieve the award?

The answers to these four questions enable me to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of special-grade teachers in the Chinese context.

In this chapter, I first look at philosophical issues of social science underpinning my research. Then, I discuss my research approach focusing on narrative research. Next, I specify how I selected the study sample, collect and analyse data, and I also provide an account of my ethical considerations. Finally, a summary of the chapter marks the end of the discussion of methodological issues.

### 3.1 Philosophy of social science

This chapter begins by discussing issues around philosophy of social science, as the philosophical positions affect the selection of questions that a researcher finds answerable and decides to address the methods that the researcher would apply to answer them (Rosenberg, 2012), as well as the selection of theories guiding the research (Creswell, 2013). Just as the foundations of a built house must be well devised and constructed so that the house can hold for long, the philosophical foundations of a research project should be as robustly set up as possible (Ignatow & Mihalcea, 2018). Hence, it is of great necessity to introduce and clarify relevant philosophical issues regarding this doctoral research, prior to a discussion about my choices of methodologies and methods.

To proceed, we need to work out what the concept of philosophy of social science stand for first. Philosophy and social science are often deemed separate topics (Benton & Craib, 2011), while the philosophy of social science, as an academic research area, sits at the intersection of philosophy and modern social science (Ignatow & Mihalcea, 2018). Creswell (2013) defines philosophy in research as the application of abstract ideas and beliefs informing research. From a historic perspective, the philosophy of the social science has been an inquiry that is loosely clustered around the problem of the scientific status of social knowledge (Turner & Roth, 2003). Benton and Craib (2011) suggests that there are two basic models of the relationship between philosophy and science, with one being the “masterbuilder” or “master-scientist” view of philosophy and the other being the “underlabourer” view of philosophy. In the masterbuilder view, philosophy could lead to certain knowledge by rational argument. Philosophers could construct the most basic truths about ourselves, the nature of the world in which we live, and the rules for reaching such knowledge. Here philosophy offered foundations for research in the specific area. In the underlabourer view of philosophy, it is prevalently acknowledged that pure thinking about the nature of the world cannot provide us with concrete and trustworthy knowledge. Only from practical experience, observation and

experimentation can knowledge be derived. Philosophy is supposed to offer help and support to the work of scientists, as they carry on with the job of exploring how nature unfolds. In this doctoral research, I adopt the underlabourer view of philosophy as I intend to discover the nature of the special-grade teachers' experience from a practical point of view through empirical methods, rather than through pure thinking.

To be more systematic in my research investigation, I choose to seek for the help of the academic discipline of philosophy. There are sub-disciplines, or fields, within philosophy which are useful ideas and arguments that we can draw on to answer research questions, such as ontology, epistemology, logic, ethics and so on (Benton & Craib, 2011). The philosophical problems of social science refer to different types of fundamental problems of philosophy, such as problems of epistemology and metaphysics (Rosenberg, 2012). Thus, it is necessary to figure out the concepts of some of the sub-disciplines of philosophy and how these would underpin my research.

### 3.1.1 Paradigm

Paradigms, according to Thomas (2013), refer to positions on the best ways to consider and research the world, rather than simply views about the world. Proposed by the philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn (1970), paradigm represents a certain set of assumptions concerning the way that research should be undertaken. In social science, paradigm refers to two specific approaches to knowledge, positivism and interpretivism. While positivism, as a way of thinking, remains as the dominant paradigm for ages, it is challenged by the more recently produced framework for thinking, interpretivism. The hermeneutic or interpretive approach is usually deemed the main and radical alternative to positivism, and the two approaches tend to be known as mutually exclusive (Benton & Craib, 2001).

For positivists, knowledge can be gained in objective ways. While in the interpretivist view, the social world is not straightforwardly perceivable in that it is constructed by different individuals in various ways. The social world is not simply “out there” but is perceived differently by individuals, as words and events convey different meanings in different cases. The key point is that interpretivists are intrigued by the way that individuals interrelate; that is, what they view and how they form ideas about the world. In other words, they attempt to learn how the individuals’ worlds are constructed and what understandings about the worlds they have. It is worth noting that in interpretivism, researchers are not expected to be objective in their studies. Instead of trying to be objective, it is important to acknowledge the centrality of subjectivity. In relation to this research, I adhere to interpretivism as the paradigm, as the social worlds are thought to be perceived differently by different special-grade teachers.

### 3.1.2 Ontology

To Solomon (2005), ontology is simply the study of being and is sometimes used as a synonym for metaphysics, while metaphysics is often the broader discipline. Ontological issues concern the types of things that we suppose to exist in the world, and how such things are to be viewed and studied (Thomas, 2013). As Benton and Craib (2011) argued, ontology could be viewed as an answer to such questions as “what kinds of things are there in the world?” (p. 4). In the history of philosophy, there are four main traditions in terms of answering this question. “Materialists” have proposed that the world consists totally of matter, or matter in motion, and the different features of material objects, individuals, societies and so forth can essentially be understood with regard to the more or less complexity of the organisation of the matter. To the contrary, “idealists” have seen the ultimate reality as mental or spiritual. While idealists and materialists find it hard to be fully convincing when they deny each other’s view, “dualism” exists as another option to compromise the two, and “agnosticism” is the positive doctrine that the nature of the world existing separately of our subjective experience simply cannot be known. Practically speaking, Creswell (2013) argues that when researchers undertake

qualitative research, they are encountering the idea of multiple realities. Different researchers draw on different realities, so do the participants and readers of a qualitative study. As he points out, “Evidence of multiple realities includes the use of multiple forms of evidence in themes using the actual words of different individuals and presenting different perspectives” (p.20). In this study, I use different research methods, as introduced later, to present the realities of the special-grade teachers’ experience from their own perspective.

### 3.1.3 Epistemology

Epistemology is briefly defined as the study of our knowledge of the world (Thomas, 2013). It is the theory of knowledge, “the inquiry into the nature, extent, and justification of human knowledge” (Rosenberg, 2012, p. 2). In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, two major alternative ideas in contrast to each other play a key part in the dispute about philosophy and science. On one hand, the researchers with a masterbuilder view of philosophy held a “rationalist” view of the nature of knowledge. Highly impressed by mathematics, they intended to reach definitely certain conclusions by formal reasoning. On the other hand, “empiricism” was the opposite theory of knowledge which is basically connected with the underlabourer view of philosophy. Empiricist philosophers take the evidence of our senses as the only source of knowledge regarding the world. Most natural and social scientists adhere to this view of knowledge, as they strive to provide genuine and authoritative knowledge, and the empiricist view of knowledge is also the closest to most people’s common-sense feeling: “Seeing is believing” (Benton & Craib, 2001). From a practical perspective, Creswell (2013) suggests that in light of the epistemological assumption, when researchers undertake qualitative studies, they attempt to get as close as possible to their participants and hence collect subjective evidence according to individual views. Through the subjective experience of people, knowledge is acquired. Besides, it is significant to do research in the environment where the participants work and live. These all serve as crucial contexts for understanding what the participants are expressing. In this doctoral study, I intend to draw on the empiricist

view of knowledge as the special-grade teachers' experience is apparently based on their subjective experience, rather than mathematic reasoning. Specifically, I select narrative inquiry as my research approach to explore special-grade teachers' professionalism, and I demonstrate this in detail in the next section.

## 3.2 Research approach: narrative inquiry

Narrative inquiry involves “the study of stories or narratives or descriptions of a series of events” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 4), and it exists in numerous forms and stems from various social and humanities disciplines (Creswell, 2013; Riessman & Speedy, 2007). Since the term “narrative” is conceptualised differently, the researchers use it in different ways. For instance, some suggests that it is only a method of explanation, while for others, it forms part of the object being studied. As a result, in some cases, narratives are utilised as a means of providing causal explanation, whereas in other cases, they are taken as a way of description of social processes and social reality (Zalanga, 2011). Given these situations, drawing on the works produced by Clandinin and her colleagues, as well as some others, I state the ontological and epistemological assumptions of narrative inquiry, as well as how the relevant theories underpin my research.

### 3.2.1 Experience as an ontology

As a way of understanding experience, one of the philosophical underpinnings of narrative inquiry is rooted in John Dewey's theory of experience (Clandinin & Caine, 2008). According to Dewey, experience is described as “a notation of an inexpressible” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p.4), which can be interpreted as that experience is not self-explanatory (J.-H. Kim, 2016). The nature of experience involves two statements. First, it “can be understood only by a combination of an active and a passive element” (p.70), which means that, in one hand, human actions are intentional and meaningful, and in the other hand, humans undergo or suffer the consequences of their actions. That is

what Dewey says, “We do something to the thing and then it does something to us in return” (ibid.). Second, experience can be understood only a combination of inner and outer factors, just as Dewey points out:

[experiences] can be understood only as we take into account the total normal experience in which both inner and outer factors are so incorporated that each has lost its special character. In an experience, things and events belonging to the world, physical and social, are transformed through the human context they enter, while the live creature is changed and developed through its intercourse with things previously external to it. (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p.4)

From the citation, two important criteria of experience, interaction and continuity (Clandinin & Caine, 2008), can be identified. For interaction, J.-H. Kim (2016, p. 71) explains that

*interaction of experience* is an interplay of objective and internal conditions that what we call a *situation* (Dewey, 1938/1997, p. 42). Thus, when we say we live in a world, it means that we live in a series of situations where interaction is going on between an individual and objects and/or other persons.

In other word, the situation that an experience takes place, including its social dimension, is indispensable for the ontology of experience. For continuity of experience, it means that experiences build up from previous experiences and lead to further experiences (J.-H. Kim, 2016). Clandinin and Rosiek (2007, p.5) notes that “this continuity is not merely perceptual; it is ontological” and “Wherever one positions oneself in that continuum – the imagined now, some imagined past, or some imagined future – each point has a past experiential base and leads to an experiential future”. The continuity of experience



implies that we should treat experience historically, reflectively and prospectively.

The understanding of the nature of experience as an ontology and its two criteria underpins my research from three perspectives: First, I regard each special-grade teacher's experience as being in an experiential continuum including past, present and future to explore their professionalism and professional development. Second, I pay attention to the situations in which the special-grade teachers' experiences take place and interpret their experiences incorporating different inner and outer, as well as active and passive factors. Third, the current research serves as a portal through which I, as a researcher, enter into the special-grade teachers' experiences, and start a new experience for me and my participants. I treasure the experience and take advantage of such an interaction with the best teachers in China to co-create the research findings, and attempt to enhance my participants' and my learning and change (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007).

### 3.2.2 Narrative as a mode of knowing

"Narrative", as a representative form of human experience, is an intricate and bewildering concept. Since the term derives from different theoretical perspectives such as narratology, culture theory, poststructuralist literary and constructivist, its meanings and implications are divergent from each other in light of its provenance (Czarniawska, 2004; Rimmom-Kenan, 2006). Thus, it is necessary to define it first. In my research, narrative is defined as "a discourse form in which events and happenings are configured into a temporal unity by means of a plot" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5). This type of narrative is not simply a prosaic discourse but rather a storied narrative, which

is the linguistic form that preserves the complexity of human action with its interrelationship of temporal sequence, human motivation, chance happenings, and

changing interpersonal and environmental contexts. In this context, story refers not only to fictional accounts but also to narratives describing "ideal" life events such as biographies, autobiographies, histories, case studies, and reports of remembered episodes that have occurred. (p.7)

Taken in this sense, a storied narrative is the best representative of Dewey's "the total normal experience", which "is constituted by interaction between subject and object, between a self and its world, it is not itself either merely physical nor merely mental, no matter how much one factor or the other predominates" (Clandinin and Rosiek, 2007, p.4), since it reflects the nature of experience and two principles of experience of "interaction and continuity". Bruner (1991) insightfully proposes ten features of narrative, including narrative diachronicity, particularity, intentional state entailment, hermeneutic composability, and context sensitivity and negotiability, and so on, and illustrates how narrative "operates as an instrument of mind in the construction of reality" (p. 6). Following these ideas, special-grade teachers' storied narratives are collected as data to generate my research findings because they offer an ontological and epistemological entity that I can study.

### 3.2.3 Narrative inquiry as a suitable approach

In addition, narrative inquiry is a feasible approach for my research because it provides a diversity of useful tools that I can use in my research. First, the attention to the three commonplaces of temporality, sociality and place that are put forward by Connelly and Clandinin (2006, cited in Clandinin et al., 2007) guide my research process effectively. Drawing on Connelly and Clandinin's (2006) work, Clandinin and Rosiek (2007, p. 25) summarise them as follows: Temporality means that "events, people, and objects under study are in temporal transition", and are described "with a past, a present, and a future". Sociality refers to "the simultaneous concern with both personal and social conditions". For personal conditions, each participant's emotions, desires, and moral

dispositions both in their storied contexts and in research contexts are considered. For social conditions, the situations that each participant encounters, including the environments, people, surrounding factors and force, and so on, should be taken into account because these situations shape human actions. The third dimension is place, which means that narrative inquirers hold the assumption of “all events occurs in some place” and a belief of “the qualities place and the impact of places on lived and told experiences are crucial” (ibid.). The three commonplaces need to be explored simultaneously in a narrative research study. The three dimensions provide a useful framework to comprehensively examine special-grade teachers’ stories from different perspectives so that I can reveal the features of their professional development.

Second, two modes of cognition guide my data analysis process and the method of demonstrating my research findings effectively and innovatively. Drawing on Jerome Bruner’s research on two complementary modes of cognition, Polkinghorne (1995) indicates the traditional logic-scientific mode of knowing as *paradigmatic cognition*, and storied knowing as *narrative cognition*. The former is to use an analytic process classifying the single instance into a category or concept. In this way, the category or concept is defined by a range of common characteristics that is shared by its members. Its nature is to produce “cognitive networks of concepts that allow people to construct experiences as familiar by emphasizing the common elements that appear over and over” (p. 10). The latter is to describe the differences and diversity of people’s behaviour by using narrative reasoning, whose remarkable feature is to maintain “the temporal context and complex interaction of the elements” connecting to the core purpose of the human action. Such storied knowing informs the understanding for new actions by means of analogy. These two modes of cognition provide a basis for making sense of the two types of narrative data analysis: *analysis of narratives* and *narrative analysis*.

*Analysis of narratives* corresponds to the *paradigmatic cognition* described above. It aims to seek common themes or conceptual manifestations, as well as the relationships

among the themes and conceptions within the data consisting of stories by recursively deductive and inductive analysis, and finally produce general and abstract knowledge underpinning by the evidence from the participants' stories. *Narrative analysis* matches with narrative *cognition*. Narrative analysis provides a means of organising pieces of data into coherent developmental accounts, and thus its purpose is to formulate stories as the outcome of the research. The researcher needs to "develop or discover a plot that displays the linkage among the data elements as parts of an unfolding temporal development culminating in the denouement" (p. 15). Plot refers to the thematic thread that "lay out happenings as parts of an unfolding movement that culminates in an outcome" (p. 5) and it "provides the systemic unity to the story; it is the glue that connects the parts together" (p. 18). In relation to my research, I expect to comprehensively demonstrate the special-grade teachers' characteristics and developmental paths, as well as the external factors influencing them. I need to not only describe the common features across the group of special-grade teachers, but also display their uniqueness as individuals. The two types of narrative data analysis are feasible tools that I can use to achieve my research objectives. Moreover, I would demonstrate my findings for the third research question by developing appropriate plots to display their work profile and developmental path in a storied mode, which I believe that it is an innovative action because this writing style can rarely be seen in the literature.

### 3.3 Sampling selection, negotiating and participation

To find out the answers to the research questions, 18 special-grade teachers working in City X (pseudonym), one of the largest cities in China, were invited to attend the philosophical hermeneutic interviews, while 16 of them accepted my invitations. Their personal information is illustrated as below in Table 3.1:

Table 3.1 The information of interview participants

	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Educational Sector	Subject	Interviewing Times
1	Li	Female	53	Primary school	maths	2
2	Wan	Female	54	Primary school	maths	2
3	Zhang	Male	50	Primary school	PE	2
4	Liu	Female	48	Primary school	Chinese language	3
5	Wu	Male	52	Secondary school	Chinese language	1
6	Sun	Male	59	Secondary school	Chinese language	1
7	Guo	Female	45	Secondary school	Chinese language	3
8	Zhou	Female	46	Secondary school	geography	3
9	Tian	Male	52	Secondary school	physics	3
10	Jia	Female	54	Secondary school	English language	1
11	Chen	Female	50	Secondary school	English language	3
12	Liang	Male	50	Secondary school	history	1
13	Peng	Male	52	Secondary school	history	1
14	Yu	Female	40	Secondary school	biology	2
15	Dai	Male	49	Secondary school	English language	2
16	Qi	Male	56	Secondary school	physics	2

From the table above among the 16 teachers, half of them are males, and the other eight are females; their ages were between 40 and 59; four came from the primary sector, and 12 from the secondary sector. All of them had been special-grade teachers for more than one year when I first interviewed them in 2017.

Sampling selection involved the purposive and convenience types. At the start, 18 special-grade teachers were recommended to me by my relatives and friends. When I contacted them, I provided them with information about my research, described the contribution they would potentially make to the research, and decided on the meeting date separately with them. As a result, 16 of the special-grade teachers agreed to

participate in my research. For the two teachers who chose not to participate, one said that she was in another province on business and was not happy to be interviewed over the telephone. Thus, we did not have the opportunities to meet for interview; and the other refused my invitation with the reason that he was much too busy during the time of my request. Therefore, 16 teachers took part in my research in the end.

## 3.4 Data collection

This piece of research applied two methods of data collection. The first method was the problem-centred philosophical hermeneutic interview and the second was the collection of documents. The details are provided below.

### 3.4.1 Interviewing

I drew on the problem-centred philosophical hermeneutic interviewing in my research. For the problem-centred interviewing (Witzel, 2000), it has three advantages: (1) it is a theory-generating method that allows the interplay of inductive and deductive thinking to contribute to the understanding to a phenomenon. For special-grade teachers' professional developmental paths, few researches focused on this field, the theory-generating method was suitable to explore relevant aspects; (2) the problem-centred interviewing strategy starts with the subjective approach to the problem, subsequently enriched by dialogues employing imaginative and semi-structured prompts, which provides a procedure to conduct interviews; (3) the special-grade teachers themselves are those who can describe their experience the most accurately. Being problem-centred, instead of theory-driven, helps construct concepts and ideas by employing empirical analysis. Regarding the philosophical hermeneutic interviewing, Vandermause and Fleming (2011) summarised two important distinctions between this method and general qualitative interviewing: (1) The researcher should co-create the understandings with the participant through an engaged conversational process in the interviews; (2)

The researcher should maintain an open and flexible attitude towards unexpected or unfamiliar responses in all the stages, and construct the research findings by integrating different participants' perceptions, as well as his/her own views. They also give several useful techniques to ensure the fidelity to these philosophical assumptions, including setting the tone of the research as openness and reflexivity, using incomplete sentences to stimulate more important stories, looking for the participant's affirmation, to testify and correct the growing understandings to a phenomenon, and avoiding the participant's distraction from the story. I shall describe how these techniques were used in my research later.

The data collection by the problem-centred philosophical hermeneutic interview was divided into three phases. The first phase of interview took place between July and September in 2017 when I contacted each of my participant for the first time. I managed to tell them the details of my research, let them feel my interest in their professional lives, and establish a feeling of trust between us. Then, about one or two days before I met them, I reminded the participants that we would meet and sent my translated interview schedule to them. All of actions that I took aimed to allow time for them to think about their experience more deeply so that we could be ready for the following dialogues to construct the meaningful understanding between us. The venues for the interviews were negotiated ahead so that both the participants and I felt quiet, safe and at ease. In the end, I did almost all the interviews with the 16 teachers in their offices or the meeting rooms at their own schools, and during the interview processes, nobody intruded in. Additionally, one of the interviews took place under a big tree on the participant's campus, and we also enjoyed an undisturbed time. When I was working on the interview schedule, I took the theme "professional development of the special-grade teachers" as a core and divided the interview questions into four topics: characteristics of the group, external influencing factors, professional developmental paths, and other information. The first phase of interviews covered all the four topics. The longest interview was nearly three hours, and the shortest was one hour and a quarter. All the participants were interviewed at least once, with many of them being interviewed twice

or even three times. The consideration of doing the second and the third interviews was that some questions were left unanswered or unclarified in the previous interviews. It turned out to be necessary to carry out the following-up interviews, as I gained more useful information from them. The content of the interviews covered all the research questions. The interview schedule is shown in Appendix.

The second interviewing phase was arranged in July 2019. As I was not in China at that time, I could not meet up with my participants in person for the interviews. Instead, I interviewed six of them on WeChat (a popular social media mobile application in China) by using its function of voice call or by telephone. The interviews were conducted based on a comprehensive analysis of the data gained from the first-round interviews in 2017. The content of the second-round interviews included a short questionnaire recording the special-grade teachers' basic information, such as age, the year of award of the special-grade teachers, the time of their self-identified critical incidents and so on. Besides, we further discussed and clarified a number of viewpoints that we touched on superficially or vaguely in the previous round of interviews. Moreover, I encouraged them to offer new insights or narratives regarding the four topics, and I gained new information that we did not discuss previously, as well as new understanding about the same topics. The longest interview lasted an hour and six minutes and the shortest was 27 minutes. The sample of the interview schedule can also be seen in Appendix.

I carried out the third phase of interview at the beginning of October in 2019. Five of the participants were interviewed for the third time. I took the one-to-one, face-to-face form of interview this time, and I met them in the offices, classrooms or meeting rooms at their schools. The interviews unfolded in a relaxing and pleasant environment without being disturbed by anyone. In this round of interviews, in addition to clarifying the vague viewpoints from the previous two rounds, I focused mainly on the critical incidents of the special-grade teachers' professional development. Specifically, I looked at the effect of the critical incidents, such as how these incidents shaped the special-grade teachers.



Moreover, I aimed to investigate which internal and external incidents influenced their professional development in which phases and under what conditions, and how the internal and external factors simultaneously affected their professional growth. The longest interview was 2 hours and 38 minutes while the shortest was 57 minutes. The sample of the interview schedule is available in Appendix.

The interview data of the three rounds were transcribed verbatim and analysed immediately after the interviews. The interview schedules for the second and third rounds were made based on the comprehensive and systematic analysis of the data from the previous round. The reason for conducting the interviews over two years' time was that the researcher (I) could immerse myself in the data for a long period of time so that I could perceive the phenomenon relatively clearly. At the same time, I was able to communicate and discuss with the participants more deeply for some specific issues in the subsequent interviews. Along with the participants, I constructed the understanding and interpretation of the research questions.

Drawing on the features of problem-centred philosophical hermeneutic interviewing, I paid attention to the following points in the interviews: Firstly, openness was a key point throughout. I devised open-ended questions to allow the participants to express their ideas without restrictions for each interview, rather than the traditional style of interview of a question-and-answer game (Witzel, 2000). For instance, I asked such questions, "if you were me, what do you think I should know as a person who is interested in the group of special-teachers?" or "what else do you want to tell me about special-teachers?" Furthermore, I devised brainstorming questions so that the participants could give answers freely. In other words, there would be no unique expected answers to these questions. The participants were expected to tell the stories that were forefront in their memory, and I was there to facilitate the stories. To draw an example, in the third phase of interviews, I first asked the teachers to list the critical incidents that they thought had significant influence on their professional development,

and then let them describe these incidents. I acted as a facilitator guiding rather than leading them to enrich the details of the stories. In the end, I obtained their complete professional developmental routes connected by the critical incidents.

Secondly, reflexiveness was a key point throughout. For instance, I asked the participants to tell their critical incidents to find out their characteristics and the influencing factors that impacted their professional development. After listening to the stories, I usually discussed impressive people and things with the participants to validate my understanding, or enriched both the respondent's and my understanding through dialogue. To exemplify, Zhang, a P.E. primary teacher, shared a successful lesson using games with me, and he said a lot about how the pupils liked it, including their smiles, their languages, and they were unwilling to leave after the lesson. He continued:

In the end, I found a girl still there. I asked her why she did not leave. She came up to me, holding one of my hands. She was only seven or eight, and she smiled with a missing tooth in her mouth. She asked, 'Laoshi (Chinese for 'teacher'), can I kiss your hand?' Before I said something, she dropped her lips to my hand, and then ran away with joy. From this example, we can see, as a teacher, you must love the pupils, you must let them like your lessons, then the pupils would give you their love in return.

As Zhang finished, we discussed about this story from different perspectives, and then reached consensus on several points: (1) excellent teachers possess effective skills to help the pupils learn, and the pupils are able to get happiness in the process of learning; (2) excellent teachers love the pupils through helping them to learn with happiness, rather than by hollow languages and disembodied behaviours; (3) Excellent teachers should realise and keep proper limits to the pupils, especially avoiding physical contact with the pupils. By discussing the story, we re-created and generated excellent teachers' features. In this way, I collected relatively rich quality data for my research.

Thirdly, I was sensitive to the respondents' unspoken and body languages, and tried to extract important information from them. For instance, when I found that a participant would say something, but stopped, and saw back, I felt that he had some scruples. Then I tried to probe, and he expressed his dissatisfaction against some teachers' inappropriate words in front of the students, such as some critical comments on the government. Additionally, I clarified the true meaning of the stories that the special-grade teachers shared in the interviews by using incomplete sentences and seeking for assent with them. Through using these techniques, I gained rich data which built a solid foundation for my data analysis.

Nevertheless, the problem-centred philosophical hermeneutic interviewing has two potential limitations that need to be overcome. In other words, when adopting the problem-centred philosophical hermeneutic interviewing in practice, the interviewers have two potential challenges to take on, and if they cannot handle the challenges well, they may face the consequences of it, such as missing key information. First, since the interviewees are given maximal freedom to narrate themselves, the interviewer has to interpret the meaning of the narratives following the interviewees' train of thought. This requires the interviewer to have a strong ability to keep track of and comprehend what the interviewees narrate. Given that the interviewees may keep providing new thoughts about the same experience or on the same topics, if the interviewer is unable to adjust his or her understanding from time to time, the interviewer may not keep him- or herself updated with the latest meaning given by the interviewees. If this is the case, there may be discrepancy and ambiguity in the understandings about the same issues between the interviewer and the interviewees. If the interviewer feels that the discrepancy and ambiguity occur, he or she has to seek chances in the interviews to clarify with the interviewees. In my case, despite my failure to clarify some of the issues, such as the interviewees' understandings about teacher morality in the first-round interviews, I was able to do so in the next two rounds of interviews. In short, I managed to overcome the first limitation, as I got the discrepancy and ambiguity cleared in the end.

Second, Witzel (2000) suggests that when this interviewing method is adopted, a preformulated introductory question is devised to help the researcher to focus the discussion on the problem under study. Yet, he also implies that if the question is too broad, it can allow the interviewees to answer the question overly freely. In other words, the interviewees may share whatever information they like without considering much about the balance between their answers, and this is exactly the case in my interviews with some of the special-grade teachers. In the interviews, the participants were generally enthusiastic about sharing their experiences with me. Their words covered a wide range of topics that I would like to learn about. For the topics that they were keen on sharing about, they tended to talk endlessly and provided lengthy answers with me. However, for the topics in which they were less interested, they did not have so many words. In tackling the issue, I stimulated narratives of the interviewees by employing imaginative and semi-structured prompts. More specifically, I asked more ad-hoc questions on the topics that were less talked about. Hence, this limitation was largely overcome.

### 3.4.2 Document collecting

Documents are the second main resources to generate the research findings. Although they are static, they contain large amounts of information and have capacity to tell us beyond the information that they contain because they are socially constructed (Matthews & Ross, 2010). The documents included papers, lesson plans and self-reflective articles, shown as in Table 3.2 (see the next page).

In Table 3.2, introduction information refers to the texts about each interview respondent on their school websites, including their personal information, features and achievements. Papers refers to their publications in different kinds of journals. Lesson

plans are the teaching designs that the teachers devised for the public lessons. Articles are those written by the interview respondents, including self-reflective texts after the public lessons. I searched for their introduction information on their school websites by myself. For the other three types, I asked them for any documents that they liked to share with me when I interviewed them. Some of them were offered to me on the spot, but most of them were sent to me after the interviews. These documents, as important data, helped to justify the research findings generated from interviewing, and provided different perspectives to look at special-grade teachers' professional lives.

Table 3.2 The types and numbers of documents collected from the participants

	Pseudonym	Introduction information	Papers	Lesson plan	Articles	Others
1	Li	1		1		
2	Wan	1		3		
3	Zhang	1	1			
4	Zhou	1				
5	Liu	1	3	1	2	
6	Wu	1		2	6	
7	Sun	1		1	1	
8	Guo	1	2		3	
9	Tian	1			4	1
10	Xia	1		3		
11	Chen	1	1			
12	Liang	1		1		
13	Peng	1		1		
14	Yu	1	1	4	2	
15	Dai	1		2		
16	Qi	1			1	

## 3.5 Data Analysis

### 3.5.1 Interviewing data analysis

Since my interviewing data are nearly all in the form of narratives, Polkinghorne's (1995) work about how to analyse narratives guided the data-analysing process. In relation to my research, I expected to comprehensively demonstrate the special-grade teachers' characteristics and developmental paths, as well as the external factors influencing their professional development. I needed to not only describe the common features across the group of special-grade teachers, but also displayed their uniqueness as individuals. The two types of narrative data analysis described in Section 3.2.3 above completely matched with my research objectives. Utilising the method of *analysis of narratives*, I generated the common features, such as their characteristics and influencing factors, to reveal what they had in common. While I showed their individual developmental paths, I adopted the method of *narrative analysis*. Through the life history stories of the special-grade teachers, I identified their specific development features from the early to the late phase of their careers in their own environments. This form of presentation showed both the general developmental path across this particular group of teachers and the professional development features as individuals. Hence, the two types of narrative data analysis became the most suitable choice for my research, as they helped study both the individuals and the group. In the next section, I give an account of the two processes of analysis.

#### 3.5.1.1 Analysis of narratives

Following the three rounds of data collection, I did three rounds of data analysis. In the first two rounds of data analysis, I followed four steps: familiarisation with data, preliminary analysis, searching for themes, making the interview schedule for the next round interview, and then collecting new data. For the third-round of interview data, I first analysed them by repeating the first three steps, and then interpreted the data.

Finally, I made myself ready for writing. I explain each step in detail below.

The first-round interview data analysis	The second-round interview data analysis	The third-round interview data analysis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• familiarisation with the data</li> <li>• preliminary analysis</li> <li>• searching for themes</li> <li>• making the interview schedule for the next round interview, and then collecting new data</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• familiarisation with the data</li> <li>• preliminary analysis</li> <li>• searching for themes</li> <li>• making the interview schedule for the next round interview, and then collecting new data</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• familiarisation with the data</li> <li>• preliminary analysis</li> <li>• searching for themes</li> <li>• interpreting the data</li> <li>• preparing for the writing</li> </ul>

Figure 3.1 The steps of analysis of interview data

*Familiarisation with data*

After each round of data collection, I first familiarised myself with the data. I took every special-grade teacher as a case of study, and I read the interview transcripts of each of them word by word. I paid particular attention to three topics: (1) the characteristics of the special-grade teachers, (2) the external factors influencing their professional development, and (3) their developmental paths. Any part of the content irrelevant to the three topics was classified into other information. I marked the key words in the data and noted down my thoughts about the texts by annotation. For instance, a piece of raw interview data with my annotation was summarised in the table (see Appendix 2). The words of the participant are shown on the left in the table, and my notes are on the right. In these particular paragraphs discussing the characteristics of the special-grade teachers, three key words were identified, which were (1) having zeal for education, (2) being non-utilitarian, and (3) being willing to share thoughts with peers.

### *Preliminary analysis*

In the second step, I conducted preliminary analysis. In other words, it is a process of identifying codes. I put every special-grade teacher as a unit of analysis and listed all the key words about the three topics above. Referring to the interview transcripts, I figured out the meaning of each key word and identified the codes. Then, I added some new codes, deleted the ambiguous ones, and combined those with the same meaning. I also replaced some codes with more appropriate names so that they could embody what the interviewees were trying to express. I take the piece of raw interview data in Appendix 2 as an example: first, I carefully analysed for the participant, what “having zeal for education” encompassed. It involved loving the subject that he taught, teaching well, and paying attention to the life growth of juveniles. These three points reflected the features of the work of teacher. Taking into account other statements of the participants, I believed that “loving the work of teacher” worked better as a code than “having zeal for education”. Second, I initially identified “being non-utilitarian” as a code, and it basically stood for laying no emphasis on fame and wealth. But having had a closer examination of what the participant expressed, I found what he said, “trying not to be utilitarian”, was more of an advocacy. He did not claim himself to be non-utilitarian, nor did he suggest that the special-grade teachers were non-utilitarian. Thus, I deleted the code. Third, “being willing to share thoughts with peers” was originally identified as a code. However, when I read through the interview transcripts and my notes, I felt that the code could be deemed part of “influencing other teachers” which already existed as a separate code. Hence, I combined the former into the latter. In this way, I confirmed the codes for each special-grade teacher in response to each research question. The codes were written on several pieces of A4 paper for each participant.

### *Searching for themes*

In the third step, I searched for themes which was a complicated and arduous process. I first clustered the codes derived from each participant’s interview data according to research questions. Next, by comparing and contrasting the codes, I sought to find



themes. Last, I identified preliminary themes. There were essentially two standards for identifying the themes. First, it was the frequency that a code emerged in the cases. In general, if a code was mentioned by more than half of the interviewees, it would be deemed a potential theme. To exemplify, as nearly all of the 16 interviewees referred to their head teachers for the impact that they exerted on the special-grade teachers' professional growth, the head teacher was identified as a potential one. Second, just as Braun & Clarke (2006, p. 82) points out, "the 'keyness' of a theme is not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures - but rather on whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question", so in my research, when a code played an irreplaceable key role in the participants' professional development, it would still be recognised as a potential theme, even if it was not mentioned by over half of them. For instance, only three teachers talked about the influence that essay competition had brought on them. The essay competitions enabled them to develop the habit of writing and realise that writing was a primary means of their reflecting practices. This facilitated their professional development significantly. Therefore, it was seen as an influencing factor. As a result, for the first research question about the special-grade teachers' characteristics, I identified 26 initial themes for further scrutiny. For the second question in terms of the external factors that influenced the special-grade teachers' professional development, I moved recursively among the data and combined the codes into 12 themes. For the fourth research question in relation to the existing problems in the practice of the special-grade teachers' work after they achieve the award, five preliminary themes emerged. However, I could not gain fruitful outcomes for the third research question at this stage.

#### *Making the schedule for the next-round interview and collecting new data*

In the process of analysing the data collected in the first round of interview, I realised that with regard to the first, second and fourth research questions, the analysis went on smoothly, since the interview questions pointed directly to the research questions. However, in relation to the third research question, the data seemed scattered, and I found it hard to extract themes. I demanded more data to underpin my analysis. Thus, I

noted down the points that needed clarification as well as the information related to the research questions that I would still like to know. These would be the main foci in the following rounds of interviews. For instance, I was aware that I still needed to check or confirm details concerning some of the participants' personal information and the critical incidents on their developmental paths. In accordance with the features of the philosophical hermeneutic interviewing, based on the analysis of the data collected in the previous round, I made the interview schedule ready for use for the forthcoming round. With my understanding about the research questions, I paid attention to collecting critical incidents in the second and third rounds of interviews, and I gained more narratives regarding the special-grade teachers' professional growth. In the third round of data collection, I focused on delineating their professional developmental paths together with the participants. As Creswell (2013) suggests, I asked the interviewees to theorise on their careers, life courses and professional developmental paths. I further strengthened my understanding about the details and significance of the critical incidents in their professional growth. Indeed, I analysed the second- and third-round interview data based on the data analysis in the previous round. I combined the new codes, themes and thoughts into the whole process of data analysis. As the Figure 3.1 shows above, having finished the first three steps in the third round of data analysis, I started to interpret the data and prepare for writing.

### *Interpreting the data*

Interpreting the data "involves abstracting out beyond the codes and themes to the larger meaning of the data" (Creswell, 2013, p. 192). In my research, this process includes two procedures: organising the themes into broader units of abstraction to convey the meaning of the data, and then representing the data through text, tabular or the figure form. For the first question, I reconsidered the relationships between the potential themes, combined, deleted and renamed some themes, and finally formulated a list of ten characteristics among the special-grade teachers. To exemplify, almost every participant showed that they loved their students by statements and/or narratives, so one of the potential themes was "loving students". However, when I returned to the

data and confirm the theme, I found “love” was too general as a theme, and the participants’ narratives showed how they treated their student well. Thus, I changed the theme as “showing care towards the students” with three sub-themes of caring for the students in different circumstances. For the preliminary themes “extensive reading” and “willingness to travel”, the participants emphasised that reading and traveling inspired them to understand education from other perspectives, which implied that they adopted reading and travelling as their approaches to learn more. Therefore, I identified the theme as “having awareness and actions of learning” with three sub-themes “in-service learning”, “extensive reading” and “willingness to travel”. In this way, I identified ten characteristics that the special-grade teachers possessed. Although these ten characteristics were not closely related to each other, I believe that they displayed what the special-grade teachers looked like. I would discuss them in detail in Chapter 8.

For the second research question, I identified 12 themes out of the codes. and I found the three categories of external factors that had great influence on the special-grade teachers, which were key individuals, critical incidents and environmental factors. The 12 influencing factors served as the sub-themes within each category. Through further abstracting, comparing and contrasting, I developed an analysis figure, as displayed in Figure 3.2 (see the next page).

As the figure 3.2 demonstrates, the category of key individuals consists of five types of individuals. Among the five types, the experienced senior teachers, other special-grade teachers and experts or scholars were further categorised into the formal mentors, referring to those who provided the participants with guidance during a certain period of time. Another type of mentors, the informal mentors were the ones taken as examples to match up to by the special-grade teachers. Or the informal mentors’ writings informed the special-grade teachers’ growth. Yet such mentors themselves were not aware of the fact that they were regarded as the special-grade teachers’ mentors. In brief, the five types of individuals were summarised into three categories:

(1) the head teachers, (2) the formal mentors, and (3) the informal mentors. For the fourth research question, I kept four out of the five preliminary themes identified above, and the one left out was made a point of discussion in Chapter 8.

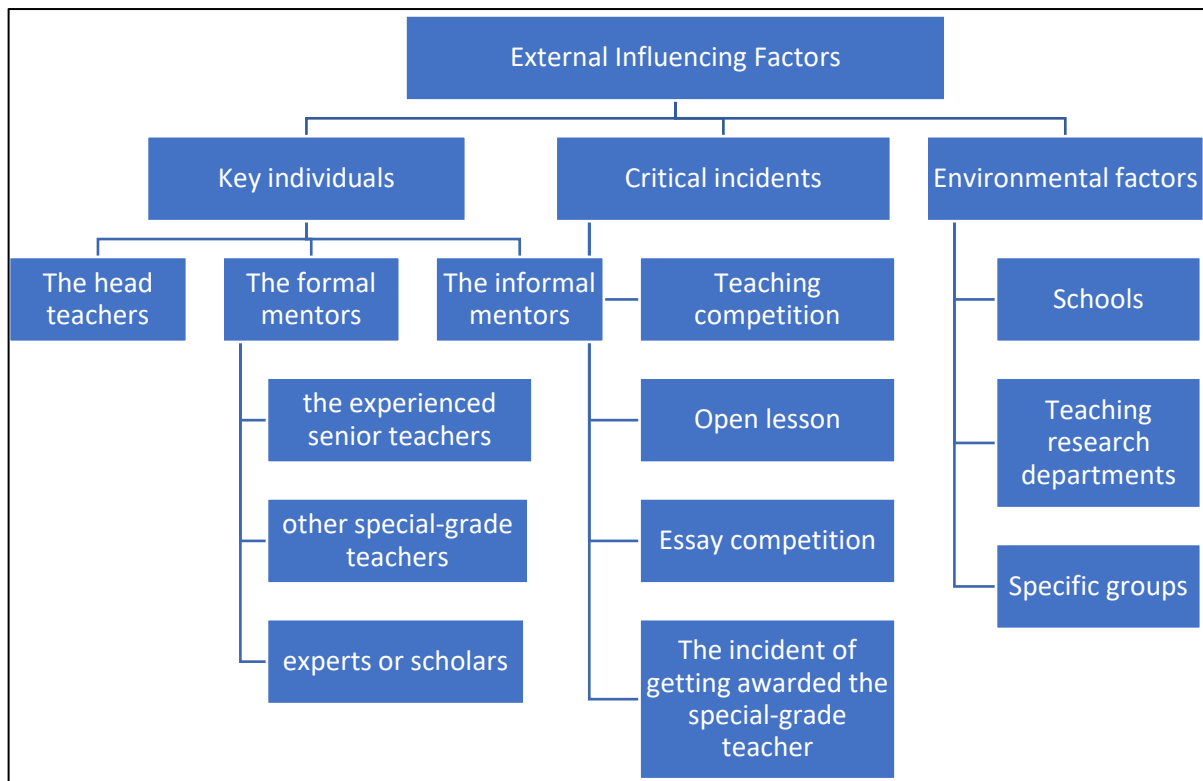


Figure 3.2 Analysis figure of the external factors influencing the special-grade teachers' professional development

For the third research question, which was concerned with my understanding about the special-grade teachers' professional developmental paths. From the narratives in each participant, I identified the critical incidents that impacted on the special-grade teachers' professional development and abstracted out the three core concepts, work notion, work practice and scale of recognition in the course of their professional developmental paths. I drew the three concepts as angles to observe the special-grade teachers' developmental paths, divided their professional development into three phases,

confirmed the beginning and ending points of each phase, and formed the model of special-grade teachers' professional developmental paths consisting of the three phases, the task-led, the transitional and the notion-led stages, respectively. I shall provide a detailed account of this research finding in Chapter 6.

### *Preparing for the writing*

Having completed data analysis, I confirmed the writing structure centring around the research questions. For instance, Figure 3.2 displays not only a way of representing and visualising the themes but also my outline of writing. I took the 12 influencing factors as the subtitles, assembled the relevant evidence into Word documents, in readiness for the follow-up writing. During the process of writing, since ever more in-depth analysis of data kept deepening my understanding about the special-grade teachers, I adjusted my writing from time to time, based on my updated thoughts.

#### **3.5.1.2 Narrative analysis**

As for the narrative analysis, I drew every special-grade teacher as a case of study. Thomas (2011, p. 513) defines case studies as:

analyses of persons, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions, or other systems that are studied holistically by one or more methods. The case that is the subject of the inquiry will be an instance of a class of phenomena that provides an analytical frame—an object—within which the study is conducted and which the case illuminates and explicates.

In relation to my research, I took each special-grade teacher as a subject of the inquiry and his/her professional development path as an analytical frame to present each case's

professional developmental path and unique characteristics. Based on the research findings of the three stages of special-grade teachers' professional developmental path generated from the analysis of narratives above, I conducted narrative analysis by using the special-grade teacher's professional developmental path as the thread to present their professional lives from the start of their careers to the time of my interviews. According to Polkinghorne (1995), narrative analysis aims to make stories as the research outcomes. On one hand, it displays the commonality from each professional developmental phase of the special-grade teachers. On the other hand, it describes the unique characteristics in different environments as individuals. The process of data analysis is comprised of five steps: establishing each case's biographical journal, generalising each case's work notion and personal characteristics, identifying the critical incidents contributing to the formulation of each case's work notion and personal characteristics, narrative smoothing and preparing for writing. The detail of each step is presented next.

#### *Establishing each case's biographical profile*

Clandinin and Connelly (2000, cited in Creswell, 2013, p. 189) suggest "analyzing the data for three elements: interaction (personal and social), continuity (past, present and future) and situation (physical places or the storyteller's places)." I draw on this idea, since it would be helpful for me to understand about the special-grade teachers' thoughts and actions politically, economically, and historically. Hence, I set up a biographical profile for each of the special-grade teachers over their tracks of work, stretching from the beginning of their careers to the time of my interviews, with a focus on the identification of the critical incidents taking place in different places. For example, here is the biographical profile for Chen:

Table 3.3 Chen’s biographical profile

Name: Chen	Gender: Female	Age: 50
Work Experience		
School	Time period and work descriptions	Critical incidents
Junior High School A	1992 – 1997: Being English language teacher and class teacher at a junior high school.	1. In 1995, attending in-service Bachelor course
		2. First prize in school-level essay competition.
High School B	1997 – 2017: Working at a key secondary school as English language teacher, class teacher and director of international department. This phase is divided into 3 periods:  Period 1: 1997 – 2001, teaching junior high school;  Period 2: 2001 – 2002, teaching Mandarin at a school in the UK;  Period 3: 2002 – 2017, teaching senior high school.	3. In 1997, transferring to a key secondary school.
		4. Teaching competition.
		5. Demonstration lessons.
		6. 2001 – 2002, teaching at a school in the UK.
		7. In 2002, teaching senior high school.
		8. In 2005, attending Master programme in TESOL
		9. In 2008, getting to know a special-grade teacher
		10. In 2013, becoming a special-grade teacher
		11. An international school observation event
International School C	From 2017 onward, working as director of curriculum development department at an international school	12. A leaders’ meeting

At this step, I summarised all the incidents that had facilitated the participant’s professional development into the table. As soon as an interview was done, I immediately started to compose the biographical journal, and in the meantime, I noted

down the parts of content that still needed clarification as well as the topics that demanded more data to be collected. These would serve as the basis for the design of the next-round interview questions. Having the biographical journals enabled me to gain comprehensive understanding about the participants' stories. However, for some of the interviewees, I could not delineate their track of work fully, as the data collected in the interviews were limited and insufficient.

### *Generalising each case's work notion and personal characteristics*

In the analysis of narratives, I extracted the three angles toward understanding the special-grade teachers' professional development: work notion, work practice and scale of recognition. I explored the formation and development of these work notions of the special-grade teachers, and the personal characteristics formed based on these notions were key to my description of the uniqueness of the special-grade teachers. For this, I analysed and extracted each of the participant's work notions and personal characteristics, as exemplified in Chen's case shown in the Table 3.4 (see the next page).

In the data analysis, I realised that in many cases, a generalisation was underpinned by several pieces of evidence, and a piece of evidence could work for multiple generalisations. To draw Chen's case as an instance, she researched and developed student-centred and competence-focused teaching methods; in an open lesson, instead of demonstrating how to revise for the National College Entrance Examination, a topic that other teachers favoured, Chen delivered research-based content at the risk of failing; and when she found it hard to change the curriculum setting in the international department, which breached her notion of "the students should be treated as a complete person, rather than a test-taking machine", she resolutely left the school that she had been working for long for an international school. These pieces of evidence underpinned the second, third and fourth work notions listed in the table above. This step made me explicit about each participant's unique points, laying a solid foundation



for my description of the uniqueness of the special-grade teachers as individuals. Meanwhile, I confirmed the formation and development of the special-grade teachers' work notions and personal characteristics as the thematic thread that generated their life stories.

Table 3.4 Chen's work notions and personal characteristics

Work notions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Whichever situation a teacher is in, the teacher must be self-confident.</li> <li>2. The aim of English language learning is to use English.</li> <li>3. The students should be treated as a complete person, rather than a test-taking machine.</li> <li>4. School education needs to build a foundation for the students' lifelong development.</li> </ol>
Personal characteristics	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Chen was not self-confident, and later she gained self-confidence through external recognition.</li> <li>2. She was able to analyse her personal situation rationally and took advantage of and created opportunities and environment that were beneficial to her personal development.</li> </ol>

*Identifying the critical incidents contributing to the formulation of each case's work notion and personal characteristics*

In the second- and third-round of data collection, I consciously let the special-grade teachers narrate their most impressive incidents that had impacted on their development and asked them to elaborate what the specific impact was. This greatly enriched my understanding about the special-grade teachers. While I carried out data analysis, I first drew on Yussen and Ozcan's (1997, cited in Creswell, 2013) plot structure

to do a preliminary analysis of these incidents. From the five aspects of characters, settings, problem, actions and resolution, I sorted out all the incidents that the special-grade teachers shared in the interviews. Then, I investigated the relationship between the critical incidents and their work notions plus personal characteristics. In other words, I sought to examine the role that the critical incidents played in the development of the special-grade teachers' work notions and personal characteristics. Last, I removed the incidents with low relevance, and kept the incidents that could be used as research evidence. As a result, I created a profile for each of the special-grade teachers including their work notions, personal characteristics, and critical incidents (see Chapter 6 as examples). By and large, the data for seven of the special-grade teachers were detailed and rich, while in the other nine special-grade teachers' cases, the narratives were deficient and lacked consistency. Due to time limitation, I was not able to do more interviews with the nine. Therefore, I selected the seven special-grade teachers' narratives as the potential cases to present in my writing of the research findings.

### *Narrative smoothing*

Polkinghorne (1995, p. 16) explains the meaning of "narrative smoothing" as follows:

The analytic development of a story from the gathered data involves recursive movement from the data to an emerging thematic plot. .... The emerging plot informs the researcher about which items from the gathered data should be included in the final storied account. Not all data elements will be needed for the telling of the story. Elements which do not contradict the plot, but which are not pertinent to its development, do not become part of the research result, the storied narrative. This process has been called narrative smoothing.....

Following my selection of potential cases, as explained in the last section, I re-examined the seven special-grade teachers' cases and inspected their biographical journals, work

notions and personal characteristics as well as the storied accounts underpinning the formation and development of their work notions and personal characteristics. I returned to the database in order to re-verify the extracted research findings and evidence. I modified the inaccurate expression in the texts and deleted the events that did not support the research findings strongly enough. In the end, I formed the research texts for the seven special-grade teachers, similar to that in Chen's case as shown above.

### *Preparing for writing*

Considering the length of this thesis, I selected three cases to present my findings. Through describing the special-grade teachers' critical incidents in each stage, their distinctive characteristics, and their emotional responses to favourable and adverse situations, I display their professional developmental paths. The selection of the three cases were made under two considerations. First, in the interview data, there was sufficient evidence showing the developmental stages clearly. Second, there were ample narratives in the data that embodied their characteristics throughout their developmental paths. These storied cases inform the understanding for new actions by means of analogy (Polkinghorne, 1995). As a result, I chose the cases of the three special-grade teachers, Chen, Guo and Yu, to demonstrate my in-depth understanding about the special-grade teachers' professional lives. I intended to present the research findings in chronological order and make all the materials for each case ready for use. I shall show my research findings gained from narrative analysis in Chapter 6.

By virtue of the two methods of analysis, analysis of narratives and narrative analysis, I completed a comprehensive and meticulous analysis of the interview data and generated robust research findings.

For the quality assurance for the translation of my interviews, I refer to Sutrisno et al.'s

(2014) review of the three types of linguistic equivalence which examines how similar the linguistic expressions in one language are to their translation in another. While lexical equivalence scrutinises the correspondent words in the source language and the target language, conceptual equivalence is concerned with the comparability of concepts or ideas between the two languages, rather than the lexical meanings. Dynamic equivalence focuses on “reproducing the message from the source language to the target language in the most natural manner for the target language users” (p. 1339). Sutrisno et al. (2014) also present three common procedures of translation for qualitative studies, which are single translation, back-translation and parallel translation. Given the constraints of time, costs and the number of researchers involved of the latter two, I adopt single translation as the translation procedure in this research. As Sutrisno et al. (2014) suggest, in order to enhance the trustworthiness of results of the single translation, the dynamic equivalence approach can be integrated into the procedure. I draw on their idea. Specifically, I corroborated my translation results with my supervisors who are the target language users to confirm that the translation results were easily understood by them. This was done to lower personal bias and boost transparency in the translation process. Furthermore, Squires (2009) puts forward 14 criteria to evaluate cross-language qualitative research, and “translator credentials” is a key part of the methodological recommendations aimed to maximise the trustworthiness of translated qualitative data. Being a doctoral student who have been studying in Durham University for over a decade certifies that I possess a high level of language competence.

### 3.5.2 Document data analysis

The analysis of documents consists of two steps. First, I read all the documents carefully and highlighted all the pieces of information relevant to the research questions. Second, according to the themes identified in the analysis of interview data, I sorted relevant data into the corresponding themes for subsequent writing. To exemplify, in the analysis of interview data, I found that the special-grade teachers tended to have a set of self-

constructed framework toward educating people. During the interview with Tian (a participant), he referred to his “character education” and showed me an appraisal form for character education. I kept the form as a collection of documents. When I was learning the self-constructed character education, I paid special attention to the appraisal form and analysed it carefully. As a result, I understood the content of character education and learned how to use it as a method for the teachers to appraise the students. Therefore, it is manifest that the document collection and analysis served as a beneficial complement to the interview data. There existed an interplay between the two types of data. They helped verify the research findings, thereby enhancing the reliability of the research findings.

### 3.6 Ethical Considerations

As a researcher, I take research ethics seriously. I draw great attention to ethical issues and abide by requirements of research ethics. Prior to the start of my research, I read through the latest version of Research Ethics and Data Protection Monitoring Form created by the School of Education, Durham University. Moreover, I made application for ethics approval to the School of Education Ethics Sub-Committee. Upon receiving the ethics approval, I commenced my research. Furthermore, two issues below were emphasised in my research.

Firstly, a copy of the participant information sheet translated into Mandarin Chinese was given to my participants in order to ensure that they understood the information provided. Specifically, they were made aware of the voluntary nature of their participation as well as their right to withdraw from the study at any time without justifying their decisions. All the participants were given at least a week notice for them to decide whether or not they would agree to participate in my research. Moreover, they were briefed on aims, objectives and methods of the project, and their roles in the research were also clarified. They were asked to sign an informed consent form before

I included them as part of my research.

Secondly, actions were taken to achieve anonymity and secure confidentiality. A digital voice recorder was used for the interviews. It is worth noting that recording was permitted by my participants before interviewing. If the participants were unwilling to be recorded, I would take notes instead. If the participants asked for the digital voice recorder to be switched off while they discussed about sensitive issues or made comments on some person (Goodson & Sikes, 2001), I would respect them and stop recording. All data were anonymised immediately after data collection, and the data were safely stored with no access to the data by others. Moreover, pseudonyms are applied throughout the research for the purpose of private and personal data protection.

In a word, this chapter has shed light on philosophical issues of social science and research approach of narrative inquiry. I have also expounded on the thoughts about and the processes of data collection and analysis. In the next four chapters, I demonstrate the research findings plus supporting evidence, in order to describe the key characteristics of the group of special-grade teachers, the external factors influencing their professional development, their professional developmental paths, as well as the problems that they encountered in their work.

# Chapter 4 Key Characteristics

Based on the data analysis in relation to 16 special-teachers, ten key characteristics (see Figure 4.1) were revealed, which are: (1) showing care toward their students, (2) formulating self-constructed approaches for educating students, (3) taking the “first-time” experiences seriously, (4) maintaining positive relationship with students, (5) being proud of their own abundant subject knowledge or unique skills, (6) applying student-centred learning, (7) keeping paying attention to the students’ progress, (8) having reflective awareness and skills, (9) showing teacher leadership, and (10) having awareness and actions of learning theories and broadening horizons. I provide evidence for each of the ten characteristics.

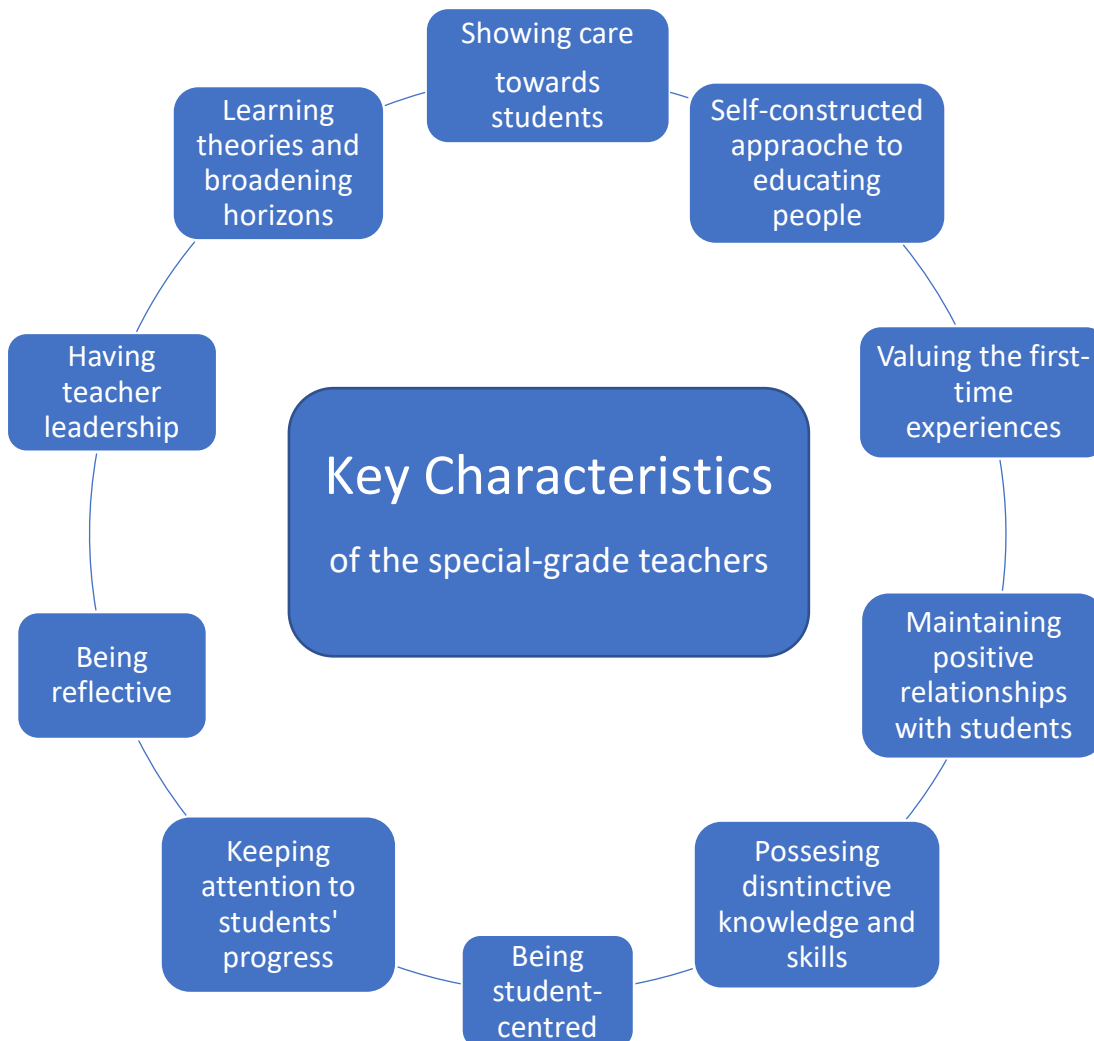


Figure 4.1 Key characteristics of the special-grade teachers

## 4.1 Showing care towards the students

The analysis of the interview data revealed that the special-grade teachers shared a common characteristic of showing care towards their students. I select several cases to present how the special-grade teachers care for their students.

### 4.1.1 Care for the young pupils

From my analysis, showing care towards the young pupils mainly involves three different aspects: first, special-grade teachers cared about the students' feelings; second, they understood the needs of students; and third, they converted their ideas into actions. These three aspects were demonstrated in many special-grade teachers' cases. I mainly present Wan's and Li's cases to provide evidence.

Wan (pseudonym, the same applies throughout the chapters) taught Mathematics at a primary school. She was also a class teacher. According to the "Work Requirement of Class Teacher at Primary and Secondary School" (MOE, 2009), a class teacher is responsible for the management of a class. She spent many years in teaching the first-year pupils, and her case was concerned with new pupils' adaptation to the primary school. Firstly, she paid attention to the new pupils' feelings from the kids' perspectives, just as she said in the interview that the kids usually had a mixed feeling about their new primary school life, since they were told by their father, mother, grandparents and relatives that they would be little grown-ups as primary school students. It seemed that they could easily deal with various tasks that they had never done before. While they looked forward to the new school life, they were a bit anxious. Secondly, she understood the kids' needs that was how to get used to their new school first. She believed that the teachers were supposed to tell all the details relevant to the new school such as descriptions of different facilities, as well as school rules and safety issues. Thirdly, she developed a set of activities to help the kids' adaption to the new school, including



“drawing my new school”, “talking about my new school to my parents”, “my troubles with my new school life”, “talking about my new friends” and so on. All the activities were in relation to an aspect that helped the pupils get familiar with the new school life. Besides, Wan suggested that the first-year teachers should not be too serious and let the students know that they were very welcome to come and ask them for help. From Wan’s description, it is evident that she paid attention to the pupils’ psychological needs, inclined to put herself in the pupils’ shoes and took actions to help with the new pupils’ adaption to their new school life.

The second case was in relation to how to help a young pupil manage his behaviour. In Li’s class, there was a boy who was only four years old, and he did not go to nursery before he became a primary pupil. The boy was very clever but naughty. He could not sit in the seat for over ten minutes, and he always said something irrelevant loudly and bothered the other pupils in class. These made the pupils very unpleasant. A parent whose kid sat beside the boy complained and asked the teacher to move the boy behind. Li realised that she must help the boy adjust his behaviour, but not let him feel that he was disliked. Firstly, Li understood the boy very much. He was brought up by his grandparents, and he did not have any chance to stay with a group of peers, so he behaved as he did at home. Secondly, Li believed that he was supposed to know what the suitable behaviours looked like. Thus, she asked the boy to draw pictures about the classrooms that impressed him, and told which was good and which was bad. Very quickly, the boy knew the rules. Thirdly, Li found some opportunities to let the boy move around in class on the premise of the others not being interrupted so that he did not feel bored and bother others. For the second year, he could behave properly. Li stated:

If this boy was treated improperly, it was possible that he was disdained by his peers and would gradually become a bad boy. In fact, it was just because he was younger than others and did not know the classroom rules. Know your pupils’ needs, and treat them with great care. Very important.

#### 4.1.2 Care for the students under unique circumstances

Among the participants I interviewed, several of them talked about how to help the students under unique circumstances such as an adverse or a special situation. The special-grade teachers normally took different strategies to show their care for the students. I give two cases to present their love, help and enlightenment to their students. The first case is from Chen, a class teacher in English language at a junior high school. She demonstrated:

One day when I was planning my lessons in my office, I got a phone call and learned that a student's father suddenly passed away due to an accident in work. The student was just a little girl and I went straight to her home as soon as I heard the news. When I got her home, I kept my hands on her arms for a while without saying anything, and she was crying hard. Then I said to her, "Don't be too sad. You are a grown-up girl now. I believe you will take care of your family well." She nodded and later gradually fell asleep. I was staying with her all night and did not leave her home until the next morning.

A few days later, the student's mother came to Chen and was very grateful for what she had done for the girl. Initially, Chen was surprised because she did not feel that she influenced the students so much, but it made sense when the mother explained to her what had happened since she left their home. As a result, Chen viewed that her care granted the student power and belief, as she continued:

Her daughter said to her, "Mom, don't be too sad. You still have me. Dad is like your left arm while I am like your right one. Now you've lost your one, I am still here to hold you up." Her mother believed it was my words that made the girl grow up overnight. I think my company and words gave her power and belief and this is exactly what I should do

for students who are under adverse circumstances.

For this unique case, Chen presented her care by visiting the student's home in time, accompanying and inspiring the student, and helped the student get through the hardship. Evidently, the special-grade teacher showed her great care for her student.

Another case is from Qi. In his class, there was a student who underwent an operation on the gall bladder. She lived far from the school and had to stay at school from Monday to Saturday. Thirty years ago, the food in the school canteen was very bad. The student needed to eat porridges and better food for recovery. Thus, Qi asked his wife to cook food for her every day for half a month. Later the girl got a very bad cold, and there seemed to be something wrong with her gall bladder because she was a lot of pain. However, she did not want to go back home due to the very bad living condition in her home in the countryside. Qi took the student to his own home, and his wife took care of the girl for more than a month until she got better. This case demonstrated Qi's way to help the sick student. He understood the girl and knew that she could not get delicate care from her family because of the bad living condition. However, he did not let it go. His wife and he tried their best to provide the student with better food, accommodation and great care to help her recovery. This case and the case above showed that the special-grade teachers helped the students under unique circumstances in different ways, which demonstrated their care for the students.

#### 4.1.3 Care for the students by correcting students' misbehaviours

Special-grade teachers showed care not only to disadvantaged students or those in difficult situations, but also to other students. Another form of care is presented by correcting students' misbehaviours. Most of the participants believed that correcting students' misbehaviours showed the true love toward the students. To exemplify, Tian

highlighted the importance of adjusting the students' behaviours and denied that the teachers should praise the students all the time. He suggested:

No rules, no standards. The teachers must help the students to adjust their misbehaviours. This shows you truly love them. Nowadays, many children are "little emperors". Yeah, the teachers should respect them, but respecting them doesn't mean saying the sweet words all the time.

Sun believed that the teachers should see the students in a positive way. Despite the misbehaviours of the students, the teachers were expected to help the student to develop by correcting them. Correcting the misbehaviours should mean stopping them from doing them. He proposed:

As a high school teacher, we should look at every student's future on the bright side. But they are the people who are developing, and we should help them to be better. Even though somebody is not good at learning and cannot get good marks in the examinations, or the other steal something from others, or fighting with their classmates, or sometimes being absent from school, all these are ok, very normal, we, as teachers, are supposed to help them correct these misbehaviours, rather than look down upon them.

Besides, Dai briefly commented on the necessity of correcting the students' bad behaviours, as he said, "If you want your students to become big trees, you should trim them so that they can grow well, just as we correct the students' misbehaviours."

Li emphasised that all the students needed guidance on how to conduct well. She gave

an example in the interview. A new student, Student A, just transferred to her class, and gained very good marks in two exams. He soon replaced another student, Student B, in the first position, while Student B had always been the top ranked student in the class. This made Student B very jealous and start to say bad things about Student A to other students. When Li found this, she had a chat with Student B to point out his problem. Since then, Student B changed his mind completely. As can be seen, a special-grade teacher's guidance can positively influence a student's thoughts and behaviours. This was indeed a different example of care that the special-grade teacher demonstrated.

In sum, the special-grade teachers' care was shown for different students in different ways. This originated from their love towards children.

## 4.2 Self-constructed approaches towards educating people

The second prevailing characteristic of special-grade teachers is that most of them had their own approaches constructed by themselves towards educating people. According to the document of The Regulations on the *Appraisal and Selection of Special-grade Teachers* (MOE, 1993), they were stipulated to be "a model devoted to educating people". In analysis of the data, it was evident that the special-grade teachers viewed educating people as a key concept to keep in mind in their work, and the approaches that they adopted towards achieving it were varied.

Among the 16 special-grade teachers interviewed, many of them mentioned their self-structured approaches to educating people. Some regarded their approaches as one of their significant achievements. The approaches to educating people referred to a unique set of methods that had been formed through many years of exploration and that the special-grade teachers as class teachers applied to promote the students' intelligent, mental and moral development. Four common features emerged among the

approaches to educating people. First, the approaches aimed to equip the students with the qualities that would be necessary for their lifelong development, such as self-confident, self-discipline, leadership and so forth. Second, the approaches were systematic. This meant that adopting the sets of methods could help the students become their ideal selves. Third, all the approaches were designed based on the students' year groups. The educational system involved six years in primary school, three years in junior high school and three years in senior high school. A fixed theme was set for every term or every year. Fourth, all the approaches were constantly updated and proved effective through long-term practice.

There were also three discrepancies among the approaches to educating people. First, different special-grade teachers selected different themes. For example, some drew on character education, some favoured the cultivation of leadership, some highlighted the development of habits, and others viewed physical exercises as an entry point. Despite the differences in theme, "all roads lead to Rome" – all of the approaches were used to make the students positive individuals and were aimed at the students' lifelong development. Second, different special-grade teachers integrated their approaches into the work of developing students to different extents. For instance, Sun required the students to unify knowledge with action mainly in learning, while Tian integrated the character education into every aspect of life of the students. Additionally, some teachers took their approaches as a project to conduct, as exemplified in the case of Peng's experience-based approaches. The students needed to spend a certain amount of time to complete the project each year. Third, a small number of teachers linked the approaches to their subjects. Wu, as a Chinese language teacher, connected his work of class teacher with his teaching. The students were asked to write diaries, which both improved their writing ability and developed their reflective habit. However, most of the special-grade teachers were not found to relate their approaches to their subjects of teaching. It was widely agreed that educating people built a solid foundation for the students' lifelong development. Two approaches are presented in detail and some others briefly as follow to provide evidence.

#### 4.2.1 Sun's philosophically rooted approach

Sun claimed that he admired Wang Yang-ming who was a well-known general and philosopher in Ming Dynasty. Wang Yang-ming held a belief that the most important thing for an individual was to become a sage through learning, and he called for the unity of knowledge and action. Specifically, as Sun explained, knowledge and action should be deemed of equal importance. One would not gain the real knowledge until one integrated one's knowledge with action. This was the idea that the philosopher was most famous for. Sun described the whole life of Wang Yang-ming as a way of becoming a talent, and based on this, he summarised his own way of educating people into three steps: first, setting up aspiration; second, integrating knowledge with action to gain good academic achievements; and third, reflecting through dairy writing. Sun believed that educating the students in this way could help them achieve greater successes in their future journey of life.

Sun then demonstrated the details of how to educate people following the three steps. In the first step, he encouraged students to set up their own aspirations in three different ways. First, Sun asked the students to find an exemplary person in life to learn from. This could be a great person in any field of the students' interests. Some of his students set historical influential figures as their examples and others draw modern outstanding persons as their models. In Sun's views, both of the choices were fine. Sun believed that these exemplary people would bring courage to the students, especially when they were in difficult situations. Second, Sun encouraged students to copy out an aphorism every day, since he believed that the students could access to the human wisdom from the aphorisms, which could help guide their learning and personal lives. Third, students were required to set out their own learning objectives and work hard to accomplish them.

In the second step, Sun demanded the students' integration of their knowledge and action to gain excellent academic results. He emphasised that the students had to know things thoroughly, but knowing things thoroughly did not mean that they could merely recall the knowledge. If they understood the subject knowledge, they must apply it in different situations. If they learned a rule or a principle, they must perform the rule or principle in actions. Otherwise, they did not truly understand them. To be specific, if the students agreed that they should work hard, they must perform it by concentrating their minds on learning, completing the homework in time, and spending plenty of time in learning. In this way, decent academic results were more likely to be achieved, since the students' knowledge (or thought) was in line with their behaviour (or action).

In the third step, Sun utilised the methods of diary writing to make the students reflect on themselves. He borrowed ideas from an elderly special-grade teacher whom he respected, and he inspired the students to develop a habit of writing diaries. He initially considered the potential difficulties that the students would face in developing this habit, such as finding it hard to get started and to persist in writing it in the long run. To cope with these, he enabled the students to get started by describing anything with a couple of sentences for a month, and then added more sentences from the second month. Obviously, they could write more if they would like to. Gradually, they acquired the habit of writing the dairy. Sun also found that the students were sometimes short of ideas about what to write in their diaries. For those who were in this situation, he every day prepared topics for students to write about. After they had developed the habit, Sun helped them to write better through expanding, refining or correcting their previous diaries. Sun believed that reflecting themselves on different aspects of life through diary writing would help the students to realise their gains and mistakes and would be beneficial to their lifelong learning. Sun viewed that dairy writing would facilitate the students' integration of their knowledge and action and would hence help lay a solid foundation for them to achieve more successes in the future. Sun evaluated the self-constructed approach of him:



I've been using this method for more than 20 years. It's been enriched and established. I taught the students to be determined, integrate knowledge with action and be optimistic and positive since they were very young. These shaped countless students. After they left school, they still used these ideas to guide their lives.

#### 4.2.2 Tian's approach of character education

As a class teacher, Tian believed that character education played a pivotal role in educating people. By character education, he referred to it as five categories of personal characters that the students needed to possess for their lifelong development. Based on the five categories, he further developed an appraisal form which I translated in English and presented in Table 4.1 below:

Table 4.1 Tian's character education's appraisal indicators

Dimensions	Characters	Indicators of Appraisal
1	Confidence	<p>a. Being able to say three merits of yourself or three things that you can do better than others.</p> <p>b. Being bold to articulate your ideas in front of teachers and a group of students.</p> <p>c. Being willing to assume responsibility as a student leader.</p> <p>d. Being able to face your problems or mistakes squarely and honestly and being able to improve or correct.</p>
2	Self-management	<p>e. Being focused on learning or doing things.</p> <p>f. Obeying the rules.</p>

		<p>g. Being able to mediate negative emotions and refrain yourself from behaving impulsively.</p> <p>h. Being able to organise and follow a daily schedule.</p>
3	Optimism	<p>i. Actively participating in all kinds of activities.</p> <p>j. Holding the belief “effort makes success”.</p> <p>k. Being able to return quickly to normal conditions after suffering setbacks.</p> <p>i. Being able to distinguish between right and wrong.</p>
4	filial piety and gratitude	<p>j. Communicating with parents in a nice and pleasant manner.</p> <p>k. Undertaking part of the housekeeping work at home.</p> <p>l. Holding an attitude of gratitude towards your own physical body, towards things and people around you as well as towards the nature.</p> <p>m. Being able to express attitude in proper ways.</p>
5	Caring about others	<p>n. Being aware of motives and emotions of your own and others.</p> <p>o. Being able to consider things in others’ positions.</p> <p>p. Being able to communicate and interact with others in a comfortable way.</p> <p>q. Being willing to help others.</p>

In the appraisal form, four indicators were identified under each dimension of the characters, and the form consisted of 20 indicators in total. The purpose of the form was

to appraise the number of characters that the students possessed in different years. In all the classes that he taught, students were asked to conduct self-appraisal using the form and also to be appraised by their parents. There was a tick box next to each indicator on the form, and the students and their parents could simply complete the form by ticking the boxes, if they considered themselves or their children as conforming to the description of the indicator. In the first year of the junior high school, the students were hoped to have at least two identical indicators ticked by both themselves and their parents within each category. Then no less than three needed to be ticked as an aim for the second year. Finally, all indicators on the form demanded a tick by both the parents and the students, and if this was the case for the student, he or she would be viewed as an outstanding performer in the character development. However, if the student did not perform well in certain aspects, lacking ticks in some dimensions, the student would be provided with advice on how to enhance in his or her case. Tian described the appraisal form as “a proud product” that he had produced over many years of his teaching career, and he was adamant that his notion of character education formed a huge part in the process of educating people in his work as a special-grade teacher. As he concluded, regardless of which types of talents that the students would like to develop themselves into, possessing good characters was beneficial to achieving all sorts of success both during their life at the school and in the future.

#### 4.2.3 Other approaches towards educating people

Evidently, in the first philosophically rooted approach, Sun connected his subject teaching with the work of class teacher, and he commented on the advantage of doing so. Sun pointed out:

As a Chinese language teacher, developing the students’ reading and writing abilities forms a part of my subject teaching. While I connected the work of class teacher with subject teaching, this both facilitated the mastering of subject knowledge and skills and got rid of preaching and instilling for the work of educating people. This became a

process for the students to self-reflect and self-educate.

For the second case of character education, I presented it in detail because the teacher brought character education into multiple aspects of the students' school and family lives. For example, it taught the students how to treat their parents with filial respect from small things and how to express their opinions and attitudes in appropriate ways. Moreover, using self-appraisal, teacher-appraisal, and parents-appraisal to promote the development of virtue of the students was the most distinguished one amongst all the cases. These underpinned my decision to present the case comprehensively.

Apart from the two approaches demonstrated above, there were other approaches that the special-grade teachers adopted to carry out educating people. Almost all the approaches were conducted over years, and they aimed to facilitate the students' life-long development by focusing on particular aspects. They selected different aspects, such as P.E. exercises, practice-based social activities, or leadership development, to focus on in order to achieve their aims. I briefly introduce these approaches.

#### *Theme-based mode*

As a class teacher at a junior school teacher, Zhou ran a themed class meeting once every fortnight. Each class meeting had a specific topic for the students to discuss about or to practice, and all the topics belonged to a particular theme which had been made by Zhou for the year. In Junior 1, the theme was forming habits; inspiring interests was the theme for Junior 2; and in Junior 3, topics were centred on improving academic performance. Similarly, Wan focused on different aspects of educating people in different years at her primary school. In Grade 1 and 2, she let her students focus on knowing rules; in Grade 3 and 4, students were instilled with the notion of loving learning, thereby wanting to learn; and in Grade 5 and 6, she worked to develop the

students' independency – students were encouraged to do their things on their own.

#### *All-around developmental mode*

Dai proposed that his students were supposed to possess three characteristics, after going through his process of educating people over the three years at school. In the first year, the students were taught to maintain their emotional stability, as he believed that managing emotions was of high importance especially in the students' adolescence. In the second year, the students were expected to master various learning skills, and in the third year, he focused on improving the students' examination results. By emphasising the significance of hard working, Dai enabled his students to hold the belief that all of them, no matter they are top students or underachievers, could gain terrific academic achievements through appropriate methods and enough efforts. This was also a positive attitude that he would like his students to uphold when they desired to attain something throughout their lives. It is worth noting that on a regular basis, Dai asked his students to share their own stories with classmates in regard to what they had done to develop these aspects.

#### *Leadership mode*

Leadership formed a crucial part of Qi's understanding of educating people, as he believed that every student would need leadership to achieve successes in their future. Hence, he made plenty of efforts to cultivate the students' leadership skills, and this was carried out in three steps. In the first step, he asked the students to establish their own standards of competent leadership. Students would do a self-evaluation by identifying the strengths and weaknesses of their leadership, and then they would draw up a plan to strengthen the relevant aspects. In the second step, to put their ideas into practice, the students were required to join student societies within the school and undertake any positions as they would like to. While many decided to work as part of the executive team of existing societies, others chose to set up new societies from scratch. Qi believed

that the students could develop their leadership skills either way. In the last step, the students were asked to reflect on themselves and review the projects that they had planned and conducted annually, in order for them to repeat the three steps the next year.

#### *P.E. mode*

Chen utilised physical exercise as a useful means to achieve educating people. As she observed in her class, there were students suffering from obesity and myopia. Chen believed that doing exercise would improve the students' physical health, thereby building a good foundation for them to obtain better academic attainments. Thus, she scheduled an hour after school every day for the students to exercise over the three years. The students could select any kind of exercise freely and were required to commit themselves to long-term training in the exercise. Moreover, she actively brought her class to participate in the school's annual sports event in September. Prior to the event, she always made gaining the first place as the clear objective for the class to achieve collectively. Chen suggested that these would cultivate the students' will power and an awareness of collectivism. Besides, doing physical exercise was deemed a good habit for the students to keep the whole life.

#### *Experience-based mode*

Peng adopted an experience-based approach toward educating people. For him, experience facilitated learning. To elaborate, students would learn something exceedingly well if they experienced it or had experience about it. Based on this thought, Peng let the students experience different aspects of life over the three years. In Senior 1, he asked the students to select five housekeeping tasks and complete them at home before the end of the academic year. This was to cultivate the awareness of responsibility in their daily life. In Senior 2, he consulted some career advisers and devised working environments. With the help from the career advisers, the students

were required to identify two mock professions, one for each term, for them to experience, should it be a nurse, a lawyer, an electrician or so on. The students were taught how to search information about and how to work in the professions by themselves first, and then in the mock working environment, they were encouraged to exchange ideas with the teacher and fellow students who were also in the same professions. Besides, some of the students could have the chance to get hands-on experience by joining industrial organisations or institutes for a short period of time. These were to make them proactively feel what it would be like when they got such jobs one day. In Senior 3, the students were inspired to experience different learning styles and find the most suitable ones for themselves. Then they would pursue the styles that they selected and work to their best for the College Entrance Examination.

#### *Service as a lever mode*

The spirit of service was a core element of educating people that Yu looked deeply into. The students were asked to utilise an advantage of themselves to serve for others every year. By serving for others, Yu specifically referred to one helping or influencing others to one's strength. To exemplify, a student who were good at writing self-reflection were required to serve his or her classmates by helping teach those who could not write it well how to write theirs. In another case, a student was confident in giving speech, the student was encouraged to share his or her ideas with others in terms of how they could also be so confident in doing this. These are what Yu summarised as demonstration of the spirit of service. These activities take place in the class meetings which are held on a monthly basis.

To sum up, the special-grade teachers demonstrated their self-constructed approaches toward educating people, which helped them fulfil the requirement of being a model devoted to educating people.

## 4.3 The “First-time” matters

The “first-time” refer to the initial events and scenarios, in which the teachers fulfil their teaching purposes set in advance, such as the first meeting with students, the first lesson and the first exam. Special-grade teachers take the “first-time” seriously because they believed that the “first-time” was the good opportunity for them to arouse the students’ interests in the subject they taught and their lessons.

### 4.3.1 The first impression matters

Many of the special-grade teachers suggest that it is crucial to leave a favourable impression through the first meeting with students. Jia said in the interview that when she meets her students for the first time, she always keeps herself nice and demure, while Qi always dressed formally. This is to make students feel that the teacher takes them seriously. The students might think that it was because of them that the teacher dresses in such a neat manner. Li said that she had to sleep well in the night before she met the students on the first day, since she wanted the students to feel that she was a teacher with full of energy, who would be able to provide enough support for their study. This would leave the students with a positive impression of the teacher. Dai recalled that he tended to meticulously design the way he introduced himself to the students. He selected some of his stories over others to share with the students so that the students could gain a sense of trust in him.

### 4.3.2 The first lesson matters

That the first lesson matters was also recognised by many special-grade teachers. They found it important to show the charm of the subject through the first lesson. I present Tian’s case for an example. Tian still remembered the first chemistry lesson that he ever took when he was still a student at school. As he recalled, “The teacher burned a piece



of magnesium and it immediately emitted a very bright light. I was quite fascinated by what I saw and my interest in the subject of chemistry was suddenly aroused from that moment.” Since he became a teacher, he always viewed that he needed to make students feel interested in the subject and in his class from the very first lesson. Hence, whenever he took over a new class, he designed his first lesson very carefully. He would like to show the distinctive features of the subject through the lesson and tried to make the students feel excited about learning the subject.

#### 4.3.3 The first exam matters

Another view is that the first exam matters. Several special-grade teachers mentioned that in the examination-oriented educational system in China, achieving excellent exam results was a means by which the students built confidence in learning the subject, as well as one of the most key factors that reflected a teacher’s teaching ability. Thus, the special-grade teachers created opportunities for the students to gain satisfactory marks through the first exams. Wan stated that a sense of accomplishment could motivate the students to enjoy a subject, and she normally helped the students acquire the sense of accomplishment through their first exam. Specifically, she set a date in about two weeks’ time after the start of academic year when the students were required to take their first exam of the subject. Questions would not be made too hard to answer so that most of the students could gain decent marks in the exam. This could give rise to their interest in the subject and they were likely to be more confident to do exams well in the future.

#### 4.4 Maintaining positive relationship with students

In China, there is a prevailing saying, “Once they are mentally close to the teachers will the students trust their teaching.” The saying is from the Chinese earliest complete article about education “Record of the Subject of Education”, which systematically and comprehensively illuminates the role and tasks of education; the principles, institutions

and methods of teaching and learning; and the relationships between the teachers and the students, as well as the relationships among the students in the process of educating. In the modern society, this saying is interpreted as: the positive relationships between the teachers and the students can enable the students to be more likely to apprehend the knowledge better, thereby achieving decent academic performance. The belief is also recognised by most special-grade teachers in my study.

The vast majority of the special-grade teacher exemplified their favourable relationships with the students and such relationships could be kept beyond the current level of study. For instance, Chen suggested that even when her students had left the school, some of them still came back and visited her on the Teachers' Day. She usually felt moved and were very fond of listening to them sharing their news and stories in their lives. Zhou participated in a student's graduation ceremony at a university, and Tian was invited to attend a student's wedding. Qi said to me that very recently, a former student of his had just made a phone call to him and chatted with him for long, while the student finished her senior-high school studies about 20 years ago. Qi was really pleased with the relationship that they had maintained and viewed the student as a lifelong friend. These demonstrated that the positive relationships between the teachers and the students left an ongoing effect which could be beneficial to both the teachers' professional development and the students' personal development.

However, only Yu presented how she maintained good relationship with the students. Yu talked about her experience of participating in a volunteer teaching programme. She held a different attitude towards the students from other teachers. She said,

When I first arrived the rural area to support teaching, I found a lot of differences between my educational philosophy and other teachers'. I treated students in a nice and mild way, whereas my colleagues preferred to adopt a strict approach. The students sometimes got

scolded and even hit by my colleagues, and their parents did not mind that.

When she found that her educating approach was incompatible with the other teachers', she struggled to adapt to them. She stated that "she never thought about adopting corporal punishment toward my lovely students". Thus, she decided to stick to her own approach. She praised the students more than blaming them. Whenever the students got into trouble, they were willing to come to her and she chatted with them patiently and helped them solve the problems. At the beginning, Yu's colleagues didn't believe that her approach would work, but later they were convinced because she reaped the benefits of doing so. She elaborated:

I managed to keep a good relationship with the students. This made me manage my classroom easily. The students enjoyed my subject, as they really liked me. At the end of year, the average marks of my class were top of the Grade.

In contrast to her colleagues who treated the students in a tough way, Yu respected the students and paid attention to their psychological needs. Her students gained better academic achievements than other classes, which showed the importance of maintaining a positive relationship between the teacher and the students.

As the teachers demonstrated their care for the students, and maintained good relationships with their students, the students expressed their gratitude to their teachers in different ways. Impressively, an interesting incident appeared in Zhang's case. The P.E. teacher at a primary school told me a successful lesson using the method of games. He said a lot about how the pupils enjoyed the lesson, mentioning their smiles and words, and they were unwilling to leave after the lesson. He continued:

In the end, I found a girl still there. I asked her why she did not leave. She came up to me, holding up one of my hands. She was only seven or eight, and she smiled with a missing tooth in her mouth. She asked, 'Laoshi (the Chinese word for 'teacher'), can I kiss your hand?' Before I said something, she dropped her lips to my hand, and then ran away with joy.

Zhang admitted that he was moved by the love of the pupils. Indeed, maintaining a nice relationship with students was universally deemed a positive practice among the special-grade teachers, which brought them a sense of job fulfilment.

#### 4.5 Being proud of their own abundant subject knowledge or unique skills

Most special-grade teachers viewed that having a wealth of subject and educational knowledge and some unique teaching skills built a firm foundation for becoming an excellent teacher. Liu believed that possessing ample subject knowledge made her a better teacher. Besides, she drew attention to the cultural aspect of teaching, as she considered how to educate the pupils in the context of Chinese culture. Specifically, she connected Chinese folklore with her teaching, as she exemplified:

I studied nursery rhyme, cross talk and traditional opera in different regions of China and integrated these forms of art into my teaching. This inspired my subject teaching and enriched my class. I believe Chinese pupils should have a Chinese soul and a colourful spiritual world, and this is how I worked to achieve that.

Peng highlighted the importance of possessing abundant subject knowledge by proposing the potential consequence of lacking it and also emphasised that interest and effort played a key role in the special-grade teachers' professional lives. He pointed out:

The level of my subject teaching should be number one in the city. I'm very interested in the subject of history, but the interest was not developed until I became a teacher. Without an interest and hard work, you may well end up being a common teacher. If you don't have ample subject knowledge, you can be challenged by your students in class without being able to provide a satisfactory response to them ... Working on your subject well is also a type of teacher morality.

Besides, several special-grade teachers stated their experience of subscribing to journals, which deepened their subject understanding and teaching. For example, Zhou said that she subscribed to almost all the journals related to geography, and she explains:

I did so because I'd like to expand my knowledge base in the subject. I paid close attention to the most updated knowledge about my subject. My students were pretty much the most excellent ones in China. When they came up with really hard questions, there was never a time when I wasn't able to answer.

Furthermore, some special-grade teachers were very proud of their distinctive professional skills and argued that those who possess some sorts of professional skills tend to be admired by the students. To exemplify, Zhou was able to draw geographical maps with her bare hands. When the students saw her draw the map of China for the first time, they were very surprised that the map looked like a printed version. Li could sketch a circle without using a pair of compasses. These were something that not many teachers were capable of doing. Additionally, Chen could speak very pure British English,

which was viewed as a distinguished feature by herself, in contrast to other English teachers who spoke American English.

## 4.6 Applying student-centred learning

In the interviews, the special-grade teachers frequently referred to their application of student-centred learning. It was universally acknowledged that good teaching had to be based on the students' needs among the interviewed special-grade teachers. This reflected in special-grade teachers' work from four perspectives: first, the forming of the concept of student-centred learning is related to the personal experiences and understanding about education, and it required a developmental process so that the teachers could apply it in their practical work. Dai demonstrated this in his case:

When I was a student, the two subjects I liked the least were politics and History because these two teachers just repeated what the teaching materials said. That's what we call teacher-based teaching now. My politics teacher only looked toward the ceiling of the classroom without looking at the students at all. My history teacher just stood behind the podium, reading the textbook word by word. Every time we took his lesson, we almost fell asleep.

When he became a teacher, he vowed not to be one of that type. However, he did not know how to implement student-centred learning. He said,

I remember it was about in 1993. We did teacher training, and we were taught how to make the students the hosts of lessons. At that time, quite a few teachers didn't agree with this idea, but I agreed with it and liked this idea very much. I thought I needed to be in the students' shoes to design my teaching. Students had to be sitting there for seven lessons each day. They just sat there. How tired! I wanted to make them move a bit, not just letting

them sit there for the whole lesson. I tried to design some activities for groups of two or four student, but I didn't have many ideas in mind.

Later, an expert from New Zealand made him get some hints to do it. He continued,

when an expert from New Zealand came to my school and did a lecture about "using brain in a friendly way", I started to realise a few things. If the students drank some water or stood up and hang around for a bit, that might not be a bad thing. They moved themselves, which could be viewed as a useful way to use their brains friendly. They could have a cleared mind in the lesson. The expert really inspired me. I started to design every part of my lessons carefully, making them interesting. The standard of being interesting was to let the students like it. Ultimately, they followed and liked my teaching, since they didn't find my lessons boring. They were also more effective in learning.

Secondly, the implementation of student-centred learning means that the teachers could help the students become the owner of learning through the teachers' professional skills. Li justified this with her suggestions:

In your lessons, you had to know how to lead your students' learning by questioning them. You needed to keep your students in mind. Through observation, you worked out what their problems were, and with the use of small questions, you helped the student break through their difficulties. The key point here was that you couldn't let the students feel they were guided by you too much. You needed to let them feel it was themselves who sorted out different problems. They were the main problem solvers, not the teachers. This could develop the students' interests in learning. Teaching is actually a kind of art.

Third, the application of student-centred learning allows the students to gain good academic results and confidence in the subject. Tian expressed his view:

At the very beginning of my teaching career, my teaching results were very good. One of my mates came to me and asked for advice. He taught the same class as I did, and he wondered how I achieved such impressive results. I used some rough words, "In your mind, only if you took your students as your grandpa, they'd take you as their grandpa. Only in this way, they could work really hard to get good grades." Although this might not sound pleasant, I meant when you, as a teacher, did everything in consideration of the students, they'd be very grateful. They'd follow you. But following you wasn't enough. You had to let them see the results. That is, they had to gain excellent academic results. With this, they'd have confidence. If you did not put the students in the middle of your heart, they'd not perform so well.

Fourth, student-centred learning not only fulfils the potential of the students but also develops the teachers. With the idea of students-centred teaching, the special-grade teachers formed their own teaching features. These features later became one of the most significant factors that enabled them to be awarded special-grade teachers. I draw two examples here. The first one was Guo's Coloured Chinese teaching method. In the interview, she introduced that her lessons were divided into four different types. She had the red composition lessons, green reading lessons, orange exercise lessons and blue textbook lessons. She viewed that good Chinese language learning needed to make the students feel as if they were playing games. The colours attached to the lessons were believed to add a bit fun to the students' learning. Also, they demanded a sense of challenge. For this, she asked them to write 800 Chinese characters within 40 minutes in a lesson, making them feel as if they were writing in an exam. The students were fond of this timed writing, and they became ever more productive. Guo further proposed:

My current idea is paying attention to three kinds of interests. They are the interest of



form, the interest of reasoning and the interest of emotion. The most straightforward one is the interest of form. It's about the forms of activities in my lessons. That's to say, I need to design interesting teaching elements and activities for my lessons. The interest of reasoning could be seen as the ultimate aim of Chinese language lessons. The process of reasoning helps the students develop their logic and rational thinking. It also includes the deeper understanding about Chinese language learning and mastering of relevant skills. This process must be interesting so that the students can improve themselves comprehensively. Next, for the interest of emotion, Chinese language is a humanity subject. It involves happy and harmonious communication between the students and the teacher, and the teacher's focus on the students' mentality. This is my distinctive point.

The other example was Zhang's Game-based teaching method. He explicated:

Game-based teaching is a pedagogical method I've been researching for years. The main idea is to let the pupils like you step by step. With some games and teaching methods, you manage to utilise the joy to make the pupils like you. That means, if you teach them some P.E. knowledge and skills while they're in the process of learning, they'll learn more naturally and seriously. Loving learning is a nature of the pupils. That's the joy in learning. They experience a sort of joy while learning. When they learn some physical skills and techniques, they had to make some moves. With correct and scientific methods to instruct them, they taste a kind of happiness and success. Without these good methods, you have no way to work it out. So you have to use the method of playing to teach them. I've designed a whole set of course, including that for Grade 1 to 6, relatively systematic.

To sum up, most of the special-grade teachers held firmly the idea of student-centred teaching. Some of them, based on this idea, developed their own teaching features which were important achievements for their teaching. Meanwhile, the teaching features became the fundamental basis for them to become the special-grade teachers.

## 4.7 Keeping paying attention to the students' progress

The special-grade teachers at both primary and secondary schools referred to an important point: they kept paying attention to the students' progress. It was a crucial strategy for the teachers to help the students stay focused on their learning and achieve outstanding academic performance. For instance, Guo viewed that only when the teachers constantly kept an eye on the students' progress could they provide appropriate and timely feedback. Li suggested that it was necessary to give huge praise for those who gained excellent results in the weekly or monthly tests. The core idea was to equip the students with a "can do" attitude. Wan proposed that she always spent time in observing and analysing the students' status of learning, including their in-class performance, assignment completion and unit tests. Once she found some students lagging behind, she would intervene immediately by arranging one-to-one based meetings with the students, trying to assist each student in overcoming their individual difficulties. She would not stop offering extra help until the students performed better.

Moreover, Tian elaborated on how he paid attention to the students' progress. He first claimed that teachers needed to keep their students' academic ability in mind. Then, he introduced his particular teaching strategy. Basically, he started with the easier modules to teach. To be specific, the subject of physics consisted of four modules, force, heat, light and electricity, with some being harder while others relatively easier. As the students learned the easier modules prior to the harder ones, it was more likely that they could learn the modules well and get good marks. Also, their interests in the subject could be developed. Later when he moved on to other modules, the students were already in a good status to learn the harder modules. They might not feel so hard to learn the modules, and they could hopefully maintain their impressive marks.

Further, Dai drew on “a mechanism of competition” in his teaching. As he explained, he ranked the students based on their marks after each test, and he would inform them of their own ranking positions while not revealing theirs to others. Then, he asked each student to set their current position as a benchmark to reach and exceed in the next test. He told the student, “The only person to beat is just yourself in the part.”

Both Tian and Dai were glad about the outcome of adopting their approaches to monitoring the students’ progress, as they suggested that their students achieved good results in the end. Given China’s examination-oriented educational system, exam results played a pivotal role in teaching and learning. Keeping an eye on the students’ progress was an influential method that the special-grade teachers applied to ensure the students’ wonderful academic performance.

## 4.8 Reflective awareness and skills

Reflection was one of the most important approaches to improving teachers’ professional development. Based on the analysis of the interview data, it was found that the special-grade teachers were aware that reflection could bring about their professional development. They tended to review and evaluated what they had thought and done. Reflection normally started from seeing issues in practice, and writing served as a useful tool to reflect. Ultimately, the special-grade teachers were shaped in different ways.

### 4.8.1 Seeing is the first step to reflect on their work

It is manifest that the special-grade teachers were good at reflecting themselves through certain scenes and incidents, which advanced their professional development. Sometimes reflections took place unconsciously or passively, while in other times, the

special-grade teachers reflected in a conscious or active way.

Liu, the Chinese language teacher at a primary school, recalled her reflecting practice based on an incident: one day, she saw some pictures on the wall of the classroom. These pictures were apparently drawn by the pupils and there was a theme on a poster in the middle of the pictures, "The spring is coming". The pupils drew different things showing the theme, such as newly grown sapling, raindrops on the window and animals stretching themselves. Although these all looked childish, they could let people feel the smell of the spring. The teacher said that she only demonstrated drawing skills to the kids but never told them what to draw for a particular theme, as she did not want to limit their thoughts.

The words of the teacher, according to Liu, inspired her teaching of composition writing. Initially, the pupils tended to link their writings to some certain big ideas, while the link of the writing and the big ideas was often tenuous. As Liu reflected, she usually provided them with exemplary compositions which always pertained to similar big ideas, and let them know that these are the right ways to write compositions. But she failed to emphasise the importance of their creative thinking. This made the pupils think that it would be more likely for them to gain high marks if they wrote in the same way of the exemplary compositions. However, this had led to a negative effect. In the compositions, their ideas were sometimes far too rigid and mature, lacking creativity and naivety appropriate for their age. Hence, she realised that it was time to alter her teaching of composition writing.

Such unconscious reflections were triggered through various incidents, such as class observation, seminars and reading. These incidents took place occasionally and gave rise to the unexpected reflections which facilitated the special-grade teachers' professional development. Nonetheless, conscious reflections were the main means by which the

special-grade teachers developed themselves. Through conscious reflection, Chen realised that for whichever subject, the teacher must focus on the students' real understanding of concepts. In her case, when she found a grammatical difficulty that her students were facing, she actively entered her reflecting process by planning to solve the problem and reviewing her teaching. She recalled:

I've taught both junior high and senior high students, and I found many students still didn't understand the third-person singular after ten years of learning English. So, I planned to tackle this problem. As I reviewed my teaching, I thought I'd explained it quite clearly, but my students still got it wrong in their tests.

Then, Chen took actions by observing her colleagues' lessons and identifying their problems in teaching. She continued:

One time, I went to observe three colleagues' lessons and learnt how they taught the grammatical point. Later, I realised the main problem was the students didn't understand the concept of the third-person singular. One teacher said it referred to him, her and it, but I didn't think it explained well. Another teacher didn't clarify the relationship between the subject and the predicate.

Linking her colleagues' problems back to her own teaching, she summarised two points that she should be careful about in teaching. She elaborated:

From then on, I drew attention to two points in my teaching: first, to let the students really understand the concept of the third-person singular, I explain it as "not you, not me, but any person or thing that's of one". For example, if an apple is a subject in a

sentence, that's a third-person singular. Second, I establish the relationship between the subject and the predicate. That is, as long as the subject can be replaced by him, her or it, the verb should be applied with third-person singular in the predicate part. In this way, students understood the concept.

As a result of reflection, Chen viewed that her teaching was enhanced. This case is a good example of conscious reflection. In this case, Chen saw the problem of the students not being able to understand the grammatical knowledge first. Then, she actively reflected and found the ways to tackle the problem. Finally, she learned the importance of the students' real understanding of concepts, and concluded, "Teaching needs reflecting over and over again."

In my interviews, almost every special-grade teacher recognised the importance of reflection. They either mentioned their reflecting practice briefly or provided details for their reflecting content and methods. In summary, reflection was a major tool that the special-grade teachers utilised to gain their practical wisdom, and writing was the main way to reflect.

#### 4.8.2 Writing as the major method of reflection

Among the interviewed teachers, most of them talked about their writing, and many of them kept a habit of weekly writing. When I asked why they wrote, they offered various opinions. Wu underlined the integral role that writing played alongside reading in education, as he used a quote:

An educationist ever said, 'without reading and writing, there can't be real education', although I can't remember who that was. I totally agree with this sentence, reading and

writing are indispensable parts of education, both for teachers and for students.

Sun developed a habit of diary writing since he was a teenager. He was interested in depicting his growth day by day, and he kept handwriting. He described:

Since my senior high school time, I've kept writing a dairy. I thought dairy writing could record my growth. I wanted to see how I would grow up from an ignorant teenager to a mature person. It's been 30 years since I started to write my diary, and I've always been handwriting. Handwriting makes me feel like writing the words from my heart.

Moreover, Zhou discussed the difference between writing and speaking and commented on the benefits of writing, as she stated:

Saying something can be very casual, while writing needs to be logical. The process of writing is about turning the blurred to the clear, turning the ambiguous to the unambiguous. This can promote your thinking. You'll gain a lot of benefits.

Unlike other teachers who had the habit of writing at very young age, Li did not have an interest in writing until she became a teacher. As soon as she started to write, she could not stop it and maintained her weekly writing since. She suggested:

I'm a mathematics teacher, so not very good at writing. I started to write just because it's a requirement for my professional title application. However, since I started, I can't stop it. So I opened up a WeChat Official Account. Now I write at least three articles every month.

To Liu, writing had already been an indispensable part of her daily life, as she explained, “I like writing. To me, it’s just a personal hobby. If one day I didn’t write, I’d feel I lost something.”

For the content of the special-grade teachers’ writing, there were mainly five types. The first type was the form of story. It included their teaching diaries, narratives of teaching, teaching cases and so on. This type centred around descriptions of facts, incidents and their feelings, forming a database for their reflections. The second type was the form of reading notes. It was the comments that they wrote in light of their individual practice and experience, while reading a book. The third type was the form of essay. It recorded the practical wisdom that was extracted from their educating practice. It could also be the concluding reports of any research projects that they undertook.

The fourth type was the form of travelling notes. Some of the special-grade teachers were keen on travelling. They were fond of writing down what they saw and their thoughts, forming a collection of the notes in the end. For instance, Wu travelled to scores of places in China in his vacation time and wrote a few books of his travelling notes. He proposed:

There is a Chinese saying, “Read ten thousand books and travel ten thousand miles.” I’ve always lived up to this saying. Reading and travelling can help you jump out of education to see education. It helps you become an educator, rather than just a workman in teaching.

Moreover, Chen taught Mandarin for one year in the UK, and she noted all her travelling



stories. She compared the education in the UK with that in China, which helped her understand more about what good education was like. The fifth type was the form of monographs. Strictly speaking, this kind of writing did not belong to academic articles. It was related to the special-grade teachers' teaching features or biography. If they were the only author, their writing could be deemed monographs in China.

It is worth noting that that some special-grade teachers only wrote for themselves – they took themselves as the only reader; some put their writings on such social media as Weibo and WeChat Official Account to disseminate their thoughts; while others wrote in the hope of their articles getting published, and they did so to accumulate their academic achievements. To exemplify, Liu shared her practice with me:

I just wrote and never stopped writing. Each year I normally wrote informal essays for about tens of thousands of words. I wrote constantly after I observed other teachers' lessons, I taught lessons, I researched lessons and I evaluated lessons. I had thoughts and understanding about teaching in Chinese on all these occasions, and I noted down all the ideas ... I don't think that's formal reflections, as I could start to write anytime and anywhere and my writings could be of any forms. I wrote my interpretation of textbooks and I wrote reviews of lessons and I wrote about my participation of events ... Having done lots of practical and theoretical research, I integrated my theories with my practice. After six years of research, about 2013, I published my monograph.

To conclude, paying attention to writing, excelling at writing and writing in large quantities was an important characteristic of the special-grade teachers. Through their experiences of writing different materials, they practised their professional mindset and enhanced their understanding of education. This could be seen as one of the reasons of them developing themselves into better teachers.

### 4.8.3 Reflection shaped the special-grade teachers in different ways

Reflection promoted the professional development of the special-grade teachers, which was manifested in the following three aspects: Firstly, through reflection, they became independent thinker. Chen provided an example to justify this:

We have been accustomed to the fixed procedures in the classroom. I designed a lesson, and I could anticipate everything that would happen in the classroom. Later, new curriculum reform came. We began to change our teaching philosophy. The students were encouraged to raise their questions, and I found that the questions they raised went far away to what we had set ahead. Some teachers thought that the students were not clever that they could not understand the teachers wanted, and it was the students' fault, not the teachers. But when I analysed several cases, I found that our understanding was not based on the student's angle, but the teachers', the textbook authors', even the government'.

From this case of teaching, we can see that when the teachers did not think that the students were clever, Chen did not take the teachers' opinion for granted. Rather, she delved into the question by herself and found that understanding of text was not from the students' perspective. She thus called for student-based interpretation of the text. In the meantime, she believed that there should be a balance between the subject teaching and preaching, which would enable the students to develop in a healthy way.

Peng drew on his experience of being a judge for the award of the special-grade teacher. He exposed the problem of the candidates that they used some concepts without understanding their meaning. This made him realise the importance of reflection to a larger extent, as he stated:

I tended to sit on the panel of judges for the award of the special-grade teacher. In the interview phase, many teachers used a few new concepts in order to show they have up-to-date teaching ideas. But when I asked them questions, I found they didn't really know the meaning of the concepts. What did this mean? This showed these teachers had no awareness of analysing concepts profoundly, nor the ability to reflect themselves. Reflection made you an independent thinker, rather than a pointless mouthpiece.

Secondly, reflection facilitated the special-grade teachers' in-depth learning. Qi required himself to publish at least two papers each year, since he deemed it helpful for his personal growth. In the process of writing, he reflected on and strengthened his understanding about the topic. Qi expressed:

Sometimes, I felt I had a very good topic in mind, and I had thought about it quite clearly. While when I started to write, I realised there were many things I had not fingered out. Then I would need to search and read literature. In this process, I found my understanding very superficial. Drawing on others' ideas to construct my own opinion, I could deepen my understanding.

Likewise, as Li stated, she observed a lesson utilising co-operative teaching, which was not a successful lesson in her opinion. After the lesson, Li wrote a reflection report analysing the problems of lesson. In a short period of time, as she needed to do a lesson of the same content, she also designed her lesson based on co-operative teaching, with particular attention to the problems that she had summarised from the teacher's lesson. Ultimately, she believed that she did a successful lesson.

For special-grade teachers, it could be summarised from the data that reflecting was a normal practice in their professional lives. They excelled at discovering problems in their

daily work, and they usually formed their own ideas and produced feasible solutions to these problems. This accelerated their professional development.

Thirdly, reflection helped the special-grade teachers formulate their own teaching features and educating approaches. As described in previous sections, having distinctive teaching features, such as Guo's "Coloured Chinese" teaching method and Zhang's "Game-Based" teaching method, as well as the educating approaches, such as Sun's "integration of knowledge and action" approach and Tian's "character education approach towards educating people, was one of the crucial reasons for the teachers to be awarded their titles of the special-grade teacher. Indeed, reflection played an important part in the special-grade teachers' processes of forming the methods and approaches in their teaching and educating practices.

## 4.9 Teacher leadership

Teacher leadership could be deemed the power of the special-grade teachers to lead and influence others on a certain scale. According to the analysis of data, as representatives of outstanding teachers, the special-grade teachers actively and passively exercised their leadership in different modes. Actively exerting teacher leadership meant that the teachers took actions intentionally by themselves, rather than doing so by passively accepting any jobs designated to them. Passively exerting teacher leadership referred to the teachers who agreed to undertake tasks assigned to them by the school or the superior leaders and exercised leadership through those assigned tasks. In total, there were six ways of how they exercised teacher leadership, which were becoming a mentor, giving public lessons, doing lectures, having studios, communicating via media, and assuming social work.

#### 4.9.1 Becoming a mentor

In China, to advance the professional development of young teachers, schools often arranged specific mentors to instruct and provide advice for daily teaching tasks and class teacher work of the young teachers. The special-grade teachers tended to act as the mentors. Additionally, the mentors offered guidance about the professional role, professional ethics and psychological health. In general, a mentor and a young teacher observed each other's lessons in order that the young teacher could develop more teaching skills by comparing both lessons and by learning from the mentor. The mentor usually helped the young teacher eliminate doubts by answering any questions that the young teacher raised. On a regular basis, the mentor inspected the lesson plans of the young teacher and gave feedback. The young teacher, through the frequent contacts with the mentor, could learn excellent qualities and skills from the mentor. Many of the interviewed special-grade teacher mentioned that they were assigned with new teachers to lead by their schools. Some of the new teachers were from their own schools, and others were from other schools. As the special-grade teachers pointed out, they were impressed with any achievements that the new teachers made and assisting in the apprentices' work let them earn a sense of accomplishment.

#### 4.9.2 Giving open lessons

Open lesson was one of the most important modes of instructional research in China. Typically, one or several teachers gave the lesson and other teachers observed it. Following the lesson, the observing teachers discussed the lesson from different angles and exchanged ideas with each other in order to improve themselves. The open lessons that the special-grade teachers gave tended to be called the showcase classes, as they were the examples to be learned by the fellow teachers. Through the showcase lessons, the observing teachers learned educational notions and teaching skills, thereby gaining professional development. Both before and after they were awarded the title of the special-grade teacher, they did plenty of showcase lessons, which accumulated practical experience for both themselves and for the observing teachers. However, it was not that

the showcase lessons brought only benefits to the special-grade teachers. Occasionally, it gave rise to stress. Chen shared a case of himself, which was an uncomfortable experience for her:

I sometimes woke up startled and the same dream repeated a few times. In the dream, when I was working on a lesson plan in my office, our teaching and learning deputy head walked to me and said, “Ms Chen, please prepare a showcase class for all the teachers at the school.” Next, I was suddenly in the showcase class, seeing a host of people in front of me. There were hundreds of people in the teaching hall waiting for my showcase lesson to begin, while lots of accidents took place then. One time, I couldn’t open up my PowerPoint slides. One time, the students didn’t turn up while the class bell had rung. Another time, the observing teachers didn’t look friendly to me. At these moments, I immediately woke up with full of sweats.

Impressively, six of the special-grade teachers claimed that they had agreed to do “free open lessons” school-wide when I interviewed them. This meant that any teachers could come and observe their lessons anytime the teachers would like to, without informing the special-grade teachers in advance. In the free open lessons, both the special-grade teachers and the observing teachers could learn educating notions and teaching skills from each other.

#### 4.9.3 Doing lectures

Doing lectures was one of the significant actions that the special-grade teachers took to exercise their leadership. There were mainly two types of lectures: one was the lectures of their personal life experiences and the other was related to specific topics. They were invited by the teacher training organisers within and outside their schools, in different school districts, administrative areas, provinces and cities. As experts, they did lectures on an ad-hoc basis, and each lecture was normally between 1.5 and 3 hours. Some

special-grade teachers received invitation twice or three times within a year, others were invited about once a month.

### *Lectures of personal life experiences*

The type of lecture was that they tended to do for young teachers and backbone teachers. Liang showed her willingness to share her experience with other teachers, and he emphasised the importance of appreciating and overcoming hardship. He believed that the young teachers could gain something valuable from her personal stories. He pointed out:

I'm happy to tell youth teachers my experience and thoughts. In the course of growing, they could encounter a lot of hardships. Especially when they heard other teachers also had similar hardships, they would think it was normal to experience these hardships. As long as we appreciate the hardships in an appropriate way, they would try to overcome these and become a really good teacher.

Li delivered a lecture entitled "Methods of improving personal growth in work" for the backbone teachers every year. She had been doing the lecture for five or six years, and she focused on sharing the inspiration that she gained from work with the teachers. She thought that they learned something more or less. When she met some teachers who did not intend to be class teachers, she patiently convinced them based on her own experience. She recalled:

Some teachers focused on the work of subject teaching, and others preferred the research of subject teaching while not wanted to be the class teachers. I told the teachers if they didn't work as a class teacher, they'd never understand their students fully. A teacher who didn't understand their students fully couldn't teach the subjects

well. One time when I just finished a lecture, a teacher came to me specifically and thanked me. She said she had already not wanted to be a class teacher anymore, but as she learned the benefits of being a class teacher from me, she changed her mind.

Undoubtedly, Li was pleased that she influenced others positively by means of lecture. For Wan, on one hand, doing lectures for teachers was like a review and summary of her own work, and some of the perceptual cognitions could turn into rational cognition. On the other hand, it brought benefits to other teachers as well. Wan elaborated:

For ourselves as special-grade teachers, we might comprehend something that we had already thought deeply about for years all at once. When we shared our thoughts with the teachers, it could save them lots of time if they really understood what we told them. That's good for their growths.

### *Lectures on specific topics*

There were two further divisions within this type of lectures, one being related and the other being unrelated to the work of teaching and educating. The former mainly referred to the specific topics of their teaching features and educating systems, research findings of their subjects, or pedagogical methods that they summarised from their practical experience over years. To exemplify, Wu did lectures on how to teach styles of writing for novice Chinese language teachers each year. Chen did annual lectures on how to ask the students questions in lessons for new English language teachers. Tian was invited by a school in a province many times to do lectures on his character education approach to educating people. Moreover, Peng shared his research findings of the bureaucratic system in Qing Dynasty, Liu went to a Normal University and delivered the topic of “how to prepare for lessons and write lesson plans”, and Zhou visited many schools to discuss the strategies and methods of reflections in their lectures respectively.



The latter referred to the specific topics of anything but school work. Wu did several times a lecture on the topic of “about reading” at his school. He elaborated in his interview:

Reading should be special-grade teachers’ normal state of life. In my lecture, I usually covered topics like why we should read, what kind of things we should read, how to select things to read and how to develop the habit of reading. Every time when I gave such a lecture, I ignited my audience’s passion for reading. One of my friends who’s an editor said to me, “When you do a lecture in the future, let us know beforehand. We’d be very happy to support you. We can offer any books you need. We have a lot of new books and good books.”

Tian, despite being a Physics teacher, was from a family specialised in traditional Chinese medical science and was interested in gynaecology. He was invited to do lectures on gynaecological care for female teachers by many schools.

The special-grade teachers were generally delighted to do lectures for other teachers. On one hand, this experience could serve as important evidence for their appraisal of the award of the special-grade teacher. On the other hand, they could gain reputation and impact for themselves through doing lectures, and this was a crucial approach to exerting their teacher leadership.

#### 4.9.4 Having studios

Due to the scarcity of the special-grade teachers, different departments at the school, district, municipal and provincial levels helped them open studios, in order for them to

better lead others. From the interviews, I learned that six of them had studios at their schools, two had studios in their districts and one had a municipal studio. It is important to note that studios at different levels had different functions. At the school level, two special-grade teachers were required to organise research and training events at least once a month for youth teachers to attend. The other four special-grade teachers were asked to organise such events on an irregular basis and they take charge of the schools' open days. All of them needed to participate in the collaborative work between the schools and the school districts. For instance, when delegations visited the schools, they needed to demonstrate their work outcomes to the visitors. Among the six special-grade teachers, half of them used designated rooms as the venues for their studio events, while the other teachers did not have the rooms. Instead, they could use random meeting rooms at the schools. Sun pleasantly talked about the facilitates that he got for his studio:

I liked my studio very much. I was really happy when the school assigned this venue to me and learned how multi-functional it was. It could be used as an office, a meeting room, an activity room or a mini library. I could, according to my own ideas, decorated it to be very Chinese-styled.

Sun worked with two apprentices and they organised discussion session of teaching frequently in the studio. One year, as he needed to get one of them ready for a teaching competition in the district, he invited his colleagues to the sessions for extra help. The outcomes of discussion looked fruitful, as he recalled:

From the whole to the details, we discussed how to design lessons which would help improve the students' learning abilities and arouse their true feelings, rather than just memorising knowledge. We just discussed in my studio, sometimes till 9 or 10 o'clock. Each young teacher, no matter if they joined the teaching competition or not, worked out designs for their lessons. Then all of us would see what the merits of the designs

were, where the problems lied, and how to improve them.

It is obvious that Sun enjoyed the time spent in the studio. He mentioned some of the benefits of having such a studio, as he further stated:

We all felt very comfortable working in the studio, as it was like an exclusive place for us. We could really concentrate there. My apprentice won the first-place award in the end, and all the other teachers felt they enhanced themselves through such a discussion process.

Dai's studio was required to hold events once a month. That was equal to four events per term. At the beginning of the academic year, they submitted an annual plan and the school allocated grant to support them. He drew an example of how his studio organised events, as he shared:

The four events for the current term were all about asking the young teachers below 35 years old to read the same book, Emile, or On Education, written by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. I really like this book, and the school bought this book for every teacher. In the first event, I invited a professor from a Normal University to give a speech about the book, so that the teachers could get some guidance in terms of how to read and appreciate the book. It was really a fantastic speech. The professor told us lots of background information about the book, which sounded quite interesting to us.

With the help of the professor, the teachers were able to read the book more smoothly. It is evident that Dai was delighted about what he had done for the teachers for the first studio event, and he was looking forward to seeing the outcomes of the studio activity

when the term finished. He introduced:

In the second event, we looked at the influence that the book had already had on us, and for the rest two events, the teachers will be invited to share their impressions of the book. We haven't had the last two events yet. They are still to come. Honestly, it is the first time for me to organise such a reading activity. Before that, I observed and reviewed lessons a lot, and so reading is like a new form of activities for me. Let's see the outcomes of the activity at the end of the term.

Further, Liang's studio was a district-wide one. He claimed to be the most outstanding teacher in the subject of history in the whole city, and he had 12 excellent young teachers working alongside him in his studio. These teachers were from 12 different schools, and several of them were making effort for the awarded of the special-grade teacher. Despite being a district-wide studio, the venues for their activities were various and could be somewhere beyond the district. The studio activities were of diverse forms. Sometimes, the young teachers came to Liang's school and observed his lessons; sometimes, the 12 teachers observed a lesson taught by one of themselves and reviewed it altogether; sometimes, they attended academic conferences; and sometimes, they held seminars on certain topics. Liang was very grateful to district-level department for offering him the opportunity to cultivate the young teachers. Correspondingly, the studio was beneficial to him as well, as he pointed out, "Most of the youth teachers were Master degree holders, and one of them got a Doctoral degree. They were knowledgeable. While communicating and discussing with them, I expanded my own knowledge base and improved my standard of educating."

Last, Qi's studio was one at the municipal level. Six backbone teachers were sent to the studio by their leaders to participate in the work of the studio for three years. Qi proposed,

Within the three years, I focused on four points in my studio work. First, I worked to update the teachers' educating ideas. Second, I worked to improve the teachers' teaching skills. Third, each of them needed to do a research project. Fourth, they needed to publicise an article every year. I needed to pass on my outcomes of writing to the teachers so that the outcomes could be further improved by them. Finally, the outcomes would be very helpful for our teaching practice. In addition to this, this would raise the teachers' reputation. When we talked about one of them, people all knew the teacher was a wonderful teacher. To achieve this, we needed to build more platforms, and my studio, I believe, was an important platform for the teachers."

The studio system at the school, district and municipal levels was a variant of the traditional mentor-apprentice system within schools. Basically, in the mentor-apprentice system, experienced teachers acted as the mentors assisting in the youth teachers' work, while the mentors might not be special-grade teachers. Normally the mentors had only a few apprentices. In the studio system, the special-grade teachers were usually the leaders of the studios, and they were assigned with more youth teachers who were equivalent to the apprentices in the mentor-apprentice system. As the evidence suggested, setting up studios was a useful approach to exerting teacher leadership and the various studio activities had a positive influence on youth teachers and even all the teachers within or beyond the school.

#### 4.9.5 Communicating via media

The special-grade teachers mainly applied two means to perform teacher leadership via media communication: texts and videos. The dissemination of texts relied heavily on journals and WeChat Official Account. WeChat was one of the most popular social media in China and the Official Account was similar to a blog. As mentioned above, the special-grade teachers took reflections very seriously and utilised writing as a tool of reflecting. Apart from a small number of special-grade teachers stored their written texts in the form of dairy without disclosing to others, most of them selected nicely written texts to

be published on journals. From the materials that I collected from the special-grade teachers, it could be seen that the texts were essentially in regard to teaching reflections and summaries of teaching experience, as well as texts discoursing on issues in education and probing into the causes behind. To exemplify, Guo wrote an article which critiqued a viewpoint of successful students in education. The viewpoint deemed education a kind of competition which was only about educating students to be excellent exam takers. It argued that being academically strong was the only benchmark for a student to be successful at school. Successful students had to constantly surpass and beat others in academic results. Nevertheless, Guo opposed to it and pointed out in her article that education should be about finding where a student's talent lied and taking advantage of it. Successful students were supposed to be an all-round person, not only being academically strong, but also having other transferable skills and abilities. This article, according to Guo, was highly valued by the press and was ultimately published on a journal.

It is worth noting that many of the special-grade teachers published their articles not on academic journals, but on non-academic journals. Additionally, I learned from my interviews that two teachers put their articles on their personal WeChat Official Accounts. Chen expressed her thoughts about having a WeChat Official Account:

In terms of setting up the account, I initially had two reasons. The first idea was that I wanted to let more people benefit from my words. I'd been teaching for 24 years, and any part of my experience that I shared could be valuable to others. I wanted not only the students in my class but also those outside my class to benefit. What's more, I would also like the teachers, students and parents who were good at learning via Internet to gain something on my Official Account. The second idea was that I wanted it to discipline me a bit. You know, sometimes I went lazy about writing things. With this account, I could overcome it and get some motivation, especially when I thought about my followers who might be expecting to see my updates. I felt if I didn't post some writing on my account for a while, I could let my followers down. Although no one really

complained about it to me, but there's like an invisible hand pushing me to do it. So, I had to keep updating it.

There were two types of communication via videos. The first type was live videos of lessons, and the second type was the training courses delivered by the invited teachers. Several teachers said that they were asked by their schools to make live videos for their lessons. These videos would be sent to the department of education in the district, and the department would pass on the videos to the under-developed areas in China. The teachers there would then be able to observe and borrow ideas from the videos for their own teaching practice. Besides, two of the special-grade teachers stated that they were assigned with the task of producing two videos, one for a lecture for teacher ethics and the other for a lecture on how to do the job of class teacher well. These videos were used as part of the training programme on a teaching and research website. One of the two teachers, Dai evaluated the task in the interview, as he suggested:

I found it quite meaningful. Senior teachers had plenty of experience. Through this channel, their experience could be spread. More teachers could profit from it. While we were preparing for the video, we could take the chance to review the work that we had done to date. Looking back at the way we'd taken and seeing how far we'd gone could be good for self-reflection. I've got an interesting point here. One day, I found myself too plump in the video. I thought I needed to lose some weight, since the students might prefer teachers with better appearance. I decided to jog after work every day now.

To sum up, the special-grade teachers promoted their educational ideas, teaching experience and practical wisdom via text and video communication, which influenced a wide range of teachers. The teachers across various locations could learn from and draw on the special-grade teachers' experience. In some sense, the special-grade teachers served as valuable source of training for other teachers. Compared with traditional methods, the use of media was probably the more straightforward and effective way to

train and develop teachers.

In conclusion, the special-grade teachers applied the five avenues to exert their impact on other teachers from the aspects of teaching and educating work and personal growth. They set themselves as examples for others, inspiring more teachers to better themselves.

## 4.10 Having awareness and actions of learning theories and broadening horizons

The special-grade teachers advocated strengthening of theory learning and broadening of their horizons, according to my analysis of data. They called for integration of theories into practice, and they enlarged their visions by the three means: in-service learning, extensive reading and travelling.

### 4.10.1 In-service learning

Working while learning was a common experience that most of the special-grade teachers mentioned. They universally viewed that despite their affluent practical experience, they lacked applying theories into practice. Thus, they engaged in in-service learning to consolidate their theoretical bases. Dai gave a detailed account of her case:

I was only a technical secondary school student. Obtaining higher academic degree was like a compulsory thing for us to do. Five years after I started my job, I went to Open University and ended up with a college degree and bachelor's degree. At that time, I worked, took evening classes and looked after my child, quite hard. But I knew I must persist to redeem a promising future. But I only got diplomas. I didn't get the degrees. I



had to get the degrees through self-taught examination. Eventually, I got the bachelor's degree. Those years, many people took the examination, while only three teachers in my class were awarded the degree. I was one of them. This is something I've always been very proud of. Just because I had the degree, I did a master's degree while working many years later. Through learning, my amount of knowledge went up dramatically, and my knowledge base was much more solid. In retrospect, my life has always been immersed in learning.

The majority of the interviewed special-grade teachers spent time doing courses equivalent to a master's programme, while they were still at work. Some of them were highly impressive with their experiences of in-service learning. Qi shared with me his case:

I was very lucky. I took my master's-equivalent course at A [pseudonym] Normal University. I only heard some of the famous experts and professors, but I had not chance of being taught by them, while I did have the chance when doing the course. They were of extremely high academic standard and their lessons were good. I was never late, took lots notes and reviewed the notes back home in the evening. That year's learning indeed broadened my horizon. Since then, I went for all the available opportunities to learn. Some teachers weren't willing to take the course, but I was. Later on, there was another opportunity. Every Saturday I went to the training of educational research methods, which lasted for half a year. That's also something I was quite happy to commit to. I finished my research assignment seriously, and it improved me massively.

Peng's research in the subject of history was fairly well-known in academia. He joined two academic research societies, one for the subject and the other for the subject teaching, and he attended almost all the academic activities and events. He valued the time that he spent in discussing issues regarding the subject of history with academic members of staff at universities as well as with his fellow teachers. He believed that if

one wanted to become an outstanding teacher, he or she must apprehend theories. As he proposed, “You have to let your students love your subject because of the ample knowledge you possessed in the subject.”

As can be seen, in-service learning was an important approach to expanding the special-grade teachers’ knowledge bases and updating their subject and pedagogical knowledge. They held a positive attitude toward different in-service training courses with full of passion.

#### 4.10.2 Extensive reading

Almost all the special-grade teachers took reading seriously. They read a vast range of materials, including not only journals and books regarding their subject teaching, but also information beyond their subjects. Examples of such information were publications related to the latest scientific, social phenomena and personal growth, as well as novels and prose. I selected several special-grade teachers’ experiences of reading from the interviews to present as below:

“One’s growth are both physical and mental. Being mentally strong can’t be achieved without reading.” (Wan)

“Letting the students love reading needs the push and guidance from teachers and parents. The teachers’ recognition of reading decides the students’ perception of reading. That is to say, if a teacher doesn’t love reading, he (or she) can’t influence the students to love reading.” (Sun)

“Reading is a lifestyle of teachers.” (Qi)

“When I was at my university, I read almost all the masterpieces available in our library, such as *Pride and Prejudice*, *the Red and the Black*, and *War and Peace*. From then, I developed my habit of reading. Since I started to work, I have bought many books. I never stopped reading, and I also recommend books to the students. They could borrow books from me. To the kids who love reading, I’m a library.” (Chen)

“When I did my master’s programme, my supervisor strongly advised me of topical reading. He said, ‘If you want to have profound thoughts, topical reading is essential. Over years, I did too much topical reading on psychology, management, study of Su Shi [an ancient Chinese poet], politics, economics and so on. When you read a lot, you won’t confine your body and mind to the scale of classroom.’” (Tian)

“A great teacher must be an adamant reader, writer and independent thinker. The teachers who didn’t read could only be experts in following textbooks tightly, focusing on exam questions and making the students suffer. Without reading, writing and thinking, the teachers were just sellers of knowledge. The students taking their lessons would only gain knowledge and skills while not thinking methods. Students could only get entry tickets to universities with such knowledge and skills. In order not to be such teachers, there’s no other way but reading.” (Dai)

#### 4.10.3 Willingness to travel

In China, an advantage of the job of teacher is that they have two vacations each year. This allows teachers to spend time in travelling during the vacations. In my interviews, a common reference that many of the special-grade teachers drew was a Chinese saying, “Read ten thousand books and travel ten thousand miles.” It implied that to be a

successful person, one needed to accumulate one's knowledge through reading a host of classics and open one's mind through abundant travelling experience. Besides, it also implied that to probe into the true essence of education, one needed to relax body and mind in the nature and think freely. This would lead to real enlightenment of education and educational wisdom. On another aspect, the saying interpreted the perspective of re-examining education beyond education. Despite their similar intentions of travelling, their travelling arrangements were varied. Wu visited a number of places of interest that many ancient writers had written about, such as some famous mountains and great rivers. He said, "Having been to these places, I felt I was like in these places while teaching texts describing them."

Li viewed travelling as an important part of the life planning that she made for both her and her daughter. She stated:

Travelling, first, made us proud of and love our country more. Second, on the exciting but fatigued journey, we experienced the fascination of life. We got to love ourselves more and cherish our lives. Third, we tasted different culture from the near to the far. We broadened our horizons and learned to see things from different angles. We became more inclusive and open-minded.

Every summer, Qi arranged to visit unfrequented places. He described his feeling of visiting Tibet:

The tranquillity of Lhasa and the harmonicity of the Jokhang Temple enlightened us. Our education was supposed to let the students grow up freely in peace, inclusion and understanding. Leaving the school and the educational settings for a short while enabled you to grasp the meaning of work and life more profoundly.

Wan thought that she found the true essence of education through travelling. She unveiled:

One year, I went to Shao Mountain. This was the sacred spot for China's revolution. I had originally expected to enjoy the spectacular mountain and scenery. But when I got there, I found the atmosphere heavily commercial. It's all about selling and forced buying. The tourists were forced to buy souvenirs. My longing to visit such a place was all gone. Owing to this, I couldn't help thinking of education. When would there be an end to the utilitarian education? Here people forced buying for money, while in order for the students to go to universities, we asked them to work overtime and do countless tests which were of no use to them in the future. What's the difference between the sellers and us?

Further, Dai put forward his thoughts, "I saw tall buildings of all the same shape everywhere and I made a connection with education. Education shouldn't just be building the students into the same type. Using the same method to teach students can't be a good idea.

From the interviews, it could be seen that the special-grade teachers were keen on in-service learning, reading and travelling. No matter in which roles they performed, be it students, readers and travellers, they managed to develop themselves into better teachers.

This chapter has revealed the ten key characteristics of the special-grade teachers. They were found to show care towards students, have self-constructed approaches towards educating people, take the first-time experiences seriously, maintain positive

relationships, be proud of their abundant subject knowledge or unique skills, be student-centred, keep their attention to student results, be reflective, have teacher leadership and know to learn theories and broaden horizons. It is worth noting that there exist some similarities between participants of different gender and among participants teaching different subjects. For example, as Section 4.9.5 suggests, it is very common for the language (Chinese and English) teachers to perform teacher leadership via media communication. Besides, most of the participants who take writing as the major method of reflection are language teachers (see Section 4.8.2). In terms of gender, five out of six participants who had studios are male teachers. However, given the nonprobability or non-random sampling and the small sample size in this research, it is impossible to test whether any similarities among the key characteristics in gender and subject are of statistical significance or not (Gallo, 2016). In the next chapter, I show what kinds of external factors influenced their professional development.

# Chapter 5 External Factors

In the previous chapter, I described the ten characteristics that the special-grade teachers possessed. These characteristics were the educational ideologies and behaviours that the special-grade teachers demonstrated in their practices. In a sense, the characteristics were shaped by certain external factors. To identify them, I analysed the data and found three emerging themes: key individuals, critical incidents and important environmental factors, which were the major factors influencing the professional development of the special-grade teachers. Figure 5.1 displays the findings regarding both Research Question 1 and 2. I will discuss each of the three in turn in this chapter.

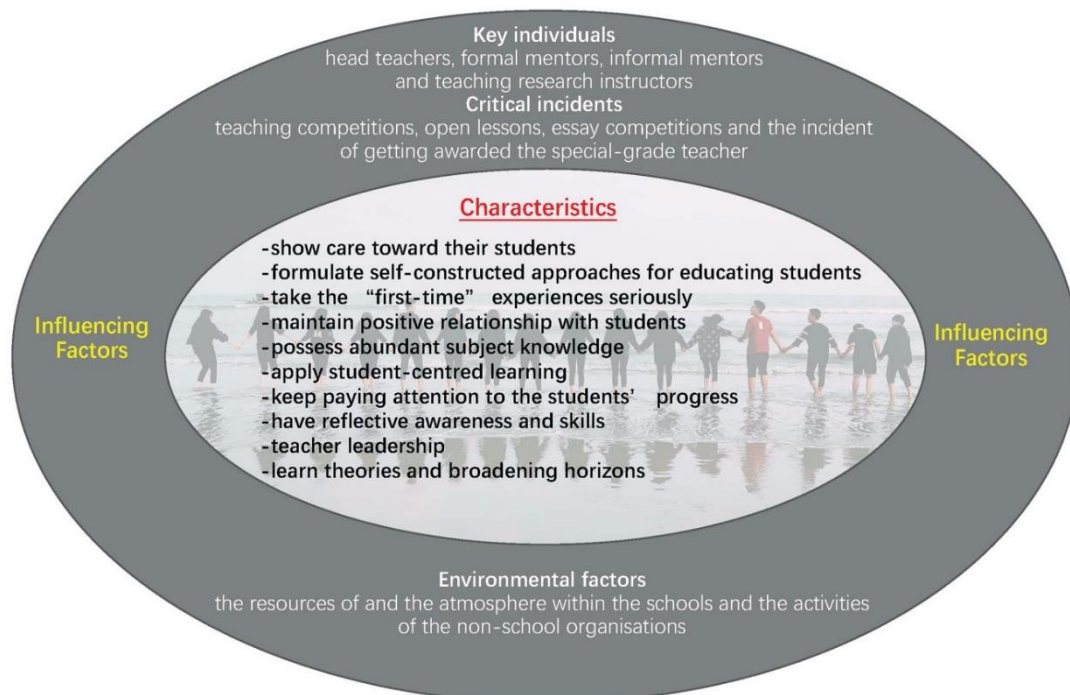


Figure 5.1 The external factors and the key characteristics

## 5.1 Key individuals

There were individuals who played pivotal roles in the special-grade teachers' developmental paths. The key individuals with the most prominent influence included head teachers, formal mentors, informal mentors, and teaching research instructors. Other individuals,

### 5.1.1 The head teachers

The head teachers referred to the heads of the schools where the special-grade teachers then worked. There were two means by which the head teachers influenced the special-grade teachers. First, the head teachers paid attention to and recognised the work done by the special-grade teachers. Second, they provided the special-grade teachers with support in three particular ways: (1) opportunity and platform offering, (2) flexible arrangement of work and (3) inspiring. Through the attention and recognition as well as support, the head teachers exerted mixed positive effect on the special-grade teachers, making them feel motivated, comfortable, grateful, trusted and so on in their work. This was apparently beneficial to the special-grade teachers' professional development.

Paying attention to recognising the special-grade teachers' work was the first means by which the head teachers made an impact, and the special-grade teachers were fond of getting the head teachers' attention and recognition. To exemplify, Liang showed a bit surprise in his tone because his head teacher's attention seemed something beyond his expectation, as he stated, "I should say our subject group was very small, but he still paid attention to us, these young people". Besides, the head teacher's attention made Zhang's job easier. In Zhang's words, "With the leader's attention to your work, you would feel more comfortable in your work. One thing was loving the job of P.E. and loving the students, and the other was the leader's attention, which made you free your hands to do your work." In terms of recognition, Zhou was grateful to her head teacher



for recognising her, as she briefly mentioned, “I could have the chances to do open lessons, thanks to the recognition from my head teacher.” Moreover, Chen emphasised the importance of the head teacher’s recognition by saying, “I felt these successes all stemmed from my head teacher’s recognition.” To sum up, the special-grade teachers enjoyed getting the attention and recognition from their head teachers.

The second means by which the head teachers had their effect on the special-grade teachers was through support. Specifically, the support was provided mainly in three different ways. Firstly, the head teachers offered opportunities and platforms for the special-grade teachers to demonstrate themselves. For instance, Zhou found the opportunity of doing open lessons valuable, as she claimed, “I think my rapid growth benefited from doing various open lessons at my school over recent years ... Not every teacher had the chance to do open lessons.”

In Chen’s case, she first viewed her head teacher as an important figure affecting her professional life, and she referred to her experience of participating in a teaching competition. Being one of the several teachers to participate in the competition at a very early stage of her career showed the great trust that her head teacher put in her. She suggested:

I can be where I am today, feeling that my head teacher had a huge influence on me. In the second year I worked at the school, the school appointed several teachers to take part in a teaching competition in the district ... To me, this was a chance to demonstrate myself and get recognised by others.

Next, Chen believed that the opportunity and platform that her head teacher provided her with, such as the teaching competition, served as a foundation for her future

achievements, including becoming a special-grade teacher. She further stated:

Later on, since I got the first-place prize [in the competition], the teaching research instructor let me become a part-time instructor of teaching research. This made me have a bigger platform. Next, I became a subject leader and then a special-grade teacher, step by step.

Last, Chen pointed out that it had to be the head teacher with executive power, while not other teachers, who could provide the special-grade teachers with opportunities and platforms. She explained, “Probably, the teachers also recognised me, but they didn’t have the power to offer me the chances to get training, to observe other schools and to learn.”

Liang recalled his experience with full of gratitude toward his head teacher. He appreciated the facts that his head teacher took the young teachers’ growth seriously and that he trusted him to do crucial tasks. Teaching competitions and the work of managing the graduating classes were the opportunities and platforms that his head teacher provided him with, which was indeed a form of support from the leader. Liang proposed:

The head teacher supported me very strongly ... He could frequently organise some competitions of teaching basics for young teachers, building such platforms for us. Besides, he boldly appointed us young teachers to undertake the work of the graduating classes ... Up to now, out of my 30-year teaching experience, I had 20 years teaching classes at Senior 3. This experience, I’m afraid, might be too hard for anyone to match up with. But for this, I was very thankful to my head ... It was a kind of appreciation and trust. He let me take charge of Senior 3 and I always worked my socks off to do it. So I think one thing was my own effort, and the other was the chance. They both advanced

one's development.

As for Zhang, he deemed the whole school a larger platform than his previous school, and he gained more opportunities. The head teacher's support and the honours that he had acquired at the school added a sense of fulfilment to his work. He shared:

The leader took P.E. very seriously. Because of this, we had a lot of room to perform. Since I came to the school, I had a larger platform and more opportunities. Of course, it's more tiring ... Working at the school was very satisfying and joyful. Besides, it brought me with lots of honours, such as being awarded the special-grade teacher. I might not be able to get awarded at another school ... Certainly I had my own calibre here. It wouldn't work without others' help.

Similarly, Yu viewed the opportunities that she gained from her head teacher as an indispensable part of her achievements, as she pointed out:

Among the several teachers I met, this head teacher was a typical one and provided me with many opportunities in my course of growth. I found this very important. If I wasn't asked to broaden my horizon and offered the learning opportunities, there might be a great number of things that I couldn't achieve.

Secondly, the head teachers were very flexible in arranging the special-grade teachers' work. In Yu's case, her head teacher adjusted her timetable flexibly in order to facilitate her chance of observing lessons. At the beginning of Yu's career, she got a chance from the head teacher to observe a special-grade teacher's lessons for a year, and she spoke highly of the head teacher, "I think the growth of a teacher can't do without the head

teacher's fostering. Many people knew our head teacher as a very smart person." While she faced the problem of time conflict, her head teacher was supportive in helping her out. Specifically, she stated:

I couldn't have the chance without my head teacher's support. I was a class teacher then. Every week I needed to go and observe the lessons once or twice, and that demanded some adjustments [of my timetable]. Other teachers had to take over my job, while my head teacher was very supportive. I thought he was very sensible. He didn't just use teachers but fostered teachers. Some head teachers might not be so sensible and might refuse to make adjustments. So I thought his sight determined his educational ideas.

Thirdly, the head teachers inspired the special-grade teachers. Guo's case was an interesting one in which a sentence of her head teacher became a motivator for her to pursue the award of the special-grade teacher. She detailed:

I think sometimes a sentence of the leader had a strong effect. He said in a general meeting for staff at the school, "I very much wish all our teachers going for the special-grade teachers ... A soldier who doesn't want to be a marshal won't be a good soldier." He said, "You all need to have objectives in your heart. For example, Guo, I think you will be a special-grade teacher in three years, as long as you strive for it." This sentence motivated me very much. He said this in 2002, and I asked him for the selection criteria of the special-grade teacher straightforward ... Then I started to make effort toward this goal. Eventually three years later, I was quite lucky [to get awarded the special-grade teacher].

As Guo pondered why the head teacher only said to her at the meeting, she believed that it might be the hard work done by her that got recognised by her head teacher. For this, she appreciated the head teacher hugely, as she suggested:

I thought I worked really hard. Why the head teacher only called my name among the 500 teachers we had at the school? Our school was very large, while he only said my name. I was the kind of the teachers doing various exceptional things at my school. For instance, I was the class teacher of the first experimental class founded that year. Actually, I was not the most senior one in experience, but maybe the head teacher saw the hard work I had done. I felt very grateful to such a leader. He could notice people who were not so loud.

### 5.1.2 The formal mentors

The formal mentors refer to the individuals who were of vital importance in guiding, spurring and instructing the special-grade teachers in their developmental processes. According to the analysis of data, the formal mentors were divided into three types. The first type was the experienced teachers. They gave the special-grade teachers instructions at the very beginning of their professional careers. The second type was other special-grade teachers and experts or scholars. They provided the interviewed special-grade teachers with help while they were developing themselves from excellent teachers into outstanding teachers. The third type of the mentors was the university tutors and experts who shaped the special-grade teachers who assisted the excellent teachers in theory learning, research and logical thinking.

To discuss the similarities and differences between the excellent and the outstanding teachers, they both love education, care for the student, have extensive knowledge, are highly skilled and get recognised by the students, the parents, and school leaders. In contrast to the excellent teachers, the outstanding teachers usually have their own distinctive features on teaching or class teacher work; they develop innovative practice leading to positive effect on a certain aspect; they are or are likely to be special-grade teachers; and they enjoy high reputation both within and outside their schools.

The first type of the formal mentors offered help and instructions on the roles of teachers, professional ethics, basic skills, interpersonal skills and so on when the special-grade teachers were still novice teachers. This played a certain part in the special-grade teachers' development into excellent teachers in the future. Several special-grade teachers' cases demonstrated how their mentors influenced them. To Zhang, his mentor affected him in many aspects, such as life, work, learning, being a person and doing things. In Zhang's words, he was not as good as his mentor, in terms of habit and many other aspects, and he claimed that he was lucky to be an apprentice of such an experienced person. Being a colleague of Zhang as well, the mentor was described as a low-key person who was very careful in doing things. Zhang provided a concrete example showing the mentor's attentive attitude toward the health and safety issues of the students, as he proposed:

Simply speaking, for teaching lessons, I learned a lot from him. For example, I was very moved and inspired from some trivial things he had done. Like the sandpit, primary school students could long jump only three or four metres. I wouldn't reach five metres, but the sandpit was nearly six metres long. To ensure the kids' safety, every time he did the lesson of long jump, he turned over the sand to make it softer.

As this was some extra work that the mentor did for the students, Zhang did not see the necessity of doing this straightforward. In the following conversation with his mentor, Zhang eliminated his doubt and the conversation illustrated the influence that his mentor exerted on him. He learned that it would always be better if a teacher could think more for the students and that he had to work regardless of effort to be a good teacher. He continued:

I couldn't understand then, and I said to him, "It took quite a while to turn over the sand

and it's exhausting. Why would you turn the sand over?" He said, "It looked exhausting, but for the kids, you had to do it. You'd never know where the kids could jump. In case they jumped out [of the central area] of the sandpit, there would likely be accidents." This left me with a deep impression. That let me know I must do things to the standard tirelessly.

Specifically, Zhang's mentor's care towards the students made Zhang aware that a good teacher must take the students' needs into consideration from time to time in his or her teaching practice. In line with the foundational ideas underlying his game-based teaching method, his mentor inspired him that he must love the students deep in heart. Moreover, his mentor passed on many teaching skills to him, and he shared such a case:

Another thing was teaching P.E. lessons. We all had it before. Drawing lines on the ground [for games] was artful work. There was a line-drawing machine to push. If you didn't do it well, the line wouldn't be straight. We also learned how to draw the lines, while it's complicated to push it. But my mentor drew very straight lights, and I asked him for advice ... In the end, I could push it quite straight, owing to his instructions ... My mentor was very dedicated. He is much older than me and is in his 70s or 80s now. I still visit my mentor every year now.

Obviously, gaining teaching skills from the mentor was another form of influence that the mentor had on Zhang. Likewise, Liang's mentor taught him skills of teaching as well, such as how to do lesson plans. When Liang became a teacher in the initial period of his career, he was not so confident about himself. He did not graduate from a Normal university but from a comprehensive university. This resulted in his lack of knowledge and skills in the field of teaching. Fortunately, he met his mentor who helped him much. He said to me with full of gratitude about his mentor:

As I just entered the profession of teacher, actually I was not even as good as a common graduate from a Normal university because I couldn't write lesson plans and I didn't know how I should write ... My first guiding person, mentor, taught me step by step, including how to write different parts of lesson plans. He observed each of my lessons and gave me some feedback ... At that time, my mentor ... saved me from taking many detours.

It was evident that the relationship with the mentors had a positive effect on the development of the early-career teachers, and some of the special-grade teachers benefited from the that at the start of their career. This built a firm foundation for their professional lives. Dai did teacher training at his school, and he shed light on why he was so patient and careful in instructing the early-career teachers. He summed up the reason into one word, inheritance. By inheritance, he basically meant that he was obliged to treat the teachers of the new generations the same way his mentor treated him, as he explained, "When I just started to work, my mentor treated me in this way. Her effort shaped me, and so I needed to shape more young people."

Furthermore, Zhang mentioned how his mentor taught him a spirit of service. Due to the influence of his mentor, he learned to enjoy serving for others. He found it worthwhile to do things for others, even if he had to make some sort of sacrifices sometimes. Being selfless was a good way to get on well with others. This point was reflected in the experience in which Zhang was working alongside his mentor and witnessed how the mentor dedicated himself to serving for others. He elaborated:

In winter, we lived in a rural area and needed to make a fire in the office. But originally, none of my colleagues wanted to make the fire for others. At that time, my mentor lived not quite far away from where the classroom was, and he voluntarily did it for us. Not only making the fire, he also tidied up the office every day for us. I ever asked why he did these, and I still remember what he said, "A spirit of service is something that



everyone should be equipped with.”

In Summary, at the very beginning of the special-grade teachers’ careers, they learned not only skills for teaching, but also excellent qualities from the first type of mentors. These certainly brought them a step forward in the process of developing into better teachers.

The second type of the formal mentors were the special-grade teachers who helped promote the mid-career teachers’ standard to that of the special-grade teachers. They served as the significant facilitators. They facilitated the development of special-grade teachers in the five aspects: setting goals, reflecting, building confidence, forming teaching features and broadening horizons.

I draw Liu’s case as an example. Initially, Liu was not clear about her intention to be a special-grade teacher, while her mentor’s adamant words helped her set different goals at different stages and kept motivating her to be a better teacher and ultimately a special-grade teacher. Prior to the special-grade award, the senior-grade title was the first goal for her to accomplish. Despite the difficulty in getting it, Liu won the title smoothly, as she recalled:

Actually, I myself wasn’t aware that I wanted to be a special-grade teacher. No, I wasn’t. It was about in 2006 or 2005 when he said to me, “You must become a senior-grade teacher.” At that time, being awarded the senior-grade was very hard. Within such a large district, only one to two teachers in the subject of Chinese language could be awarded. So, it’s really hard then ... The district required 20-year experience. As soon as I had worked for 20 years, I applied for the senior grade ... Many teachers couldn’t get awarded after three times of application, but I got awarded the first time I applied for

it.

It is manifest that the mentor's words played a huge part in Liu's professional development. Liu could hardly be self-complacent since the mentor's constant guidance and encouragement always drove her to achieve more. Even when she had already become a special-grade teacher, the mentor switched attention to the formation of her teaching features. Liu continued:

Since then, I learned I could go for it, at least she gave such a direction for me ... I never thought about being a senior-grade before, and there was no special-grade teacher in the district ... It was him telling constantly and underpinning my life direction: you needed to get awarded middle-grade, senior-grade and then special-grade. When I got awarded the special-grade teacher, he then told me, "you should have your own styles and features of teaching." He set another goal for me. So, I couldn't stop.

The mentor was indeed a highly regarded figure to Liu. In her own words, the mentor was like a "gold mine" for her. In addition to the effect on goal setting, the mentor's influence was also shown in other aspects, such as the opportunities that Liu gained and the habit of writing. Liu elaborated:

He brought my arena from the district to the country. I'd been to different places in the country to teach lessons, do training, give lectures and research the textbooks. Besides, since I followed him, he encouraged me to write informal essays constantly. Within a year I needed to write informal essays of tens of thousands of words. I just never stopped writing. I observed, taught, researched and evaluated lessons ... I noted down my thoughts and understanding about Chinese language teaching.

Liu published two monographs, which, according to herself, were benefited from the instructions of her mentor. Evidently, her continuous accumulation of summarising, reflecting, and writing were fundamental to her achievements. Similar to Liu's case, Guo formed her teaching features and had two monographs published, with the assistance of two mentors who were also the special-grade teachers. The first mentor's commitment to the long-term project and visionary thoughts affected Guo heavily, as Guo explicate:

At that time, I met a very nice mentor ... He then worked on a special project on "ruminating-styled" unit teaching. As a matter of fact, he had already worked on this project for ten years. ... This was like an ageless project. Until this senior gentleman retired, as he was not so well, many of his apprentices still carried on doing the subject. This pedagogical method of him was under study thirty years ago, and now his ideas are still being applied in subject teaching. You see, his ideas were very forward-looking. I felt I was very lucky that I met him. I received comprehensive instructions from him and made lots of attempts, including connecting my projects with his. Probably this made me progress more stably.

The second mentor influenced Guo with his smart personality and ideas as well as ample knowledge in the subject of Chinese language. Also, the mentor's books were deemed by Guo to be valuable teaching materials. Specifically, Guo introduced:

Later I met another mentor who was an ace teacher. He was also the first[-generation] special-grade teacher. The inspiration that he brought me was that his Chinese language teaching was very concrete. The points that he made were very clear and interesting, as the mentor always spoke with a sense of humour. He had a solid foundation of Chinese language. Even now we can still see his edited books ... I found these books very valuable. It's easy to use and it's a set of textbooks in Chinese language reading and writing.

With the impact of the two mentors on her, Guo was able to integrate her emotional understanding of Chinese language with theoretical underpinnings and apply her thoughts in teaching practice. She proposed:

These two teachers brought me forward on my developmental path. I think the impact was huge. At the beginning, I held an emotional opinion toward Chinese language. I viewed Chinese language should be beautiful, lively and joyful. Later I managed to find the theoretical foundation for it and the way to connect with class teaching implementation.

Apart from the two teachers, nearly half of the interviewees ever took experienced special-grade teachers as their mentors. A small number of them observed the experienced special-grade teachers' lessons on a weekly basis for about a year. They learned the teaching skills and pedagogical methods, participated in the post-lesson discussion and improved their teaching standard. Based on these, they formed their own teaching features. One of them joined a studio opened by an experienced special-grade teacher to strengthen teaching skills. Another did a research job for a research project conducted by a number of experienced special-grade teachers. As the interviewed special-grade teachers' experiences suggested, having this type of mentors was a critical opportunity for them to get to know outstanding teachers of senior generations, from whom they learned different educational ideas, teaching styles and behavioural patterns. In a sense, having the mentors was like an engine that helped the excellent teachers to develop into the special-grade teachers. In this process, they set the special-grade teachers as exemplary figures. They took their own capabilities into account and set goals accordingly. With the instructions of the experienced special-grade teachers and great effort, the excellent teachers could have a higher likelihood of becoming special-grade teachers.

The third type of the formal mentors were the university tutors and experts who offered the special-grade teachers guidance on theory learning, research and logical thinking. This built a foundation for them to insist on their educational ideas and develop teaching features. To exemplify, Wu, as a municipal-level backbone teacher in the subject of Chinese language, participated in the training at an education college and took lectures delivered by a famous professor. Significantly, Wu realised that the words of the professor transformed him from experience-based to research- and theory-based. He commented:

Probably in the past, I thought about how to do a lesson by intuition. But since I went to the college, I found the theoretical thing could support me. Say, for how I prepared for a lesson, I didn't just go with my intuition anymore, but started to think rationally. I would look at the patterns of text and the features and styles of expression from a professional angle.

Qi acknowledged that he benefited greatly from his university tutor's guidance when he was still a student. After he started to work, he still kept contact with the tutor and appointed the tutor as an adviser for a research project that he carried out, thereby gaining the chance to learn more from the tutor. Qi provided an account of his case:

The tutor, in the aspect of research project and on my journey of teaching and educating, gave me constant guidance. It could be said that she had a pivotal effect on my developmental path. Since she was appointed as an advisor for my research project, she taught me step by step how to do the research project, including educational ideas, such as the basics of teaching and so on. Hence, she provided me with sufficient instructions on pedagogy.

Yu commented the influence that her university tutor had on her. The tutor did not only

teach her useful subject knowledge but also influenced her on a macro view of biology. Moreover, the tutor influenced her even from perspectives of life and philosophy. She viewed the guidance very crucial and she provided an instance to demonstrate the tutor's influence on her. When Yu went to a small village and participated in a programme of volunteer teaching, it was very hard for her to get used to some of the approaches that the other teachers adopted towards the students there, such as corporal punishment. She was not convinced of being so rude to students, while she seemed to be the only one preferring a soft approach. At that time, she asked her tutor for advice and the tutor's response inspired her immensely. She recalled:

I was then puzzled very much and wondered how to survive amid the conflicting ideas. Then I wrote a letter to my tutor and got her response. Her response letter basically suggested that if I could not adapt to them, I needed to influence them. It shouldn't be that I just went with it. His original words were very literate, mainly saying that I assisted in teaching in the meantime of the teaching assisting in me. That's to say the volunteer teaching was in fact educating and influencing me ... It facilitated my growth ... I couldn't adapt, but I could go and influence it ... I felt that letter affected me massively, since I was so puzzled and confused. Because I was there on my own, I had to deal with everything by myself. In such an atmosphere, what should I do? As that letter was written very concisely but profoundly, I read it repetitively to understand his meaning.

### 5.1.3 Informal mentors

"Informal mentors" referred to the guiding individuals whom the special-grade teachers met or approached in different ways and set as role models, before they became special-grade teachers. The informal mentors played a crucial part in the early phase of the special-grade teachers' professional development. According to the analysis of data, it was evident that the special-grade teachers accessed to their examples by chance. The chances for the special-grade teachers to get to know their informal mentors included a meeting, a brief visit, reading and so on. Interestingly, in most cases, these mentors were

not aware that they influenced the special-grade teachers' development, as they did not know that they were taken as mentors of the special-grade teachers.

Liu's experience exemplifies the relationship between the informal mentors and the special-grade teachers well. At the very beginning of Liu's career, she met the teacher named Li Jilin who was the founder of "situational teaching". Since then, she viewed Li Jilin as a mentor of hers and believed that Li Jilin guided her professional growth. At a symposium, Liu met Li Jilin for the first time and gained basic understanding about the situational teaching. Liu introduced:

It was around the second year since I began to work. The director of the instructions office appointed me and another young teacher to attend a symposium. At the symposium, I got to know the teacher, Li Jilin. She first did a demonstration lesson and then gave a report. From the host's introductory words of her and the experts' evaluation of the situational teaching, I learned the situational teaching was a pedagogical method that stemmed from some advanced educational ideas.

Then, Liu drew attention to integrating the situational teaching into her teaching practice. Specifically, she suggested:

Based on my understanding about the pedagogical method, I started to attempt to apply the method in my Hanyu Pinyin (Chinese phonetic system) teaching. Situational teaching focused on four main elements, "truth, beauty, emotion and thinking". I tried to embody the four elements in my teaching design.

As Liu researched and applied the method further, her teaching soon got recognised by

her school, and she always subscribed to Li Jilin's ideas. It is evident that Li Jilin's influence on Liu was increasingly great, as she expressed:

Later, I read Li Jilin's book and started to probe into the method. Owing to her guidance, I was on the fast track and my teaching was recognised by the school very soon. When there were events at the school, I undertook the task of open lesson, and when I designed the lesson, I always browsed Li Jilin's book. This book became the theoretical underpinning for my teaching design.

Eventually, Liu was delighted that her integration of Li Jilin's ideas was a successful practice, and her initial worries were eliminated when she earned more recognition. She viewed Li Jilin as a significant mentor of her, despite the fact that this was not known to Li Jilin, and even when they met again in numerous years, Liu chose not to reveal this "secret" to her "secret mentor". Liu said:

One time, an observing teacher said my lesson fully reflected Li Jilin's educational thoughts. I was very excited. This meant my attempts gained recognition. I had been worried about imitating her improperly and getting some bad result. It turned out to be that my worries were superfluous. Many years later, I attended another symposium in a different city and met Li Jilin again. I was very glad, as I took her as my respected mentor, although this was not something that she knew of.

To sum up, Liu's informal teacher, Li Jilin influenced Liu throughout a long period of time in Liu's career. Liu made progress in her professional development, owing to her subscription to Li Jilin's ideas which was deemed a form of guidance that Liu gained from her informal mentor.



Wu's cases also embodied the special-grade teacher's experience with informal mentors. According to Wu, at the very start of his career, it was prevalent that the school designated teachers to observe and study in educationally well-developed areas. This kind of activity was sponsored and was called "going-out". He was sent to Shanghai and met a number of famous teachers there. In Wu's own words, "This kind of close contact, it should be said, was quite helpful for my professional growth."

The first informal mentor of Wu displayed what a good teacher should be like in natural situations. Since there were not many people observing, Wu managed to make face-to-face contact with the teacher. The natural phenomena that Wu observed, such as the free-to-enter office and daily interaction with the students, were the things that Wu wanted to see and left him with a deep impression, as Wu recalled:

The first time was Qian Menglong, a renowned special-grade teacher in Shanghai. I went specifically for him, observing his lessons and communicated with him ... When we visited Qian Menglong, we were like pushing his doors and getting in ... Pushing his doors and getting in was something purely natural. I thought I especially needed to learn this ... Other than this, we were more inclined to see how he interacted with students in his daily life. You saw something real, and real things were powerful.

Moreover, Wu shed light on why he preferred to see natural situations, such as natural, unprepared lessons, rather than prepared lessons. He viewed that preparation implied a sense of acting which might undermine the quality of lessons. He explained:

We were there to observe how he worked daily, rather than a prepared demonstration lesson, a model lesson for us to see ... If you prepared for a lesson and did it well, no matter you were a famous teacher or an ordinary teacher, you had preparation

anyway ... Despite the deficiencies and shortcomings of the [unprepared] lessons, they were real and vigorous. If you did model lessons day in day out, no matter how beneficial it might be to the students' development, it involved an element of acting.

Further, Wu mentioned his visit to another well-known special-grade teacher from whom he borrowed useful ideas at a very early stage of his career, as he said:

At another time when I visited Mr Wei Shusheng in Liaoning, I was only over 20 or 30 years of age. I learned his teaching ideas and managerial methods fairly early, and I observed him in a natural status as well.

As a result, Wu evaluated the influence of the two informal mentors on him and highlighted the benefit of face-to-face communication over text, as he elaborated:

These two special-grade teachers had tremendous impact on me. My teaching and managerial work were influenced by them to a very large extent. This kind of face-to-face communication and interaction had great effect. Reading ten books would not be as good as communicating [in person] for an hour. While the text in books was ice-cold, people were animated.

Sun referred to Wei Shusheng, the reputational special-grade teacher in the subject of Chinese language, as an informal mentor of him. Despite the fact that they never met each other, Sun claimed that Wei Shusheng's ideas guided his professional growth to a large extent, as Sun stated:

I don't know if you know of Wei Shusheng. He's the person I admire the most. His influence on me is exceedingly deep. When I was young, newspapers and periodicals were all introducing his deeds. I found all the reports that I could get hold of about him to read, learning his educational ideas, his practical methods and then applying in my teaching and educating. Although I've never met him by now, but he is my mentor for life.

As shown from the three cases above, the contact that the special-grade teachers made with their informal mentors at the early phase of their careers had huge impact on their later development. It can be summarised that if new teachers could make contact with the educational ideas and practices of the experienced special-grade teachers in the very first few years of their professional lives, they would be likely to gain rapid development, which renders a significant inspiration for teacher training.

#### 5.1.4 The teaching research instructors

There were in-service training schools for teachers in different places in China. These schools took responsibility for instructions of teaching in different subjects, monitoring of teaching quality and research of teaching. The teaching research instructors working for the training schools tended to recruit the special-grade teachers at schools as part-time teaching research instructors, undertaking the work of analysis of textbooks, instructions of teaching, edition of exam questions, training of teachers and so on. They also offered opportunities for the special-grade teachers to accumulate more practical experience. Based on the analysis of data, the opportunities and help that the special-grade teachers gained from the teaching research instructors were beneficial to their professional development.

To exemplify, Peng recalled his experience of become a teaching research instructor

himself. In 1992, the teaching research instructor from the in-service training school in the district came specifically for him and let him take part in the work of the core group and instructions of teaching. He viewed that the students' evaluation of him and the recognition of his teaching standard granted him this chance, and he improved himself through this experience. He described:

I thought it was these two things [that they looked at]. One was the students' evaluation and the other was the training school's recognition of your teaching standard. Although I didn't work for them before, they still came to me. Afterwards, they asked me to do many important things in the district, such as making exam questions. In this way, as I served for others, I improved myself meanwhile.

Liang shared his story with the teaching research instructor who supported him immensely. The instructor helped him to achieve the award of the subject leader and also provided him with different opportunities. It is evident that his contact with the instructor had a positive impact on his professional development. Liang claimed:

The teaching research instructor in our district provided me with great support for my professional work. For instance, I was awarded the subject leader, thanks to his help. He frequently offered me a number of platforms and opportunities, letting me do some large-scale lessons, model lessons, which accelerated my growth.

In addition to the key individuals discussed, some special-grade teachers mentioned other individuals who had important impact on them. A couple of teachers referred to their family members. Yu stated that she needed to thank her family as well. More specifically, her thanks went to her husband for the support for her work, as she recalled:

Since I went to the mountain for volunteer teaching, I could not go back home during the six years ... When I got there, my child just finished nursery and started Grade 1. From Grade 1 to Grade 6, I wasn't with the child. It was my husband doing everything, from life, instructions of learning, to the behavioural habits of the child. Especially, when the child was ill, he was doing it alone.

Moreover, Zhou said that her father's rigorous attitude towards doing things had an accumulative effect on her. She was always deemed a rigorous person by her colleagues while she did not intend to be so. In summary, the head teachers, as administrative leaders with power, built the platforms for the special-grade teachers' growth, and the different types of mentors and the teaching research instructors as well as other individuals provided them with momentous opportunities, advice or support, which enabled them to progress at different stages of life and finally to become special-grade teachers.

## 5.2 Critical Incidents

The critical incidents that played a significant part of the special-grade teachers' professional development included teaching competition, open lesson, essay competition and the incident of achieving the award of the special-grade teacher.

### 5.2.1 Teaching competition

Teaching competition was a traditional activity for teachers at schools in China. Excellent teachers tended to stand out from the crowd in such competition. Liu shared her experience of participating in a teaching competition with me in detail. She deemed the district-level competition a quality assessment, and as a young teacher with inadequate experience, she worked really hard to prepare for the lesson. She suggested:

The reason why I stepped on my professional developmental path was that there was a teaching competition shortly after I started to work. It was like a quality assessment in the district. I was recommended participating in this competition because I was a young teacher. So for this, I had to interpret the textbook in depth, collaborating with other members of the group. I'm not saying I didn't usually prepare for lessons. I did prepare, but I didn't interpret the textbook that comprehensively.

Through preparing for the lesson, Liu started to find it interesting to interpret the textbook. In the end, her hard effort paid off, as she performed well in the competition, and the experience of the teaching competition turned to be an unforgettable one for her as she recalled:

So, I suddenly found interpreting the textbook was a very interesting thing. By now, I still remember the lesson [I taught in the competition] quite clearly ... It was an old piece of text ... [I remember] how I interpreted the role of the figure, the character of the figure and the incident of the figure. I prepared for the lesson throughout the night with little sleep. I did it very well and got an award in the competition.

Following the competition, Liu was invited to join the team of teaching research instructors and she enjoyed the time spent in researching teaching with her colleagues there. Echoing the point made in Section 5.1.4, the teaching research instructor appeared as a key individual in Liu's professional development, as Liu further stated:

Since then, I was valued by the teaching research instructor and was absorbed into core group of teaching research in the district. At this time, I had a lot of like-minded partners, researching teaching and educating together. On a regular basis, I got a certain space

and a certain topic. For example, during the specific period of time, let's sit down, discuss the lesson and research teaching. I found myself more and more fond of researching lessons and researching teaching. [I] viewed it as a very joyful thing.

Admittedly, by participating in the teaching competition and getting to know the instructor, she earned the chance to enter the teaching research team, and both events advanced her professional development. Similar to Liu's case, Qi was appointed as a teacher in a new district and was recommended participating in district-wide teaching competitions. Later, he was invited to take part in the work of teaching research instructors. In the process of doing research with fellow teaching research instructors, he frequently reflected and enhanced his teaching. Ultimately, he became a recognised teacher in the district. He shed light on the importance of making effort and taking advantages of opportunities, as he proposed:

In the first years of coming to the district, I participated in almost all the [teaching] competitions and gained almost all the top prizes. This was deemed the most important journey for me to become an excellent teacher from a common teacher. When you first got to a new place, no one really knew you and no one took you seriously. If you didn't fight for chances, or if there were opportunities that you didn't take, you would have fewer and fewer chances and you would become more and more mediocre. Thus, in some sense, the special-grade teachers luckily took the opportunities that shaped them, in addition to their own effort made.

Apart from Liu and Qi, most of the interviewed special-grade teachers participated in school-level, district-level or municipal-level teaching competitions and gained decent awards. This was a crucial sign that indicated excellence of teachers.

### 5.2.2 Open lesson

The non-competition-related open lesson was found to be another type of critical incidents for the special-grade teachers. While the special-grade teachers participated in teaching competitions in the hope of achieving honours, doing opening lessons could hardly bring them any kind of honour. They could gain reputation and experience through open lessons though. To be clear, an open lesson referred to a showcase lesson that welcomed other teachers to observe. The benefits of both teaching competition and open lesson were shown in effectively elevating the professional development of the special-grade teachers.

Li reviewed her experience of doing open lessons. She started by providing some background information first. Specifically, she described the situations in which she needed to do open lessons and also covered the frequency of doing it, as she said:

Open lessons accompanied me for more than 20 years during my teaching career. Since my school was the best primary school locally, we accepted varied tasks. Sometimes the superior leaders came for inspection. Sometimes we had teaching research work within a certain area. No matter which kind of activities, we needed to do open lessons ... There were open lessons every year, and at busy times, we could have open lessons each month.

Then, Li moved on to highlight the details to which she had to pay attention. This manifested how carefully she prepared and how much effort she made for the open lessons. Besides, she received suggestions from other teachers in the same subject group, which made her preparation stronger. She recalled:



Since the second year of my work, I started to undertake open lessons ... When I was young, I usually couldn't sleep well the nights before my open lessons. I had to trail my lessons over and over again. I had to pay attention to my standing position, the volume of the speakers, the designs of questions, the balance of time and the content of the blackboard. I had to consider all these thoroughly in order to ensure nothing would go wrong. Fortunately, it was a collective preparation for each open lesson. For your teaching design, the teachers in the same subject group proposed comments and suggestions, and then I wouldn't stop modifying.

Last, Li commented on the benefits that the open lessons brought to her. She was able to practise her teaching skills and get helpful feedback after the lessons. She viewed the experience of open lesson as a valuable one:

In this process, it was like a deliberate practice of all kinds of your skills. You would naturally develop yourself. After the open lessons ended, there would be evaluations of the lessons. Especially through the experts' evaluations of lessons, you would have lots of inspirations. It would also let you be aware of your own strengths and weaknesses from others' perspectives. Although it was hard work, it was a valuable experience.

Zhou held a similar view about open lessons to Li. Both of them acknowledged the positive effect of open lessons on their professional development. Besides, Zhou described doing open less as "seeking death" by which she showed that it was an extraordinarily hard practice to do open lessons, as she suggested:

I attributed my rapid growth to the various open lessons that I've done over the recent years at my school. I think in the process of teachers' development, such open lessons were vitally important for their enhancement. From the district-level to the municipal level, I've done so many [open lessons]. Every time I did an open lesson, how do I say, I

had a feeling of “seeking death”. But it was just this struggling process, this grinding process that enhanced me tremendously, as I look back at it now.

Most of Peng’s lessons were open lessons, and he paid attention to changing the content of lessons each year. According to Peng, keeping doing open lessons led to continuous enhancement of himself. He explicated:

Nearly all my lessons are open ones now. Many teachers enjoyed observing my lessons. They observed year after year, as they found the content that I taught this year had been different from that of last year. I think it was worthwhile observing [my lessons]. I had to say different things. Originally, I made changes deliberately, but later I did it more naturally. If I taught an issue in a way this year, it was likely that I would have other ideas the next year. It led to continuous enhancement, making you teach your lessons more and more reasonably. The content would be more and more rational, and it’d be more and more in depth.

To sum up, doing open lessons had at least two kinds of effect on the special-grade teachers’ professional development. First, when they were preparing for the open lessons, they refined their teaching skills. As doing open lessons had an element of showcasing to others, in order to ensure a successful display, the special-grade teachers had to practise their teaching skills repeatedly prior to the open lessons. Then they would demonstrate themselves utilising these skills, and they might learn new skills at some point. This process indeed involved the strengthening and acquirement of teaching skills.

Second, doing open lessons helped them know themselves better. Everyone had their own blind spots, and it was therefore not easy for them to see their merits and demerits

from an objective perspective. While after the open lessons, the comments that other teachers made helped them realise which parts of the lessons had been delivered successfully and what had not been done so well. Through doing the open lessons, the special-grade teachers tended to gain a better understanding about themselves, as their strengths and weaknesses that had not been known to them previously could be revealed by others or by themselves. They would normally adopt a more comprehensive view of themselves. This was confirmed by Wan, as she suggested, “When different teachers talked about my advantages that I was not aware of on different occasions, I would be quite delighted, and I would involuntary do better on these aspects.”

### 5.2.3 Essay competition

In the interviews, three special-grade teachers discussed the two kinds of influences that the essay competitions had on them. First, the essay competitions enabled them to develop the habit of writing. Second, the essay competitions helped them realise that writing was a primary means by which they reflected.

Tian began his journey of writing from composing essays on class management as a class teacher. As he described, one year, the school started to require the class teachers to write an essay on class management at the end of the academic year. In order to complete the task, he braced himself for it, although he disliked the task at the very beginning. Specifically, he focused on the daily incidents that appeared in his class teacher work, as he stated:

To cope with this matter, I started to pay attention to a number of incidents in my class teacher work and note them down. Gradually, to my surprise, I accumulated a whole notebook of them. I focused on the content that was representative and that I liked and wrote down my perceptions about it. It was later developed into an essay.

Tian told me that after submission, the school created a panel of judges who divided the essays into three piles, corresponding to the first-, second- and third-place prizes. Then, the winning essays would be compiled into a collection. His essay was always part of the collection because she won the first-place prize every year.

In the end, Tian discussed the influence of the essay competition on him with me. Based on his perception, the main point was that he developed the habit of writing. He presented:

The good thing this incident brought me was that I acquired the habit of writing. I wrote on a variety of topics. Sometimes it was some thoughts that I got from conversations with students, sometimes it was a reflection of a lesson, and sometimes it was just a random idea that suddenly came up in my mind ... When I flicked through these writings, I had different inspirations. It was a good summary of my own work.

Dai recalled in detail his experience of participating in an essay competition. At the end of an academic term, the head teacher informed him that the educational association would organise an essay competition and asked him to write one. Since the submission time was the beginning of the next term, he thought that he had plenty of time to prepare for it and so agreed to take part. In his vacation time, he pondered over the topics of writing and finally decided to write about the language use of teachers. The essay was directed against the verbosity of teaching language, and he succeeded in getting the first-place award in the competition.

The success of his participation in the competition motivated him to write more

materials. As a result, Dai believed that the thinking in the process of writing enabled him to have a clearer mind, as he pointed out:

Since then, I couldn't stop it. [I] started to write some cases and reflections and submitted for publication. The articles were published in succession. Up to now, there have been over 100 articles. As a matter of fact, some articles look a bit immature to me [now]. Yet I have a clear memory of the content. Besides, in the process of writing, I was thinking unceasingly. This process clarified my fuzzy thoughts.

Qi also profited from his experience of essay competition. In brief, his interest in task-oriented teaching was aroused through his participation in the competition. He spent plenty of time researching the topic and became an expert in ultimately.

#### 5.2.4 The incident of achieving the award of the special-grade teacher

In the interviews, when I discussed with the special-grade teachers which incidents were taken as the key ones by themselves in their professional development, most of them viewed the incident of achieving the award of the special-grade teacher as a critical one. Firstly, while they were preparing relevant materials in relation to the selection criteria, they reviewed, summarised, evaluated and reflected on their own work. To be specific, in the process of preparation, they found what they had done well and what they lacked, which helped them have a better understanding about themselves.

To exemplify, Sun clearly identified three strengths of him, the students' marks, being an exemplary class teacher, and essays, which were also believed to be the reasons for him to achieve the award of the special-grade teacher. He understood:

I reckon I could be selected, for first, the excellent marks of the students in National College Entrance Examinations, for second, being a model of class teacher, and for third, essays. It was in 1990s. My [students'] National College Entrance Examination results were always very good. At that time, this helped a lot with getting awarded the special-grade teacher. Each year I was the school-level or district-level model of class teacher. I also published several essays. The awarding criteria was based on standardised quantified scores. I was ranked No. 1 in my district in 1998.

Meanwhile, Sun also reflected on his shortcomings. He was neither satisfied with his own innovative and research abilities, nor with his theoretical levels, while he was explicit about what and how to improve, as he analysed:

Nonetheless, having read the criteria, I found myself far below the standard. For example, there was a criterion, "In the teaching and educating reform, having the courage to innovate, or having outstanding achievement in pedagogical research, textbook compilation." My work didn't really match "innovate" or "outstanding achievement". My research ability was not strong, either. My essays were merely based on my experience. I then thought no matter if I got awarded or not, I would improve myself in pedagogical research. Further, [my] theoretical level was not high, either. [So, I] had to read some books of theories.

Zhou, drawing on the inspiration that she got from the incident of achieving the award of the special-grade teacher, formed her own teaching style. She first highlighted the importance of forming a specific teaching style and proposed that the teaching style could evolve from unconscious to conscious, as she stated:

Based on my understanding, speaking as a special-grade teacher, you needed to be able to form your own peculiar teaching style, and this teaching style could turn from an

unconscious one to a conscious one. You gradually formed it and refined it. That's to say, it was unconscious at the beginning but later became conscious and active.

Then, Zhou went a step further in emphasising how important it was for the special-grade teachers to have a teaching style. Besides, she implied that there would be no difference from an ordinary teacher, if the special-grade teacher did not possess a teaching style. She elaborated:

An ordinary teacher might just be a workman in teaching. He was only completing the task of teaching a subject. But when you had become a special-grade teacher, your teaching might need to have a style, and you constantly develop yourself based on the style. Before I got awarded the special-grade teacher, I thought I was teaching unconsciously. After I got awarded, I consciously formed my own style, based on the summary of my teaching.

Secondly, getting awarded the special-grade teacher made them feel recognition, pressure and motivation. It promoted their initiatives to work, which enabled them to maintain a tendency of sustained development. When Zhang recalled his experience of becoming a special-grade teacher, he started by saying what achieving the award meant to him. Recognition and motivation were the best two words to summarise his feeling, as he claimed:

The incident of being awarded the special-grade teacher, personally speaking, was first of all a recognition of my work over the many years. Second, it motivated me to continue to work for the education, making me enjoy the profession more. I got to know the kids, liked the kids and did my job better.

Then, Zhang pointed out that prior to getting the title of the special-grade teacher, it even seemed hard for him to achieve the award of the first-grade teacher, let alone the special-grade teacher. Achieving the award of the special-grade teacher was beyond Zhang's expectation, and the fact that only a very small number of teachers in the subject were special-grade teachers made him feel exceptionally honoured, as he stated, "In fact, there were only two special-grade teachers in P.E. in the whole city at the moment, so I felt very honoured. Originally it seemed something too grand to achieve, while it approached me very soon ... It was to my surprise."

Moreover, Zhang began to consider how his differences from non-special-grade teachers could be shown to others, after he became a special-grade teacher. First, he focused on creating his teaching features, as he shared:

Meanwhile, I pondered how I could let others see my differences from other teachers. On one hand, it was the creation of my teaching features. When the teachers came and observed your lessons, they would learn your features. Therefore, after I got awarded the special-grade teachers, I summarised and created my "Game-based" teaching method, and it became a tag of me.

Second, Zhang paid attention to "leading the team to gain outstanding achievements". As he briefed, they had the widest range of societies at their primary school. There were about 20 to 30 societies. He believed that within the city, or even within the whole country, it was first-class level. Also, the pupils' participation rate was high. Zhang commented on the benefits of having such a wide range of societies, as he made it clear:

The platform was built for the pupils. They got a chance to demonstrate, and they could learn more P.E. skills. This was beneficial both to their awareness of lifelong physical



exercises and to their development of habit of doing physical exercises.

Besides, Zhang realised that participating in competitions could earn the pupils a sense of honour, as he revealed, “One more thing, if they took part in competitions and get some results, they’d feel they had won glory for the school, gaining a sense of honour.” Further, Zhang listed a myriad of achievements that he led his teams to gain, which constituted a prominent difference between him and other teachers. He exemplified:

In the school football league, we competed in six events and we were the first-place winners nationwide ... One time it was an invitational. In the vacation, we went to the United States for another invitational and became the champions. For basketball, we were champions both for men’s and for women’s in the district, and it was the same for kick boxing ... [In] kick boxing, martial art, gymnastics, karate, football, basketball, men’s and women’s and volleyball, plus fencing and golf, the kids enjoyed themselves very much. In the first district-level ice hockey competition, our school were the champions. The second year a bit worse, we were the runners-up. We belonged to top three in the city, very high quality.

In addition to Zhang, there were more teachers who sensed pressure and responsibility, after they were awarded the special-grade teachers. For instance, Liang briefly stated the differences in his feelings since becoming the special-grade teacher, “I was able to obtain the highest title among the teaching staff, but I felt more burden on my shoulders. I undertook more roles to devote myself to the education. I had greater responsibilities.”

Li suggested that the title of the special-grade teacher, which she took as a laurel wreath, drove her to keep progressing. This showed that she was highly responsible for herself. She was particularly sensitive to others’ opinions about her, and it seemed that other

teachers' words became a form of pressure on her. She expressed:

Personally speaking, since I got this laurel wreath, it prevented you from being ordinary. I'm not saying you had to pursue success, but you had to keep going forward. Anyway, for me, even if I was not awarded the special-grade, I wouldn't mind. Since I became the special grade, the label was on me. If I went muddleheaded, others in the profession would question what this was about. They'd not be happy. To be blunt, they wouldn't be convinced. Frankly speaking, I had to make them feel convinced of me.

As for Liu, she explained what made her feel more responsibility, after she became a special-grade teacher. Essentially, she was supposed to perform the standard of the title and work with her peers to support young people. She told me:

Since I was awarded the special-grade teacher, I felt more responsibilities. You had to set an example for other teachers. You had to be what a special-grade teacher was supposed to be. What's more, you needed to be in line with other special-grade teachers, supporting more young people.

Additionally, Liu shared his feelings with me. In the meantime of being physically fatigued, she was very pleased because she gained a sense of self-fulfilment. In particular, she enjoyed being needed and helping others, as she demonstrated:

Tired was my first feeling. Second, I was very happy. I was tired indeed, often staying up late. Sometimes, I worked all night. My second feeling was that I was very happy. As I was needed in a lot of work and was needed by so many people, and as I could bring help to others utilising my personal value, I felt I was very happy. This was also

something I was quite delighted about.

Moreover, Liu did not believe that becoming a special-grade teacher could halt her professional development, and she still held the intention to do research in more fields. In other words, the award of the special-grade teacher did not undermine her motivation to achieve more. She suggested:

Up to now, even if I had been awarded the special-grade, I still wanted to attempt research in different fields, or research in more depth. I didn't take the awarding of special-grade teacher as an end to my professional development. No, I didn't. I still enjoyed, or say, was willing to probe into the research work in different fields.

Next, Liu drew examples of challenging new research fields and highlighted the positive outcome of doing research in different fields. The outcome was that the cross-field research made her feel "opened up", as she elaborated:

For instance, I previously did research on lessons, on teaching and on textbook. What was I like afterwards? I was willing to research evaluation, evaluating something. Later, I was willing to research the editing of textbooks. That's to say, I constantly challenge new fields. I could say this. But while you were challenging, you found all the content was knocked through. You were opened up ... Tired, happy, and third, it was wanting to attempt in research.

To conclude, being awarded the special-grade teacher was a key milestone in the special-grade teachers' professional development. First, the successful awarding made them feel "honoured", "delighted", "happy", "excited", "respected", "confident",

“surprised” and “unexpected”. They viewed this as a recognition of their hard work over many years. Second, the awarding of the special-grade teachers was a motivator, enabling them to plan their professional development more consciously, work to extend the width and depth of their development and seek for development at a higher level. Last, becoming special-grade teachers increased their sense of responsibility. They were willing to exert their influences, helping more teachers become excellent teachers.

### 5.3 Environmental factors

In this section, the environmental factors referred to the factors existing in the special-grade teachers’ working environment that had an effect on their professional development. The analysis of data revealed that the resources of and the atmosphere within the schools and the activities of non-school organisations promoted their professional development. It is necessary to note that there was an imbalance of economic development across different areas in China. Hence, the key secondary schools in large cities had the most resources. I discuss the factors in detail below.

#### 5.3.1 The resources of and the atmosphere within the schools

The interviewed special-grade teachers were from different schools, and most of them came to City X by means of talent introduction, after they had become special-grade teachers in other cities or provinces. Talent introduction, existing as a policy in China, meant that local units could employ highly skilled individuals from other cities or provinces to work in the local areas. Some of the special-grade teachers came to City X with the title called “expert in teaching” through talent introduction programmes. Having made enough effort in the metropolis for several years, they eventually became the special-grade teachers. They believed that the factors of or within the schools promoted their professional development better.

Dai was greatly satisfied with the resources that he enjoyed at the school in City X. Particularly, having the chances to meet the significant figures broadened his horizon. The content that they delivered was thought-provoking, which enabled him to see education from a different angle. Dai stated:

The environment in City X is too good, and the resources are too abundant. We had a lecture series at my school ... the content they gave broadened your horizon. It helped you see education beyond education. For example, Mo Yan was just a primary school graduate. How did he become a famous author? What were the implications of her life experiences for us educators? Your thoughts about these questions could let you have fresh insights into our educational practice.

Wan witnessed the differences in educational ideas between City X and other places. Whilst schools in other places held the belief in examination-oriented education, the educational idea prevailing at the school in City X was all-round education which was deemed the superior one by Wan. She did not regret coming to work in City X in that she got her understanding of education strengthened here. She claimed:

The educational ideas at schools in City X were really different from that in other places. In places outside City X, it was utterly examination-oriented education. In City X, I understood what the all-round education was. I rejoiced my decision to come to City X.

Zhou reflected on the effect of the quality of the students on her professional development. In 2000, she started to work in City X, and he deemed the students there an important factor that advanced her professional development. She explicated:

I worked at a school in a different province in 2000, and I came to City X afterwards. Since I came to my current school, the quality of the whole lot of students was a boost for my further professional development. In the process of my teaching, I found they had quite a few ideas that I had never thought about before. So, they kind of forced me to improve constantly and to learn constantly. I felt it was a great motivation for my further development. That's to say, the students motivated me to develop further. In some sense, it turned from being pushed to do so to doing it on my own initiative. By being pushed, I mean I got pressure from the questions that the students asked. For many things, I probably didn't know as much as they did. Thus, I needed to keep learning, and in the process learning, I could have more interests, or achieve in-depth learning. I thought this was a motivation.

Li praised her colleagues' teamwork spirit at the school and elaborated on how it influenced her development positively. She was pushed to improve herself in the team, and she progressed by contributing to the team in return. She proposed:

I thought the teamwork spirit among the fellow teachers at the school and their work status and work spirit had a very large positive effect on my developmental course. It was just this kind of spirit and such a team that spurred you to never stop developing and improving yourself. Then in the team, you contributed your spirit and power, which was indeed a progress for yourself.

Zhang attributed their numerous accomplishments to the fact that they had a fine team of teachers at the school. With each's expertise and initiative, the teachers, who were selfless and dedicated, formed a "fighting force". Zhang believed that they definitely affected his own development in a positive way, as he pointed out:

I have a very good team of teachers. In normal cases, it'd be hard to co-ordinate if the

team had a relatively large number of members. But the team at my school is of very high standard. Currently it has almost 30 people, with nearly half of them being backbone teachers in their subjects. That's really high standard. Hence it should be said the team is a fighting force – everyone has expertise and specialises in their events. From my perspective, with good co-ordination, they would work without too much trouble. There wouldn't be any problem with their initiative or positivity. We don't talk about personal gains or losses, either. It doesn't matter how much effort they make and how many benefits they'll get in return. There won't be anyone scheming against each other. Therefore, we've got many achievements.

Similarly, Liu stressed the importance of being in a good team. She put forward that high-standard team brought about the interactive influence, which was key to mutual professional development, as she explained:

In addition, it was pretty much in 2002 that I became a leader in teaching. I transferred to another school which was also the best school in the district. At that time, I not only researched on my own, but also led teachers to research. It was me leading them, and I demonstrated my professional guidance in the process. I led them and I developed myself in the meantime of leading them to develop. While I was leading, they also influenced me. I believed that the influence of being in a nice team was very important.

In summary, the resources of and the atmosphere within the school, such as the opportunities provided and the quality of the teams of teacher, played a significant role in the special-grade teachers' professional development.

### 5.3.2 The activities of the non-school organisations

The non-school organisation, as its name suggested, referred to the bodies or

organisations, such as universities, that the special-grade teachers got involved in or were members of. In the organisations, the special-grade teachers participated in different activities, such as researching and lecturing. By doing these, they broadened their horizons, gained a wider range of knowledge and acquired more skills. This enabled them to develop themselves in many aspects.

In 1990s, Li participated in a research project on teaching led by a Normal university. As a member of the research group, she was asked to do educational research using some experimental methods and write teaching plans. In the process of research, a university professor's feedback helped her gain a profound reflection on her own teaching, and she learned how to do educational research independently by herself. At the same time, she established amicable relationship with the university staff members in the research group. She was also invited to get involved in the future projects led by them and to attend academic conferences. Ultimately, on the professor's recommendation, she transferred to work in City X successfully. She asserted, "Without this research project, I would only be a common primary school teacher in my area and I wouldn't gain my current accomplishments. I was very lucky."

In Yu's case, since approximately 2000, she had been part of the adolescent health programme initiated by a social institute for more than 10 years. She served as a voluntary participant and worked as a presenter in local communities. Specifically, in her own words, "In springtime every year, I needed to voluntarily come to the communities and present information about psychological health education in the adolescence to the Grade 6 students at primary schools."

Yu believed that the educational ideas that she gained through this experience informed her teaching, as they were inter-connected with those in her subject of teaching, biology, and that her involvement in the social institute broadened her horizon. She commented:



I did various kinds of training, which had a huge impact on my class teaching and educating. At that time, teaching reform was not that much in-depth. The educational ideas that I learned in the field of adolescent health education inspired me a lot. I applied them in my class teaching, and I believed I was quite advanced. I got something new by chance, and I integrated it into my lessons or considered if my biology teaching could draw on these. These ideas were inter-connected and exerted interactive influences. In a nutshell, the more opportunities you had, the broader your horizons would be. I had a deep feeling about this.

Peng was invited to do lectures for Master students at a university, owing to his high professional level. The experience of lecturing at the university led to his reflection on teaching in general. In the interview, he first identified the three issues of teaching as “shallow”, “wrong” and “old” at that time and implied that the situation in other parts of the country could be worse. He then pointed out that he held an active attitude towards tackling the issues. He stated:

I reckon, in teaching, frequently encountered problems at the moment are that teaching is delivered relatively superficially; mistakes are many; and knowledge is obsolete ... This situation should be quite universal. Sometimes, when our secondary school teachers communicated with university professors, they could be surprised to hear what you [the teachers] said. What you said was things from several decades ago. This is the normality in our secondary schools, and the standard of the teachers in City X, compared to that of the whole country, are much higher. So, can imagine what nationwide situation is like. The three points, I just said, “shallow”, “wrong” and “old” are very often seen ... I myself actively and subjectively sought ways to deal with them.

Next, Peng specified the benefits that the experience of lecturing brought to him. Briefly, the content that he taught at the university could be integrated into his teaching at

school, and the experience enabled him to teach freely. He detailed:

For example, a Normal university offered a course called “frontier issues in history”. I was the lecturer. They let me do the lectures, meaning that my ability to keep myself updated with the latest knowledge in the subject was deemed not bad. Then I penetrated the content that I delivered at the university into my secondary school lessons. Having had the experience of lecturing at university, I could handle the secondary school teaching freely. I said in the way I wanted. Of course, for what I said, I was sure I wouldn’t get it wrong, [since] I knew I’d got basis in the subject.

On a different note, Qi was always a member of an educational association and sat on the committee of science of learning. As he participated in the association’s events and attended academic conferences, he learned many latest research outcomes about brain science and science of learning. His absorption of the theoretical knowledge served as a boost for his educational practice.

In this chapter, I have identified the crucial external factors that played significant roles in the special-grade teachers’ professional development. There were ten factors in three types, including key individuals (head teachers, formal mentors, informal mentors and teaching research instructors), critical incidents (teaching competition, open lessons, essay competition and the incident of achieving the award of the special-grade teacher), and environmental factors (the resources of and the atmosphere within the schools and the activities of the non-school organisations). In a sense, despite the various advantages that the special-grade teachers possessed, they could probably just be ordinary teachers, without the help of the key individuals, opportunities and environment. It is therefore concluded that the external factors worked along with the internal characteristics to shape the special-grade teachers.

# Chapter 6 Professional Developmental Phases

## 6.1 Overview

In the two previous chapters, I investigated the general characteristics that the special-grade teacher possessed and the external factors that influenced their professional development. This chapter is composed in response to the third research question: what are the professional developmental paths of the special-grade teachers? In this chapter, I delineate their developmental paths and summarise the features of each developmental phase.

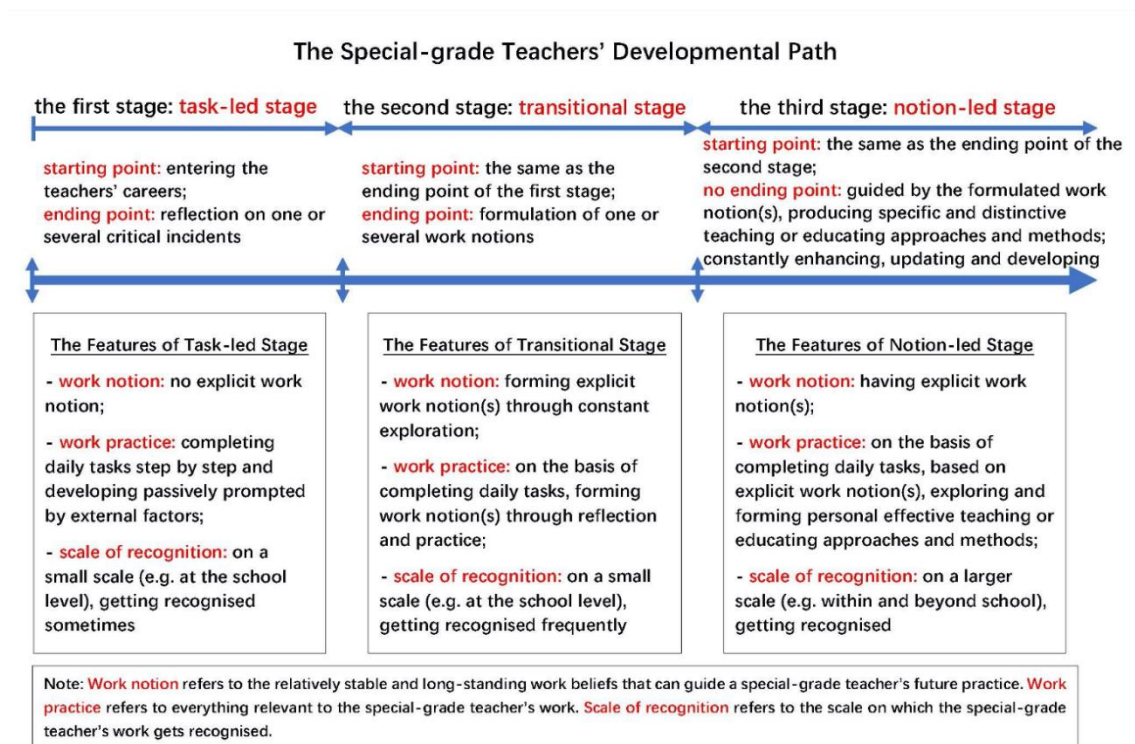


Figure 6.1 The special-grade teachers' developmental paths

Based on the analysis of data, the special-grade teachers' developmental paths are divided into three stages, i.e. task-led stage, transitional stage and notion-led stage,

from the dimensions of work notion, work practice and scale of recognition. Work notion refers to the relatively stable and long-standing work beliefs that guided a special-grade teacher's practice. The work notion is confirmed based on thorough reflection on the special-grade teacher's own or/and others' educational practice. Work practice refers to everything relevant to the special-grade teacher's work in their daily practice. Scale of recognition refers to the scale on which the special-grade teacher's work gets recognised. In light of the three dimensions, the three stages of the special-grade teachers' developmental paths are summarised in the table below:

Table 6.1 The features of the three stages

	Task-led stage	Transitional stage	Notion-led stage
Work notion	No explicit work notion	Forming explicit work notion through constant exploration	Having explicit work notion
Work practice	Completing daily tasks step by step and developing passively prompted by external factors	On the basis of completing daily tasks, forming work notion through reflection and practice	On the basis of completing daily tasks, based on explicit work notion, exploring and forming personal effective teaching or educating approaches and methods
Degree of recognition	On a small scale (e.g. at the school level), getting recognised sometimes	On a small scale (e.g. at the school level), getting recognised frequently	On a larger scale (e.g. within and beyond school), getting recognised

Task-led stage refers to the initial phase when the special-grade teachers just entered the career of teaching. All of them reach this stage automatically, and at this stage, they do not have explicit work notions. Step by step, they complete their daily tasks, and they develop passively owing to external factors, such as the words of their school leaders. They do what their school leaders ask them to do, rather than seeking for chances actively. They sometimes get recognised only at the school level.

Transitional stage refers to the process in which they form one or several work notions, through thorough reflection on one or several critical incidents, and the process is of varying length. This stage is usually accompanied by the happening of the critical incidents when the special-grade teachers start to reflect. Based on practical activities or research, they go through the process from being unclear to clear, from ambiguous to unambiguous, and in the end, they form clear and unambiguous understanding about students, learning or teachers' work. The starting point of this stage is the reflection on critical incidents and the ending point is the forming of work beliefs. For other features of this stage, they seek for active development, such as reflecting actively, while they still get recognised on a small scale.

Notion-led stage refers to the process in which with the guidance of explicit work notion, they form their unique and effective teaching or educating approaches and methods through active practical activities, research and reflection. Besides, they get recognised on a larger scale, usually both within and beyond the school level. The starting point of this stage is the moment when they start to explore and research focusing on a particular aspect, based on the explicit work notion formed in the previous stage. However, it is very hard to find the exact point of time when they enter this stage. In comparison with the transitional stage, the core of the second stage is the forming of work notion, while in the notion-led, the third stage, guided by the formulated work notion, the special-grade teachers produce specific and distinctive teaching or educating approaches and methods that they constantly enhance, update and develop.

In this chapter, I select three cases to present my findings. Through describing the critical incidents at each stage, their prominent features, and their emotional response in favourable and adverse situations, I present their professional developmental paths. The selection of the three cases are made under two considerations. First, in the interview data, there is sufficient evidence demonstrating the developmental phases clearly. Second, there are ample narratives in the data that can connect their distinctive characteristics and developmental paths. Therefore, I select the cases of the three teachers, Chen, Guo and Yu, to show my in-depth understanding about the special-grade teachers' professional lives. Each case consists of four parts. In the first part, I briefly introduce the teacher's experience, enabling the readers to have a basic understanding about the teacher. For the other parts, I describe the narratives according to their own developmental features and connect the stages with the critical incidents so that I can present their developmental path and uniqueness fully.

## 6.2 Chen's case

Chen was an English language teacher at an international school (International School C) at the time of my last interview with her, and she held the post of director of curriculum development department. Table 6.2 illustrates her work experiences (see the next page).

In 1987, she was admitted to a secondary Normal college belonging to a university in Southern China and undertook the major in English teaching. In 1992 when she was 20 years of age, she graduated from the secondary Normal college and was allocated to work in a junior high school (Secondary School A). Since she was the only one who did the subject of English language teaching among the English language teachers at the school, her level of English, as shown in her pronunciation and intonation, was far higher than her colleagues. Her students' results of Senior High School Entry Examination were

also much better than that of other students. At the school consisting of only 12 classes, she gained full of confidence and a sense of accomplishment. At the third year of her career, she engaged in in-service learning by doing a Bachelor degree course, in order to strengthen her educational background.

Table 6.2 Chen’s work profile

School	Time period and work descriptions
Secondary School A	1992 – 1997: Being English language teacher and class teacher at the junior high school
Secondary School B	1997 – 2017: Working at a key secondary school as English language teacher, class teacher and director of international department. This phase is divided into 3 periods:  Period 1: 1997 – 2001, teaching junior high school;  Period 2: 2001 – 2002, teaching Mandarin at a school in the UK;  Period 3: 2002 – 2017, teaching senior high school
International School C	From 2017 onward, working as director of curriculum development department at an international school

In 1997, she next transferred to a key secondary school ranked the first in the whole province. Within the first four years at the school, the highly competitive teaching competitions that she participated in and the decent examination results built her confidence to a large extent, and she earned recognition of the leaders and teachers at the school. Meanwhile, her teaching methods started to be imbued with certain features, and hence she became a dominant candidate for doing the school-level demonstrating open lessons. In September 2001, she was designated by the school to teach Chinese language at a school in the UK. She experienced the cultural shock and

learned the Western teaching methods, which enriched her professional experience.

Chen came back to China in 2002 and started to teach senior high grades. Her teaching features were further developed. In 2005, she was enrolled in an in-service Master programme in TESOL and ended up with a degree. In 2013, Chen became the only special-grade teacher in the English subject group at her school and was promoted to be director of the international department. Later, she assumed responsibility for developing young teachers, fostering Normal graduates and being a part-time teaching research instructor. For better personal development, she moved to an international school in 2017 and worked as director of curriculum development department.

The three preceding paragraphs form a statement of Chen’s work experience. The Table 6.3 below illustrates her work notions, personal characteristics as well as the critical incidents that played a significant role in the development of her notions and characteristics in the three professional developmental phases. In the table, the critical incidents are numbered chronologically. The table has three functions. First, it displays Chen’s uniqueness; second, it demonstrates her professional developmental path; and third, it serves as an outline for the writing of this case.

Table 6.3 Chen’s developmental path

Dimensions	task-led stage	transitional stage	notion-led stage
Work notions		1. Whichever situation a teacher is in, the teacher must be self-confident.  2. The aim of English language learning is to use English.	



		<p>3. The students should be treated as a complete person, rather than a test-taking machine.</p> <p>4. School education needs to build a foundation for the students' lifelong development.</p>	
Work practice (critical incidents)	<p>1. In 1995, in-service Bachelor course.</p> <p>2. First prize in school-level essay competition.</p> <p>3. In 1997, transferring to a key secondary school.</p>	<p>4. Teaching competition.</p> <p>5. Demonstration lessons.</p>	<p>6. 2001 – 2002, teaching at a school in the UK.</p> <p>7. 2002, teaching senior high school.</p> <p>8. 2005, Master programme in TESOL</p> <p>9. 2008, getting to know a special-grade teacher.</p> <p>10. 2013, becoming a special-grade teacher.</p> <p>11. An international school observation event.</p> <p>12. Engaging in the curriculum development.</p>
Scale of recognition	Getting recognised within the school.	Getting recognised within the school.	Getting recognised within and beyond the school and achieving the award of the special-grade teacher

Personal characteristics	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Chen was not self-confident, and later she gained self-confidence through external recognition.</li> <li>2. She was able to analyse her personal situation rationally and took advantage of and created opportunities and environments that were beneficial to her personal development.</li> </ol>
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In the ensuing three sections, I reveal the forming and development of Chen’s educational ideas and the outcomes achieved based on her educational ideas, through in-depth description of her critical incidents. The ultimate aim is to show Chen’s professional developmental path.

### 6.2.1 Chen’s task-led stage

In this phase, things went smoothly for Chen. She viewed that two incidents could be deemed critical ones in her professional development. The first one took place in 1995. It was the third year since she started to work. She got involved in the in-service learning of the Bachelor degree course. On Wednesdays and Saturdays every week, she attended the course at a university. She justified identifying doing the in-service Bachelor degree course as a critical incident, as she viewed the incident as a cornerstone of her future opportunities and achievements. She elaborated:

Why do I find this a critical incident? It was because I wouldn’t be able to transfer to the key secondary school in the province, if I did not have a Bachelor-level qualification. Without the Bachelor-level qualification, I wouldn’t have the chance to do the Master degree afterwards. Most importantly, without this period of learning, I wouldn’t get to know Chanjuan (pseudonym). She and I did the in-service learning together. She was a teacher at a key secondary school. She told me her school lacked English language teacher, and on her recommendation, I transferred to the best school in the province. At that time,

I just finished my Bachelor degree course, although I had not got the certificate. Honestly, I was very grateful to my head teacher. When I had such a chance, he didn't stop me from going to a better school for me, but he encouraged me to take the chance.

Another critical incident was that she gained the first prize in her school's essay competition. Chen denied that she had any special talent in writing and claimed that she did not even know how to write essays technically. Based on her own understanding, she only listed the things that she did in work and added some feelings, and then she won the first prize. The whole incident had a positive effect on her confidence, as she suggested:

I always lacked confidence. Although my academic record was always strong and being admitted to a secondary Normal college meant I was a good student at that time, I was still not confident ... Getting the first prize made me aware I was able to write essays, and I could write even better than other teachers. This boosted my confidence massively.

In this phase, Chen did not have many high expectations for her professional life. She only focused on finishing the teaching tasks and keeping a favourable relationship with her students. Engaging in the in-service learning was also because strengthening educational background was advocated in that day and age. Similar to most of the secondary Normal college graduates, she did the Bachelor-level programme. She viewed her experiences of in-service learning and getting first prize in the essay competition as passive actions, and these actions brought about benign development for Chen. On another hand, she felt lucky to have the chance to transfer to the key secondary school (Secondary School B) in the province later.

### 6.2.2 Chen's transitional stage

In September 1997, Chen moved to the key secondary school (Secondary School B) in the province, which was deemed by herself a critical incident, because she gained access to the most excellent groups of students and teachers locally and had more opportunities. Her 20-year professional developmental path at this school could be divided into three periods: first, teaching at a junior high school (Secondary School A) for the first four years; second, teaching Mandarin at a school in the UK in the fifth year; and third, teaching at a senior high school (Secondary School B) back in China for the last 15 years. In the first period, compared to her mundane life at the former secondary school, she had more ups and downs. Two critical incidents portrayed her complex feelings and progress in this phase.

One was her experience of participating teachers' competitions. When she transferred to the key school, she felt fortunate, and a little unconfident, just as she said:

When I was young, I was not very confident. ... Since I went there, it was not that I felt inferior; I was low in confidence; or I didn't believe I'd teach well. Seems not like that.

Then she took part in the school-level teaching competition, and she thought that her lesson was all right, in her words, "not very good, but not too weak". However, the result surprised her because she was ranked the third from the bottom. She elaborated:

I was appalled and felt dizzy in mind. At that moment I felt myself very bad and inferior. This incident made me extraordinarily uncomfortable. As I went back home, I considered this thoroughly for long. First, I did find myself limited in teaching ability. Second, I found the judges very unfair. Why did I find unfair? Because I knew my performance and standard were absolutely no worse than the other two teachers in my subject.

This incident made her reflect herself, and she believed that one of the reasons that she was ranked lower because she was new and young but she needed to work hard. The next year, when she was recommended to participate in a district-level competition, she was puzzled:

I was quite confused why it was me. I was ranked the third from the bottom in the last-year competition and was recommended with such level. ... Would I be able to achieve the top prize in the district just as the school required? I was a bit anxious and depressed. At that time, I wasn't so confident, and I never found myself superb. Yet I went to the competition.

The time, Chen got the top prize unexpectedly. However, she did not feel happy.

While I was in the competition, I found the judges there very familiar, and they were almost the same judges from the last year. To be honest with you, I found the ranking implausible. It might be because the judges were mainly teachers from my school, I wouldn't get bad marks. So, for this incident, although I got the top prize, I wasn't so proud.

In the same year, she also got the top prize in the school-level competitions.

It was just in a-year time, I was ranked No. 1 twice. Did I gain so much progress over the last year? Well, it was impossible for me to progress so much. I could understand it in the right way. Even so, these incidents indeed strengthened my teaching skills and built my confidence. I think young teachers must have confidence.

As Chen's case suggests, the competitiveness of teaching competitions brought her

unforgettable experiences. She experienced success and failure in the new school, which made her believe that confidence was one of the valuable attributes for any teacher, especially for the young teacher.

The other is the observation of the demonstration lessons of the excellent teacher. At the first year after she came to the new school (Secondary School B), an open lesson delivered by an excellent teacher inspired her much and played an important part in forming her teaching features. In China, Province-level key secondary schools tended to accept reception tasks assigned to them by the relevant municipal-level department. The reception tasks referred to the work that the schools needed to do when the head teachers or the delegates from other cities or provinces visited the schools for observation or inspection. They came to learn advanced teaching and managerial experience, and a number of excellent teachers were required to do demonstrating-purposed open lessons, in order for the visitors to observe. Chen introduced:

As the new academic year started, the most excellent teacher in my subject group, Xishi [pseudonym], was told to undertake an open lesson at the end of September. We all gave her ideas and advice, so that she could demonstrate the highest level of teaching at my school. On the day of the open lesson, there were about 20 people, full of the visiting teachers in the classroom. To my surprise, the teacher didn't say much in the whole lesson. It was just the students talking and demonstrating. After the lesson, experts in the province spoke highly of the lesson. In fact, the teacher didn't normally do lessons in this way. That seemed to me a successful example to follow, and it made me re-think how I should design my lessons.

Chen reviewed her teaching over the last few years and found that she had been applying the "teacher-centred" method of teaching. With this method, the students could get high academic marks, but it was not beneficial to cultivating their abilities of listening, speaking, reading and writing. She noticed that good academic results gained

in the subject might not be equal to a strong ability to apply the language in real life. Besides, she realised that high marks were not the only thing that Chen would like her students to get. She wanted the students to use English practically as well. Hence, she paid attention to changing her teaching so that it could enable the students to use English. She claimed:

Since the students' level was quite good, I didn't need to worry about them not getting good academic grades. I began to focus on the design of teaching. One point was to design situations of teaching, and the other was to design the tasks that were as close to the real-life situations as possible. I didn't let my students learn by merely memorising things, without being able to use what they learned. In the past, when I did a lesson, I usually spoke for two thirds of the time. Afterwards I only spoke for a third. I'd rather the students improve their skills in the interesting teaching activities.

At this point, Chen's transitional stage, the second phase ended. Through the teaching competition and the open lesson, as well as her own practice and reflection, she formed two explicit work notions. First, whichever situation a teacher is in, the teacher must be self-confident. Second, the aim of English language learning is to use English. From then on, she stuck to these notions and practiced them thoroughly. Certainly, other work notions were also in the process of forming.

### 6.2.3 The notion-led stage: a fruitful but confusing mid-to-late career

In 2001, it was the fifth year since Chen started to work at the school. She entered the third phase, the notion-led stage of her professional development, and she was dispatched to teach Mandarin at a school in the UK. This provided her with a good opportunity to deepen the understanding about the two existing work notions and developing new notions.

The impact that this episode of life brought on her was exceedingly large. She experienced the elements of English language and English culture that she learned from the textbooks, which enabled her to gain a better understanding about the subject of English language. She illuminated:

At the first time to the UK, I saw Big Ben and Buckingham Palace, and I recalled the customs and culture that I learned about the UK in my university time, I found the things around me quite familiar. So, I immediately immersed myself into the language and culture of the UK.

She also made a comparison of the school education between China and the UK. This triggered her reflection that the students should be treated with humanity. She was critical of the fact that the students were treated like exam-taking machines in China, as she expressed:

At British schools, there were about 10ish or 20ish students in each class. In contrast to the large-sized class in China, there's huge difference. Besides, the humanity embedded in the details of the school, such as the positions the desks and chairs were placed, and the teachers' attention to the students was quite impressive. The children in the UK were like little grown-ups, as they were treated as a full person, while [in China] we treated our children like exam-taking machines.

Additionally, Chen's work experience in the UK made her review her own English language learning. When she found her lack of abilities in English listening and speaking, despite a very high score in an English language test, she believed in her second work notion more firmly that the aim of English language learning is to use English.



Consequently, she made up her mind to change her teaching method, as she stated:

For my English, I couldn't really understand others until I adapted for three months. Then I wondered why my English listening and speaking were so bad, even if I had got a really high score in my IELTS test. I got an 8 in reading. If I still stuck to the traditional method to teach students, they might just be another lot of students with high scores but low abilities.

As she returned to China, she started to bring her thoughts into practice. Specifically, she focused on strengthening the students' communication abilities while not taking their academic results lightly, as she admitted, "A year later, I came back to China and started to work on how to improve the students' interactive and intercultural communication abilities, instead of just getting high marks. Well, high marks were important for them though."

Afterwards, Chen was designated to teach at senior high school within the same secondary school. She believed that this was another meaningful incident in her teaching career in that designing different learning content for different year groups increased the depth and width of her teaching. She recalled:

I held great appreciation for my head teacher. After I came back, I was arranged to work at the senior high school. I could teach junior high school without a problem. Even if I didn't prepare anything specifically, I was still able to arouse the students' interest in English language in my lessons and the students would get good grades. While for senior high school students, it was a lot harder work. I had to put all my energy into analysing textbooks and designing teaching. This had an effect on my professional growth. I gradually got used to the teaching of the senior high school, and my students' academic results were satisfactory, too. Quite soon I found my position in the senior high school.

After Chen finished teaching her first class at the senior high school, she successfully secured a place on a TESOL programme provided by a China's university in collaboration with an Australia's university. This was a three-year in-service course. Every weekend during term time and throughout the summer, she went for the course at the university in China. This Master programme helped her find theoretical support for her pedagogical research. She viewed:

I gained a lot from the three-year study. One thing was I really liked the tutor who was in charge of the programme in the Australian end. I could ask him any questions if I had any. The other was I learned a lot about the theories of second language acquisition. There was no pen and paper exam but only essay writings. I not only learned how to write essays, but also integrated it into my teaching practice. Thus, my practice got some groundings. People in Australia were quite rigorous, and they had strict academic standard to follow. The process of writing was very tiring but it's worthwhile.

When Chen gained her Master degree, the second class that she taught at the senior high school reached their last year of study. At that time, she got an opportunity to do a province-level open lesson. The way she designed and delivered the open lesson fully reflected the three work notions that she held. In deciding on the topic of the open lesson, although the superior department had assigned the topic of how to revise for exams, she had her own ideas. She was inclined to connect theories with the practice of cultivating the students' abilities and thus chose a different topic. She elaborated:

The Grade of Senior High 3 was really hard. I always wanted to develop some excellent students. The province [educational department] asked our school to do an open lesson. The topic was how to revise for exams. I undertook the open lesson. I wanted to relate the theories that I'd learned from my Master time to cultivation of the students' English

language abilities that I'd paid attention to for long. I expected the observing teachers to give me opinions and advice. I knew if I catered to the teacher, I could demonstrate it very well. But this time, I'd like to do it in an alternative way.

As a result, the open lesson turned out to be an impressive success, as Chen said, "I took the risk of failure and did the lesson that way. Hundreds of teachers observed my lesson, and in the discussion time, they provided very positive feedback. When my head teacher heard their feedback, she was pleased." In some sense, Chen's choice of using her teaching inspiration as the topic of the open lesson, instead of using the assigned one, showed her self-confidence. This is consistent with her work notion that "whichever situation a teacher is in, the teacher must be self-confident". Nonetheless, it is necessary to point out that she was lucky not to get blamed by her leaders for changing the topic arbitrarily.

Furthermore, the experience of the open lesson also brought a surprise to Chen. She met Xiaoyue, an experienced teacher who later helped Chen so much, such as inviting her to do lectures and encouraging her to write reflections. These were beneficial to Chen's professional development, as she detailed:

Especially a senior experienced teacher, Xiaoyue [pseudonym], was very interested in my research. She was an overseas Chinese and had been doing research in English language teaching throughout her life. After the discussion, I exchanged my phone number with Xiaoyue. Afterwards, she invited me to take part in some events and do some lectures to Normal students at universities. She instructed my teaching and encouraged me to write reflections after each lesson. Then I started to write and tried my best to connect the theories to practice. The more I wrote, the stronger the basis of my practice would be. This course of actions was really helpful, which improved me a lot.

Owing to the success of that open lesson, Chen was frequently invited by Xiaoyue to participate in lecturing, training and research activities. She gained reputation, and Xiaoyue encouraged her to apply for the title of special-grade teacher. In 2013, Chen became the only special-grade teacher in the subject of English language at the school. She dedicated her gratitude wholeheartedly to all who helped her, as she expressed:

I heard some teachers still didn't get it [the title of special-grade teacher] after several times of application. Unexpectedly, I got it the first time I applied for it. When I learned the result, I was like ecstatic. I felt all my efforts over the many years paid off. I had full of gratitude. I was thankful to the head teachers I met. They always gave me opportunities, letting me enrich myself constantly. I was only a Normal [university] graduate, while now I'm an English language teacher at senior high school with a Master degree. I was thankful to Xiaoyue and a teaching research instructor. Without their recognition and recommendation, I would never think about going for the special-grade teacher. I was also thankful to my colleagues. They were really nice. We helped and supported each other. It was these people's help that made me have such an honour. I don't think this honour belongs only to me. It belongs to everyone who ever helped me in my journey.

Having been awarded the special-grade teacher, Chen became busier. At school, in addition to completing teaching work, she needed to take on apprentices, do research project and assume the role of director of the international department. Beyond school, she also carried out the training and lesson observation tasks. As Chen held the work notion of being a self-confident teacher, she deeply knew the negative effect of lacking confidence on teachers' growth, since she used to be one without much confidence. Thus, she paid attention to phrasing in a way that would not harm the teachers' confidence when she provided them with feedback. She suggested:

I often undertook some lesson observation tasks, and then I gave feedback about the teachers' teaching. Because I used to be extremely short of confidence, I tended to worry my words would lead to negative effect on the growth of youth teachers. That meant when I made feedback about the teachers' lessons, I had to recognise the teachers' merits as well as point out their demerits in a pertinent and tactful way.

Besides, she made great preparation for each lesson that she observed, and ensured the quality of her feedback by showing her objectivity and pursuing the artistry of the language, as she proposed:

I needed to show my quality as an expert. I thought this was like a refinement of the special-grade teacher for me. For this, every time when I observed a lesson, I observed it carefully and made dedicated preparation for my speech. I told myself I must show the nature of objectivity, instruction and facilitation of teaching research. I must also pursue the artistry of the language I used.

As a special-grade teacher, Chen helped other teachers not only by providing them with feedback after lessons, but also by doing demonstration lessons herself. She needed to design the lessons so that she could pass on her ideas to the observing teachers, which she deemed a hard process. She commented:

Actually, this was still not the most difficult thing, as doing demonstration lessons myself was even harder, particularly when you wanted to have some breakthrough. Many teachers came and observed your lessons. On the premise of fulfilling the teaching objectives and ensuring the students' gains, what information would you like to convey to the observing teachers? This required designing.

While Chen was immersed in her busyness day after day, she gradually began to question her status of living. In her own words, “Since I became a special-grade teacher, I felt I’ve kept outputting. There wasn’t effective input.”

Additionally, as Chen introduced, she became director of the international department at the school in 2013, and she was expected to make some impressive achievements in her new work. The school had approximately 100 students admitted each year, and the students’ common objectives were to study at universities abroad. In fact, the school outsourced the international department to a company. While the company took responsibility for curriculum design, appointment of international teachers, university application and so on, the school was in charge of admission.

It is worth mentioning that Chen was not satisfied with the curriculum and teaching offered by the company. She, as had done previously, opposed the idea that the students should be made into exam-taking machines, and stressed the importance of designing courses that focused on developing the students’ abilities, as she pointed out:

My thought was, after all, the students would stay at our school for three year, we couldn’t make the exam-taking machines and send them to the universities abroad. We needed to produce distinctive courses that could enhance their academic, collaborative and intercultural communicative abilities.

Hence, Chen decided to visit other international schools and learned the advantage of the courses used at the schools, which was promoting the students’ all-round development. She stated:

Then, we observed a number of international schools. These schools had very advanced educational ideas. Some offered IB programme and others offered courses designed by the schools. No matter which curriculum systems they held, they all promoted the students' all-round development.

When Chen went back to her school, she had numerous discussions with the head teacher, in the hope of re-designing the curriculum system of the international department. Ultimately, she found her goal too hard to be accomplished. To sum up, Chen was not satisfied with the standstill in her professional development.

Therefore, in 2017, she decided to leave the school for which she had worked for 20 years and joined an international school (International School C), assuming the role of director of curriculum development. When I interviewed her in 2019, she spoke about the reasons for leaving her former school (Secondary School B). She revealed:

Before getting awarded the special-grade teacher, I had various kinds of trainings, and I was learning and improving. But since I became a special-grade teacher, there were no trainings specific to the group of special-grade teachers but only endless demonstrations, instruction for other teachers and social activities. I didn't feel comfortable. Working as director of international department, actually, was a very good platform for me. It was like, I opened up a new domain, but we didn't have autonomy over the curriculum, management and some other aspects.

As can be seen, the previous school did not provide Chen with opportunities for her further development. More importantly, her work experience in the international department of the previous school breached her work notions, "the students should be treated as a complete person, rather than a test-taking machine" and "school education

needs to build a foundation for the students' lifelong development". These formed the reasons for her departure for the international school.

Nevertheless, at the international school, she was able to fulfil herself. She gained further development through working on her interest and undertaking a leadership role. Despite being unfamiliar with the domain, she managed to earn a sense of accomplishment while performing the new role. She demonstrated how she liked her new job, as she said:

I was very interested in curriculum, and fortunately I had the opportunity to be the director. This was a further development for me. I didn't rest on my achievement without moving forward. I hesitated for long while I still went for it. Doing curriculum [development], to me, was a completely new domain. I needed to learn IB, AP and other curricula and learn how to construct a curriculum system. I worked to build a foundation for the students to gain better development in six, nine or twelve years. Then I had a great sense of accomplishment. I really love the new job. It makes me grow.

Chen's case provided us with the following implications: firstly, Chen's professional career went through the three developmental phases, namely the task-led, the transitional, and the notion-led stages. At the first stage, no explicit work notion was found in her narratives. For both the in-service learning and the participation in the essay competition, she did them not because she intended to do these originally, but because other teachers were doing these. She was influenced by others passively.

At the transitional stage, Chen formed an explicit work notion. That is, whichever situation a teacher is in, the teacher must be self-confident. To elaborate, the teaching competition made her aware that no matter she was in an adverse or a favourable



situation, she had to keep her self-confidence. This was the first work notion that she formed through profound reflection on her experience of participating in the teaching competition. Indeed, at the point of forming the work notion, she was thought to enter the third phase of her professional development, the notion-led stage.

Generally, the third developmental phase begins with formulation of one or several work notions. In Chen's case, guided by the four explicit work notions, she formed her distinctive teaching method focusing on developing the students' intercultural communication abilities and lifelong development, through many years of practice and exploration. This method was one of the important assets that helped her achieve the award of the special-grade teacher. It is necessary to point out that the third developmental phase has no ending point, as it is constantly enhancing, updating, and developing. On one hand, the teaching method that Chen devised was likely to be improved and optimised, becoming better and approaching perfection day by day. On the other hand, as Chen was working on curriculum development at the International School C, she could probably produce other outcomes. Hence, the third developmental phase of the special-grade teacher is a process of constant exploration and innovation. Yet, some special-grade teachers make effort to create more, while others might not progress further at such an outstanding level.

Secondly, Chen gained five valuable opportunities which seemed hard for other teachers to get. The first was the opportunity to transfer to the province-level key secondary school. She changed from a relatively dull status of work into a lively status. She had to re-examine herself and the environment, overcome self-abasement, and accumulate confidence. Without this experience, she might remain in her comfort zone for a longer period. Being complacent could make her a mediocre person. The second was the opportunity to become the Mandarin teacher in the UK. This enabled her to perceive and compare the Eastern and Western culture and education and facilitated the formation of her explicit work notions. The third was the opportunity to move to teach

the senior high from the junior high school. This let her re-examine the secondary school education in China fairly comprehensively. She also enhanced her teaching skills and increased her subject content knowledge through this chance. The fourth was the opportunity to pursue the in-service Master degree. This reinforced her theoretical foundation, enabling her to use theories to guide practice. With the aid of theories, she formed her teaching features. The fifth was the opportunity to get to know the teaching research instructor and the other special-grade teacher. As reflected in the interview, “I was thankful to Xiaoyue and a teaching research instructor. Without their recognition and recommendation, I would never think about going for the special-grade teacher.” This motivated her to make more effort in order to meet the requirements of being a special-grade teacher. Notably, the special-grade teacher, Xiaoyue encouraged her to write reflection diaries, which provided her with the path and method for improvement. As could be seen, being an excellent or special-grade teacher profited from the mixed effect of the internal characteristics and the external factors.

### 6.3 Guo’s case

Guo was a teacher with distinct personality. Within her 31-year professional career, she spent the first 21 years teaching at a secondary school outside City X, and she came to City X and worked at a different secondary school for the last 10 years. She had always been a Chinese language teacher at the senior high school as well as a class teacher. Her developmental course not only confirmed the professional developmental path extracted from the data, but also showed many distinctive characteristics that Guo, as an outstanding teacher, possessed. These characteristics were not something that she developed after she had already become a special-grade teacher, but they played a key role in enabling her to be the special-grade teacher.

In writing Guo’s case, I first delineate her professional developmental path, which forms part of the evidence for identifying the general developmental path of the special-grade

teachers. Then, I depict Guo’s individual characteristics and the ways that she displayed these characteristics in her work practice. Last, I provide a summary and evaluation of her work notions, work practice and personal characteristics. Guo’s work experiences and developmental path are illustrated in Table 6.4 and Table 6.5, respectively.

Table 6.4 Guo’s work profile

School	Time period and work descriptions
Secondary School A	1988 – 2009: Being Chinese language teacher and class teacher at a senior high school.
Secondary School B	In 2009, coming to a secondary school in City X and being a Chinese language teacher and class teacher.

Table 6.5 Guo’s developmental path

Dimensions	Task-led stage	Transitional stage	Notion-led stage
Work notions		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Teachers must manage to let the students feel interested in the subject they teach.</li> <li>2. Teachers must pass on happiness.</li> <li>3. The nature of educational work is educating, rather than teaching.</li> <li>4. It is necessary to let the students have a sense of gain in each lesson.</li> <li>5. Work is life, and life is work; teachers must devote themselves to work.</li> <li>6. Being diligent in reflecting makes teachers grow.</li> </ol>	

Work practice (critical incidents)	1. Working in a manner that aroused the students' interest and was relatively innovative.	2. Being bold to attempt while being complained about.	3. Research project 4. The head teacher's encouragement 5. The mentors' help 6. Achieving the award of the special-grade teacher 7. Arrival at the large city
Scale of recognition	No obvious recognition.	Getting recognised within the school.	Getting recognised in the province.
Personal characteristics	1. In accordance with the work notions, keeping the following habits throughout the year: devoting herself to work, learning ceaselessly, doing research projects, writing reflections, passing on happiness, caring for the students, and letting students be interested in the subject and have a sense of gain. 2. Having a high level of persistence and self-control.		

### 6.3.1 Guo's professional developmental path

In 1988, Guo graduated from a Normal university and came to a school that had been founded 50 years ago. Guo shared her impression of the school with me, as she said, "When I first got there, I felt an atmosphere of humanity. The colleagues were nice and got on very well with each other. There were a lot of traditions." At the school with over

500 staff members, the teaching there adhered to traditional approaches, while Guo preferred to take a distinctive path and always prepare something new for her lessons. Initially, she was not exactly sure if her attempts could be accepted by the students, as she explained:

By nature, I didn't want to follow the orthodox methods of teaching. So, I made lots of attempts. It was like, if I didn't prepare anything new, I wouldn't be willing to do the lesson myself. So, I'm saying, I was quite muddled.

Then, her innovative approach proved welcomed by the students. Even many years later, her students still remembered and talked pleasantly about the activities that she organised in her lessons. Guo stated:

Even now when my students came back for the reunion party, they remembered and said, "At the very beginning, when we were to write compositions about winter and snow, you brought us out and went for a snowball fight. Then we came back to write about it." They said they could still remember it clearly and found it extremely interesting.

Guo also found that an interesting part of a lesson that she specifically designed, such as a language-related activity, was more likely to leave the students with a deep impression than the whole lesson. This meant that her innovative attempts turned out to bring about some positive result. The students did enjoy the new activities that Guo prepared for them, as shown in her words:

They also said before each of my lesson, I would do some sort of exercise of speaking.

These were the things that they had the deepest impression about, rather than any of the [whole] lesson I taught them. They were really fond of these language-related activities.

Despite the students' interest in Guo's teaching, some parents held some negative views. In the parents' mind, being overly active might not be so beneficial to their children's growth. Although Guo believed that she built the best memory for the students, she received complaints from the parents. Guo provided a detailed account of the incident, as she said:

But that process was actually thwarted with some setbacks. In the two classes I taught later, the students still enjoyed it very much, whereas the parents weren't so happy. They were not happy with their children being that vigorous. Moreover, I was class teacher then. At Christmas, the children actively climbed the mountain and dig out the pine trees. There were many pine trees on the mountain, and they turned the pine into Christmas trees. They decorated them very beautifully. That was the best memory in their youth time. But some parents reported to the head teacher. They accused my classes of being too active. They didn't accept that.

Due to the parents' complaints, Guo was dismissed from her post of class teacher, and for personal reasons, she did not do much to turn the situation around. She went on saying:

Hence, I was stopped from being a class teacher anymore, but I still taught them Chinese language. The influence that I exerted on them diminished. Just at that time, I was preparing to get married. For a while, I settled into silence.

This incident dealt such a huge blow to Guo's career that other young teachers like her might well lose themselves, if they experienced the same. Nonetheless, while Guo kept silence, she also reflected on herself. As she began to reflect, she entered the second professional developmental phase, the transitional stage. She revealed:

The period of time I felt muddled was actually a perceptual process. Somehow I believed this was the way the students would like and also the way I would like. I felt Chinese language should be taught in this way ... But I still thought I must adhere to these because I felt this was what I was pleased with. Afterwards, having kept my way in the first phase when I was relatively muddled, I somehow started to seek for the laws of Chinese language teaching. Indeed, you needed to pay attention to the students' needs. You needed to make your practice closest possible to the students. This was the root of education. I probably didn't sort out the frameworks and things. But including my lessons, I must manage to let the students feel interested and like the subject of Chinese language. This was my original intention.

Having had such a relatively profound reflection, Guo decided to stick to her way and hold her teaching beliefs firmly. She formed the first work notion she abided by for long. That is, teachers must manage to let the students feel interested in the subject they teach. Since then, she rapidly reached the third professional developmental phase, the notion-led stage. The main feature of the third phase is "guided by the formulated work notion, producing specific and distinctive teaching or educational approaches and methods." Guo's development is consistent with the feature of the phase. Adhering to the work notion of letting the students feel interested, she embarked on research on her own teaching. Overall, she carried out three research projects, and based on what she had learned from the research, she formed her own teaching features in the end.

The first research project that Guo applied for was named "colourful Chinese language", which was a national-level project. Basically, she attached different colours to different

types of lessons. As well as the students found the lessons more interesting than they were previously, Guo viewed that the practice-based research process facilitated her growth. She explicated:

At that time, my lessons were classified into red composition lessons and green reading lessons, as well as orange exercise lessons and blue textbook lessons. [The students] learned articles in lessons and also extra-curricular things. Each lesson had an anchored objective. I experienced this phase for a few years. I had some initial sparks of thoughts, and then integrated them into my own projects. After I finished this project, I was awarded the leading teacher of the subject. This process, I believed, made me more mature.

Later, Guo undertook the second project entitled “new pedagogical method of reading”. As she integrated the thoughts that she gained from doing the project into practice, Guo emphasised that the students were expected to find the grace of the Chinese language and to read it from a perspective of appreciation. She elaborated:

When I taught every text, I didn’t teach knowledge in the traditional way at the beginning. I also focused on the basics, but I felt I needed to let the students discover the grace of Chinese language. For the teaching of reading, you needed to lead them to find the interesting things in it. Thus, I led the students to read the Chinese language and read every text from a perspective of appreciation.

For the third project, Guo adopted a new approach to the teaching of writing, as she worked on some speed-composition exercise. She called for adding a sense of challenge to the students’ composition, and apparently, the speed of writing played a huge part in establishing the challenge. Accordingly, she developed several timed writings. As a result,



her new approach was well received by the students. She described:

I thought for students' composition, you needed to let them feel a sense of challenge, just like playing games. Hence, I designed it to be 800 words within 40 minutes. But I focused on letting them write first and then I'd provide instructions. This was to make them feel as if they were in an exam. I found this method was favoured by the students. They found it more challenging than other usual methods. Later you saw some students manage to write 900 words within 17 minutes.

Guo pointed out that she always used projects to guide my Chinese language teaching so that her teaching could be filled with more rational thinking. Taking advantage of the research projects, mentors' instruction, reflection writing and so on, Guo formed her distinctive teaching method, the colourful Chinese language teaching. It is important to note that the initial conceiving, the development of idea and the final formation of the colourful Chinese language teaching corresponded to the three professional developmental phases of the special-grade teachers.

While Guo was working hard at the school, the words of the head teacher said in a general meeting for staff aroused Guo's intention to apply for the award of the special-grade teacher. In 2005, Guo became a special-grade teacher, and the process of awarding left an indelible impression for her. She depicted the hardships that she experienced emotionally:

I can endure many things. Actually, the process of awarding the special-grade teacher was arduous. Psychologically I almost broke down, as we went through rounds of screening. One was the political examination panel. I found it harder than that in City X. Our province did it very carefully. The political examination panel was a secret ballot,

different from the experts' panel. The secret ballot was for all the teachers at the school. The passing rate required an 80% or above. It would be based on your experience at the school. You couldn't control others' evaluation about you. This was the first thing. The second point was observing lessons. The experts' panel visited the schools and observe a lesson. It was this lesson that decided your victory or defeat. You had to do it well. The third challenge was the original lesson plans. Like I said, you couldn't forge it. In this process, I remember after observing the lesson, we submitted [the application], and that's in May that year. In the end, we got the result in December that year. Were these months of your waiting not a suffering period of time?

Undoubtedly, the successful awarding of the special-grade teacher was a critical incident in Guo's professional career. This let her have a sense of mission which enabled her to be stricter with herself. She analysed:

I think much of what it brought me was a sense of mission ... I think we have emotional quotient, intelligence quotient and adversity quotient which is the quotient of willpower. I think I'm low in intelligence quotient. My emotional quotient is ok, while I feel I'm the highest in adversity quotient among the three. In terms of my willpower, I'm beyond the normal level ... To make myself better, I think this title is like the Incantation of the Golden Hoop [used by the Monk in the novel, Pilgrimage to the West, to keep the Monkey King under control]. I feel it has this effect.

Having been awarded the special-grade teacher, Guo did not stop progressing, while she expected for greater development. By virtue of the title, she came to City X and opened up a new chapter of life. She left the school that she had worked for 21 years for City X, and she had her own consideration. She would like to verify that she deserved the title by making more effort. Besides, she did not want to stand still and enjoy what she had acquired. Rather, she was still seeking for a better chance for her development. These explained why she moved to City X, as she made it clear:

[Getting awarded the special-grade teacher] required me to prove myself worth of the title. I had to work harder. I was awarded the special-grade teacher at such a young age, and if I were in other provinces, I might just enjoy my life as if I had already retired. Put simply, it's like I could be deemed having accomplished both success and fame. But I chose to come to City X and started everything from scratch.

Guo described her experience of starting a new life in City X as “a process of nirvana” by which she meant that she reached an ideal state of work. Also, she reaped different kinds of benefits of being a special-grade teacher, as she commented:

It was really a process of nirvana for me. But I appreciated this experience so much and also appreciated the spur that the title of the special-grade teacher gave me. As a matter of fact, since I got to City X, I felt I had leap in many aspects. These were all the kind of gain that the awarding of the special-grade teacher brought me. It made me more settled.

Moreover, Guo made progress on her professional development. This was manifested in the case of keeping her lessons open. As she welcomed the teachers to observe her lessons anytime they liked, she had to do the lessons to the highest standard she could. She proposed:

In the professional aspect, I achieved greater development. What's more, professional-wise, it made me more skilful. You see when I was at school, I had a line of manifesto. That was, my lessons were open. If you were willing to observe my lessons, you'd be welcome to do so at any time. I think this demanded courage, as you had to try to do every lesson to the best. Yet every lesson of you needed to make the students gain

something. You couldn't go slack.

In some sense, Guo came to City X not only for better personal development, but also for the fine resources that the new school would make available to her. However, the former school had to accept an outflow of talent. In China where there existed a huge imbalance between economic and educational development, this phenomenon was a fairly serious issue. This is to be looked further into in the ensuing chapter of Discussion.

### 6.3.2 Guo's individual characteristics

Apart from the colourful Chinese language teaching that served as a major thread running through the professional developmental phases of Guo in the previous section, she possessed a number of distinctive work notions and personal characteristics. From the analysis of the data, it was very hard to judge when and how she developed the characteristics via any critical incidents. These were the sorts of qualities deeply rooted in her mind. In this section, I present three main characteristics of Guo: (1) insisting on the idea of "being students-centred", (2) insisting on devoting all herself to work, and (3) insisting on focusing on personal growth, so that I could gain a deeper understanding about the particularities of the special-grade teachers.

#### *Insisting on the principle of being student-centred*

Over many years, Guo insisted on and practiced the principle of being student-centred. This was embodied in the following four aspects. First, Guo suggested that a teacher needed to consider what kind of person the teacher would like the students to be and that the teacher needed to become the kind of person before asking the students to be. Second, the teacher needed to let the students gain something from each lesson. Third, the core of educational work was educating, rather than teaching. Fourth, the teacher needed to pay attention to the students' mental development and spiritual world and

safeguard their self-confidence. Now, I provide parts of interviews and cases as evidence underpinning the four aspects.

Guo viewed herself as an optimistic person. She believed that a teacher should be a positive and happy person first, and then the teacher could pass happiness on to the students. She elaborated:

Why do you teach students? What do you want the students to develop to be? [You want them to] develop into happy people, and happy people have two aspects. The first is the aspect of emotion. If the teachers were not happy, how could the students be happy? The students might only sympathise with you as the teacher. They might even think they'd never be a teacher when they grew up, since they saw the teacher was not happy. I think I needed to let my students feel I am happy. This is a manifestation of teacher morality. The first thing is to spread sunshine.

Evidently, Guo placed the idea that a teacher needed to be a happy person and needed to pass on happiness at the level of teacher morality, and she believed that it manifested teacher morality. In addition, another important manifestation of teacher morality that Guo identified was letting the students acquire a sense of gain, as she shared her understanding about teacher morality with me:

I feel the concept of teacher morality is a very broad concept. As the name suggests, it is an issue of morality. I feel as a teacher, teacher morality must be having a loving heart and being responsible for students. But now we often talk about having clean hands. I think that's also very important. In my view, the genuine teacher morality is letting your students gain something from your lessons. This is my genuine understanding ... The second point, you need to make the students have a sense of gains ... I think I really need to let them have it.

Among all the interviews with the special-grade teachers, there were two of them, Peng and Guo viewing that a display of teacher morality was letting the students have a sense of gain. Guo even thought that inefficient lessons represented a lack of morality. Influenced by the explicit work notion of letting the students have a sense of gain, she constantly enhanced herself with a particular focus on her ability to make the students gain something in each lesson. She expressed:

They take my Chinese language lessons. If this lesson wasted their youth, that'd be something lacking morality. That's why I said I tried hard to be more skilful in teaching. For instance, when I taught composition, my composition lesson made them have gains. Compare to not taking the lesson, it must be different from taking the lesson.

However, she found it peculiarly challenging for the Chinese language teachers to make the students always have a sense of gain. Because Chinese language was the students' mother tongue, they might take the content of the lessons lightly. Hence, they would not worry about falling behind terribly, even if they were absent from the Chinese language lessons for long. Guo suggested:

I thought it was challenging especially for Chinese language teachers, since the Chinese language lessons differed from other lessons. Chinese language lessons made the students feel there wouldn't be a big problem even if they didn't take the lesson for a long period of time.

In policy documents, the special-grade teachers were expected to be a teacher of exemplary virtue. Based on Guo's interpretation, the genuine teacher morality mainly involved the following four elements: (1) passing on happiness, (2) caring about the

students, (3) letting the students have a sense of gain, and (4) being a role model for the students. From a more profound perspective, she believed that the nature of educational work is educating, rather than teaching, and she drew an unforgettable case to illuminate the work notion.

The case took place in 2006. A student at my school selected a topic in the subject of biology to work on. One day, he went to attend the viva voce, and the examiner was a university professor in biology. Beforehand, he made full preparation. As his parents told Guo, he made a presentation, wrote a good essay, consulted a biology teacher for long and rehearsed many times at home. On the day, she went for the viva voce in good spirits. Guo did not attend his viva, and she was working in the office. Unexpectedly, after the viva voce, the student ran out of the room weeping. As a strong and tall male student in the grade of Senior High 2, his behaviour appalled everyone who saw him.

Later, Guo learned from others that the student in her class was crying in the classroom alone. She immediately rushed to him and asked what happened. He only said the word “nothing” as his answer, since he was reluctant to let her know about his grief. Then, Guo made a phone to his parents and asked them to check with the student after school, as she guessed that he might want to talk to his parents. Eventually, his parents learned the whole incident from him and reported it to Guo.

According to his parents, the examiner of the viva voce said to the student, “Your argument is completely wrong. I teach this course at university. I find that. Your data are all wrong. The project is utterly pointless.” Apparently, all the student’s work was denied. He could not bear it and went off crying. The parents defended their child by stressing how much he had done for the project, and they insisted that he did not deserve such acute criticism. When Guo heard these, she found the student and chatted with him. She thought that the only thing that she could do was placating him, as she said to him,

“Probably the examiner only said that from a professional angle. He may not see the effort you’ve made.” Although she tried to placate, she felt that it was too hard to offset. As a result, the student disliked learning biology from then on. He was hit hard.

While Guo was narrating the case, she still looked sad and sorry for the student. Via this case, she was able to distinguish educating people from teaching. In essence, educating people was in regard to cultivating the students’ confidence and interest, whilst teaching merely referred to the professional function of a course. She explicated:

In fact, the student’s interest in this aspect must have been dispelled. This is the difference between educating people and teaching. If the professor considered that in addition to the professional function of the course, it also had a function of educating people, he wouldn’t comment like that. He must say like this, “The student’s enthusiasm in exploring makes me admire. As a Senior High 2 student, you can think of such a difficult question in biology. Some scientists haven’t thought about it yet.” He must spend long in making this point. So what was this for? This was to cultivate the student’s confidence and the student’s interest, letting the student’s spark in scientific exploration get protected. This is educating people.

Further, Guo viewed that educating people needed to precede professional things. To practice educating people, the teacher should point the way forward for the students and impart necessary knowledge to them. She continued:

Educating people needs to go first and then we talk about professional things. Next, you point out the direction for the kid, “Your topic is acceptable, but it may still need data analysis in some part, and then you can get a conclusion.” Science draws on objectivity and facts. We need to teach the kids research methods. I think this is educating people. You help them, equipping them with some walking sticks.



Apart from Guo' attention to the students' emotions, she used a case to exemplify how she cared about their self-esteem, self-confidence and sense of accomplishment in the process of educating people. When the students performed badly in writing a composition, she did not want to go bluntly critical of them. Instead, she would like to educate them based on their merits. She stated:

I made an attempt yesterday. Actually, I've always been doing this on the front line. I like it very much. Now I am still making attempts. At this time, I read the students' compositions on the topic of "listening". As a matter of fact, when I read their compositions, I was quite frustrated. I thought they wrote too badly. But I couldn't just say this to them straightforward. I'd like to see their merits under a magnifying glass.

Specifically, to elaborate on the attempt, Guo set three prizes in the composition review lesson. Each prize was made to praise one of the aspects that the students had done well in their composition. Although none of them did well in all aspects, she managed to find some positive points in each composition. For instance, there was the prize for swift thinker. This was for those who finished their compositions within 40 minutes. Next, it was the prize for sparkle shining. Some students might only have one sentence written well in their compositions, while they still had the chance to win the prize. The last prize was for beautiful composition, but none of them could reach this standard of excellence. When she announced that this prize was vacant, the students laughed out understandably.

As a consequence, the attempt proved fruitful, since the students became more proactive in the following lessons. Guo found:

I realised when I taught my lesson in this way, my subsequent lessons went very smoothly. Despite pointing out their deficiencies, I was helping them to improve. Because of the work done beforehand, the students became more proactive in the lessons. We had 30 students in my class, and it was like more than 20 of them answering questions. I felt the power of interest of emotion was tremendous. You had to pay attention to the leaning in their mind.

Guo concluded that the concept of educating people should involve two parts of meaning. First, the teacher needed to treat the students as people to educate, rather than a machine. Second, the teacher should focus on the students' development of sound personality and growth of emotion. As can be seen, both as a Chinese language teaching teacher and as a class teacher, Guo insisted on the idea of being student-centred and implemented it in her lessons and in the management of the class. This displayed the demeanour of an educator.

#### *Insisting on devoting all herself to work*

Guo loved her job of teacher very much. In discussing her commitment to work, she deemed work a kind of regimen, which was quite a distinctive perception. She proposed:

Personally speaking, work is life, and life is work. I always think work is a kind of regimen, and regimen is also like a kind of work. That means, your work ought to be pleasant. It made you grow. So, you liked it and with such an attitude, the things that I did every day were related to my work.

Guo not only believed in the work notion that work is life, and life work, but also wished to implement the notion in her daily life. For example, going to the library was literally a regular activity in her life, and she was delighted to be credited as the “most active”

member. She confirmed:

Therefore, I may reflect this [the work notion] in my teaching. I'd be in such a status, probably working tirelessly to prepare and teach lessons ... Our school's librarian said to me I was the one coming to the library and looking up information the most, and the one subscribing to self-paid magazines the most. The two "the most" made me feel proud.

Specifically, there were four aspects of evidence underpinning her implementation of the work notion in her work practice. First, she prepared for her lessons carefully, enhancing her teaching skills. She demonstrated:

It's like what others said, "A minute on the stage takes ten-year practice." Really you had to work attentively to achieve this ... It had been a habit for me to do every lesson as an open lesson ... A lesson was only 40 minutes, but the time I spent in preparing for it might be no less than 40 hours.

Second, she was diligent in reflecting, constantly developing herself. This was manifested in her long-term accumulation of post-teaching reflections. She described the situation at the time when she applied for the award of the special-grade teacher:

I was required to submit three-year lesson plans in hard copies, the original ones. These could not be forged, and the time left for application was very tight. I remember my three-year lesson plans were of quite a few notebooks. Each of my lesson plans was followed by post-teaching reflections which were of greater length than my actual lesson plan. I did it in this way for all the three years. That's why my [students] gained

such results of the University Entrance Examination, why I had the three-year lesson plans in hard copies, and why I have published over three hundred essays.

Third, Guo dedicated both time and vigour to her work. She recalled the busiest period of time in her career. As shown in her extremely hectic schedule, she had little time to rest even in the summer vacations during the ten-year time. Out of a week, she could only rest for half a day. Undoubtedly, her work took up almost all her time and vigour. She stated bitterly:

You see how busy my work was at that time. I taught the grade of Senior High 3 for ten consecutive years. What was Senior High 3's life like in the other province? When they finished the exams on 8th June, we started to gather and mark the exams on 11th June. We did it for ten days, and then on about 20th June, the work of the [next] Senior High 3 for the new academic year began. There was like only about half a month as the summer vacation. That was the longest period. Within the half a month, we might have tours organised. I hardly rested in the summer vacation. The students' night-time self-study wouldn't end until 11pm, while at 5 o'clock in the morning, I came to the school again. For the life status in the other province, I could only have half a day off on Sunday [per week]. My spouse said to me the deepest impression he had was that the half-a-day was used just for catching up on some sleep.

Fourth, she was strong-minded and ambitious in whatever she pursued. As she mentioned, "I endured many hardships in my childhood, so perhaps I have a sort of tenacity. For whatever I do, I have to do it the best. I probably have an awareness of pursuing perfection." In summary, it was hugely because of Guo's devotion to work that she became such an extraordinary teacher.

*Insisting on promoting personal development*

Since the very beginning of Guo's career, she had been valuing her personal development very much. Persisting to learn, to reflect and to do research projects, as mentioned above, were the useful means by which she facilitated her personal development. Additionally, her attention to personal development was also demonstrated in her experience working at the school in a different province before she moved to City X. The relaxing environment there did not keep her in the comfort zone. Rather, unlike the ordinary ones, she was still able to thrive with her aspiration and self-control, as she elaborated:

I had more than 20 years [working] in the Lushan [pseudonym] province. That school was a relaxing environment, while the relaxing environment had advantages and also disadvantages. For advantages, if you had aspiration or dream, you could work hard to fulfil it [in the environment]. While for disadvantages, if your self-control was not strong enough, you might just become ordinary. I may belong to the former with relatively strong self-control and always have dream.

Further, she identified three merits of her, the desire to get stronger, the self-control and the reflection spirit, as the factors that helped her to gain personal development. She analysed:

I think, first, I'm one constantly striving to become stronger. I'm not a clever one, but a clumsy bird has to start flying early. I think this is a point that applies to many special-grade teachers. Second, my self-control is fairly strong. This is an external factor. Third, in terms of professional aspects, my reflection spirit is quite strong. All my essays are my reflections of lessons. I view questions as my research topics.

Reflection was not just a kind of spirit existing in Guo's mind. She worked extremely hard

on writing reflections as well. In the interview, she pleasantly shared with me how much she had done to reflect:

Basically, if I had any thoughts and feeling after my lessons, I'd write reflections. If I did a lesson well, I'd reflect. If I did a lesson not so well, it'd be more necessary for me to reflect. Thus, I made my collection of reflections. For the ones that had been published as books and articles, there were about over 800,000 words. But for the unpublished ones, on my PC, there should be another 100,000ish words. These have not been published yet.

Up to the time of interview, writing reflections had become a habitual action of Guo. Even when she was in a very busy status, such as teaching Senior High 3, she did not stop it. She carried on saying:

If I didn't write reflections, I'd feel uncomfortable. It's even like that. It'd been a habit .. From 1997 to 2007, I always taught Senior High 3. Sometimes I taught Senior High 1 and Senior High 3 at the same time. So, you see my status. But over the ten years, I published more than 300 articles. Currently I am modifying two works. I published monographs after I came to City X.

Moreover, doing teacher training was another way to gain personal development for Guo. The many years of accumulation of experience not only improved her professional abilities, but also served as rich materials for teacher training. She referred to the teacher training that she undertook in Singapore, an interesting case which showed how the accumulation of experience benefited her. She explicated:

When lecturing, I provided them with trainers, and I cited many teaching materials in my lectures. So, the teachers in Singapore asked me which website I found these materials on and if I could let them know the websites. They wanted to download them as well. I said to them, "It's not that easy to answer this question to you because these things were not made available on any websites. They were from my daily life. They could be a book I read, a chat with any of my colleagues or a phenomenon I encountered during the process of me going to buy vegetables today. Then, I accumulated them."

In summary, Guo always took her personal development seriously, and she did various things to gain it, such as writing reflection, doing teacher training, and undertaking research projects, as discussed previously.

In conclusion Guo's case, as a "research-based" teacher, Guo's professional development had three distinctive features. First, she suffered a blow in the early phase of her career, while she bounced back strongly. Second, she held her personal beliefs firmly and practiced based on her work notions, which made her an outstanding teacher. Third, she was keen on learning, diligent in reflecting, and persistent in writing. Noticeably, she insisted on using research projects to guide her professional development throughout her career.

## 6.4 Yu's case

Yu was a biology teacher and used to teach at three different junior high schools. In 1996, having graduated from a university, she came to a school in the urban area. At the 11th year of her work, she moved to a school in the mountainous area for volunteer teaching for two years. As she enjoyed the time at the school, she did not leave it until 4 years later when she joined another school in the urban area. At the time of interview, she was working at the third school for her. Her work profile and developmental path are

summarised in the Table 6.6 and Table 6.7.

Table 6.6 Yu's work profile

School	Time period and work descriptions
Secondary School A	1996 – 2007: Being biology teacher and class teacher at a junior high school in the urban area.
Secondary School B	2007 – 2013: Being biology teacher and class teacher at a junior high school in the mountainous area.
Secondary School C	2013 – 2015: Being biology teacher and class teacher at another junior high school in the urban area.

Table 6.7 Yu's developmental path

Dimensions	Task-led stage	Transitional stage	Notion-led stage
Work notions		1. Teachers must love their profession. 2. Teachers should engage in constant learning with initiatives. 3. Teachers should have innovation awareness and put innovation into practice.	
Work practice (critical incidents)	1. Gaining the opportunity to observe lessons of a special-grade teacher.	2. Reflecting on the special-grade teacher's professional life	3. Participating in the activity of adolescence education; 4. Undertaking research projects;



			<p>5. Experiencing setbacks in volunteer teaching;</p> <p>6. Receiving instructions from university mentors;</p> <p>7. Getting long-term support from family members;</p> <p>8. Becoming a special-grade teacher in 2014;</p> <p>9. Focusing on research on development of innovative talents;</p> <p>10. Setting up studio and exerting influence.</p>
Scale of recognition	No obvious recognition.	No obvious recognition.	Getting recognised in the city.
Personal characteristics	<p>1. Being innovative.</p> <p>2. Being persistent in adverse situations.</p> <p>3. Being good at taking advantage of her strength. For example, she opened the studio and used it as a platform to promote the students', the school's and her own development.</p>		

#### 6.4.1 Yu's task-led stage

At the first year of her career, she got an opportunity by chance to observe lessons of a special-grade teacher for a year. The special-grade teacher was a notable in biology and was ever met by the President of the country. She observed the lessons once or twice

per week, which enabled Yu to see the work status of an excellent teacher at the very beginning of her career. Gradually, she became faster in acquiring skills. In this hectic year, she was busy with coping with daily work at her own school and going to observe the lessons at the special-grade teacher's school. She was mainly learning and adapting, while she had not planned her professional development yet. Having finished the year of lesson observation, she started to reflect on the job of teacher. Given that the beginning point of the transitional stage was found to be reflection on one or several critical incidents, Yu's start of reflection indicated that she entered the transitional stage swiftly.

#### 6.4.2 Yu's transitional stage

During the one-year experience of observing lessons, Yu learned comprehensively about the special-grade teacher's understanding of education, the profession of teacher, the subject of biology as well as teaching. In connection with her own situation, she generated three points of consideration regarding how to develop to be an excellent teacher. First, she believed that it was important to love the profession of teacher:

Personally speaking, I like the profession so much. This is the most key point in making you stay in the field and the career of teacher. I feel it must be that you like it yourself. Since the first time I stood next to the podium, I feel I've devoted myself to teaching and educating. Being a teacher made proud.

Second, Yu commented on the necessity of constant learning, in her process of becoming a special-grade teacher. Even if no one helped her, she acted on her own with initiatives. She said:

On the basis of loving the profession, I also need to keep updating some concepts myself. At my previous school, I undertook a key project. At that time there was no one instructing me. That is to say, I groped it, explored it myself.

Third, Yu stressed the importance of innovation and made it clear that one would not become a great teacher if he or she had no awareness of innovation. She stated:

Teacher is normally hard work ... Actually some teachers are just like workmen in teaching. They taught well and their [students'] academic results were also very good. Like that, they've been working very well but might never become a special-grade teacher, nor a backbone teacher. I think this is about lacking an awareness of innovation in their own fields, the innovation for educational, conceptual things or the innovation for their pedagogical methods. They'd normally work hard while not take the road of innovation. They'd not make themselves stand out of the crowd of teachers.

Undoubtedly, Yu's one-year experience of lesson observation at the first year of her career accelerated her professional development. As a result, the three points of consideration developed into the three work notions of her, as listed in Table 6.7, From then on, she constantly practiced these notions. It can be concluded that within approximately one year of her entry to the career, she went through the first and the second professional developmental stages. This was a rare case compared other interviewed special-grade teachers. Then, Yu smoothly moved into the third stage of her professional development.

#### 6.4.3 Yu's notion-led stage

To provide an overview of Yu's professional developmental path, she worked for 19 years of time at three different schools. At the first school (Secondary School A), she

focused on being an excellent teacher who devoted herself to education and valued the chances and platforms that she gained to develop herself. From 2007 to 2013, Yu engaged in a volunteer teaching programme at a school (Secondary School B) in a mountainous area. This was a highlight of her professional development. She achieved ground-breaking results in multiple aspects, such as teaching ideas, curriculum development, student development and changing adverse environmental factors. In 2013, Yu transferred to another school (Secondary School C) in the urban area and was awarded the special-grade teacher in 2014. This was a phase for Yu to summarise her own development and get the results through reflection.

Although she spent 11 years working at the first school, there were only two influential incidents reported in the interview. One was participating in the programme of adolescence education and the other was doing research projects. The former expanded her vision while the latter helped her develop the habit of research. These are demonstrated in detail in the following paragraphs.

At the second year of Yu being a teacher, she got involved in a programme regarding adolescence health, as a volunteer. The key words that outlined the reasons for her involvement were “interest”, “need” and “related to the work of class teacher”, as she elaborated

I myself was fairly interested in it, and the education of adolescence [played a role] in educating the students and in their physiology and psychology. One thing was that it was related to biology. The other was that from the perspective of class teacher and also based on the personal needs and cognition of educating the students, I valued it. So, I had been doing the job related to this area.

Yu had been part of the programme for 20 years. She found that the core ideas, the training and the non-profit nature of the programme all brought about positive effect on her work. Another incident that had a huge impact on her development was taking responsibility for the district-level key research projects. She proposed:

Since undertaking the key project, it had been a toughening experience for me, not only for the research projects, but also for the cognition of education. I step by step grew up in the process. Having such a platform of research project, I gradually updated my educational ideas for a deep understanding about educating and teaching.

At that time, Yu was totally unaware of how to do a research project. In order to complete the project successfully, she read a wealth of literature in regard with the development of innovative ability and research projects, which facilitated her personal growth. She recalled:

Although the projects were done 20 years ago, they are still consistent with the current ideas. Being guided by these ideas 20 years ago, it should be said, was a boost for my growth. Besides, doing a project completely made me learn the steps and methods of doing research projects. I integrated it into teaching practice, which was the route connecting [research to] biology teaching. Then I formed the habit of working in research and researching in work. This was beneficial to me.

In China, biology was a subject that was not valued so much because in the Senior High Entrance Examination, biology was not listed as a compulsory exam to take. The students, the parents and even the school leaders would not deem the subject of biology a crucial task to focus on. Nevertheless, she valued her own subject with full of confidence, as she thought:

The subject of biology is closely related to the being and life human and is an important part of conducting “holistic education”. I ardently love the profession of teacher and the subject of biology and love the educational significance that the subject brought to the students more. It can make a person.

Yu’s ideas had been verified in her six-year volunteer teaching experience since she came to the mountainous area in 2007. While she was assisting in teaching there, she went through a process from not adapting to the environment, to changing the environment and developing the students contextually, and finally to accomplishing the students, the school and herself.

When Yu arrived at the remote mountainous-area school, she first found it hard to adapt to the environment there. Her educational were completely contradict the mainstream idea there, as she suggested:

When I just got to the school, I couldn’t accept their educational ideas very much, such as corporal punishment and being simply rude to the students. This led to my educational ideas being incompatible there. I took persuasive education as my main approach, while it didn’t work for the students there. The teachers said, “You must use corporal punishment. You must scold them and roar at them so that they can listen to you.” I was quite puzzled then. I wondered how I would survive in the environment which totally conflicted with my educational ideas?

In this situation, Yu felt confused and helpless, and she wrote a letter to a mentor that she got to know at my university. Her mentor replied her very soon and consoled her. He also pointed to the direction for her to proceed. She viewed:

I felt that letter had a very large impact on me, since I was too puzzled and too perplexed. Because I was there fighting alone, what would I do in such an environment surround me? Since he wrote that letter very concisely but profoundly, I read it repetitively to understand his meaning.

Her mentor's response letter made Yu confirm two standards of behaviour to which she held herself at the school of volunteer teaching. First, she needed to influence other teachers at the school with her advanced educational ideas, rather than being influenced by those teachers' ideas. Second, as the volunteer teaching was a favourable opportunity for her to develop herself, she needed to seize it and make achievements.

Regarding the method of educating the students, Yu stuck to the friendly approach that respected the students. As a result, her persistence did influence other teachers at the school. She stated:

If I didn't stick to it, I might be the same with them. I wasn't like that, while I held my ideas to educate the kids and also influenced them conversely. Gradually, they did less corporal punishment and scolded the students less. They were gradually influenced by me and followed my way to educate the kids. That was, I influenced them. If I communicated [with the teachers], they wouldn't be convinced. They'd persuade you, letting you know that your method wasn't right. It wouldn't work. But gradually, in a week or two, probably in half a term or a full term, or even in a year's time, they saw the effect of the approach and they changed imperceptibly.

Hence, the way that the teachers treated the students were changing and so was their expectation towards the students. Yu was proud of the impact that she made on the

local teachers as well as the educational environment there, whilst one thing that concerned her more was how to facilitate the students' development.

In order to really promote the students' development, Yu first gained a full understanding about the situation of the students and confirmed the idea of developing the students' scientific literacy. In the end, she successfully achieved her goals, as she advanced the students', the school's and her own development.

Specifically, through her conversations with the teachers, the students and the parents, she learned two important factual situations about the students. First, the chance for the students to go to senior high schools were very low. As she told me, "There were very few kids in the mountain, generally speaking, going to the senior high schools, let alone the key senior high schools." Second, plenty of the students engaged in agriculture as they returned home or made a living by doing odd jobs. She continued, "Many of the kids returned to the rural area. For instance, they [worked in] farming or planting fruit trees. Even some went for the odd jobs in the society. So, there was like an outflow."

In relation to the situations of the students, Yu wished to equip them with the knowledge and skills that would be of lifelong benefit to them via her teaching. She explicated:

[The students in the mountain] relied only on textbooks but actually, they still could not beat the students in key secondary schools academically. So, it didn't mean that the students had to get 100% marks in biology but that their scientific literacy needed to be improved. Therefore, I, from this aspect, wanted to foster them in a different way. This might be beneficial to their whole life. For example, how to research a thing. If I became a peasant in the future and worked in fruit tree management, how would I research fruit



trees? How would I raise the productivity of the fruit trees? [It would be good to] have such scientific thinking and such a method. I just wanted them to have such an illuminative scientific method.

Then, Yu started to ponder how she would foster and enhance the students' scientific literacy. Soon she had some ideas. She would like to integrate some local resources with her biology teaching, develop featured or scientific courses on research-based learnings. Since Yu lived in the accommodation at the school, she stayed there every day, and it was thus convenient for her to examine the natural environment. She described:

Because we were just next to the Dongting River, the kids could see how the water changed every day. With so many tourists coming here, what pollution might this bring to the quality of water? The waste was also influencing, and the local people put some nets for fishing into the water. The kids saw all these. [But I wondered] how [I] would make them pay attention to these, using scientific methods to research these and taking them as a kind of projects to research. Literally it was to open up a window of the science for the kids in the mountainous area, letting them examine the surroundings from a different perspective, thereby enhancing their scientific literacy. We offered suchlike projects. In my six years there, we basically had over ten topics every year. We divided them into groups to carry out. We let the kids learn biology using this method and in the form of projects.

Yu's teaching approach was gradually accepted and favoured by the students. The students paid attention to the environment and the scientific methods, and they started to love learning. As a result, her students gained surprising results which were hard for the students in the urban area to get even. In the process of her innovative practice, many students wrote essays and won the first-place prizes in a competition. Some of them came out of the mountain for the first time in their lives, as they went to the city to accept the awards. These became unforgettable experiences for them.

Many of their families were extremely impoverished. As they came out of the district and got to the city of City X, they could demonstrate themselves and compete at the same stage with other students from the key secondary schools. This had a tremendous impact on the students at that time. In my interview with Yu, she shared a story of a student who became self-confident and optimistic after attending the award ceremony in the city. She narrated:

One of the kids left me a very deep impression. Originally, she was an introverted person. She stayed there for a week, and her personality was changed after she came back. She used to be very introverted and bashful. Since coming back, she turned to be very bright. She also made friend with a Korean kid. She actively communicated with the kid and stayed in touch with their mobile phone numbers exchanged. They became good friends, which I felt influenced her so much.

As the student returned, she also influenced other students in the school. Particularly, she did a report to her schoolmates and shared her experience with them. This inspired the other students' desire to go and see the world out of the mountain. Yu carried on saying:

You might not be able to imagine but from the expression in their eyes, I saw that their envy inspired their keen attempt. This made a difference in the kids, as the kids in the mountainous area were looking forward to it, when they saw the changes in her after coming back and got the information that she brought back.

Finally, Yu suggested that every time she took the students out of the mountain, she paid attention to letting them see and learn as much as possible. Therefore, the other

students who did not go with them could get plentiful information from the returning students. Between 2010 and 2015, Yu had students going to the competition in the city and residing there every year.

Yu's distinctive approach of guiding the students to do research-based learning enriched her biology teaching and earned her satisfying outcomes. Both her teaching and her school became a model of the development of scientific literacy.

At the end of her two-year life of volunteer teaching in the mountainous area, her students' research had not finished. She was worried that if she returned to her original school in the urban area then, the research might not be carried on. When she expressed this concern to her husband, her husband supported her and encouraged her to stay in the mountainous area until the students finished. This made Yu extremely moved, and she dedicated her gratitude to her husband for his long-term support, as mentioned in Chapter 5.

Eventually, Yu decided not to leave there until someone else replaced her. This decision made her stay in the mountain for four more years. In 2013, as the school in the mountain was merged into another school at the edge of the urban area, she came to the new school [Secondary School C] with her students.

Although the new school's geographical location was closer to the urban area, most of the students were not local citizens in City X. This meant that they could not take the National College Entrance Examination in City X. The students could only study there temporarily, as Yu shared:

This school was quite special. There were mainly kids of the migrant workers. They were not of registered residence in City X. These kids were not only impoverished, but also very unstable. That was to say, they felt uncertain about their future. They were not sure when they'd be sent back to their native places. They were not sure when they'd leave here, leave the collective, leave the school, or even leave the city of City X. Then they had to embrace a new kind of life. When many students left the school, they might not go to another school again. They had no hope for the future. So, these students were different from the kids in the mountainous area. Based on the characteristics of these students, we developed some courses for them.

Taking advantage of her experience in designing and implementing research-based courses, Yu developed the courses for the new school and attracted attention of the higher authorities again. In 2014, Yu was awarded the special-grade teacher. It was beyond her expectation that she became the youngest special-grade teacher in the subject of biology in City X then. This made her feel responsibility and pressure. She expressed:

When I was awarded, I didn't feel that excited. Frankly speaking, it was not a kind of excitement but a kind of responsibility, a kind of pressure ... I was really young. When I became a special-grade teacher, I wasn't even 40 years old. I was only 38. It wasn't that I got the special-grade teacher, and for my future road, I could just retire. It was great pressure for me.

Nevertheless, Yu not only had responsibility and pressure in her mind, but also she viewed the award as encouragement. Besides, she was eager to prove her value as a special-grade-teacher, as she would like to live up to the identity. She continued:

Alternatively speaking, it was also encouragement. You got recognised while you had

the pressure. As soon as I got the honour, I started to consider how I would develop in the future. Although this honour was like the highest one, how would you develop next? Many people thought given my achievement, I could stop and do nothing. You'd be centred around at the school, as you were the only special-grade teacher. You'd be quite buoyant. It was actually not. I took it as an encouragement. I'd probably work better. I'd be worthy of the honour and also the certificate. That was to say, as a special-grade teacher, I had to act like a special-grade teacher.

Since achieving the award of the special-grade teacher, it had been four years up to the time that Yu took my interview. At the time of interview, Yu was contributing to the students, herself, the colleagues and the school, by means of the "development of innovative talents" research programme and the opening of the studio to develop young teachers.

On one hand, for the programme of the development of innovative talents, the school organised research groups consisting of 7 people. The groups investigated how to cultivate the students' innovative ability in daily teaching. The research of this field was not strange to Yu. She carried out similar research projects 20 years ago, and she was enthusiastic about research of this topic. She suggested:

I viewed that the development of innovative thinking and innovative ideas was necessary for the students' growth. This would help them face the challenges in the future in the world. As a matter of fact, innovative awareness and innovative thinking also had a boosting effect on my professional quality. For instance, my current courses were concerned with more fields, such as things related to chemistry and physics, domestic or international leading-edge updates about the development of science, and probably some questions the students were interested in. My courses did not set off from the textbooks, nor did it set exam results as the aim. I had a different starting point and a different design philosophy.

Yu's research projects were still being undertaken. It appeared to be a very useful topic to research how to develop the students' innovative thinking and ability.

On the other hand, with the help of the head teacher, Yu founded a studio named after herself. She led the young teachers to do various work. She demonstrated:

The studio designed a large number of courses of study tours. We also offered our own school-based courses, all centred around biology teaching and curriculum development. Besides, we applied for the construction of ecological garden. An agricultural ecological garden was about to begin construction soon. I wanted to promote the whole school's development through my abilities or by one of my featured courses. This was my idea.

In review of Yu's professional developmental path, she had the three distinct features. Firstly, at the first year of her career, she gained the opportunity to observe lessons of the special-grade teacher for a year. During this year, in addition to learning the advanced educational ideas and teaching skills from the teacher, she reflected and summarised the features of the professional development of excellent teachers. Besides, in connection with the subject of teaching, the profession of teacher and the professional development of her, she formed the work notions that she stuck to for long. On one hand, the one-year experience of lesson observation accelerated Yu's development. From the analysis of data, while other the interviewed special-grade teachers normally took longer to form an explicit and stable work notion, Yu formed it only in a year. This displayed the rapid progress on her professional development gained in the early phase of her career. On the other hand, the experience of lesson observation showed her what good teaching, a good teacher and good education should be like. This helped her anchor high objectives to achieve. Hence, the momentous opportunity that she took at the first year of her professional life played a crucial part in her later

development.

Secondly, being in the adverse environment of the Secondary School B, Yu not only overcame the problem of adaption, but also found room to accomplish self-fulfilment, as she promoted the students, the school's and her own development. This reflected the effect of the underpinning work notions. Her practice was guided by her work notions, which enabled her to gain positive results.

Thirdly, after Yu became a special-grade teacher, the school established the studio for her. Based on the studio, she designed courses, developed young teachers, started to build the agricultural ecological garden and found her own field of constant development. In conclusion, her work notions formed early served as a solid foundation on which she thrived to gain all the achievement, which was the distinctive feature of her professional development from that of other teachers

I have, in this chapter, displayed the developmental paths of the three selected special-grade teachers. Based on my analysis, I believe that that the task-led stage, the transitional stage and the notion-led stages were the important developmental phases that each of them went through. Features of each stage have also been summarised. Now, I move on to present the problems that the special-grade teachers encountered after they achieved the award.

# Chapter 7 The Professional Development of the Post-special-grade Teachers

In this chapter, I focus on the issues arising in the period of time when they have already achieved the award of special-grade teacher, namely the phase of the post-special-grade teacher. In the interviews, every special-grade teacher shed light on the confusion and problems that they experienced after their awarding. According to the data, the widely reported problems included: (1) the psychological imbalance brought about by the setting of the professional rank of the *zhenggaoji* (professorship), (2) excessive teaching tasks which were detrimental to their professional development, (3) the lack of training at the post-special-grade level which hindered their constant development, and (4) the heavy stress led to by the harsh annual reviews. I first describe the details of each of the problems and then analyse the reasons behind them as follows.

## 7.1 The psychological imbalance incurred by the setting of the professional title of the *zhenggaoji*

As stated in Section 1.1.2 of the introduction chapter, the system of professional titles was reformed in 2015, with the *zhenggaoji* added as a new rank sitting at the top of the system. The *zhenggaoji* was basically equivalent to the title of Professor in higher education. This means that in the past, the senior-grade used to be the highest professional rank for primary and secondary school teachers. Those virtuous teachers who had great contribution in teaching and educating could be awarded the special-grade teachers. But the special-grade was only an honour, representing that they were the outstanding teachers among the excellent ones. The addition of the *zhenggaoji* teacher enabled many special-grade teachers to compare the two titles, thereby causing some imbalances in their mind. This was demonstrated in the following four points:



Firstly, the establishment of the *zhenggaoji* teacher implied that the special-grade teachers without the title would not have as high academic ability as those with the title, so the value of the special-grade teacher seemed to depreciate. Whilst the special-grade teachers emphasised teacher morality, it was universally acknowledged among the participants that academic ability was a key focus for the *zhenggaoji* teachers. For example, Peng proposed, “The senior-grade relatively stresses academic ability. The special-grade teachers emphasised teacher morality a little bit overly.” Moreover, Yu pointed out, “The special-grade teacher is an honorary title. ... It embodies a kind of honour. It was a recognition of your work.” Thus, the special-grade teachers who were originally thought to be “teachers of exemplary virtue” and “experts in teaching” turned to be the teachers of exemplary virtue while not necessarily being experts in teaching. This seemed to be that the special-grade teachers could not hold their dual top places in both of the standards anymore, as they would still be the best in teacher morality while might not be the best in teaching. This led to the imbalance in their mind.

In terms of whether the interviewed special-grade teachers were willing to apply for the *zhenggaoji* title and whether they were competent enough to apply, I summarised the two dimensions into four categories, as displayed in Table 7.1:

Table 7.1 The special-grade teachers’ attitude towards *zhenggaoji*

	Competent	Incompetent
Willing	1. Both willing and competent	2. Willing but incompetent
Unwilling	3. Unwilling but competent	4. Neither willing nor competent

With regard to the first category of the special-grade teachers (“both willing and competent”), they would like to apply for the *zhenggaoji* teacher with very high

academic ability. They had no problem with accepting the implication that the *zhenggaoji* teachers were higher in academic ability than the special-grade teachers, and they would apply for the *zhenggaoji* title in due course. While for those under the other three categories who were either not willing to apply, or not competent enough, or a bit of both, they would certainly not welcome and would even complain about the situation in which they would lose their dual top places in the two standards mentioned above. To exemplify, Sun questioned:

What is the relationship between the *zhenggaoji* and the special-grade? I just cannot figure out this matter. The special-grade teacher is an honorary title, and the *zhenggaoji* is a professional title ... Having a *zhenggaoji* in secondary school doesn't make sense. To be straightforward, you might call (a *zhenggaoji* teacher) a special-grade teacher. The special-grade teacher could be *zhenggaoji*.

Further, Qi held similar thoughts with Sun, as he expressed his confusion:

What is *zhenggaoji*? Is it equivalent to Professor? How could secondary school be the same as university? The highest professional title in the secondary school could just be special-grade teacher ... If possible, you go and help appeal. The (new) secondary school professional titles don't make sense.

Several special-grade teachers called for regulating the professional title in the secondary school. They suggested combining the *zhenggaoji* teacher into the special-grade teacher, and both would be addressed the special-grade teacher. However, even the teachers who complained the most held a view that compared with the *zhenggaoji* teacher, it seemed easier to get awarded the special-grade teachers. In their opinions, the *zhenggaoji* teacher became something harder to achieve than the special-grade

teacher. In some sense, the harder a thing was gained, the more valuable it would be. Therefore, the *zhenggaoji* was deemed a greater pursuit for which the special-grade teachers could strive.

Secondly, the application requirements for *zhenggaoji* at different types of schools varied, which incurred the teachers' imbalance. Amongst the special-grade teachers whom I interviewed, some worked at the primary or secondary schools directly administered the educational departments, while others were from the schools affiliated to universities. Two teachers referred to the inconsistency in the application requirements. Zhou elaborated:

In terms of selecting the *zhenggaoji*, the rules may vary across different places. Like my school, it follows the university's selection system. The selection system is different, so is the selection principles. We use the selection system of the professional titles of our affiliated university. You won't be eligible to apply for the *zhenggaoji* teacher unless you have been a special-grade teacher for 8 years, while in some other places, it's concerned with your teaching experience and teaching skills reaching a certain level. If you have been a senior-grade teacher for a number of years and your academic ability and academic standard have reached a certain level, then you can apply. So, it's different. Just like at my school, you have to be special-grade if you want to apply for the *zhenggaoji*. Yet in other districts, you might be able to apply even if you were not special-grade.

Similarly, Tian argued that different schools might have different standards for *zhenggaoji*, which could result in unfairness, as he commented:

The special-grade teacher is an honour, while the *zhenggaoji* is a professional technical title. Actually, I think they are two different things. Previously, when there was no such

*zhenggaoji*, the special-grade teacher could represent that your academic ability was quite strong. But now, you can only participate in the appraisal of the *zhenggaoji* teacher (to show that). The places are limited, and it needs to cover different schools. Well, there exists a huge difference between the top-level teachers in each school. If you were at an inferior school, you might get awarded (the *zhenggaoji*) even if your level was not that high, since there were places (allocated to the school). If you were at a good school, you might fail to get awarded even if your level was very high, since there was no place left.

Thirdly, the special-grade teacher being awarded the *zhenggaoji* teacher created a dual imbalance for both the special-grade teachers themselves and other excellent teachers. Since the number of places for the special-grade teacher and the *zhenggaoji* teacher were highly limited, the question of where the scarce resources would go became a key focus for the most excellent teachers. For the special-grade teachers, they had already occupied the scarce resource of the special-grade teacher. If they applied for the *zhenggaoji*, it could mean that they would occupy both kinds of scarce resource. This would make them feel uneasy, as Wan explained:

Our school was quite general but brought in three teachers through the channel of talent introduction. Including me, we were all very excellent. I was a special-grade, while the other two were not the special-grade. However, they were both the province-level master teachers. Since I'd got the title of the special-grade teacher, if I went for the *zhenggaoji*, it'd be like me occupying all the good things. Well, I wouldn't apply for the *zhenggaoji* in the near future.

Guo shed light on the dilemma of applying or letting others. She believed that either way had negative effect, as she suggested:

As you had been a special-grade, and (the school) would probably not give any chance of selection for excellence for you. I myself actually had a sense of letting others. For example, when we had selection for excellent (teacher), for the Teacher with the Four Characteristics, including the *zhenggaoji* teacher, I'd give up voluntarily. But this kind of giving up was also a kind of negative influence. As a matter of fact, the special-grade teachers also need some opportunities.

There was another concern that the school leaders were not willing to allocate the places of the *zhenggaoji* teacher to the special-grade teachers, in consideration of distribution of benefits. In this case, the special-grade teacher would enjoy the dual benefits. Dai proposed:

If I asked myself, I felt I did very well. But the school wouldn't give you the chances. They wouldn't let you apply for the full-senior grade, since you'd been a special-grade teacher. I believed, relatively speaking, this was not fair for the special-grade teachers. It should be based on their performance. They should treat everyone equally. If they don't do well, then don't give them.

For those excellent teachers without the title of the special-grade teacher, the setting of the *zhenggaoji* professional title provided them with an alternative way to proceed. If the special-grade teachers were given priority in selecting for the *zhenggaoji*, the excellent teachers' interest would be undermined to a certain extent. In the interviews, only one special-grade teacher discussed the influence of the special-grade teachers selecting for the *zhenggaoji* on other teachers. Indeed, it is a game of the interest.

Fourthly, the fact that the selection of the *zhenggaoji* teacher had a strong link to the management posts made the special-grade teachers imbalanced. On one hand, the

*zhenggaoji* teacher was a professional title, which meant enhanced salary, while the special-grade teacher was not part of the salary system, despite a small amount of subsidy. Thus, to some teachers, it seemed more important to see who were the ones earning more money than to know who were the more excellent ones. Dai suggested:

Because the awarding of professional title was linked to your salary, there were a lot of non-academic-related factors involved in the awarding. In normal cases, it should be that your academic ability was really strong, and your academic level was really high. Then you could get awarded the *zhenggaoji*. But at the real operational level, it might lose its accuracy. There were many improper factors interfering in the appraisal. What the leaders weighed up was who the money should be sent to.

On the other hand, two teachers clearly pointed out that the strong link between the selection of the *zhenggaoji* teacher and the management posts was unjustifiable. Guo argued:

The selection of the *zhenggaoji* teacher was something I participated in this year, while I was like a bystander. Why? In theory, the *zhenggaoji* teacher should be linked to the frontline teachers. There should be a standard that (an applicant) should be a special-grade teacher at first. In that case, this would make room for improvement for the special-grade teachers. But I saw most of the applicants last year were leaders, the incumbent leaders. It was said the places were extremely limited this year. That's why I say I was like a bystander. For those who have always been frontline teachers, the chances were extremely limited. It turned to be something like a "*zhenggaoji* leader", rather than the "*zhenggaoji* teacher". I think it's very irrational. The direction of the government was not right.

Wan's opinion on this matter was not much different from Guo's, as she believed:

In the recent couple of years, those who got awarded the *zhenggaoji* were all the school leaders. Even if some were not leaders, they were not the lesson-teaching teacher, either. I don't find this trend good. It aimed to motivate the teachers' constant growth. Well, if everyone went to be a leader, who'd deal with the frontline jobs? I'm almost retiring, but I've been teaching at the front line. Yet, who cares about these things?

To sum up, as the setting of the *zhenggaoji* professional title gave rise to a political and economic game among the excellent teachers and among the management posts and the teacher posts, it did not perform so well in terms of facilitating the teachers' professional development.

## 7.2 The excessive amount of work detrimental to the special-grade teachers' professional development

The issue of excessive amount of work was reflected in three kinds of situations in this research. In the first situation, the total amount of the related tasks was too large. By the related tasks, I refer to the tasks of being subject teacher, being class teacher, doing research projects, developing youth teachers and composing articles and monographs, as well as the meetings, seminars and conferences in association with the five types of tasks. In the special-grade teachers' mind, these were the reasons for them to be busy. For Liu, Li and Zhou, the tasks made staying up late a normal state of life. But they viewed the tasks as part of their job. They were delighted to undertake the tasks, as Zhou provided an account:

Many of the special-grade teachers were undertaking very onerous teaching tasks at their schools. I think I can understand these tasks. From the schools' perspective, they

wished such excellent teachers could teach more students and lead more young teachers' growth. So, in this sense, the schools would ask them to undertake a variety of projects, teaching tasks, scientific research tasks, even management tasks and so on. Being busy while growing up. I find it ok.

The second situation was also in connection with the related tasks. Some of the tasks were something that the special-grade teachers were reluctant to accept, but they had to accept passively. This led to them feeling excessive burden on them. For instance, in the teaching competitions for youth teachers organised by the schools, some teachers needed to undertake the reviews of the lessons not only in the same subject as they taught, but also the lesson reviews in other subjects. The latter was the job that they found reluctant and unnecessary to do. In the interview, Qi expounded on the reason of his unwillingness to undertake this kind of job:

It's not a problem if I reviewed the lessons for the teachers in the same subject as me. My comments could be spot on, while reviewing lessons in other subjects wouldn't work. Although I learned English when I was a student, I'd not touched English for so many years. But the leaders asked me to review lessons for the English language teachers. I had to observe a lesson before I reviewed it, and for this, I had to change my schedule. Having observed the lesson, I needed to give feedback which wouldn't be any good. For such things, I hope the less, the better. It's not that I don't support the school's tasks. It's something to do with the lack of ability.

In the third situation, the special-grade teachers undertook unrelated tasks, especially undertaking tasks of the teacher post and of the management post at the same time. This brought about the excessive burden. Tian suggested:

A large number of the special-grade teachers were both subject teachers and



administrative leaders. Personally speaking, this would cause very great pressure on the teachers. They had to deal with the administrative work on one side and get the teaching work done on the other side. They might attend to one and lose the other.

Besides, Li expressed her worries about not being able to concentrate, when she took up multiple posts. She said:

I was previously a head teacher at a branch of a school, but now I've stopped doing that. I quit the post myself. I just found it too distracting. If one likes teaching, too many things like this won't actually help with the special-grade teacher's growth.

There exists a hint of a paradox in this research. Most of the special-grade teachers believed that they were awarded the title of the special-grade teacher by virtue of their strong teaching abilities. Nonetheless, after they became the special-grade teachers, some schools in fact reduced the amount of the teaching work for them. Instead, they were arranged to do administrative work. Seemingly, excellent teachers could also do administrative well, while it might not be the case. For those who excelled in teaching work but were bad at administrative work and were promoted to assume administrative or management posts after being the special-grade teachers, they would not play to their strengths and might become beginners in administration and management. Just as Chen observed:

Since quite a few special-grade teachers became school leaders, this actually had some impact on the further development. At my school, I found this phenomenon very obvious. Many of them became the leaders. Certainly, I'm not saying it's not good to be leaders. As leaders, the extra tasks they were in charge of were also very important as a different function. But for the development of the special-grade teachers' teaching, it'd

be somewhat affected. After all, there were too many administrative things.

The three situations more or less influenced the professional development of the special-grade teachers. In reference to the first situation, despite the joy of growth that they gained from busy work, staying up late frequently and too much fatigue might be harmful to the special-grade teachers' health. While with regard to the second situation, the special-grade teachers did not do the jobs that they could perform well with their abilities and talent, but were encumbered by the jobs that they were unable to perform well or that others could do better, thereby being ineffectively busy. For the third situation, the point of focus was concerned with the issue of how to unleash the potential of the special-grade teachers. All the three situations should be paid attention to by their schools and educational departments.

### 7.3 The lack of professional support influencing constant development of the special-grade teachers

In relation to the missing of training, the findings show that insufficient policies and supporting mechanisms, as well as the lack of appropriate trainings were the main obstacles to the special-grade teachers' further development. A detailed account is provided next.

Firstly, from the policy to the practice level, there were little policies or supporting mechanisms to further the professional development of the special-grade teachers. In consistent with other teaches, the special-grade teachers were required to receive training of 360 hours every five years according to the document of "Suggestions on Greatly Strengthening the Work of Primary and Secondary Teachers' Training Work" issued by MOE in 2011. But they usually took trainings alongside the backbone teachers and the subject leaders, as there was no training specific to the special-grade teachers.

Liu commented:

I cared so much about who would help you gain better development when you had become a special-grade teacher. I felt it's like no one's here to supervise me and guide me. So, I thought if the special-grade teachers would like to develop further, they had to do everything voluntarily. There's not any organisation, team or platform motivating you to carry on, right? So, I felt at loss.

Qi referred to the lack of attention to the development of the special-grade teachers and made his suggestion. He appealed:

Is it possible to gain some professional attention to the development of the special-grade teachers from different dimensions, no matter which dimensions these might be? Because I reckon being able to get to this level was quite hard. Like one thing I knew of, I'm not sure if that exists in other cities or provinces. That's the research centre for the special-grade teachers, attracting the special-grade teachers to join and helping them have better development.

It is worth noticing that some teachers doubted the feasibility of boosting the professional development through external training. They believed that interest, reading and reflection were avenues for professional development. Dai stated:

When I reflected on how I developed, it's mainly that I was very interested in the professional questions in my subject. I like this thing ... Without interest, one would not develop so well professionally.

Peng was doubtful about the effect of teacher training, as he elaborated:

I don't really believe teacher training can develop excellent teachers. In my case, there were only some scholars in the subject who I never met in person. I was very interested in their theories and read their books. If you talk about if there's anyone helping with my growth face-to-face, I can't really find such a person. The special-grade teachers need to develop through reflection.

Wan held a similar view, being uncertain about the benefits of teacher training programmes:

How do you develop excellent teachers? The excellent teachers cannot be developed actually. Like if you organise many training classes or in-service programmes, you might not be able to develop them. I think reading books by themselves is very important.

Secondly, whilst the special-grade teachers had a demand for training, there were no content of training appropriate to their professional level. Regarding the demand for training, the majority of them expressed a strong desire in their interviews. To exemplify, Zhang made his point clear:

The special-grade teachers also need improvement. From the aspects of their theoretical level, being a person and doing things, there should be elevation, training and guidance. Because after all the special-grade teachers have a role of leading and radiating, they still need to improve a little bit further in these aspects. It doesn't mean you've arrived in the destination or reached the end. At least I am still playing a part in influencing others in educating people with my thoughts.

Liu also pointed out the lack of appropriate training for the special-grade teacher, as she commented:

I felt at the step prior to the awarding of special-grade teacher, there were people developing me. Like I was a practice mentor in the project of star teacher development. I led these teachers and some of them would become the special-grade teachers. But there's no one leading me. I think an institution should be set up for the special-grade teachers. I found targeted training for different phases in teacher training, such as the novice teachers, the backbone teachers and the would-be special-grade teachers. But only for how the special-grade teachers would develop in the future, there's no relevant institution.

Moreover, Liang highlighted the needs of development of the special-grade teachers, as he provided his thoughts:

As we talked about the issue of recharging, actually a special-grade teacher is also a person who develops as the society develops. For his knowledge, he can't just rest on his laurels. Does it need update or not? But sometimes, it's hard to get the work down on his own. He needs our schools and the educational administrative departments to create such opportunities for him.

As the quotes demonstrate, they had a strong need of development. Meanwhile, they have some opinions and expectation about the content of training. Peng argued:

Our training emphasised too much on such things as general training and educational

ideas. It doesn't mean these are not important, but for the frontline teachers, actually it wouldn't help.

Li was not optimistic about the current special-grade teachers' abilities, as she said:

Somehow, I don't find the current special-grade teachers ok in their discipline, not very strong. Generally speaking, the all-round abilities of the special-grade teachers must be stronger than other teachers, but their professional qualities were still not so good, needing further enhancement.

Tian pointed out that the training needs of the special-grade teachers differed from others, as he unfolded his point of view:

Broadening the special-grade teachers' horizon is very important. In terms of their expertise, I think the schools could spend more money in book and journal subscriptions. Then for oversea training and domestic short-term training, it should be broader and of higher level. It shouldn't be the same as the training for normal teachers. That wouldn't work. The special-grade teachers have their specific needs. For example, you shouldn't train the special-grade teachers how to write a lesson plan, something that they have already known well. You need to get to a higher level, since their needs are different.

According to the suggestions above, for the content of training, it would be necessary to take training both in the professional field of the subject and in horizon broadening. With regard to the methods of training, reading and short-term domestic and oversea training were suggested to be appropriate. On a different note, paying attention to the special-grade teachers' training needs and providing specific and targeted training

would facilitate their professional development.

## 7.4 The high level of stress led to by the harsh annual reviews

The special-grade teacher prevalently viewed the annual review as something necessary because they found it a responsible act of the superior authorities in charge. However, centred around two main problems in the review, which were first the excessive requirement for academic outcomes and second the content of review being too much of doctrine. The former was the one that the special-grade teachers most complained about. Zhou denied school as a scientific research institution and claimed, “Some special-grade teacher wrote a lot of articles, while they might not teach well.” Next, Liang put up his thought in detail:

The main base of the special-grade teachers is in class. I think in the review, there should be a weight. Previously, we highlighted too much on essays and treatises. The weight of these was relatively large. But this departed from the reality of the secondary schools because the secondary school was not a scientific research institution after all. In this way, doing research every day would be a bit like the university. At my secondary school, 90% of the time was basically used for teaching. So, I feel they should put a greater weight on classroom teaching, slightly greater, while essays and treatises are also necessary. These things, however, should not be required to submit every year. To be appropriate, it should be at least in a while. Like within five years, you should have two or three. Even one’s fine. I believe as a special-grade teacher, you must have these. You cannot be without these. Wouldn’t this be closer to the reality of the secondary school? You know, many teachers taught lessons extremely well without having essays, while they were quite popular. At the secondary school, the majority of time should be used for teaching, rather than scientific research.

Wu went critical as well:

We always talk about writing things and publishing monographs. Actually, if the special-grade teachers published that many things each year, they'd be forced to death, since it's not that easy to publish things on the core journals. There's also lots of corruption ... If you published a lot, you'd need to show something new. Is this really important? As a matter of fact, it's just wastepaper. You waste the paper of the country.

Owing to the excessive requirement for educational research outcomes in the annual review of the special-grade teachers, such as the requirement to publish articles every year, the academic corruption was brought about. Two of the interviewed special-grade teachers detested this, as Wu drew an example to manifest his point of view:

I didn't learn this until I attended a symposium. Some teachers spent money in buying space of page to publish articles. You see, for a journal at the national or province level, or a core journal, how many works can they publish? Many waited to publish essays (in this way), thanks to the review! They had to work out a solution. Like the academic fraud in the medical profession, in fact, the priority of doctors is seeing patients. Then you summarise the experience and develop youth doctors with the experience, improving the developmental level of the whole medical work. Should scientific research be carried out? It should be, but saving people and developing the youths are of greater significance. If they devoted all energy to scientific research, then no one would treat illnesses.

Besides, Chen showed her concern about equal opportunities, as she proposed:

At the moment, many schools paid money to buy space of page in the journals, in order for their teachers to publish articles. But not every teacher would get equal



opportunities. Only the ones who the head teachers wanted to develop and liked, and the school leaders would get the chance.

Although it is unconvincing to conclude the excessive requirement for the academic outcomes in the review as the only reason leading to academic corruption, it had some pushing effect. The special-grade teachers generally viewed that teaching the students well and passing on their mature experience to the youth teachers were the main avenues to exercise their influence. These should be the essential requirements, whereas publishing essays and monographs should be deemed the desirable requirements. In this case, the special-grade teachers' anxiety could be alleviated, and they would be able to use their energy to do the things that they were most supposed to do.

For the content of review being too much of doctrine, it was mainly displayed in two phenomena. First, there were a large number of unnecessary items to go through in the review, and second, the content of the review could not really reflect the effort of the special-grade teachers. Wu listed some of the items that he had to go through in the annual review:

Every year, I filled in the form and submitted it to the school. The school passed it on to the Educational Commission in the district and then to the municipal Education Commission. It had to include the essays that won awards in the district and in the city. For example, we needed to publish an essay each year. It used to be an essay per two years but was later changed to one per year. It also included the communication events in the city and district. There was a list of open lessons and reports, and we needed to upload our lessons on the website of the city two to four times each academic term. This was for other teachers to select and learn, for teacher training. Two to four times, a lot to do.

Further, Zhou appealed for more humanity in the review for the special-grade teachers, as she explicated her view:

The review for the special-grade teachers was necessary, but I wonder if the content of review needed to be so much of doctrine. Did you have scientific research projects every year? Did you do open lessons every year? How many essays did you publish? If you were at the front line of teaching and engaged in the work of teaching, your teaching work would be full workload. It'd be ok if you played a role in leading and demonstrating in your work of teaching. As for from which aspects the effect of leading and demonstrating are reflected, does it have to be how many books you have published and how many district-level or municipal-level open lessons you have done? I don't think it has to be this harsh because this is influenced by many factors involved. Like for a municipal-level open lesson, there are quite a few youth teachers now and we expect the youth teachers to go for it. Then we, as special-grade teachers, may be the ones to support them behind the scenes. Perhaps we don't go onto the stage of teaching, but for the whole design, the observation, the review and the modification of the lesson, these may be the things the special-grade teachers do. So, I feel this needs to be moderately humanised. Also, if you weren't at the front line while worked in management, would these items be appropriate?

Overall, despite some positive effect of the review for the special-grade teachers on promoting their professional development at the policy level, unrealistic requirements, such as publishing an article every year, caused them certain stress and anxiety. It would be better for them to fulfil their potential if the redundant content of review could be reduced at the level of policy.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated the problems existing in the phase of the post-

special-grade teacher and analysed the possible reasons behind them. In the next chapter, I analyse the research findings in depth and cast light on the implications and practical application of the findings.

# Chapter 8 Discussion and Application

## 8.1 Overview

This research aims to investigate the characteristics of the special-grade teachers, probe into the external factors that influence their professional development and delineate the different stages of their professional development. It also reviews the existing problems in the post-special-grade teacher phase and finds potential solutions. Based on the research of the 16 special-grade teachers, I managed to find answers to the four research questions, as illustrated in Table 8.1:

Table 8.1 Research questions and findings

Research Questions	Research Findings
What are the key characteristics of the special-grade teachers?	(1) showing care toward their students; (2) formulating self-constructed approaches for educating students; (3) taking the “first-time” experiences seriously; (4) maintaining positive relationship with students; (5) being proud of their own abundant subject knowledge or unique skills; (6) applying student-centred learning; (7) keeping paying attention to the students’ progress; (8) having reflective awareness and skills; (9) showing teacher leadership; and (10) having awareness and actions of learning theories and broadening horizons
What are the crucial external factors influencing the special-grade teachers’ professional development?	(1) key individuals: head teachers, formal mentors, informal mentors and teaching research instructors; (2) critical incidents: teaching competitions, open lessons, essay competitions and the incident of getting awarded the special-grade teacher; and (3) environmental factors: the resources of and the atmosphere within the schools and the activities of the non-school organisations

What are the professional developmental stages of the special-grade teachers?	(1) the task-led stage; (2) the transitional stage; and (3) the notion-led stage
What are the existing problems in the practice of the post-special-grade teachers' work?	(1) the psychological imbalance incurred by the setting of the professional title of the <i>zhenggaoji</i> ; (2) the excessive amount of work detrimental to the special-grade teachers' professional development; (3) the lack of professional support influencing constant development of the special-grade teachers; and (4) the high level of stress led to by the harsh annual reviews

In this chapter, I discuss the ten characteristics of the special-grade teachers and the abilities reflected in the characteristics, the ten influencing factors of their professional development, and the features of the three stages of their development. I also draw attention to the important implications of the findings.

## 8.2 The characteristics of the special-grade teachers

### 8.2.1 The characteristics and the abilities reflected in the characteristics of the special-grade teachers

The first finding of the research indicates that the special-grade teachers possess ten common characteristics, as illustrated in Table 8.1 in the previous section. Based on the analysis of the ten characteristics of the special-grade teachers, I conclude them into Table 8.2 with five categories labelled as “being student-centred”, “learning ability”, “reflection ability”, “interpersonal ability” and “leadership”, respectively:

Table 8.2 The core abilities of the special-grade teachers

being student-centred	learning ability	reflection ability	interpersonal ability	leadership
showing care towards their students	being proud of their own abundant subject knowledge or unique skills	formulating self-constructed approaches for educating students	maintaining positive relationship with students	showing teacher leadership
taking the “first-time” experiences seriously	having awareness and actions of learning theories and broadening horizons	having reflective awareness and skills		
applying student-centred learning				
keeping paying attention to the students’ progress				

As Table 8.2 illustrates, the first column displays the educational idea of “student-centred” that the special-grade teachers held. It reveals their view of students from the four aspects of emotional input, inspiration of the students’ interest, adoption of the student-centred teaching methods and constant focus on the students’ academic progress. The second column demonstrates the special-grade teachers’ learning ability. Specifically, possessing abundant knowledge not only showed the solid knowledge bases for teaching (Shulman, 1987; Turner-Bisset, 1999), but also showed their constant learning ability, as they kept themselves updated with the leading-edge knowledge in their subjects. Besides, learning theories and broadening horizons meant that they kept engaging in in-service learning, reading and travelling. They saw education from different perspectives, striving to gain more comprehensive and in-depth thoughts

about education. These all reflected their constant learning ability. In the third column, the special-grade teachers' reflection ability is shown in their formulating of the self-constructed approaches for educating students. It required the special-grade teachers to be able to sum up previous experiences, discover the principles of educating people, find the medium to deliver it and form the modes of it. This reflected the systematic and rational mindset of the special-grade teachers. In the fourth column, maintaining positive relationship with students demanded the teachers' decent interpersonal ability. The fifth column manifests the special-grade teachers' ability to influence peers, students, schools and districts. This accumulated favourable reputation and remarkable achievements for them.

The characteristics of the special-grade teachers were underpinned by a set of core abilities. According to my findings, I drew a diagram that displays the idea and abilities that the special-grade teachers possessed, as illustrated in Figure 8.1:

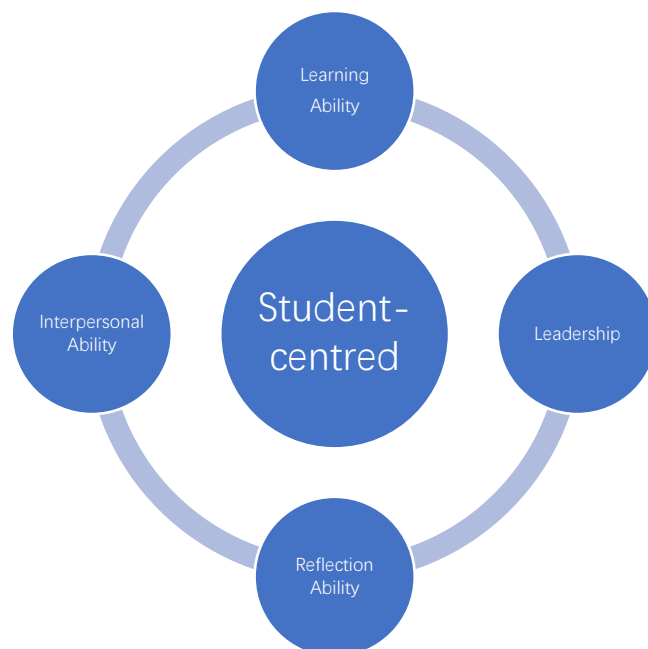


Figure 8.1 The “one educational idea and four abilities” model

The educational idea of being student-centred held by the special-grade teachers is located in the middle of the diagram. The significance of their work was to promote the students' all-round development through their professional behaviours, building a firm foundation for the students' learning and work in the future. With such an educational idea, it is surrounded by four professional abilities that the special-grade teachers possessed, which are learning ability, interpersonal ability, reflection ability and leadership.

The learning ability encompassed three aspects: the first aspect was the awareness of longing for learning; the second aspect was the ample knowledge that they mastered and the adept skills that could underpin the student-centred educational idea; and the third aspect was the creation of the innovative practices based on theories. The interpersonal ability, in this research, was mainly demonstrated in establishing and maintaining positive relationship with the students, and in expressing gratitude towards their leaders, colleagues and mentors who helped them during their developmental courses. The reflection ability was uncovered in their inclination and behaviours of "seeing", "thinking" and "showing", as depicted in Figure 8.2:

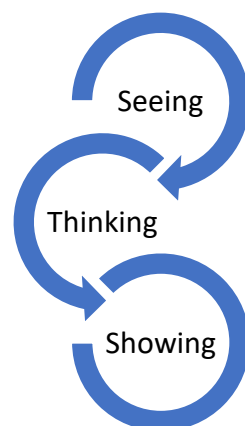


Figure 8.2 The elements of reflection ability



Seeing referred to the ability to find problems in their common and daily working situations and teaching practice. Thinking, on the basis of seeing, was the ability to analyse the found problems, attribute them to different causes, and put forward the strategies and methods to solve the problems. Showing was deemed the ability to present and reinforce the strategies and methods derived from thinking through essay writing, practical application of their ideas and so on. The leadership was the ability to exert positive influence on peers, schools and districts actively or passively. The “one educational idea and four abilities” were shown in most cases of the interviewed special-grade teacher and were therefore viewed as the representative characteristics of the outstanding teachers. In some sense, this diagram sets goals to develop outstanding teachers.

### 8.2.2 The other characteristics among the special-grade teachers

When I investigated the first research question, I found the ten prevailing characteristics of the special-grade teachers. In the previous section, I summarised them into the “one educational idea and four abilities” model. It is necessary to point out that these characteristics were ubiquitous among the interviewed special-grade teachers. Apart from these, I also found a number of characteristics which were not prevalently shown but were distinctive. For instance, Guo, Liu, Liang and Tian all emphasised diligence; Yu, Sun and Wan highlighted innovation; Wu and Jia underscored personal management; Guo paid attention to resilience; and Zhang referred to team management. These were the individual characteristics reflected in themselves, which played an important role in making them outstanding teachers.

To be more specific, for Guo and Liu, in addition to doing the jobs that every teacher would do, they never stopped writing reflections. This was something that they did actively, rather than being required by the schools to do so. It almost became the routine for Liu to stay up till late night, while Guo’s half-day rest on Sundays was utilised both to

catch up on some sleep that she lacked during the week, and to save energy for the next week's work. Besides, for Liang, showing himself as a knowledgeable person meant that he had to do plenty of reading and research. Moreover, Tian was busy with coping with every single task in both his full- and part-time jobs, which scarcely left him with any time for leisure. Furthermore, Wu and Jia were strict in their self-discipline, as shown in Wu's quitting of smoking and drinking and in Jia's way of life that might minimise the chance of getting illness summarised from her experience. They were not only strict in disciplining themselves, but also passed their thoughts and actions onto their students, since they would like the students to enjoy a healthy way of life and learning.

The most notable case could be the one of Guo regarding her resilience. The setback that she experienced in the initial phase of her career did not make her remain depressed for long. However, it spurred her passion in learning the rules of the Chinese language teaching. As she mentioned several times in her interviews, despite her intelligence quotient and emotional quotient being not very high, she was great in adversity quotient. This was reflected in her quick recovering from suffering the setback, driven by her love of education, her care toward the students and her interest in educational research. In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of research investigating teachers' resilience (e.g., Beltman et al. 2011; Q. Gu & Day, 2013; Mansfield et al., 2016). These scholars look at resilience like something such as teachers' optimism, bravery and determination from the perspectives of work motives, interpersonal relations, work environment and so on. At the same time, they stressed the importance of fostering teachers' resilience. From Guo's case, it could be seen that a range of qualities, including proactive motives toward her work, rationality, not following things blindly (for example, not simply following other opinions about her own teaching) and gauging situations well, all helped her get rid of the adversity rapidly and shaped her into an outstanding teacher. This might provide another perspective for relevant research to work on.

### 8.2.3 Implications of the ideas and abilities of the special-grade teachers for teacher professional development

The findings about the special-grade teachers' characteristics and the discussion in relation to their educational ideas and abilities inform teacher development and teacher education from three points: Firstly, in pre-service and in-service training for teachers, I suggest that the "one educational idea and four abilities" model could be used to form a part of the training system. To justify, first, the student-centred educational idea is the grounding in the profession of teacher, given that it is the real people with emotions, needs and pursuit of development that the teachers work to serve, rather than materialised products. Hence, the teachers were supposed to perceive and respond to the students' emotions and needs, facilitating their mental and physical growth as well as their intelligence development. Besides, it is necessary to develop the teachers' ability of critical thinking, which would also enhance their reflection ability. It means that the teachers have to apprehend the concept of critical thinking and suspend their current mode of working in which they tend to act pointlessly and teach with superficial understanding. The emphasis is put on developing the teachers' ability to summarise, extract and write and helping them form the practical wisdom in accordance with the principles of education. This would boost their in-depth understanding about the profession of teacher. Moreover, it is important to cultivate the teachers' self-management and social ability, making them communicators and collaborators with stable emotions and strong interpersonal relationships. Further, the teachers should be made optimistic, tenacious and resilient individuals, and they need to pass on these qualities to peer teachers, forming a community with positive energy. Last, according to the different developmental phases and actual situations of the teachers, different tiers of goals need to be set in order to suit the developmental needs of different teachers.

Secondly, while taking the "one educational idea and four abilities" model as five themes, we could collect the teachers' cases in their practice and develop suitable curriculum resources, and it would form a systematic teacher training programme. According to the

analysis of data, almost every special-grade teacher had relevant cases under the five themes. To draw the reflection ability as an example, Sun, influenced by the traditional Chinese culture, appreciated Wang Yang-ming's thoughts of unity of knowledge and action and his quality of grittiness. He put forward his ideas of educating people by focusing on determination set-up, integration of knowledge and action to achieve good marks, and diary writing as a means of reflection. For another instance, when Chen found the difference in the excellent teachers' delivery of teaching between open lessons and normal lessons, she was inspired to ponder what good teaching should be like. Then, with integration of teaching theories in English language, she invented her own teaching methods for the development of students' English proficiency and intercultural communication competence. In Guo's case, she took the question of what kind of Chinese language lessons the students would like as a starting point to review her teaching and created her "three-joy Chinese language" pedagogical method through research projects. Among these cases, almost every special-grade teacher experienced the process of "seeing", "thinking" and "showing", and finally formed their own educating or teaching features. These cases could be applied as curriculum resources in teacher training. The professionals might research these cases systematically first and then develop a series of training programmes in regard to different developmental phases of teachers.

Thirdly, the special-grade teachers could be used as training resources, and themed research on them could be organised. Undoubtedly, the special-grade teachers were the representatives of outstanding teachers. They were the ones possessing the "one educational idea and four abilities" and they could certainly be resources for teacher education. In China, there was a successful case of how to promote the special-grade teachers' resource advantages, while the case has not been much promoted. T. Zhang (2015) recorded the details of the case: Wu Zheng-xian, a well-known special-grade teacher in maths in Beijing, developed a "1+5+N" teacher development mode with her research team. In it, the "1" referred to herself and the work studio consisting of 72 maths teachers from different districts of Beijing. The "5" referred to the five sub-studios

voluntarily set up by the teachers in the suburbs where resources were not rich. The “N” referred to the various schools and the wide range of teachers that the studio and sub-studios influenced. The research practice of a number of years gained her plentiful outcomes. For example, Wu Zheng-xian refined her own educational ideas of children further and published three monographs. Besides, many teachers learned her educational thoughts and teaching skills and became backbone teachers in their local areas. Moreover, all the maths teachers in three remote suburbs engaged in the teacher training programme developed in her research activities, and the teachers found it effective. Yet, this mode of work has not been promoted broadly in China. It is therefore recommended that the governmental department takes such mode of work seriously and promotes it so that the special-grade teachers, as training resources, can exert more positive influence on more teachers.

### 8.3 The analysis of the external influencing factors on the special-grade teachers’ professional development

#### 8.3.1 The external factors influencing the special-grade teachers

This research presents ten crucial external factors that played significant roles in the special-grade teachers’ professional development. The ten factors were of three types, including key individuals (head teachers, formal mentors, informal mentors and teaching research instructors), critical incidents (teaching competitions, open lessons, essay competitions and the incident of getting awarded the special-grade teacher); and environmental factors (the resources of and the atmosphere within the schools and the activities of the non-school organisations). These ten factors were the themes emerging from the analysis of the 16 participants’ interviews and were deemed the common external factors that boosted the special-grade teachers’ professional growth. Besides, there were also distinctive influencing factors in individual cases. For instance, Chen transferred to the key secondary school in the province, got the opportunity to teach Mandarin in the UK, and did the in-service learning programs at Bachelor and Master

levels, which all had a huge impact on her professional development. Yu's experience of volunteer teaching shaped the students, the school and herself. Analysing both the common and the individual influencing factors would help us to develop effective and widely applicable interventions, which would be beneficial to teachers' professional development in general.

### 8.3.2 Implications of the influence of the external factors on the special-grade teachers' professional development

In reviewing the ten external influencing factors, it can be found that the outcomes that the factors brought to the special-grade teachers were the power of exemplary figures and the opportunities, platforms or environments that were beneficial to their professional development. In general, the power of exemplary figures referred to the effect of the exemplary figures whom they set for themselves. The exemplary figures tended to be their formal or informal mentors who guided their development. For example, as Zhang just entered the profession, he took his mentor as an example. The mentor taught him to care about his students and get on kindly with others, and also equipped him with necessary teaching skills. In other cases, Liu, Wu and Sun viewed the famous or special-grade teachers as their examples and learned the professional spirit, knowledge and skills from them. This led them to become outstanding teachers. These echo the findings of X. Jin et al.'s (2019) research, as they confirm the effect of the expert teachers on novice teachers. They believe that the support from expert teachers' both informs the novice teachers' choice of teaching methods and encourages their learning. Moreover, the head teachers created favourable school cultures (such as an atmosphere of motivating the teachers), built the platforms for the special-grade teachers to showcase themselves (such as organising teaching competitions), provided exercising opportunities (such as letting the special-grade teachers undertake open lessons and study abroad). These all indeed accelerated their growth. Furthermore, the schools and non-school organisations offered the environment and the opportunities that helped the special-grade teachers to expand their knowledge base and acquire more skills. For

these external factors that facilitated the professional development of the special-grade teachers, I would like to comment about the influence of three of the factors on the whole population of teachers by putting forward three points. To be specific, the three factors are concerned with the competitive events, the arrangement of open lessons and the effect of the influential special-grade teachers.

Firstly, the education departments should pay attention to a key issue, which is to what extent and on what scale the events with high competitiveness promoted the teachers' professional development. Most of the participants in this research referred to their experiences of teaching competition (as well as the essay competition). These competitions were deemed critical incidents in their professional careers, and apparently, the special-grade teachers were all the victors. To see the positive side of the matter, the competitions offered them the chances to stand out of the crowd, and while preparing for the competitions, they strengthened themselves, as they made great effort to get the impressive results. In the process of preparation, they enhanced and refined their teaching skills, and their impressive results tended to earn them more opportunities to demonstrate themselves. These were all the positive effects of the competitive events on the participating teachers. Nonetheless, for the negative concerns, focusing on these competitions cost the teachers a period of time in which they might neglect their normal work. Besides, the preparation for and participation in the competitions brought more stress and burden for them to bear, on top of that from their daily tasks. Also, the inconsistent evaluation criteria and subjective preferences of the judges might lead to unfairness that could do harm to the teachers.

Secondly, it is worth considering to what extent and on what scale the chances to do open lessons, which only centred around a minority of teachers, promoted teachers' professional development. Given that my research sample is a group of outstanding teachers, they tended to show their high level of teaching through undertaking open lessons for visitors at the schools. In the interviews, many of the special-grade teachers

mentioned doing open lessons, and this was believed to bring three kinds of benefits to the teachers. Specifically, they sharpened and enhanced their teaching skills in the process of preparation; they obtained useful opinions from the post-lesson reviews and feedbacks; and they gained more fame and reputation for doing the lessons. Nevertheless, it is necessary to point out that too many tasks of this kind gave rise to excessive mental stress for the special-grade teachers. Chen, for example, said that she often had nightmares before the open lessons. Due to worrying about the potential problems and mistakes appeared in her lessons, she would wake up suddenly at night. Other teachers also referred to the stress and anxiety that the open lessons had brought about. For this, I would like to put forward three suggestions. First, the number of open lessons that a special-grade teacher could do within a period of time should be capped in order to ensure his or her health and well-being. Second, in light of the benefits of doing open lessons, such opportunities should not be exclusive to the special-grade teachers. Rather, other teachers should be entitled to the chances of doing open lessons. Third, the special-grade teachers were a kind of valuable educational resource at schools that should be utilised to develop young teachers and facilitate the schools' development. However, they should by no means serve as a tool of demonstration purely for earning more honours for the schools.

Thirdly, in this research, before the participants became the special-grade teachers, they had already established relationships with other special-grade teachers in different ways. Many of the participants were mentees of the senior special-grade teachers. Besides, a small number of them took the well-known special-grade teachers as their informal mentors. They absorbed the teaching features of the informal mentors, learned their educational ideas and regarded them as mentors for life. The participants were influenced by the experienced special-grade teacher greatly. The experienced special-grade teachers played an important role in helping the participants to accumulate knowledge, improve skills, broaden horizons, and set objectives in their daily work. In my research, the senior special-grade teachers were the group of individuals who influenced the participants the most widely and deeply.



To analyse existence of the phenomenon, I sum up three important reasons. For the first reason, the senior special-grade teachers were part of the cohort of teachers themselves – they knew teachers the best. Their guidance to the new teachers fit well in the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) and was thus supposed to be very effective. For the second reason, the senior special-grade teachers set the basic standard of the outstanding teachers for the new teachers to follow. The answers to the questions, such as what educational ideas were good, what teaching methods were better and what kinds of behaviours were valued by educational authorities, were naturally provided by the senior teachers through their practice. This served as a means by which the teachers could assess themselves, which was helpful for them to develop their strengths and overcome their weaknesses rapidly and purposefully. For the third reason, the senior special-grade teachers were extremely familiar with the developmental path growing from a common teacher to an outstanding one. They knew clearly the ups and downs that the new teachers could face in the process. Hence, they could lead the new teachers to fulfil their objectives in an easier way, drawing on their own experiences. In summary, the senior special-grade teachers were significantly functional as resource of teacher training themselves.

Therefore, how to promote the special-grade teachers' functions so that they can facilitate other teachers' development better becomes a key issue to address. Based on my research, I have three recommendations. First, I suggest creating more chances for the new teachers to see the real work status of the special-grade teachers in their initial phase of their careers. This would help the new teachers connect their practice with that of the special-grade teachers and learn their skills and experience. To justify, Yu carried out lesson observation of a special-grade teacher for a year in the first year of work, which made her feel that loving education, being good at learning and having innovative practice were necessary characteristics for her to be a special-grade teacher. Otherwise, she would only be a workman of teaching, and she would “become neither a special-grade teacher, nor a backbone teacher”, according to her own words. This perception

later played a vitally important role in her designing of inquiry-based curriculum, in her fostering the students' scientific literacy and innovative spirit, and in her intentional planning of professional career. Similarly, in the starting year of work, Wu observed two special-grade teachers' daily work in two different cities. He believed that the influence of the face-to-face communication with the special-grade teachers was overwhelming, and he claimed that reading 10 books would not be as good as communicating in this way for an hour. These cases demonstrated that letting the new teachers observe the special-grade teachers' actual work, rather than just listening to their lectures, could have profound influence on the new teachers' development.

Second, given that most of the special-grade teachers had their own achievements in teaching and in the work of class teacher, it is recommended that the achievements could be spread further so that the special-grade teachers would have a greater influence on a larger scale. For those teachers who were interested in these achievements, they could borrow ideas from them and apply them into practice. To exemplify, Liu accidentally learned Li-Jilin's situational teaching theory and became interested in it. She put it into her practice and used Li-Jilin's books as reference books. Yet Li-Jilin was never aware that there was such a teacher working under her guidance. If there was a chance that Liu could meet and consult Li-Jilin in person, or a chance that Liu could work together with Li-Jilin, this method of teaching might have an even better effect and affect more teachers positively.

Third, since the special-grade teachers undertook the arduous daily task of teaching as well as taking responsibility for developing other teachers, these added too much pressure and burden to them, making them over exhausted. Thus, I suggest the relevant educational departments adjusting the focus of work of the special-grade teachers. There should be a better balance between the work of teaching and the work of developing other teachers, as this would make the special-grade teacher perform their jobs more effectively and reasonably, thereby making better contribution to education.

## 8.4 Analysis and application of the research on special-grade teachers' professional developmental stages

### 8.4.1 Analysis of the special-grade teachers' professional developmental stages

Based on the analysis of data, I divided the professional development of the special-grade teachers into three stages and described the features of each stage from the dimensions of work notion, work practice and scale of recognition. I also used three cases to demonstrate the developmental features of the special-grade teachers vividly in the three stages in Chapter 6. Having analysed the data systematically, I propose the division of the three stages based on the theories of teachers' professional development and of adult learning. I unfold my thoughts in three points.

For the first point, the concept of professional learning differs from the concept of professional development. My understanding about the two concepts draws on the two definitions from Jarvis (2004, p, 111) and Evans (2011, p. 867), which I described in Section 2.4.2 of the literature review chapter. While the former attaches more weight to the process, the latter focuses more on a permanent outcome. In relation to my research findings, the ending sign of the first stage (the task-led stage) and the beginning sign of the second stage (the transitional stage) are the reflection on one or several critical incidents. This also marks the start of the special-grade teachers' conscious learning. However, the second stage does not end until they achieve the learning results "with a degree of permanence that exceeds transitoriness" (Evans, 2011, p. 867) through a series of learning processes. As the data of the research suggested, they formulated one or several work notions, which was deemed the ending sign of the second stage. The work notion is defined as "relatively stable, long-standing and explicit work belief(s) that guide(s) a special-grade teacher's future practice, and eventually result(s) in self-constructed approaches and (or) methods", which is in line with the point of "permanence exceeding transitoriness" in Evans's (2011) definition of

professional development. This manifests that the special-grade teachers do not go through into the third stage of their professional development (the notion-led stage) until they have reached certain level of their professional learning via different ways.

For the second point, I focused on the combined effect of the different types of learning on the special-grade teachers' professional development, and constructed the three stages of the special-grade teachers' professional development with the explicit learning as the principal line since implicit learning processes and outcomes might be hard to capture either in the practice or in the researching situations. In terms of possible learning situations, Jarvis (2004, pp. 107-108) identified six types (see Section 2.4.1), each of which was reflected in the special-grade teachers' development. To draw a number of examples, Chen improved her educational background by undertaking a Master programme, which was a formal-intended type of learning situation. When Chen found the point of integration of the knowledge that she learned from her Master programme into her current practical exploration, she was in a formal-incidental learning situation. Additionally, as Chen realised in the lesson observation that what was recognised as good teaching was different from her conventional teaching, she was inspired to start her review and improvement of her teaching methods. This might not necessarily be the objective of the activity, nor Chen's objective of attending the activity. It was a contingent gain in this specific situation, belonging to a non-formal-incidental type of learning situation. Besides, the lesson observations organised by the schools, the teaching competitions and the mentors' instructions in Zhang's and other teachers' cases were of the non-formal-intended type. Moreover, as Guo and some others subscribed to a large number of journals and magazines for autonomous learning, they engaged in the informal-intended type of learning situation. Finally, it was an implicit-incidental type of learning situation in which seeing the students' paintings of the spring coming triggered Liu's reflection on her composition teaching. It can be seen that the special-grade teachers' learning verified Jarvis's theory of six types of learning situations. Nevertheless, given that the implicit learning was hard to capture and that there was inadequate evidence indicating how the implicit learning advanced their professional

development, my division of the three professional developmental stages was based on the explicit learning of the special-grade teachers.

For the third point, my division of the three stages drew attention to the processes of the special-grade teachers' "micro-level professional development", which is put forth by Evans (2019, see Section 2.4.2). I took each of my participants as a unit of analysis, and looked specifically at how the special-grade teachers identified which ones of the previously-held professional work-related knowledge, understanding, attitudes, skills or competences needed to be displaced or replaced (Evans, 2019). Then, through the "mental internalisation process", they formed and developed their new professional understanding, and based on which, they updated their professional practice. In the first stage of their professional development (the task-led stage), by saying "no explicit work notion", I did not mean that they were not under guidance of any educational notion, but that they did not hold the relatively stable, long-standing and explicit work belief(s) that guide(s) a special-grade teacher's future practice, and eventually result(s) in self-constructed approaches and (or) methods. Besides, the ending sign was the reflection on one or several incidents did not imply that the special-grade teachers did not reflect at all in the first stage, but that the reflection was only restricted to the planning of the daily tasks. This belongs to one of the four reflective modes that Day (2004) proposes. That is, "preparation for what must be done to get by", which "will not be enough to ensure growth, for it is limited to feedback of experience by self on self" (p. 120). Only when the special-grade teachers started to reflect on one or several critical incidents did they enter the second stage of their professional development (the transitional stage).

In the transitional stage, the starting point often took a certain critical incident as a trigger that stimulated the special-grade teachers' "incidental learning" (Marsick & Watkins, 2015) which is defined as "a subcategory informal learning" and "a byproduct of some other activity" (p. 12). Jarvis (2004) termed the process as "disjuncture", which is the "moment when the recognition occurs that the situation has become problematic"

(p. 107). This takes place when people interact with the social milieu and produce an episodic experience from which learning occurs. Based on the data analysis, drawing on this concept, I set reflection on one or several critical incidents as the ending point of the first stage (the task-led stage) and the beginning point of the second stage (the transitional stage). However, the appearance of the disjunction does not mean that the special-grade teachers can immediately have a correct perception about the nature of the problem concerned with the disjuncture. They need to think, learn and internalise constantly so that they can gain one or several stable and long-standing work notions. The learning outcomes must be explicit, and only if they are explicit can they be discovered by researchers. The forming of this or these stable and long-standing work notion(s) marks the entry into the third stage of the special-grade teachers' professional development (the notion-led stage).

In the notion-led stage, the special-grade teachers have already got explicit work notions. The work notions are similar to what Kelchtermans (1993, p. 444) defined as the "subjective educational theory", which is defined as "a personal system of knowledge and beliefs about their job". For Kelchtermans & Vandenberghe (1994, p. 47), such a subjective educational theory "not only emphasizes the subjective, but also to some extent the rational structure [integration and organization] of this body of knowledge"; and it is also "part of a professional self and as such a product of a professional biography". Compared with Kelchtermans's definition, the work notion found in this research stresses more on its stable, long-standing and guiding nature. In the third stage of their professional development, the special-grade teachers, guided by this or these work notion(s), explore the work approaches or methods based on the work notion(s). This suggests that through long-term learning and exploration, the special-grade teachers formed "durable, flexible, functional, meaningful, generalizable and application-oriented" learning outcomes (Simons et al., 2000, p. 1). As these work approaches or methods were recognised by the relevant authorities, they became the important reasons for which the special-grade teachers got awarded the honorary title. Indeed, these work approaches or methods reflect different forms of PCK, which is

teachers' understanding and enactment of how to teach or educate the students. It is noticeable that PCK theory highly focuses on subject. However, in my research, PCK is not only demonstrated in the subject teaching such as Guo's "three-joy" Chinese language teaching method, but also in the educating work as class teachers such as Sun's philosophically rooted approach (see Section 4.2.1) and Tian's approach of character education (see Section 4.2.2). These suggest that the research on PCK should widen its scope and cover the different areas of the teachers' work.

#### 8.4.2 Discussion of the journey of the special-grade teachers' professional development

For the journey of the special-grade teachers' professional development, I propose three arguments: (1) reflection ran through the whole course of the special-grade teachers' professional development, while the content and modes of the reflection varies. (2) from the entry to the second stage to the award of the special-grade teacher, there was a featured developmental path embedded in the special-grade teachers' professional development; and (3) after they had become special-grade teachers, some of the special-grade teachers experienced the second-curve development that ensured their sustainable development. I illustrate them in detail, with a figure (Figure 8.3) showing the links between all the elements.

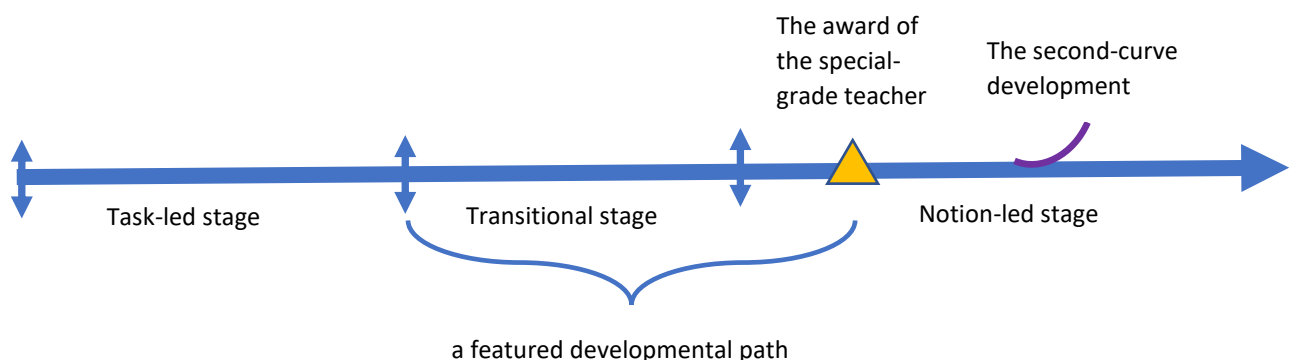


Figure 8.3 The links between the special-grade teachers' professional developmental stages, a featured developmental path, the award of the special-grade teachers and the second-curve development

For the first argument, in terms of the content of the reflection, the reflection in the three stages of the special-grade teachers' professional development essentially echoes Gimmett et al.'s (1990, cited in Day, 2004) three types of reflection which are "technical", "deliberative" and "dialectical" (see Section 2.4.2 in detail) . In the first stage, the special-grade teachers' reflection was basically restricted to the technical level, which meant that the reflection mainly aimed to enhance the efficiency of the delivery of existing teaching but not to question its value. Yet, they invested in a great amount of time in "maintaining the system that reflection is enacted as an activity in which vagueness is normal, and values are left unexamined in the preparation for what must be done to get by today and tomorrow" (Day, 2004, p. 120). It was hard for this type of reflection to ensure substantial improvement of the teachers' professional level. Their reflection was no more limited to this type, when they started to reflect on one or several critical incidents consciously or unconsciously. As they found the conflicts between their previous experience and their current experience, they entered the second stage of their professional development (the transitional stage). In the meantime, their reflection switched to "deliberative" from the "technical" type, and they needed to choose from a number of alternative views and practices of teaching. Ultimately, through different forms of professional learning, they confirmed the work notions that they agreed to, which manifested that they reached the third stage of their professional development (the notion-led stage). In this stage, they adopted the "dialectical" reflection as the main type, which served as "as a means of transforming by reconstructing practice within concepts of social justice and emancipation" (Gimmett et al., 1990, cited in Day, 2004, p. 112). For the special-grade teachers, under the guidance of their favoured work notions, they constructed their distinctive teaching and educating approaches and methods.

With regard to the modes of the special-grade teachers' reflection, Day (2004) identify four types which are (1) preparation for what must be done to get by, (2) critical incidents, (3) autobiographical reflection and (4) action research. These four modes of



reflection are all shown in the professional development of the special-grade teachers. The special-grade teachers' reflection was basically limited to the first mode, preparation for what must be done to get by, in the first professional developmental stage (the task-led stage). Then, when they broke through the current mode of reflection and started to reflect on one or several critical incidents, they moved to the second stage of their professional development (the transitional stage). Thus, the reflection on critical incidents was taken as the starting point of the second stage, meaning that the reflection on critical incidents played a significant role in the special-grade teachers' professional development. As "events can only become 'critical incidents' afterwards, retrospectively" (Kelchtermans & Vandenberghe, 1994, p. 51), the interviewed special-grade teachers were better able to share their meaningful critical incidents with me in a historical and interpretive way. It was the critical incidents that became the trigger which helped the special-grade teachers to reflect more profoundly. Next, the mode of autobiographical reflection ran through every stage of most of the special-grade teachers, while the content and depth of the reflection might be different when they were in different stages. Finally, the action research was mainly embodied in the third stage (the notion-led stage) of some of the special-grade teachers. To exemplify, after confirming that she would let the students learn the Chinese language with full of joy, Guo applied for three research projects to undertake action research and eventually formed her own distinctive teaching feature. As can be seen, reflection was a basic way to promote the teachers' learning and development.

Secondly, as Figure 8.3 illustrates, it is interesting to note that from the entry to the second stage to the award of the special-grade teacher, a featured developmental path was embedded in the special-grade teachers' professional development. To be specific, they normally had distinctive characteristics in teaching or in the work of class teacher, which constituted an important condition for them to be awarded the special-grade teachers. By analysing their individual developmental paths in detail, I summarise that they tended to go through the five steps, which were triggering reflection, learning theories or learning from others, researching, practicing and forming of features (see

Figure 8.4). It is necessary to clarify that the five steps generally unfold in turn, but at times it can jump back to one or several previous steps. In this process, the special-grade teachers keep deepening their understanding of the work notions and form their teaching or educating features compatible with their teaching or educating styles.

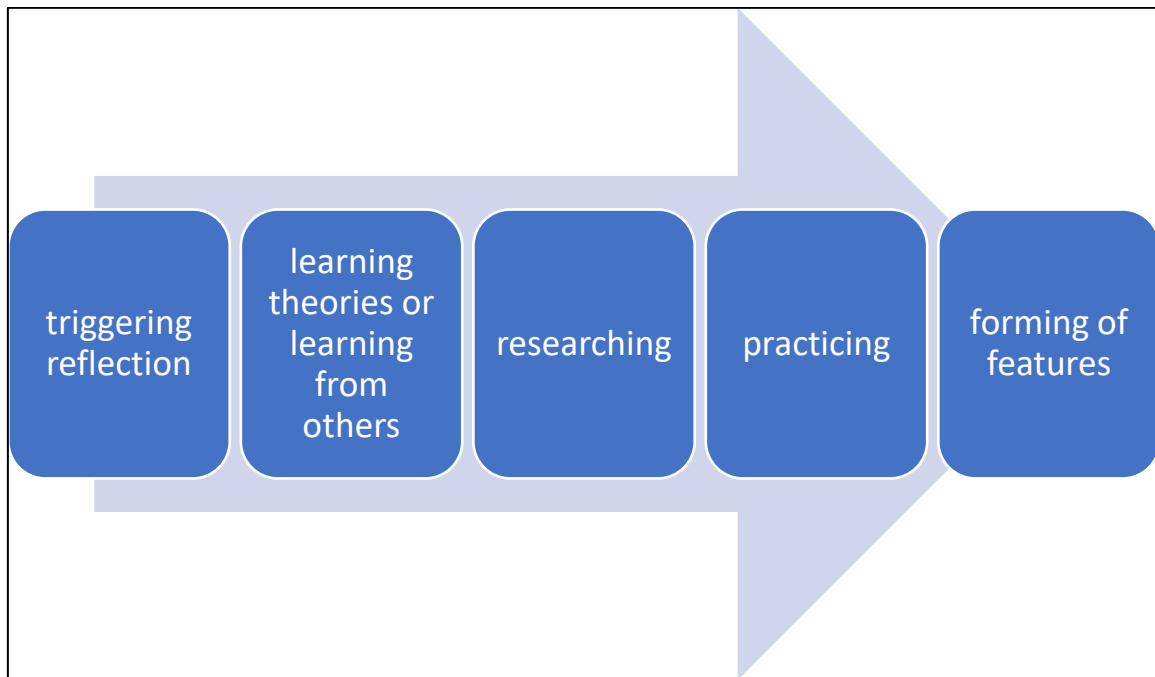


Figure 8.4 The special-grade teachers' featured developmental path

For example, in the first year of Chen transferring to a key secondary school in the province, she observed a demonstration lesson and found that the positively reviewed lesson was indeed different from other lessons. This triggered Chen, and she started to reflect what would be good teaching. Afterwards, based on her one-year learning of the Master programme and her comparative research of class teaching in China and in the UK, she established her teaching idea in the subject of English that she should focus on developing the students' listening, speaking, reading and writing, and intercultural communicative skills. In line with the teaching idea, she trailed and practiced her self-devised pedagogical methods for many years. In order to receive feedback about her pedagogical methods from peer teachers, she did an open lesson using the methods in

front of hundreds of people. Finally, she got recognition from the peer teachers and formed her own teaching features.

Likewise, the forming of Guo's "three-joy Chinese language" teaching feature also experienced such a process. Since she became a teacher after graduation, she naturally viewed that the Chinese language teaching should inspire the students' interest. It was necessary to make the students enjoy the Chinese language, and the students should be full of passion in learning it. However, owing to the influence of the examination-oriented education in China, the parents believed that being too active might distract their children from concentrating on learning and made complaint to the school. She was thus removed from the post of class teacher, but still remained the work as a Chinese language teacher in this class. In fact, Guo met her Waterloo in the initial phase of her professional career, which triggered her reflection. Through reflection, she still held the belief firmly that her lessons should arouse the students' interest and passion in learning, but she needed to grasp the rules in the Chinese language teaching. Since then, she learned two special-grade teachers' featured teaching and applied to carry out three research projects in total, which enriched her own methods of teaching. Over many years of research and practice, she ultimately formed her own teaching features.

From the two cases above, we can see that in their second and third developmental stages, there embedded the five-step featured developmental path. Indeed, this featured developmental path was also a journey of professional learning for the special-grade teachers. This process of learning verified three characteristics that the special-grade teachers possessed as learning professionals (Simons & Ruijters, 2004, see Section 2.4.2). In the practice of the special-grade teachers' daily teaching and educating as a subject teacher and class teacher, they enriched their professional knowledge and enhanced their professional skills through implicit and explicit learning from practice; they strengthened their knowledge bases and educational backgrounds by engaging in some programmes, such as Master- and Bachelor-level studies; they utilised action

research to conduct inquiry learning; and via the critical reflection, they re-examined their norms and values to develop their professional insights; by means of formulating their own teaching and educating features, publishing monographs, doing lectures, and having studios, they contribute to the further development of the teachers, the schools and the districts. All these different learning experiences resulted in their development of PCK in their own context, and moreover, their PCK was partly demonstrated in their teaching or educating features. Hence, we can see that although not all teachers can be considered as “learning professionals”, the group of the special-grade teachers basically displayed the characteristics of the learning professionals. Admittedly, drawing on the concept of learning professional helps me understand the professional lives of the special-grade teachers.

Besides, with regard to the literature reviewed, L. Jin (2011) divides the professional development of the special-grade teachers into the three phases which are the adaption phase, the crucial phase and the breakthrough phase, whilst S. Yang (2015) sees it as having the four phases, namely the career-beginning phase, the professionally-developing phase, the job-motivating phase and the spirit-transcending phase. Both scholars put an emphasis on the respective second phases which are viewed as a critical period of time. They argue that if targeted support can be made available to the special-grade teachers during this period, the teachers can progress impressively. However, if the teachers missed the period, it would be hard for them to overcome the hardships impeding the progress in their professional development. In my research, there is no evidence in the findings that supports the argument explicitly. The participants gradually gained recognition through long persistence in learning and researching, while the triggering of reflection by certain incidents was a crucial point of their professional development. Moreover, both L. Jin (2011) and S. Yang (2015) acknowledge that there exists a plateau period prior to the special-grade teachers’ award of the title. S. Yang (2015) and others even attributes the teachers’ failure to achieve the award of the special-grade teacher to their incompetence to get through the plateau period. In relation to my research, before the participants became the special-grade teachers, the

plateau period was not found to appear. Nevertheless, some claimed that having achieved the award of the title, they entered a situation in which they could hardly achieve anything higher than their previous accomplishments. The situation is similar to the plateau period, while it did not appear until they had already become the special-grade teachers. This is not completely consistent with what the literature suggests. Apparently, the issues around the crucial phase and the plateau period still demand further research investigation for better clarity and enrichment.

Thirdly, as shown in Figure 8.3, after they had become the special-grade teachers, some of them experienced the second-curve development that ensured their sustainable development. As Cioclov and Lala-Popa (2017) argued, the concept of the second curve was put forward by Handy (2015) and was concerned with selecting the right time for implementing a change. To be more specific, it is worth noting that the sigmoid curve, also termed as the S curve, is a tightly related concept to the second curve concerning the timing of change. In both personal and professional contexts, the S curve is deemed a pivotal concept representing sustainable growth. The cyclic structure of the S curve, according to Tolan (2009, cited in Cioclov & Lala-Popa, 2017), consists of three main phases that every activity passes through, which are the Learning phase, the Growth phase and the Decline phase. In the first phase, individuals work hard to learn and understand, while they might see little improvement. Thus, it can be a massively frustrating phase. In the second phase, all the effort made in the former phase appears to pay off, and the individuals' development reaches its peak during stagnation. In the third phase, as energy level decreases, things become challenging, and it is typically the time when individuals favour a change. Any change is expected to be implemented in the Growth phase prior to the point of stagnation in order to activate the second-curve development at the most beneficial time. The concept of the second curve was proposed to prevent individuals from joining the natural Decline phase of the first curve.

Nonetheless, not all of the participants in the research experienced the second-curve

development. Overall, after they became the special-grade teachers, they entered one of the following four situations. In the first situation, they maintained their work practice without making breakthrough. They tended to feel tired, seeming to reach the bottleneck of the development. In the second situation, as they carried on with their work practice, they worked passionately. They felt that they were in continuous improvement. In the third situation, they transferred to work in better-developed economic and educational areas through the large city's talent recruitment programme. They first applied their successful experience and practical outcomes in the new work environment. When they found the problems and weaknesses of the application, they modified their approaches and methods. In this way, they kept updating their practical experience. To draw Guo as an example, when she applied her "three-joy Chinese language" at her new school, she enhanced this particular teaching and research outcome further, enabling it to suit the needs of the students who grew up in different circumstances. This is consistent with S. Li's (2019) theory of first-curve innovation which refers to the constant innovation in one's first-curve development. In the fourth situation, based on their previous work, they developed new programmes or projects, in order to achieve further development. For instance, with her previous experience of curriculum innovation, Yu founded the ecological garden which obviously became a new domain of personal development for her. Besides, after Chen left her former school, she embarked on curriculum research in which she was interested, rather than being complacent with her previous achievements. I use the term "second-period innovation" to describe the fourth situation which is in line with what S. Li (2019) defines as discontinuous innovation. It ensures a teacher's constant development through different approaches, when the teacher transfers from one domain to another. Whilst the crucial point of the second-curve development is the timing of starting it, this doctoral study shows no evidence of the special-grade teachers selecting the point of time sensibly to enter their second-curve development. Perhaps, a thorough inquiry into the special-grade teachers' motives of moving from the under-developed areas to large cities could build a better understanding about their second-curve development. This certainly invites further research to be conducted in the future for more supporting evidence.

### 8.4.3 Application of the research on special-grade teachers' professional developmental stages

According to the analysis and discussion of the special-grade teachers' professional developmental stages in the previous sections, I make three recommendations. First, teachers should learn to reflect. Reflection, being an integral part of the teachers' professional development, has different ways to practice. I suggest that at the very beginning of the teachers' careers, they should be equipped with the knowledge of how to reflect on their work and on themselves. This would facilitate their seeing and thinking and aid them in forming innovative practice.

Second, teachers need to learn how to put their practice into outcomes. Based on the analysis of data, the participants in the research paid great attention to summarising and extracting the teaching and educating methods in their practice, mainly by means of writing. Among the 16 special-grade teachers, some of them developed the habit of writing and they wrote different materials almost every day. Others were also willing to write, as they could present their experience, lessons, thoughts and innovation in this way. During their professional developmental courses, many of them were encouraged to write reflections by their senior colleagues, and based on the reflections, they formulated their teaching and educating outcomes afterwards. These outcomes were also used to apply for the award of the special-grade teacher. The process of writing was an important approach to constant summarising of experience and forming teaching and educating outcomes, which became the integrated part of their PCK.

Third, the special-grade teachers should learn the theories about the second-curve development, thereby finding feasible ways to maintain their constant development. In the current research, there is no clear evidence manifesting that they planned their

professional development by taking advantage of the second-curve theory. However, there are cases showing that the special-grade teachers pursued better development, such as the cases in which they moved to work in better-developed economic and educational areas, and the case of Chen in which she transferred to an international school to undertake curriculum research. These cases indicate that there is a need for the special-grade teachers to master relevant theories in order that they can plan their professional development better.

## 8.5 Analysis and recommendations about how to enhance the special-grade teachers' professional development in the post-special-grade phase

In terms of the existing problems in the post-special-grade phase, the special-grade teachers' psychological imbalance due to the introduction of the title of *zhenggaoji*, the excessive amount of work, the lack of professional support and the high level of stress were found to be the predominant ones. In Chapter 7, I analysed the reasons behind the existence of the problems from the special-grade teachers' own perspectives. In this chapter, I will discuss the two issues which are the impact of the introduction of the title of *zhenggaoji* on the policy of the special-grade teachers and the outflow of the special-grade teachers from the under-developed areas, and will make recommendations for both issues.

### 8.5.1 Analysis and suggestions on the introduction of the title of *zhenggaoji* teacher policy

As stated in Section 7.1, the introduction of the title of *zhenggaoji* as a policy of teacher led to many of the special-grade teachers' psychological imbalance. Having examined the policy, I find that the policy has four problems that contribute to the phenomenon.



Firstly, it does not take into consideration the historical development of the special-grade teacher policy that the special-grade teacher was brought into play in order to enhance the excellent teachers' remuneration and commend their outstanding performance. After its suspension due to the Cultural Revolution in China, the policy resumed in 1993. The policy stipulates the special-grade teacher as a title with professionalism and advancement used to commend the extra-ordinary teachers. They receive a government subsidy each month and continue to enjoy the same amount of subsidy after retirement.

At the practice level, many scholars and educational practitioners mistakenly believed that the special-grade teacher was the highest rank in the professional title system for primary and secondary school teachers, whereas only a small number of people were aware that the highest rank was the senior-grade teacher and that the special-grade teachers was not included in the professional title system while only remained as an honorary title. It was not until 2015 that the academics and educational workers realised that the special-grade teacher was not part of the professional title system, when the four ranks in the previous system changed to five, with the addition of *zhenggaoji* to the new system. The reform of the system made the special-grade teachers examined the difference between the *zhenggaoji* teacher and the special-grade teachers and the overlap of the two titles and gave rise to their psychological imbalance, which has been presented in detail in Section 7.1. At the policy level, the main reason attributing to the imbalance is that the policy makers do not handle the relationship between different policies. Specifically, although the special-grade teacher does not belong to the professional title system, it represents the highest standard and honour of the primary and secondary school teachers that was confirmed by the policies. The fact that they enjoy the government subsidy even after they retire seems to imply that the special-grade teacher was at a higher level than the previous top rank, the senior-grade teacher. Nonetheless, since no professional title existed to match the level, the title of the special-grade teacher was used to represent the teachers at such an exceptional level. In other words, there lacked a position for the special-grade teacher in the professional

title system. If, in the reform of the professional title system in 2015, the special-grade teacher was classified as *zhenggaoji*, the problem of lack of position could have been solved. However, policy makers completely overlooked the historical development of the professional title system and the relationship between the old and new policies, as they added *zhanggaoji* to the system. Since the selection criteria of *zhenggaoji* are similar to that of the special-grade teacher and *zhenggaoji* exist along with the special-grade teacher, it results in the psychological imbalance of the interviewed special-grade teachers.

Secondly, because *zhenggaoji* is the highest rank in the professional title system, only the most excellent experienced teachers would qualify for the title. This implies that the special-grade teachers and other outstanding teachers without the title are the most direct stakeholders in that the title matters the most to them. For a long time, the special-grade teachers were deemed to be the best group of teachers who were role models in the aspects of teacher morality, educating people and teaching, and others tended to learn from them. The introduction of the *zhenggaoji* meant that in order to be still seen as the best group of teachers, they would either need to reinforce their top position by obtaining the *zhenggaoji* title or end up with accepting the fact that they might not be regarded as the most excellent ones. In the former case, they would need to undertake a greater number of tasks to prove themselves, and in the latter case, they would adjust their mentality and accept the reality. Both cases would add extra mental burden to the special-grade teachers. For the excellent teachers who do not achieve the award of the special-grade teacher, they would be at a disadvantage if they competed with those who did achieve the award, as the special-grade teachers might be considered prior to those without the title. This might diminish the excellent teachers' enthusiasm in work.

Thirdly, the fact that the special-grade teacher policy and the *zhenggaoji* policy are in effect at the same time increases the difficulty in implementing the policies. There is

little difference in the standard of award between the two titles, which means that a large number of special-grade teachers have been up to the standard of being the *zhenggaoji*. With the special-grade title, it appears to be wasteful of resources for them to apply for the *zhenggaoji*. In terms of the sense of honour, there would be just a low marginal effect, since they had already gained the title of the special-grade teacher which was traditionally viewed as the supreme honour. Achieving the *zhenggaoji* might not make them feel much more honoured, and thus they might not have a strong desire to apply for it. Besides, the policy makers are supposed to balance the relationship between the two policies. If the differences between the two policies are not clearly identified, the policies will not exert their impact to the full extent, and this is exactly the case. In the interviews, some of the special-grade teachers complained that they did not see the necessity of introducing the new *zhenggaoji* policy, given that the special-grade teacher policy was in place. Without being clear about the difference between the two, the special-grade teachers hesitated about applying for the *zhenggaoji* title. Obviously, this requires the policy implementers to utilise their rationality and wisdom to clear the doubt of the applicants, which indeed increases the level of difficulty in implementing the policies. Moreover, according to the analysis of data, some school leaders stripped the special-grade teachers of the chance to apply for the *zhenggaoji*, while let other teachers go for it in that they would like a larger scale of teachers to benefit from the various opportunities. However, this could harm the special-grade teachers' interest, such as their salary. The special-grade teachers might feel unfair, which could damage their job satisfaction.

Fourthly, the concurrence of the two policies undermines the effectiveness of the policy of the special-grade teacher. The special-grade teacher has long been considered to be the peak of professional standard and honour that many excellent teachers strive to reach throughout their professional career. The introduction of the *zhenggaoji* policy made the special-grade teachers feel that the title of the special-grade teacher emphasised more on the aspect of teacher morality than teaching, whereas the *zhenggaoji* title attached more weight to the aspect of teaching. Thus, gaining the

former title would imply that the teachers were high in teacher morality while might not be as outstanding in teaching as those with latter title. This certainly decreased the value of the title of the special-grade teacher, thereby reducing the incentive and effectiveness of the policy.

In light of the four problems stated, as well as my description and analysis of the special-grade teachers' true feelings in Section 7.1 of Chapter 7, I put forward three points of suggestions for the policy makers' reference. First, the relationship between the special-grade teacher and the *zhenggaoji* teacher should be clarified, so that the positive effect of both titles could be promoted. Second, the selection rules of the *zhenggaoji* teacher across different places should be unified for the panel of judges to abide by accordingly. Third, there should be limited numbers of places for the management posts and for the teacher posts respectively, as this would boost the growth of both the school leaders and the teachers.

### 8.5.2 The outflow of talents in the economic and educational under-developed areas due to the transferring of the special-grade teachers

Among the 16 participants whom I interviewed, three had always been working in the same place, a large city in China where they were awarded the special-grade teachers, while the other 13 came from other cities or provinces, including second-, third-, fourth- and fifth-tier cities and even remote counties and towns. After they became the special-grade teachers, the 13 special-grade teachers moved to the large city from their small cities, counties and towns by means of different talent recruitment programmes. As a result, they gained better living conditions, more opportunities for their professional development and higher salaries. In the meantime, they contributed their effort to improving the large city's educational standard. These were the positive effects on the special-grade teachers themselves as well as on the large city. However, their original cities lost the excellent teachers, which led to the outflow of talent at the local places. I

discuss this issue in detail below.

Through investigation, three reasons were believed to give rise to the phenomenon. For the first reason, China was a country that developed highly unequally in economics and education. While the south-east part of China was well-developed, the middle-west part was relatively under-developed. Large cities were developed well, whereas the middle and small cities were not the case, and the difference was huge. There were abundant resources and plentiful development opportunities in the well-developed areas. The special-grade teachers came to the well-developed places for better professional development, remuneration and quality of life. These points are described in Section 5.3.

For the second reason, some systems in China, such as the household registration system and the system of National College Entrance Examination, as well as local policies regarding exceptional talent recruitment, could bring benefits to the special-grade teachers and their families, which facilitated their migration from the under-developed to the well-developed places. These benefits would not be easily available if they stayed in their original under-developed areas. To exemplify, it was easier for the children whose household registers were issued in Beijing, Shanghai or such megacities to attend schools of high educational quality. Besides, through the National College Entrance Examination, they would have better chances of going to prestigious universities. These appealed to the special-grade teachers strongly and motivated them to make a move. Furthermore, the talent recruitment policies in some well-developed areas involved concessional terms in high salary, house purchase, household registration, spouse employment, children schooling and so on, which encouraged the special-grade teachers to transfer to these well-developed areas for their personal and family welfare.

For the third reason, my research suggests that after they got awarded the special-grade teachers, they expected to achieve further development. They sought to gain their first-

curve continuous development or second-curve innovative development. In light of this, if the local policies and environment could not suit the special-grade teachers' need of further development while made them immersed in the situation of excessive amount of teaching tasks and research activities and insufficient professional support, it would be likely for them to choose a place better for their development to work. For instance, Chen had the professional developmental need of curriculum development and construction, while her school could not suit her need, as they outsourced their business. In this case, Chen did not believe that she could gain the development that she expected, and she thus decided to transfer to an international school where she assumed the role of director of curriculum research and development. For Guo, she felt that she reached the bottleneck of her professional development at the local school. While she moved to a new school in a large city, she gained the excitement of "nirvana" (Guo's words), which proved the positive effect of the move on herself.

Nevertheless, developing a special-grade teacher demanded numerous years. The growth of a teacher could not be achieved without the teacher's own effort as well as the support from the school and the colleagues. Undoubtedly, the special-grade teachers' migration to the better-developed places led to the outflow of the local talents. For this issue, it would be unjustifiable to let the special-grade teachers stay in their local areas, if they had already had the desire to move to different places for better development. Here I make three suggestions for the policy makers to consider. First, at the level of country, the regulations that are detrimental to social equity and educational equity should be abolished step by step, and equal and fair social environment should be established instead. Second, the authorities should take responsibility for providing the special-grade teachers with quality professional learning and development opportunities. On the one hand, personalised trainings should be designed according to the professional needs of the special-grade teachers. On the other hand, the channels of professional learning should be broadened by the authorities in collaboration with the educational institutes in the well-developed areas. This would require the local government not only to recognise the importance of facilitating the professional

development of the teachers after they were awarded the special-grade title, but also to ensure the contribution of fund. Additionally, the authorities might invite professionals to help the local special-grade teachers design plans of professional development, which would assist them in having a smooth developmental course.

Third, the authorities should build high-end platforms of professional development for the special-grade teachers. On the so-called “high-end” platforms, the special-grade teachers would act as both leaders and the ones being led. They would not only supply their professional knowledge, skills and qualities, but also would promote their own gaining of knowledge, acquirement of skills and enhancement of professional qualities. It would be impossible to build such platforms on their own. They would need the educational leaders at different levels, such as the head teachers at schools and the heads of educational departments in the provinces, to become the builders for the platforms. To draw an example, there could be a designated place or occasion where the special-grade teachers could find domestic and international teachers with the same learning and research interests and make professional development partners with them. They could have learning activities on a regular basis and progress along with each other. In summary, it should be an issue of focus for the government at different levels and relevant educational authorities to offer the special-grade teachers better remuneration and developmental opportunities and make fair policies so that the teachers would be more willing to stay in the local places, rather than going to larger cities for better development. This is also an important means by which the educational departments could improve the educational standards in the under-developed areas.

### 8.5.3 Suggestions about the post-special-grade teachers’ professional development

In the previous two sections, I have discussed the policies relating to the special-grade teachers and the outflow of talents in the under-developed areas due to the transferring

of the special-grade teachers, and provided some recommendations. Besides, I presented four problems that the special-grade teachers encountered after they were awarded the title in Chapter 7. In this section, for the four questions, I give three suggestions to inform policy makers and educational leaders in China.

Firstly, better management mechanism should be established to alleviate the special-grade teachers' excessive stress derived from their work and the annual review of their title, so that their health and well-being could be ensured. More specifically, the relevant departments should first identify the special-grade teachers' areas of expertise in order to let the teachers take advantage of their expertise in leading and influencing others. For example, the departments might not arrange the special-grade teachers in a subject to review the work of the special-grade teachers in a different subject. This was to prevent them from wasting energy in an area of work in which they were not skilled. Moreover, given that many of the interviewed special-grade teachers complained about the burden in writing being too heavy and that writing high-quality pieces of work was indeed a time-consuming task, the relevant departments should consider the teachers' actual ability to write in the meantime of undertaking other tasks. It would be more likely for them to produce writing of really good quality if the quantity could be reduced reasonably. After all, the special-grade teachers are a group of teachers who hold themselves to very high standard with intention and actions of autonomous development. Hence, there is little to worry about leaving them with more room to develop themselves in the way they are more willing to. Conceivably, it would be easier for them to fulfil their full potential if the redundant content of review could be cut down to a more appropriate level. Furthermore, in a sense, good teachers are an indispensable part of good education and caring the teachers' well-being means valuing the future of education. Therefore, I recommend that the schools as well as the governmental departments should view enhancing the well-being of the teachers, especially the well-being of the special-grade teachers, as a foundational work to do, as the special-grade teachers, being the best among the peers with varied tasks to perform, are inevitably under great pressure at times. The well-being of the special-grade teachers deserves



more attention. Should relevant policies be laid down to ensure their welfare, they will be able to make greater contribution to the school and to education, which signifies a promising future for all parties involved.

Secondly, specific teams that could provide the special-grade teachers with targeted support should be built in order to facilitate the special-grade teachers' professional development. As presented in Section 7.3, before they were awarded the title, the special-grade teachers were well supported, while they did not gain enough professional support after they achieved the award. This caused them a status in which they had no substantive acquisition of information that could help develop them further and in which they only supported others. However, only if the special-grade teachers' knowledge structures and educational ideas got updated, could they provide the students and young teachers with professional service of high quality. For this, relevant departments could ask the specific teams to investigate the professional developmental needs of the special-grade teachers. The teams would then establish training modes suitable for promoting their development and organise training events and activities on a regular basis. For instance, they could organise seminars, forums or other kinds of meetings where the attendees could share their stories of professional growth and exchange ideas with others. This has the potential to enrich the experience of the special-grade teachers' professional lives, thereby boosting their development. It is worth noting, though, that having the specific teams requires support on the levels of policy, human resources, materials, finance, as well as professional support, which would be the issues for the educational management departments to consider.

Thirdly, the schools should let the special-grade teachers themselves determine whether they would enter a management post, based on their own professional developmental plan. From the research, it can be seen that most of the special-grade teachers were awarded with the title because they possessed strong professional abilities in teaching and educating students and they ever made significant contribution

to education. Nevertheless, whether or not they are suitable to be leaders is a different question. In China, it is a tradition that good teachers make officials. To explain, the good teachers tend to be promoted to be management leaders. If a promoted teacher works well as a management leader, then there will not be an issue of waste of talent. However, if the teacher performs badly in the management post, the school will just have an underperformed leader while the students will lose a good teacher meanwhile. Seemingly, excellent teachers could also do another type of job at the school well, such as administrative work, while it might not necessarily be the case. Indeed, there could be some teachers who excel in teaching work but are bad at administrative work, while they are still promoted to assume administrative or management posts after becoming the special-grade teachers. In this case, they would not play to their strengths and might become beginners in administration and management. Additionally, there is a traditional thought of “official standard” in China. That is, in general, being an official is precious and is thus prioritised. For promotion of leaders, people traditionally expect to move up along the rank, rather going down. If one gets promoted to be a leader while performs unsatisfactorily, then he or she might be removed from the leadership position and only remain in or return to the post of teacher. The teacher would have a deep feeling of losing face and might start to worry about being seen as an incompetent person by others because he or she is unable to stay in the powerful position. Hence, it is possible that for some of the teachers who got promoted, even if they found that the management posts did not suit them, they would rather maintain their positions to avoid humiliation.

Given the features of the Chinese culture, I believe that the special-grade teachers’ own opinions about becoming a management leader should be taken into account fully. They could assess their abilities first and then decide if they would leave the teacher’s post and engage in management work or undertake both the leader’s role and the teacher’s role at the same time. For the special-grade teachers who do not intend to be a management leader, it will be a better choice for them to remain as a teacher. While for those willing to be the leaders, they could have trial in the management work first

without leaving the teacher' post. At the end of the trial, if they excel in doing it and are pleased to continue the job, they can remain in the post; if they are not good at it or get bored with it, they can return to the teacher's post; and in case they can do well in both jobs, they will then decide which one to carry on with or do both simultaneously. In the period of trial, the teacher's post should still constitute the major proportion of their job, as this will prevent them from the potential embarrassment of returning to the teacher's post one day, if they cannot work well as leaders. When their leadership ability is proved strong in the trial of the management work, they should work mainly in the management post if they are allowed to continue the job. Their work efficiency should not be negatively impacted for working in the two posts at the same time. In conclusion, for the special-grade teachers being so rare amongst the teaching body, drawing on their strengths can bring more benefit to the students, the schools and the society.

## Chapter 9 Conclusion

In this research, by adopting the narrative inquiry approach, I found ten characteristics of the special-grade teachers, identified ten external factors that influenced the special-grade teachers' professional development, described the professional developmental paths that they went through, and revealed the problems and puzzles that they encountered. Based on my research findings, I proposed the model of "one educational idea and four abilities", the "seeing-thinking-showing" reflection model, the three professional developmental stages and the featured five-step developmental path of the special-grade teachers. These research outcomes enrich the existing literature from two perspectives. From the first perspective, the special-grade teachers are the excellent teachers in China, who take up only a tiny proportion of the whole teacher population. They are the extraordinary ones, and in a sense, they can be called the outstanding teachers. They are of great research value, and this research provides credible evidence for understanding the special-grade teachers' characteristics, the external factors shaping their growth and their crucial professional developmental paths thoroughly. This helps the researchers, the policy makers and the practitioners to comprehensively understand the key factors existing in the professional developmental course of the outstanding teachers, grasp the principles of their growth and facilitate their professional development. The rich data, detailed and in-depth description and elaborate analysis provide a useful account of the special-grade teachers in the context of mainland China, which offers materials and reference for comparative research on the counterparts in other countries.

From the second perspective, in the process of data analysis, I used both analysis of narratives and narrative analysis to analyse the data and present the evidence. This accumulated practical experience for analysing and presenting the same set of data using different methods of analysis. In retrospective of the processes of data collection, data analysis and thesis writing, I have four valuable lessons to share. First, the multiple interviews conducted in the different rounds allowed me to have sufficient time to

reflect on the problems existing in the previous round. Hence, I could work on the problems and avoid them in the next round of interview. This provided necessary opportunities for me to verify and enrich the interview data. However, while the multiple interviews were an effective way to gain data, they occupied plenty of time of the interviewees. Second, collecting their critical incidents and interesting stories was helpful for me to verify the statements of the interviewees in the actual scenarios. This could help me to capture and understand the interviewees' opinions accurately. Thus, it is a useful method of data collection. Third, as I used the two different methods to analyse the data, my understanding about the special-grade teachers was profoundly deepened through immersing myself in the data for a long time. By combining the two methods of data-analysis, I delineated the professional developmental path of the special-grade teachers from their entry into the profession to the time of the interviews, which helped me to abstract the emerging themes smoothly from the collected data. Fourth, I applied two different ways of writing. In Chapter 4, 5 and 7, I presented the themes first and then provided the relevant evidence to support the statements. When I wrote Chapter 6, in order to clearly demonstrate the professional developmental paths and the unique characteristics of the special-grade teachers, I chose to describe their developmental paths by connecting their critical incidents. To me, this is an innovative way of writing. I wish that the readers of the doctoral thesis could sense the journey of the special-grade teachers' professional development and my dedicated care towards the composition of the research. I also hope that my thesis could offer some useful materials for the field of narrative inquiry.

However, this research has two main limitations. First, the sample size is not large. Due to the fact that the number of the special-grade teachers is small, it is hard to find more participants in the research, which limited the size of the sample. Second, the methods of data collection were not diverse enough. I gathered the data by doing multiple-time face-to-face interviews with the individual special-grade teachers and collecting relevant documents. If more kinds of data could be collected in more ways, the evidence from different sources would be better triangulated each other to further enhance the

reliability of the research findings.

Here comes the end of the research study. Having experienced different sorts of hardships in the journey, I have indeed developed myself into a stronger person, not only in the field of research, but also in real life. I learned a greater amount of knowledge as well as research and personal management skills. As I conclude everything here, I find the journey of the doctoral study a worthwhile in my life.

# Appendix 1

## The schedule for the interviews

### The schedule for the first-round interview

How would you describe your professional development as a special-grade teacher?

Could you give me some examples that can demonstrate your development?

Is there any very important person who significantly influences your professional development? If there is, what is your experience with this person?

What distinctive characteristics do you possess as a special-grade teacher?

How is the experience of being a special-grade teacher significant to you?

What does teacher morality mean to you?

Have you thought about it in your daily life?

Could you provide some examples of how you demonstrate your teacher morality characteristics?

In what sense do you feel you are different from non-special-grade teachers in terms of teaching?

Since you have been recognised as a special-grade teacher, what characteristics in terms of teaching have been recognised?

[Try letting the participants themselves mention about nurturing students, and if they don't, ask the following questions:]

I have noticed that nurturing students is important for being a special-grade teacher. Have you thought about the concept of nurturing students?

What do you do in daily life to nurture students?

[About the potential factors that affect the special-grade teachers' professional development, don't ask them explicitly. While when they mention a potential factor, ask them in this way:]

Oh, this seems an important factor that affect your professional development, isn't it?

Could you elaborate on it?

[Provide the participants with some policy extracts when necessary.]

Are you aware of the policies about the special-grade teachers?

If so, how do you keep yourself up to date with the policies?

How do you use them in your everyday teaching?

What do you agree or disagree with what the policies state?

When did you decide to become a teacher?

What did you do to become a teacher?

What happens between the time when you were a teacher and the time when you became a special-grade teacher?

## The schedule for the second-round interview

### **Questions for all the teachers:**

1. Confirmation of personal information: age, work places, the time of being rewarded the special-grade teachers, etc.
2. What do you think are the differences between the group of the special-grade teachers and other teachers?
3. In which phase or period, do you think you developed faster than in other phases or periods, and why?
4. What are the important educational ideas do you hold, if any? How were they develop? How did they impact your practice?



**Questions for the individuals:**

[Taking Chen as an example]

1. You said last time that everybody should be confident whichever situations they were in, do you mean that the external environments influenced the teachers' development less than personal attributes do?
2. How did the experience abroad shape your teaching methods?

The schedule for the third-round interview

**Questions for all the teachers:**

1. What critical incidents impacted your professional development? Can you describe these incidents in detail? How did these incidents change you in any way?
2. What support do you think the teachers should get in different career stages?

**Questions for the individuals:**

[Taking Guo as an example]

Could you tell me more about your "three-joy Chinese language" teaching method? How was this teaching method developed?

## Appendix 2

### The interview transcripts with Sun and the notes

The interview transcripts with Sun	Notes
<p>采访者：作为一名特级教师，与一般教师相比，您认为您具备哪些与众不同的特征？</p> <p>Interviewer: Being a special-grade teacher yourself and comparing yourself with non-special-grade teachers, what distinctive characteristics do you think you possess?</p> <p>被访者：我这么跟你讲，小伙子，现在我们周边的有些特级我还看不惯，为什么呢？当特级教师要有教育情怀，教育情怀这个东西它很抽象，你要发自内心的去做好你的专业，教好你的专业课。同时就是我刚才讲得，你必须关注中学生未成年人的生命成长，这点我觉得即使有一些特级教师，我个人认为他做得也很一般。这个东西我认为它是个因人而异的东西，它是一种乐趣的使然。</p> <p>Interviewee: I tell you in this way, young man. I frown upon some of the special-grade teachers around us. Why? Being special-grade teachers need zeal for education. The zeal for education is very abstract. From the bottom of your heart, you need to do your profession well, teaching your subject well. Meanwhile, like I just said, you must pay attention to the life growth of juveniles. Regarding this point, I feel even if some teachers are the special-grade teachers, I personally think they did also very mediocrely. Personally, I believe this</p>	<p>特级教师的特点：1. 有教育情怀，包括热爱专业，教好课，关注年轻人的生命成长</p> <p>The characteristics of the special-grade teacher: 1. having zeal for education. This includes loving the subject, teaching well and paying attention to the life growth of the young people.</p>

<p>thing (the zeal for education) means different things to different people. It is shaped through a kind of joy.</p> <p>第二，尽量不要功利，当然现在年轻人没有功利很难了，我们当时也没想到要去做什么特级。我觉得教育情怀是第一位的，我们谈不到什么理想，我也没有想到我去做一个什么东西，没想过。但我自己认为我还是一个很有教育情怀的人，我这个教育情怀，一对语文的情怀，第二就是对年轻人下意识的去关注，年轻人成长的这种情怀，我觉得这一点对任何一个老师都非常非常重要，有了这种情怀什么事他都好办。</p> <p>Second, try not to be utilitarian. Without doubt, it is very hard for the young people to be non-utilitarian now. We did not think of being any special grade. I put the zeal for education first. We didn't touch upon any aspiration. I didn't have an idea of doing a certain thing, either. I didn't. But I still took myself as one with great zeal for education. For my zeal for education, the first is the zeal for Chinese language, and the second is the involuntary attention to the young people, the zeal for the growth of the young people. I think this point is very, very important to every single teacher. With this kind of zeal, anything can be done easily.</p> <p>而且它也不是高大上，我也出去到外地去给教师搞培训，很多人说出去讲学，我说我不是讲学，都是出去招摇撞骗，我把我一生的所思，所想，所做愿意跟同行去分享，这我愿意，而且发自内心愿意去跟同行去交流。</p>	<p>2.不功利</p> <p>2. Being non-utilitarian.</p> <p>3.愿意与同行分享所思所想</p>
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<p>Besides, it's not lofty. I also went to other places to do trainings for teachers. Many said about going out to give lectures. I said I wasn't giving lectures which were all about bluffing. I am willing to share my lifetime thoughts and actions with my peers. This is something I am willing to do, and I am willing to communicate with my peers from the bottom of my heart.</p> <p>采访者：这样一种教育情怀我能理解，我能感受到。</p> <p>Interviewer: I can understand this kind of zeal for education. I can feel it.</p> <p>被访者：反正我也说不太明白，这个东西只可意会不可言传。</p> <p>Interviewee: Anyway, I cannot express it very clearly. This is something that can only be perceived rather than expressed by words.</p>	<p>3. Being willing to share thoughts with peers</p>
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