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New Curriculum Reform in China and its Impact on Teachers

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The Impact of New National Curricular Reform on Teachers L'impact de la réforme du nouveau curriculum national chez les professeurs

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Abstract

China, the developing country with the largest and oldest public education system, is transforming its education system through a nation-wide curriculum reform. This large-scale curriculum change signifies China's complex and multi-dimensional processes and endeavors in empowering its educational system to meet the challenges and opportunities in the era of globalization. This paper reports on an interpretive case study with a particular interest in understanding the impact of the nation-wide curriculum reform on teachers in urban areas. Findings from this study present the complex dimensions of teachers' lived experiences during this dramatic education change and shed new insights on the current teaching profession in urban China.

Résumé

La Chine, pays en voie de développement avec le plus grand et le plus vieux système d'éducation public, est entrain de réformer son système en instaurant un curriculum national. Cette réforme cherche à ce que les processus multi dimensionnels puissent surmonter les nouveaux défis et opportunités de la globalisation. Cet article présente une étude de cas interprétative dont l'objectif principal est de comprendre l'impact que cette réforme éducative exerce sur les professeurs urbains. Les résultats montrent d'une part la complexité des différentes dimensions vécues par les professeurs lors de ce changement éducatif dramatique, et de l'autre, les nouvelles perspectives urbaines quant à la profession d'enseignant en Chine.

Introduction

Currently, China is undertaking an unprecedented nation-wide New Curriculum Reform (NCR) for school education (K-12), which involves 474,000 schools, 10 million teachers, and 200 million students (China Education and Research Network, 2011). The new national curriculum shifts dramatically from traditional Chinese education values and practices, and, therefore, creates new opportunities and tremendous challenges for teachers who have been charged with a collective task of translating the new national curriculum into pedagogical actions.

This paper reports on an interpretive case study with a particular interest in understanding the impact of the nation-wide education change on teachers in Beijing. It begins with a brief overview of Chinese educational traditions and the demands of the new national curriculum for teachers. This is followed by a description of the research objectives, methodology, and data collection/analysis. The impact of the nation-wide education change on teachers in Beijing are interpreted and highlighted through themes generated from the study of 18

teachers from urban and rural schools in the Beijing area. This paper provides new insights on the teaching profession in China in the era of globalization and presents the complex dimensions of teachers' lived experiences during this dramatic education change.

Educational Landscape in China

China has a long and rich tradition of education and the roots of its education system can be traced back as far as the 16th century B.C. Throughout its long history, education in China has remained as a highly centralized system dominated by Confucian tradition of merit and a structure of hierarchical examinations. The examination-oriented education system has not been stable through ancient and present times in China, but "the examination culture has been woven into the social fabric of the Chinese people's everyday life" (Li, 2005, p. 50). As a result, teaching and learning in Chinese schools has traditionally focused on helping students achieve good exam scores in standardized tests at various levels. The emphasis on exams contributed to the content-oriented and teacher-centered nature of educational practices in China and left a lasting effect on teachers' professional identities. It is traditionally believed by Chinese people that knowledge lay in the teacher and the texts, and the teacher's role was that of expert and lecturer, giving definitive interpretations of the texts. Students are expected to obtain all the required knowledge and skills from teachers and the texts.

Following the former Soviet Union education model adopted by the Communist Party of China (CPC) in early 1950s, the current educational system in China consists of six years of universal primary education and six years of secondary education. Although western philosophies of education - such as progressive education, behaviorism, cognitivism, constructivism, post-structuralism - were introduced to China in early 20th century and reported highly influential in contemporary Chinese education policy development (Su, 1995), communist ideologies still remain a dominating feature of Chinese curricula structure, content, and pedagogy and continue to have a powerful impact on existing conceptualization of education and its purpose, educational philosophies and practices. As a result, school subjects that involve the study of the humanities, arts, and social sciences have been devalued or disregarded in Chinese education system. This has created challenges and conflicts in implementation process of the new national curriculum, which advocates for liberal learning and ideologically laden curriculum content and pedagogy.

As China is a geographically large country, the social, cultural, economic, and educational contexts are tremendously diverse in different

regions. In order to have an in-depth understanding of the system-wide educational change's impact on teachers in urban areas, this study was conducted in Beijing, the capital of China. Driven by its strong economic and political forces, Beijing has achieved transformative social development in many areas in the past decades. By the end of 2011, the number of the city's permanent residents reached nearly 20.2 million, with the per capita GDP standing at nearly \$12,600 CAD (Beijing Municipal Statistics Bureau, 2011). Like all other educational jurisdictions in China, Beijing adopts a dual-track schooling system combining Key Schools (also called Demo Schools) and Regular Schools. Key urban schools employ teachers with high qualifications, have the best facilities and resources in the city, and admit elite students who have passed the competitive school entrance exam which establishes a rating of excellent academic performance. Regular schools make up the largest sector of the public education system in Beijing. Students who failed the entrance exam to key schools are normally enrolled in this type of school based on the area of their residency.

Table 1: Educational Statistics of Beijing

	Category of School	# of schools	# of teachers and staff	# of students
Public	Secondary	779	89203	727741
	Elementary	1104	60038	653255
	Reformatory/correctional ¹	6	344	764
	Special education	21	1201	7981
	Nurseries and Kindergarten	1245	37227	276994
Private	Secondary Schools	94	5016	43386
	Elementary schools	21	2295	32686
	Nurseries and Kindergarten	445	13566	83730
	Vocational & training	1194	24291	1191672

Source: Beijing Municipal Commission of Education (2012)

As the university admission rates from these less prestigious schools are lower than they are for students from Key Schools, students from the regular schools thus are concerned about a lack of preparation to be successful on the high stakes exam. This prompts their families to enroll them in after-school academic programs. "Gaokao Buxixuexiao", literally means 'school for preparation of university entrance examination' (Prep School), is a type of private training organization which offers after-school classes with a focus on disciplinary preparation for university entrance exam. Table 1 shows the most recent statistics

regarding the school categories, registered students, and staff in Beijing.

The New Curriculum Reform (NCR) in China

In early 1980s, Chinese Governmental Officials made a historic decision to shift China's economic system from a planned economy to a market economy (Guo, 2010; Feng, 2006). The dramatic change of the economic system initiated consequential changes in the political system toward decentralization and democracy. The rapid social, economic, and political development in China called for fundamental changes in education. To improve the educational system and its quality as well as to prepare citizens with the knowledge and skills for an increasingly globalized world, the Ministry of Education in China released the Basic Education Curriculum Reform Outline in June 2001 and officially started the most unprecedented basic education reform in Chinese modern education history: the New Curriculum Reform (NCR).

The philosophy underpinning the new curriculum is for each individual student's development (Zhong, Cui, & Zhang, 2001). *Basic Education Curriculum Reform Outline (2001)*, the national policy issued by Ministry of Education in China specifies the following six objectives of this large-scale curriculum change:

1. Develop a comprehensive and harmonious basic education system. Change the function of curriculum from knowledge transmission to helping students become active lifelong learners;
2. Construct new curriculum structure. Change the subject-centered curriculum structure into a balanced, integrated, and optional curriculum structure to meet the diverse needs of schools and students;
3. Reflect modern curriculum content. Reduce the difficulty and complexity of the old curriculum content and reflect the new essential knowledge, skills and attitudes that students need to be lifelong learners. Strengthen the relevance of the curriculum content to students' lives;
4. Promote constructivist learning. Change the passive learning and rote learning styles into active and problem-solving learning styles to improve students' overall abilities of information processing, knowledge acquisition, problem solving, and cooperative learning;
5. Form appropriate assessment and evaluation rationales. Curriculum assessment and evaluation shifts from its selective purpose to improving the quality of teaching and learning. A combination of formative and summative evaluation approaches is required in the new curriculum; and
6. Promote curriculum democracy and adaptation. Curriculum administration is decentralized toward a joint effort of central government, local governments, and schools to strengthen the relevance of the curriculum to local situations.

These six objectives indicate the scope and complexity of this reform and have called for transformative changes in all areas of Chinese education system, including educational philosophy, curricula structure and administration, curricula standards and content, pedagogy, the development and use of curriculum resources, curricula assessment and evaluation, and teacher education and development (Guo, 2010; Zhong, Cui, & Zhang, 2001). Representing a radical departure from traditional Chinese education, these transformative changes require teachers to re-conceptualize their understanding of teaching and learning as well as their identities formed in an examination-orientated and very competitive elitist education system. Teachers are required to become thoughtful and tactful pedagogues with the capacity for thinking, introspection, reflecting, accepting and appreciating the complexity of the new curriculum and its application to their situations.

Large-scale Curriculum Change and Teachers

Fullan (2005/2006) stresses that large-scale education change is an ongoing and complex process, rather than an event. The once accepted idea of planning change and implementing it rationally in a linear way should be discredited because it doesn't take into account the specific contexts and conditions of the change. Due to the increasingly complex nature of the large-scale educational changes, which combine political, economic, and technological developments to change traditional cultural assumptions and educational practices, educational researchers and curriculum scholars (Carson, 2009; Fullan, 2006; Hargreaves, 2005) point out the need for a sophisticated understanding of system-wide education changes in relation to their particular political, cultural, and ethnic contexts.

Whether an education change is successful or not ultimately depends on teachers' capacity of translating the new curriculum and ideas into pedagogical actions (Aoki, 2005; Fullan, 2006; Hargreaves 2005). As teachers face increased expectations, responsibilities, and pressures from multiple sources – government, educational administration, parents, and students - they need to constantly negotiate within the complex and uncertain situations in order to maintain a balanced well-being in changing contexts. Guo (2010) argues that New Curriculum Reform in China has adopted an instrumental curriculum change framework - plan and decide the curriculum objectives, implement the curriculum, and then evaluate the effectiveness of the curriculum. This framework is problematic because it positions teachers as consumers of the program produced by curriculum experts and leads to a fundamental contraction between teachers' commitment to technological progress and the improvement of

their personal and situational lives. Inspired by Canadian curriculum scholar Aoki's (1986/2005) suggestion of viewing curriculum implementation as "situational praxis" (p. 116), some recent studies on the nation-wide curriculum change in China have paid attention to the inter-subjective nature of teachers' knowing and change in the changing process (Carson, 2009), the traditional cultural influences on Chinese teachers' identity change (Zhong, 2006), teachers' lived experiences in the changing process (Guo, 2010), positive changes and pedagogic challenges in specific subject areas (Li, Wang & Wong, 2011; Wang, 2007). These studies have reported that the new curriculum reform was welcomed by many teachers in China. Although traditional teaching and learning are still dominant in practices, positive changes have occurred at various educational levels.

In a recent interpretive study examining what the New Curriculum Reform (NCR) means for teachers in rural Western China, Guo (2010) reported that large-scale curriculum change brought new professional development opportunities as well as tremendous pressure, ambivalence, and psychological struggles to rural teachers. While appreciating the new national curriculum is more integrated and updated with strong advocacy for student-centered practices, many teachers felt great challenges in achieving the demanded changes because of the constraints of the current evaluation system, the lack of professional development opportunities and resources, the complexities in shifting from traditional professional identities, and the ambiguity teachers experienced situating between curriculum-as-planned and curriculum-as-lived. As a result, teachers in rural China are reported more resistant to this large scale education change.

Because great differences exist between urban and rural schools in China in terms of teachers' qualifications, students' social-cultural backgrounds, infrastructure, and teachers' professional development opportunities and resources, this study explores the impact of the large-scale curriculum reform on urban school teachers in China's capital city Beijing through understanding their working and living contexts and lived experiences in the changing process.

Research Methodology

A case study approach, informed by hermeneutic inquiry (Gadamer, 1989), was adopted as the research methodology. A case study approach enabled the researcher to focus on contextual particularities and complexities of an activity and its significance (Stake, 1995) and allowed a close look at meta-issues of greater relevance to theorization, policy and practice (Vavrus & Bartlett, 2006). Hermeneutics, the art of interpretation, recognized the broader cultural,

historical, and political contexts as the interpretive conditions required to understand the unique conditions, challenges, and lived experiences of teachers and offered important insights to understanding the deeply inter-subjective nature of teachers' learning and unlearning process in education change (Gadamer, 1989; Guo, 2010; Smith, 2006).

Table 2: Teacher Participants' Information

Teacher	Gender	Age Range	Education	Years of Teaching	District	Location	School	Grade	Subjects
1	Female	36-40	Bachelor	15	Fengtai	Urban	Public	7-9	Music
2	Female	41-45	Bachelor	23	Fengtai	Urban	Public	7-9	Biology
3	Male	31-35	Master	3	Fengtai	Urban	Public	7-9	Physics
4	Male	31-35	Master	6	Xicheng	Urban	Public	12	Chinese
5	Female	< 25	Master	1	Dongcheng	Urban	Public	10	Chinese
6	Female	36-40	Master	14	Shunyi	Rural	Public	12	Chinese
7	Male	26-30	Master	2	Xicheng	Urban	Public	8-9	Physics
8	Male	> 55	Bachelor	46	Haidian	Urban	Private	12	Math
9	Female	41-45	Master	20	Daxing	Urban	Public	7-9	English
10	Female	31-35	Bachelor	10	Fengtai	Urban	Public	7	Chinese
11	Female	36-40	Bachelor	22	Fengtai	Urban	Public	9	Chinese
12	Female	41-45	Master	23	Fengtai	Urban	Public	9	English
13	Female	41-45	Master	20	Xicheng	Urban	Public	11	English
14	Female	36-40	Bachelor	14	Xicheng	Urban	Public	10	English
15	Female	26-30	Bachelor	7	Xicheng	Urban	Public	10	English
16	Female	31-35	Bachelor	12	Xicheng	Urban	Public	7	English
17	Female	36-40	Bachelor	15	Xicheng	Urban	Public	11	English
18	Male	> 55	Bachelor	38	Xicheng	Urban	Private	11	English

Data were collected through policy analysis, questionnaires, and conversations with each individual teacher participant. Eighteen teachers from

nine schools were invited to participate in this study. These 18 participants were from a combination of key public schools, regular public schools, and a private school. Table 2 shows teacher participants' demographic information.

Policy analysis focused on the social, political, and economic contexts of this study, while questionnaires had 25 questions on participants' demographic information and was made available in both English and Chinese. Each teacher participant was invited to take part in a 1 - 1.5 hour audio-taped conversation to talk about their lived experiences in system-wide education reform. The conversations were conducted in Mandarin and consisted of a process of talking, listening, reflecting, and responding through questioning, anecdote-telling, and sharing. Understanding the meanings of the curriculum reform and reaching a new understanding about curriculum change was viewed as the essence of our conversations. As Gadamer (1989, p. 371) notes,

To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were.

Findings and Discussions

Teachers' Working and Living Conditions in Beijing

Although a full-time teacher in China is expected to work 40 hours a week, 72 percent of teacher participants in this study reported working more than 40 hours per week. Teachers reported an average class size of 38 students. The classes in junior high schools are generally smaller than those in senior high schools. All teacher participants indicated that smaller class size was desirable because it would allow them to engage students more actively in learning and they felt more competent to organize and conduct the student-centered learning activities required by the new national curriculum.

All teachers in this study indicated that the rapid economic development in Beijing has greatly improved the school infrastructure, teaching facilities and educational resources during the past decades. The majority of teacher participants clearly indicated that they were satisfied with the educational resources available to them. Describing the teaching facilities and resources available to her, a teacher from a regular public school said:

My music classroom is equipped with a computer, an overhead projector, a piano, a keyboard piano, percussion instruments, DVD players, a stereo player, music composing and editing software and equipment, and all sorts of wall decorations about music. I have all what I need for music education. I haven't learned how to use all these instruments yet. (Teacher 01, Conversation on 2010-08-06)

A few teacher participants from key urban schools claimed that their schools had the best facilities and resources in Beijing, or in the country. These

schools have beautifully landscaped campuses, artistically designed teaching buildings and classrooms, the most advanced educational equipment and information technologies, digital school libraries, and well developed recreational facilities such as gyms, sports field, tennis courts, swimming pools, etc. They also expressed great satisfaction with the research and teaching resources available in the school libraries.

All teacher participants in this study were under employment contracts with schools based on the Labor Contract Law, which covers all employees in China. Since 2010, a performance-based salary system was implemented in all schools in China, including Beijing. According to the new system, a teacher's salary consists of basic wages, seniority pay, performance-based bonus pay and allowances for administrative responsibilities. Basic wage and seniority pay come from government funding based on a combination of the number of years of post-secondary education and the number of years of teaching experiences. The budget for performance-based bonus pay is decided by schools based on teachers' instructional hours, administrative responsibilities, and the evaluation of their work, and the overall school budget. The average teacher's salary consists of 70 percent basic pay and 30 percent merit pay. Salaries have risen by more than 20 times in the last 20 years, yet still remain a major concern for teachers. 56 percent of teacher participants earned less than \$600 CAD each month. All teachers working in public schools, regardless of gender, age, or the number of years of teaching experiences, stated that their salaries are not compatible with their education, the workload, and inadequate for them to live a decent life in Beijing. Most teachers in this study commented that the average increase of their salaries lagged far behind other professions requiring similar educational qualifications and were not catching up with the current inflation in China. Sixty percent of teacher participants indicated that they did not feel a great sense of job satisfaction because of the pressures from long working hours, high housing prices in Beijing, inconvenient transportation from work to school, and comparatively low salary.

The majority of teacher participants in this study appreciated the improved working condition as a positive result of the New National Curriculum reform, however, the increased social inequity, salary gap, and the financial stresses of living in Beijing led teachers to frustration and decreased motivation to be fully engaged in the teaching profession as well as the process of education change.

The Meanings of the New Curriculum Reform for Teachers

The impact of the new curriculum on teachers was investigated through understanding what the new curriculum reform meant to them. The following thematic interpretations of the meanings indicated that the complexity and paradoxes in the process of curriculum implementation.

Embracing the opportunities of forming a new professional identity

In many teacher participants' view, the new curriculum advocates an alternative paradigm of pedagogy in which the focus is no longer on teaching, but rather on the learning and development of students. This fundamental change meant dramatic shifts in their work, such as: from primarily lecturing in classroom to facilitating students' learning; from transmitting knowledge to developing students' multiple abilities; from focusing on education results to paying greater attention to education process. These demanded changes caused challenges and increased pressure in all teachers, however, most teachers in this study welcomed the opportunities of forming a new professional identity because their students became more engaged in learning and demonstrated enhanced self-autonomy and criticality in the learning process. Talking about the demanded changes and their impact on students' learning outcomes, a teacher participant commented:

The new curriculum demanded changes in three areas: subject content, pedagogy, and learning styles. Teaching used to be lecturing the textbook content, but now it becomes meeting students' diverse learning needs and levels. For example, I always tried to assign different math problems to students at different levels. While helping students achieve higher levels based on their own situations, this (strategy) actually enhanced their learning interests and motivated them to challenge themselves. Sometimes students text-messaged me for more difficult math problems. (Teacher 18 Conversation on 2010-08-08)

Appreciating that new curriculum was directing teaching and learning to a more humanistic educational experience and inspired by students' increased participation and engagement in the learning process, most teacher participants in this study appreciated and welcomed the challenges and ambiguity emerged in the curriculum implementation process with understanding and positive attitudes. Urban teachers reaction to the curriculum reform are quite different from the reported resistance of rural school teachers, who more likely feel displaced and threatened by the identity crisis they experienced in the changing process from a traditional teaching paradigm to a student-centered teaching paradigm (Guo, 2010). However, both urban and rural teachers expressed the greatly increased professional pressures:

Reflecting upon my teaching in the past years, my deepest impression is that I have been using my utmost energy and strength to learn, to improve, but I still cannot catch up with the demanded changes. (Teacher 11 Conversation on 2010-08-10)

Increased Professional Development Opportunities and Resources

All teacher participants stated that the new curriculum meant higher professional standards of professionalism and that they needed to continuously enhance their professionalism to make transformative changes in all aspects of their teaching. To implement the new curriculum, teachers are required to attend a certain number of professional development workshops and seminar sessions on the new curriculum before they implemented the curriculum in classrooms. Teacher participants in this study were offered such opportunities to assist them in their transition to student-centered teaching philosophy and practices. The professional development opportunities and resources reported by teachers in this study included participatory training workshops offered by the District School Board and universities, training workshops by curriculum developers, school-based teaching and research activities, and local/national/international study tours. These opportunities and resources were viewed by teacher participants as the medium for the fostering of changes in their attitudes and pedagogy in curriculum implementation. Some of the teacher participants have been sponsored by their schools to attend professional development workshops and seminars overseas in order to improve their own educational practices.

Forming new understandings of textbook, curriculum, and their relationships with life experiences

In the past, the order and sequence of teaching were strictly prescribed in textbooks and subject syllabi. Textbooks were the 'bible of teaching', according to which teaching and examinations were planned and conducted. For many teachers, curriculum meant textbooks. Teacher participants in this study reported that they were able to use textbooks and other materials in a more flexible way to achieve the desired curriculum outcomes since the new curriculum was implemented. Many schools in Beijing have offered school-based curriculum and extra-curricular activities to students in order to give them well-rounded schooling experiences. Teacher 11 was proud of a wide range of extra-curricular activities available to students in his school:

Each year we offered about 20 school-based curriculum and activities to students, including Beijing Opera, visual arts, choir, robotics, racing car model competition, science fair, baking, a chess club, flower arts, a basket ball club, a table tennis club, a tennis club etc. These activities greatly enriched students' learning interests in school subjects. Before implementing the new curriculum, we didn't have the chance to create such groups and curriculum. (Teacher 11, Conversation on 2010-08-10)

Such experiences were echoed by other teacher participants, who reported that the new curriculum created a space for them to situate their teaching in local contexts and to understand curriculum and pedagogy from very different perspectives.

Students become the center of education

Most teacher participants in this study realized that students were placed in the center of the new curriculum, which was the most obvious shift from traditional educational practice. Though the levels and depth of changes differed greatly from one individual teacher to another, all teachers reported positive changes in the results of students' active participation of learning. One teacher stated:

In the past teaching is the individual performance of a teacher. Teachers used to prepare the lessons based on textbooks and then perform the content he/she prepared on the platform. But now teaching is to guide students to explore and investigate with well-structured questions. Students' backgrounds, interests, abilities, and feelings have to be considered in lesson planning and teaching process. Students become active participants in the show, not teachers any more. (Teacher 16, Conversation on 2010-08-12)

Most teacher participants commented that students become alive when they adopted learner-centered pedagogy. They realized that students were not the passive learners waiting to be fed with knowledge, but rather they became alive, curious, and thoughtful human beings. Students' changes became teachers' changing catalyst and motivated them to learn and experiment new pedagogy in practice. Through trying and reflecting on what worked and what did not work, teachers indicated that they became more confident in making differences in students' lives through providing relevant learning experiences. For some teachers, the new confidence they gained motivated them to connect with colleagues and communities to explore new learning opportunities for students.

The other positive changes are reflected in the formation of teachers' new understandings of curriculum, pedagogy, the importance of pedagogy relationship, and effective integration of educational technology into educational practices.

Understanding the connections and differences between the new curriculum and indigenous philosophical and educational traditions

Some teacher participants in this study raised the question of how Chinese cultural and philosophical traditions are positioned in the new national curriculum. They shared their views on how indigenous perspectives on education helped them translate the new curriculum into effective educational practices. Their critical evaluation on the adaptability of student-centered pedagogy in Chinese context reflected their ability of looking into the deeper and

more philosophical factors influencing their perceptions of teaching, learning, curriculum, and education. This ability enabled them to think beyond the demanded change superficially presented in the curriculum policy documents and to examine what works and what doesn't work in local context. At the same time, the appreciation of indigenous educational traditions enabled teachers to ground their new professional learning in something they had already known and make it possible for teachers to understand the deep root of their identities of being teachers and learners in China.

The new Chinese curriculum provides an unprecedented opportunity and domain to engage in transnational conversations about how curriculum can facilitate teaching and learning sensitive to multiple modes of reasoning, worldviews, and cultures. This massive curriculum change should not simply be the content of transnational conversations, but a domain for conversations between East and West. At a time where a whole education system is changing as a response to globalization, such a space is not only necessary, but critical for meaningful discussions on connecting educators across borders with these diverse ways of knowing and being.

Common Challenges Experienced by Teachers

While the teacher participants welcomed the new curriculum reform, they also expressed concerns about extended working hours, much heavier workload, struggles in shaping new teaching identity, complexities in unlearning and learning process, job security, and examine-based evaluation system as a huge barrier to change.

While appreciating the professional development opportunities, most teachers complained about the extra working hours they had to put in to participate in such activities:

I attended weekly training sessions at school and participated in PD sessions organized by school district once every two weeks. We are also required to observe colleagues' teaching regularly and to help each other improve teaching through debriefing sessions. Sometimes we also go to public lessons organized by Beijing municipal educational commission and it was really eye-opening learning experiences. All of these (activities) increased our working hours greatly. (Teacher 09, Conversation on 2010-08-10)

The mandatory professional development courses/workshops on the new curriculum created much heavier workload for teachers in and after schools. One teacher commented that *"teaching has become a 24-hour job. I thought about teaching even in my dreams"*. She stated that such working style was not because of her passion towards teaching, but because of the long working hours and endless teaching and administrative demands on a daily base. Many teachers

were stressed about the lengthy working hours and heavy workload due to the required professional development courses/workshops. The increased job competition at workplace and reduced personal time at home caused much greater professional and personal pressures to teachers, especially those who have young children.

Identity change has been identified as the most difficult challenge for teachers during this dramatic curriculum change (Guo, 2010; Wang, 2006; Zhong, 2006). The new curriculum demands teachers to change from being the “sage-on-the-stage” to learning facilitators, foster a more democratic pedagogic relationship between students and teachers, and shift attention to students’ learning process instead of examination results. These demanded changes brought teachers struggles and anxiety in their teaching practices. Teacher 11 described one instance of having such struggles in his practice:

Once a parent called me in the evening and said his child asked him to call and tell me he did not want to do the homework because he had mastered the concepts. I first said the assignment wouldn’t take more than 10 minutes and he should not be an exception from the rest of the class. But the students insisted not doing it and promised he would pass the test the next day. I said OK and he did complete the test without any mistakes the next day. If this happened years ago, I would think this student did not respect my authority and I would find ways for him to complete what I had assigned him to do. But now I view this instance differently and realized that I did not always assign homework appropriate to students’ learning level. I have struggling moments like this one all the time. (Teacher 11 Conversation on 2010-08-10)

Most teacher participants in this study had had more than 10 years’ teaching experiences before the dramatic curriculum change. Their capabilities, experiences, and pedagogic wisdoms accumulated through prior educational practices to a certain degree were disconnected with what is advocated by the new curriculum. They had to unlearn their prior knowledge and skills in order to develop new philosophy and pedagogic skills required by the new curriculum. While dealing with the conflicts between the new roles defined by the new curriculum and their old professional identities rooted deeply in traditions, it became a collective challenge for teachers to explore meaningful ways to maintain their self-esteem in new professional identities and practices. Consciously and unconsciously, they constantly reflect and examine who they are, what they can do within the current school and social structure, and how much they would like to invest in implementing the new curriculum. The complexities of this unlearning and relearning process certainly brought lots of uncertainty and ambiguity to teachers.

Some teachers in this study felt very insecure about their employment status in schools because they automatically became less qualified teachers based

on the demands of the new curriculum. Another factor contributing to teachers' job insecurity is the competition they felt from the increasing number of graduate students with higher educational qualification and professional capacities who are entering into the teaching force. Some of the teacher participants indicated they were afraid that one day they might lose their job because the new graduates usually adapted more quickly and easily to the demands of the new curriculum and longer work hours.

All teachers indicated that the unchanged exam-based evaluation system was the biggest barrier to changes towards student-centered teaching and learning because examinations were the most powerful force in directing teaching, learning, and school development. In senior high schools, the National University Entrance Examination results are the key standards used, not only to rank students' admissions to university, but also to evaluate the performance of teachers and schools. Under this arrangement the university enrolment rate has become the key focus of school administrators, teachers, students and parents. The issue of the impact of exam-based evaluation system on teachers' personal and professional lives was brought up by every teacher participant in this study. Talking about the struggles meeting the demands of both the new national curriculum and the preparation of the national university entrance exam, one teacher commented that:

Whenever I gave students opportunities to participate in new learning activities or do new assignments, students always showed creative ideas which were out of my expectation and imagination. If there is no pressure from the exam scores, I would like to give students more space and opportunity to develop their creative thinking and different capabilities. (But) now we are trapped in the exams and the biggest obstacle of changing our practice now is the national university entrance examination. I am extremely concerned that students couldn't get good exam scores if they don't follow my instruction on the curriculum content. My ultimate goal of teaching now is to prepare students to get ready for the (national university entrance) exam. (Teacher 05, Conversation on 2010-08-09)

The existing exam-based evaluation mechanism hindered teachers' enthusiasm and initiation of making changes as they did not always have parents' support in shifting the exam-based teaching to student-centered learning:

Every time we held a parent-teacher meeting, we have to report students' exam results to parents as this is the single most important thing parents wanted to know. Even we did not rank students based on their exam scores, their parents will compare with each other and found out the ranks. And then often the parents became very concerned that their son or daughter's exam result was not good enough. This created lots of pressure on us. (Teacher 05, Conversation on 2010-08-09)

Issues of Teachers' Rights in Education Change

In many countries, teachers' unions are the legal entity safeguarding teachers' working and living conditions. As all teacher participants in this study complained the extended working hours caused by attending the professional development workshops on the new curriculum, they were asked about their views on the Teachers' Union (TU) in China and whether they felt their rights are protected by the TU. The majority of teacher participants were not clear about the roles and responsibilities of the TU. Through the interviews with teachers, it seems clear that teachers' right became a striking issue in China. Although the Teachers' Union is the representative body for all teachers and educational workers, it is an employer-dominated union and do not bargain collectively on teachers' salary and employment conditions. Talking about the roles of the Teachers' Union, some teachers commented that the Teachers' Union is only responsible for organizing social events, such as birthday parties, holiday celebrations, sports events, movies, etc and hence teachers were left no place to grief:

We have no place to share our concerns. I know some of my rights and responsibilities through Teachers' Law. But we are always reminded our responsibilities but rarely informed of our rights as teachers. (Teacher 12)

I don't think teachers' rights are protected. Most teachers work more than 40 hours a week. To improve students' exam scores, they have to teach on weekends and on holidays. Even I don't want to go, I have to. There's no choice. (Teacher 09)

The Chair of the Teachers' Union is very nice. He is one of the school administrators. They work very hard and regularly organize some social and sports activities. Sometimes they organize new year's celebration and tours for teachers. ...they could communicate with school administrators if teachers are not satisfied with their salary or working environment, but can't make any decision, or negotiate on teacher's behalf. (Teacher 11)

I don't usually ask for support from teacher's union on issues related to my job as they are not responsible for such things. I either remain silent or sometimes go directly to school administration for resolution. Teachers' Union is under the school's leadership and follows the school's direction. They don't play a very important role in fighting for teachers' rights and welfare. But I do enjoy participating in the activities they organized. (Teacher 05)

Teacher union is a very boring [organization], they just organize some social and sports events. (Teacher 08)

There is no way to express my thoughts if I am not satisfied with my salary or working environments. We can't be on strike as teachers in other countries. (Teacher 18)

Conclusion

The New Curriculum Reform has had tremendous impact on teaching profession and teachers in Beijing. While bringing improvement in educational resources and positive changes in students' learning through a shift from teacher-centered to student-centered pedagogy, it also brings pressure, dilemmas, and struggles to teachers. This unprecedented education change meant a new development process for teachers' professionalism, including reconceptualizing the purposes of education, forming new teaching identity and curriculum understanding, developing new pedagogy, and updating disciplinary knowledge and skills. Such demands call for the concurrent reform of both pre-service and in-service teacher education, which is not an easy task due to the scope and complexity of the reform. However, this task cannot be delayed or neglected if an enhanced education system to be seen in China.

Teacher participants' different reactions towards the new curriculum and the professional development programs invite us to rethink teachers' relationship to knowledge and attend to the value of practical wisdom in teacher education. Teachers have accumulated tremendous practical wisdom through their previous teaching experiences and how to help them become creators with imaginative insight requires effective pedagogy in teacher education and development. It is not the pedagogy of mimesis (copying), but the pedagogy of practice wherein the practice is not mere repetition but the practice of doing, reflecting, visioning, and doing yet again with a difference. A thoughtful and critical teacher education and development system is mandatory to facilitate teachers change in this large scale curriculum reform and it is especially important for those who do not have access to resources other than the limited mandatory training hours.

The fast economic growth and changing social environment in Beijing have brought many changes in the education sector. Improvements have occurred in schools' planning, infrastructure, and educational resources available to both students and teachers. Positive changes of students' active participation in learning have become evident because of the implementation of the new curriculum. The living standards of teachers have increased, however, data from this study does not indicate the improvement of teachers' well-beings because of the increasing disparity between teachers' salaries and the cost of housing, job dissatisfaction and insecurity, and longer working hours.

Another striking issue emerged from the study is the lack of rights and opportunities for teachers to participate in decision-making related to salaries, evaluation, curriculum development, and other issues that directly concern their employment and teaching practices. These rights are not guaranteed in China as Teacher's Unions are not separated from educational administration. An

independent representative body for all teachers and other educational workers should be established to protect teachers' labour rights, to bargain collectively on teachers' salary and employment conditions, and to support the employees in the field of education when they have to fight for their conditions of working and living.

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¹ Prison/facility for either juveniles (16 and 17 years of age) or adults (18 years of age or older).