

## **Motivation and Commitment: Pre-Service Teachers from Hong Kong and Mainland China at a Training Institute in Hong Kong**

**By Mingyue (Michelle) Gu & Chun Lai**

Every year, mainland China sends numerous undergraduate and postgraduate students to study abroad at English-medium universities (Tan & Simpson, 2008), a large number of whom attend Hong Kong universities (Li & Bray, 2007), including the Hong Kong Institute of Education. The Institute is Hong Kong's principle local teacher education institution, with its graduates accounting for around 80% of kindergarten teachers, 84% of primary school teachers and 30% of secondary school teachers in Hong Kong. In the academic year of 2005-2006, 10% of the students admitted to the Institute's English Department were from mainland China; in the following two academic years, mainland students accounted for 18% and 62% of student intake, respectively.

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*Mingyue (Michelle) Gu is an assistant professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction of the Faculty of Education at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and Chun Lai is an assistant professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Hong Kong.*

Upon graduation, these mainland Chinese prospective student teachers would be eligible for employment in local secondary and primary schools. However, differences between the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of these cross-border prospective student teachers and their local counterparts may make it difficult for the former to become qualified teachers in Hong Kong. Whereas, Putonghua has long been the medium of instruction for all primary and secondary

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students in mainland China, Hong Kong's unique mix of Cantonese, Putonghua, and English makes for a more complex and diverse linguistic phenomenon (Li, 2009). Most mainland prospective student teachers have Putonghua as their first language and only a small number of them, those from Guangdong province, can speak Cantonese. Furthermore, the cross-border students have no experience of studying in such local schools, which may be considered to be at a disadvantage compared with their local peers.

Research indicates that historical and social backgrounds influence individuals' motivation to teach and their commitment to teaching (Gordon, 2000; Su, Hawkins, Huang & Zhao, 2001). This article reports on a comparative study exploring the motivation to teach and the commitment to teaching among non-local prospective student teachers from mainland China and their Hong Kong local counterparts.

### **Motivations to Teach, Commitment to Teaching, and Professional Identities**

It is individuals' motivation to teach that draws them to become teachers, sustains their commitment to teach, and promotes their professional knowledge (Day, Elliot, & Kington 2005). Research across a variety of participant groups suggests that people entering pre-service teacher education share a number of common motivating factors, including a desire to work with or benefit students, a sense of altruism or a wish to make a difference in their community or society through teaching, the influence of parents, former teachers, peers or relatives, and the perceived benefits of a teaching job such as career security, vacations, and salary (Sinclair, 2008).

While research into motivation to teach has tended to focus on pre-service teachers' initial motives for becoming teachers, these can change in response to their educational experience and 'real' teaching experience during teaching practica (Sinclair, 2008). Previous studies on commitment to teaching have mainly focused on qualified teachers. Existing studies have identified various factors that affect in-service teachers' commitment to teaching, such as their teaching achievements, ethnic backgrounds, and gender (Hart & Murphy, 1990; Sinclair, 2008). Research has also suggested a relationship between teachers' entry motivations and their continued commitment to teaching: those who enter teaching because of strong altruistic motives are more likely to be frustrated by a lack of evaluation of their work and guidance with respect to goals, and are thus more likely to leave teaching (Mieth & Elder, 1996). In addition, intrinsically motivated teachers have been found to be more committed to teaching than extrinsically motivated teachers (Martinez-Pons, 1990). An examination of the internal factors that drive pre-service teachers to enter and remain in the teaching profession, as well as situated and social impacts, is important for both pre-service and in-service retention (Sinclair, Dowson, & McInerney, 2006).

Focusing on the internal factors that initiate and sustain pre-service teacher's motivation to teach, Sinclair (2008) adopts multiple methods to investigate changes

to the initial motivation and commitment of first year primary pre-service teachers at two universities in Sydney, Australia. His findings reveal that, while there were numerous motivating factors,<sup>1</sup> the most common were a positive self-evaluation of their capacity to teach and to work with children and the intellectual stimulation teaching would provide; in addition, the dynamic and temporal character of the prospective teachers' motivation and commitment emerged over the first semester of their teacher education.

Interesting as Satire's work is, it is mainly an attempt to provide a detailed and systematic account of motivation from a cognitive perspective, and leaves situated and social impacts unaccounted for. To address the influences of personal history and the wider society on motivation, the concept of teaching identity, which acts as a bridge between the individual and society, has been introduced (Day *et al.* 2005). Identity influences the ways in which teachers construe and construct the nature of their work (Battey & Franke, 2008; Horn, Nolen, Ward, & Campbell, 2008; Kelchtermans & Vandenberghe, 1994), and is closely linked to motivation and commitment (Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2009). It is commonly accepted that teaching identities are constructed in the constant interaction between individual experiences and the socio-cultural and institutional environments (van den Berg, 2002). Cross (2006) argues that focusing on teacher identity deepens and extends one's understanding of who teachers are and what teaching is. Varghese, Morgan, Johnson, and Johnson (2005) echo this, noting that, in order to understand teaching and learning, "we need to understand teachers: the professional, cultural, political and individual identities which they claim or which are assigned to them" (p. 22). Several studies exploring the interwoven relationship between teaching identity, motivation to teach and the socio-cultural and institutional contexts have, in effect, suggested the fruitfulness of such a research direction. For instance, in examining the dynamic interplay among individuals, teacher identity and the reform context, Lasky (2005) finds that the development of teacher identity and teaching commitment over time is mediated by early professional training, school reform policy and political, social and economic systems. Merseth, Sommer, and Dickstein (2008) have also discovered that teacher identities and commitment to teaching are tempered, challenged and sometimes redefined during a twelve-week teaching practicum, due to the influence of multilayered contextual and social complexities.

The above review suggests that more in-depth investigation into changes in pre-service teachers' motivation to teach is much needed. It also highlights the necessity of examining the historical and social dimensions of motivation to unravel the complex, multiple and dynamic nature of motivation to teach.

### **Motivation to Teach among Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese Teachers**

Studies on motivation to teach within a Chinese context have described a com-

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plex and nested phenomenon (Gordon 2000; Lai, Chan, Ko, & So, 2005; Su *et al.*, 2001; Zhao, 2008). Gordon (2000), in a study of Asian minority students in the United States, argues that the high expectations Chinese culture has of teachers saps students' confidence and reduces the interest they have in choosing teaching as a career, as do parental demands that they pursue and obtain positions with higher social status and financial rewards. A national survey of teacher candidates in mainland China by Su *et al.* (2001) finds that many participants enter teacher education programs reluctantly, often due to low university entrance exam scores or such practical considerations as financial difficulties. Many appear to have no enthusiasm for teaching and some even express a dislike of the teaching profession. A majority do not even intend to pursue teaching as a lifelong career, mainly due to its low social status and lack of benefits. Zhao's (2008) study of the life-long story of 17 teachers of English from five secondary schools reveals that aspects of motivation and demotivation co-exist in their teaching careers. Although most of them show an interest in their subject and enjoy the capacity teaching has to make a difference to their students, they nonetheless identify a number of demotivational factors, such as "a lack of financial reward... insufficient understanding and knowledge of EFL pedagogy, long work hours, inappropriate appraisal, inability to cope with challenges, poor work conditions, etc" (Zhao, 2008, p. 193), that make them less engaged in their work. Although Chinese society has a long tradition of valuing education and of seeing teachers as deserving of respect (Li, Xie, & Wang, 1998), in modern times, however, the social status of teaching has, paradoxically, declined.

Teaching seems to be more popular in Hong Kong than on the Chinese mainland. A survey of 1249 secondary students affords teaching a relatively high ranking, with participants describing it as the occupation they 'most wanted' and 'most respected' among 20 listed occupations (Lai *et al.* 2005, p. 165). In addition to their altruistic desire to help others and their intrinsic interest in working with children, students were also motivated by "the relatively favorable initial pay level, conditions of service, and better job security" in Hong Kong. Different from mainland pre-service and in-service teachers who turned away from teaching because of the low benefits and undesirable social status, the participants in the study by Lai *et al.* (2005) identified the "strenuous and monotonous" nature of the work as a major demotivating factor.

In mainland China and Hong Kong both, teaching attracts more students of low academic standard and from families of lower socio-economic status than it does those with high academic achievements and from high socio-economic backgrounds (Lai, *et al.*, 2005; Su, *et al.*, 2001). A high proportion of mainland Chinese prospective student teachers who enrolled in teacher education programs in Hong Kong, however, came from economically better-off families (Gu, 2011). Also, as only those students who qualify for first-tier mainland Chinese universities meet baseline admission standards for undergraduate programs in Hong Kong universities, only the best academic achievers on the Chinese mainland get the chance to study in Hong Kong. Given the different linguistic, social, and academic backgrounds

of these cross-border prospective student teachers and their Hong Kong counterparts, we take a cross-cultural approach to investigate the socio-cultural impacts on changes in pre-service teachers' motivation to teach during the initial educational experiences in the teacher education programs in Hong Kong.

## The Study

### *Participants and Data Collection*

The Institute offers a four-year Bachelor of Education (English Language) degree program. Ninety first-year prospective student teachers enrolled in the Department of English in the academic year 2009-2010: 22 from mainland China and 68 from Hong Kong. The coordinator of the year one cohort for the program's 2009-2010 academic year was contacted and asked to help to recruit participants. An invitation letter was sent to potential participants; 10 mainland Chinese and 10 Hong Kong prospective student teachers responded and agreed to participate. Table 1 summarizes the profile of the 20 participants. The names are all pseudonyms.

Five mainland Chinese participants and five Hong Kong participants were interviewed individually. The remaining ten participants were interviewed in two focus groups of five participants each (one Hong Kong group and one mainland Chinese group). The mainland participants were interviewed in Putonghua, while a mixture of English (mainly) and Cantonese was used when interviewing Hong Kong participants. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed; data extracts in Chinese in this article have been translated into English by the first author.

The individual interviews were semi-structured and lasted approximately 30 minutes each; although an interview guide was used, participants were encouraged to expand upon their experiences whenever possible, in order to hear their views and experiences and to enhance the researcher's understanding of their life realities (Johnson & Golombek, 2002). The interviews were conducted at the end of the first

**Table 1:**  
**The Participants**

<i>Mainland Chinese Participants (10)</i>			<i>Hong Kong Participants (10)</i>		
Name	Gender	Native language(s)	Name	Gender	Native language(s)
Xin	Female	Anhui dialect, Putonghua	Aeron	Male	Cantonese
Tian	Male	Cantonese, Putonghua	May	Female	Cantonese
Xuan	Female	Hebei dialect, Putonghua	Penny	Female	Cantonese
Jiang	Male	Cantonese, Putonghua	Sam	Male	Cantonese
Yun	Female	Zhejiang dialect, Putonghua	Sandy	Female	Cantonese
Xiaohua	Female	Cantonese, Putonghua	Janet	Female	Cantonese
Qun	Female	Shanghai dialect, Putonghua	Leo	Male	Cantonese
Qian	Female	Shanghai dialect, Putonghua	Tim	Male	Cantonese
Hui	Female	Putonghua	Mary	Female	Cantonese
Xiao	Female	Fujian dialect, Putonghua	Sally	Female	Cantonese

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semester of the participants' first year of study to explore how the initial learning experiences in the teacher education program had influenced their motivation to teach and commitment to teaching. Participants' reasons for choosing the program, their understanding of teaching and the teaching profession, their experiences in the teacher education program and their future career plan were explored. Separate interviews approximately 60 minutes in length were conducted with each of the focus groups to explore any unusual or interesting information that emerged from the individual interviews and to identify and confirm the themes continually emerging. The interactive responses from the focus group interviews also enabled the topics to be more deeply and widely discussed.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis was characterized by a gradually evolving process in which the data set, relevant literature, coded categories, and research questions were constantly evaluated, re-evaluated, and reformulated. The data were reviewed repeatedly until themes and patterns that potentially answered the research questions emerged (Strauss & Corbin 1998). In this sense, these themes represented "indigenous concepts" (Patton 2002) initiated by the participants, such as 'commitment to teaching is mediated by contextual factors' and 'commitment to teaching is rooted in the imagined teaching identity' (p. 454).

As recurring patterns deemed relevant to the research questions were identified, categories were developed informed by both the data and relevant literature. Alternative explanations were then sought to test the emerging understandings across cases. Similarities and differences in motivation to teach and commitment to teaching between Hong Kong and mainland Chinese participants were identified and analyzed against their different historical backgrounds and the different socio-cultural settings in Hong Kong and on the Chinese mainland.

## **Findings**

### **Entry Motivation**

Both Hong Kong and mainland Chinese participants identified altruistic and intrinsic incentives as important reasons for their joining the teacher education program. Consistent with previous studies (e.g., Lai *et al.*, 2005; Zhao, 2008), the participants in this inquiry wanted to teach because they love children and believe that teaching is a noble profession that can make a difference to individuals' lives, as exemplified by the following extracts:

I love kids. They are sincere and always smile. I think teaching is a great profession because we can guide children to be useful people to the society, from which I can gain a sense of fulfillment. (Penny, Hong Kong)

I love staying with kids because they are very simple. I like communicating with

others. I think teaching is a process of giving and I will definitely feel very happy when I see students learn something I teach. (Tian, mainland)

In addition, echoing the study by Lai *et al.* (2005), certain extrinsic aspects of the teaching profession were also identified as attractive, including the professional stability, long vacations and relatively high salary available to Hong Kong teachers and the pleasure of working in a less competitive environment, as illustrated by the following extracts:

What attracts me most about teaching is the relatively simple and easy atmosphere in the primary school. We won't be much involved in social complexity. (Penny, Hong Kong)

In Hong Kong, the salary for teachers is relatively high. I can travel to other countries on my vacations. (Xin, mainland)

Paradoxically, all participants reported choosing this language teaching program as a compromise, because their university entrance exam scores were not high enough to guarantee admission to the more prestigious universities in Hong Kong. The participants all indicated having an interest in English and identified a number of advantages to teaching English rather than other subjects. The following extracts are representative,

English teachers have more advantages than teachers of other subjects because a good command of English enables us to have more choices in the future, while not being limited to English teaching. (Yun, mainland)

An English teacher would be more multi-culturally aware and more knowledgeable of what is happening locally and globally. (Penny, Hong Kong)

While Yun, who is from mainland China, values the broader range of career options a good command of English could give, Penny (from Hong Kong) emphasizes the multicultural awareness an English teacher should have.

Although both groups reported similar reasons and incentives for entering the teaching education program, the mainland Chinese participants particularly emphasized the attraction and benefits of studying in Hong Kong, particularly the city's bilingualism and multiculturalism. For example,

Hong Kong has a mixture of Chinese and Western cultures. It would be easier for me to go overseas for further study if I got a bachelor degree in Hong Kong. (Xin, mainland)

Thus, a Hong Kong education and degree is perceived as leading to more options in the future, including the possibility of studying in English-speaking countries and the availability of career choices other than school teaching. Compared with Hong Kong participants, the location of the teaching program was a more important factor in mainland Chinese participants' choice.

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### **Commitment to Teaching**

All participants were asked whether they were committed to teaching as a lifelong career, with the data indicating that mainland Chinese participants were less committed than their Hong Kong peers. Only two of the 10 mainland participants were committed to teaching as a lifelong career; six planned to change to another career after teaching in Hong Kong for a few years, and the remaining two were uncertain about their future. In contrast, nine of the 10 Hong Kong participants were committed to teaching as a lifelong career; the sole participant who indicated otherwise planned to work as a flight attendant upon graduation in order to gain more experience before becoming a qualified teacher at a later date.

Recalling their first semester experiences, the mainland participants held positive perceptions of their teaching program and most expressed a continued interest in learning to teach English. They had gradually developed a better awareness of the nature of teaching, while the intricate nature of teaching aroused their interest in teaching strategies. While some reported experiencing some stress and difficulties during the initial teacher education course, this did not seem to reduce their motivation to learn. Moreover, as they gained more knowledge of theory in teaching English, mainland Chinese participants reassessed the amount of teaching difficulty they anticipated experiencing in local schools. For example,

I never realized teaching involves so many strategies before. I learnt more about this field from some courses in the first semester like Human Development. I think teaching English is very different from learning English. Teaching is not easy and I hope I can be an expert in teaching when I finish this program. (Tian, mainland)

However, their strong motivation to learn and to learn to teach did not lead to a high commitment to teaching. The following comment was representative:

I have a lot of interest in learning to teach English, but that does not necessarily mean I will be a teacher. I can learn both communication skills and the English language, which may help me work in other fields. (Hui, mainland)

English proficiency and skill in teaching English were viewed as resources for new opportunities in fields other than teaching. By contrast, Hong Kong participants were keen to apply this knowledge to their future teaching. For example,

My motivation to teach was actually enhanced after this first semester. I learnt a lot of teaching strategies. I could have mastered grammar better in primary and secondary schools if our teachers had used these strategies to teach us. I want to apply these theories and strategies to real teaching. (Mary, Hong Kong)

It is interesting that mainland Chinese and Hong Kong participants, while both becoming more motivated to learn and learn to teach English after the first semester, displayed different degrees of commitment to teaching. The first semester courses and rigorous training increased Hong Kong participants' commitment to teaching, while mainland Chinese participants, most of whom were academically high-achieving-



ing, came to see an improved command of English and of teaching skills as valuable resources that would allow them to explore alternative career possibilities. We shall further explore the reasons underlying these differences in the following section.

#### **Factors that Influence Commitment to Teaching**

The data analysis revealed that the mainland Chinese participants tended to associate core values closely with their imagined teaching self, which in turn influenced their commitment to teaching. Six of them expressed concerns regarding classroom discipline in Hong Kong classrooms. The following extract is representative:

A good teacher should concentrate on knowledge transfer, rather than waste time on classroom management. But in Hong Kong, teachers have to spend a lot of energy and time on classroom discipline. I don't think teaching is a suitable job for me. (Qun, mainland)

The participant questioned her suitability to teaching based on a value conflict between her teaching identity and the emphasis on teachers' management skills in Hong Kong. She saw good classroom discipline as a condition for effective teaching, but failed to consider that the latter could lead to the former; thus, by endowing teaching with a narrow meaning, she limited her potential to develop a comprehensive teaching capacity.

The mainland Chinese participants further expressed deep concerns about whether they could gain a legitimate place in local schools. Lacking the knowledge of local schools possessed by Hong Kong local English teachers and the 'native' language proficiency of teachers who speak English as their first language, they positioned themselves in between the two (Benson, forthcoming) and constructed a deficient identity, compared to those of Hong Kong local teachers and 'native' English-speaking teachers:

I knew little about the education system in Hong Kong and, although I am learning Cantonese, I still cannot communicate well enough with Hong Kong classmates. If I don't understand what the students are thinking about after I start teaching in Hong Kong, I doubt I can be a good teacher. (Qian, mainland)

We are at a disadvantage compared with native English-speaking teachers. English is always our second language. I think all parents will welcome an NET (native English teacher) rather than an English teacher from mainland China. (Yun, mainland)

The teaching identity as that emerged among those teachers with little knowledge of the school system and local cultures in Hong Kong and who cannot speak 'native-like' English can be seen in the above extracts. This, to a large extent, undermined their commitment to teaching in Hong Kong:

I have few advantages when working in Hong Kong as an English teacher other than my Putonghua proficiency. But, in any event, I don't want to teach Putonghua. (Qian, mainland)

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The participants limited their professional development by basing their future teaching capacity on their current ability, which they saw as unchangeable and unchanging. Their Cantonese proficiency and familiarity with local culture could be enhanced over time if they were to put an effort into doing so; in addition, their teaching confidence could be re-established by drawing on their own particular cultural and linguistic resources in the teaching context of Hong Kong to construct an irreplaceable teaching identity.

Some mainland Chinese prospective student teachers envisaged themselves working as researchers or teacher educators in universities, rather than as primary or secondary school teachers. To that end, they planned to pursue higher degrees overseas, after getting a permanent Hong Kong residency permit. For example,

My parents think I need to continue studying after graduation. They always told me that a Bachelor's degree is not enough for my future development and said that I need to get at least a master's degree, if not a Ph.D. They can support me as long as I am enrolled. (Yun, mainland)

As mentioned earlier, mainland Chinese prospective student teachers and local Hong Kong prospective student teachers at the Institute hail from different socio-economic backgrounds, with most of the latter coming from working-class families and most of the former from relatively better-off and better-educated families. As the above extract indicates, family influence helped shape their imagined teaching identity and their commitment to teaching in primary and secondary schools.

Although Lai *et al.* (2005) argue that some Hong Kong secondary students are less inclined to choose teaching as a profession because they viewed it as both strenuous and monotonous, this inquiry has found that it is prospective student teachers from mainland China, not Hong Kong, whose commitment to teaching has been negatively influenced by their widely held view of the profession as repetitive and unchallenging. Some of them explicitly indicated that they could not imagine remaining in the profession for long. The following interview extract is representative of some participants' belief that teaching in primary schools provides less space and fewer opportunities for self-development:

Researcher: Why don't you see teaching as your lifelong career?

Xin (mainland): I think I would feel bored if I kept teaching in primary schools. I wouldn't be able to make much progress because English in primary schools is simple. I would like to make more explorations in life and take on a more challenging job.

Moreover, the data indicated that the low social status of primary and secondary school teachers on the Chinese mainland diminished mainland participants' commitment to teaching. Even though only one of them planned to go back to mainland China for employment after graduation, the prevalent Chinese mainland values seemed to influence all of their future career choices. The following extract is representative:

Teaching is a great job because we can help others. But being a teacher is not seen as a cool profession among young people in China. A teacher's salary is low and society doesn't value the teaching profession. People usually value jobs like being a government executive or that are related to management, business and economics. (Tian, mainland)

Admission standards for teacher universities are lower than those for other comprehensive or specialized institutions, both in mainland China and in Hong Kong. In addition, the government offers applicants scholarships or free tuition as incentives to study at teacher universities. These two factors have contributed to the prevailing belief among mainland Chinese that teaching is a non-elite profession; this contradicts traditional Chinese cultural discourse, which affords teachers high social status and views teaching as a well-respected occupation (Fwu & Wang, 2002). Mainland participants were thus ambivalent about the status of teachers and teaching. On the one hand, they advocated the altruistic aspect of teaching while, on the other hand, they did not embrace teaching itself, because it was "not cool." In short, they applied the values of mainland China to the Hong Kong context when considering their career prospects.

Some mainland Chinese participants regarded rich social experiences as a key element to being a qualified teacher and showed uncertainty when envisaging their teaching:

Yun (mainland): I don't think I can be a qualified teacher if I start working right after graduation, because I have limited experience and have no confidence that I can always give the students correct advice. I am afraid that sometimes I may mislead them.

Researcher: Why do you think a teacher should always provide correct advice?

Yun: When we were young, we were always told that everything that teachers said was correct and that the teacher should know everything.

In the above extract, Yun established an imagined teaching self, that is, a teacher with enough social knowledge to make perfect judgments and to provide correct guidance to his or her students in every instance. However, the participant's awareness of her distance from this imagined teaching identity may keep her out of the profession, at least for the first few years after graduation. The unproblematized use of such terms as "make perfect judgments" and "always provide correct guidance" showed awareness that teachers are socially influenced and indicated the influence of the traditional Chinese view of teachers—key cultural figures (like heaven, earth, and the emperor) who should be free of any mistakes (Cleverley, 1991; Schoenhals, 1993).

Unlike their mainland Chinese counterparts, who hold rather negative perceptions of the social status of teachers, Hong Kong participants believed that the teaching profession is respected in Hong Kong society, that teaching English is different from teaching other subjects and that teachers of English receive still more respect in Hong Kong.

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Teaching is a valued and respected profession in Hong Kong. English teachers are shown more respect in Hong Kong than teachers of other subjects because English is a global language and is important to Hong Kong's desire to be an international place. (Penny, Hong Kong)

Also, while mainland participants' imagined teaching identities either positioned them unfavorably in the Hong Kong teaching profession or drew them away from teaching in local schools, Hong Kong participants established an imagined teaching identity that bonded them closely with teaching. For example, some were sensitive to the power of teaching to serve others and to fulfill their own needs:

I think a good teacher should have high English proficiency and know how to teach the students; he/she should really care about the students, not just the grades. I will give the students from families with lower income more support. I know how they feel and what they need because my parents were always busy working and couldn't give me enough guidance. (May, Hong Kong)

May's conception of a good teacher was based on her own learning experiences and the lack of guidance her parents provided in her childhood, and pushed her to envisage offering help to students from lower socio-economic families; this reflects the historically constructed nature of teaching motivation and identity.

Furthermore, some Hong Kong participants tended to focus on specific teaching strategies in order to help children get high exam scores and to meet both parental and societal expectations, in contrast to the heavy social responsibilities with which the mainland Chinese prospective student teachers burdened themselves. For example,

Hong Kong children face fierce competition and are under great pressure to enter good schools. Examination scores determine the students' future sometimes. Parents believe good teachers are those who can help students gain high scores. I am skilful in managing classroom discipline and in teaching them techniques in dealing with examinations. I will try to help students get high scores in examinations so that they can enter good universities, have good jobs and lead happy lives. (Aeron, Hong Kong)

Aeron believed he was well-suited to teaching because his classroom management skills and ability to teach techniques for obtaining high scores met society's expectations of a good teacher. The match between his skills and the social discourse sustained his teaching. However, his linking of "high scores" and "a happy life" is idealistic and linear and, if accepted by his students, may lead to frustration and disillusion if and when that belief crumbles after they enter society. A more holistic view of the factors influencing an individual's development may allow him to consider 'whole-person' education for the purpose of equipping students with academic and social knowledge, the ability to think independently and the willingness to face up to both academic and personal challenges, rather than focusing on "high scores" alone.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This study has explored the initial motivation and commitment to teaching between and within two groups of prospective student teachers studying in a teacher education institute in Hong Kong. The data presented here suggests that the individuals' commitment to teaching was mediated by immediate contextual factors (Gao & Trent, 2009), closely related to their imagined teaching identity (Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2009; van den Berg, 2002), shaped by their socio-economic backgrounds (Gordon, 2000), and constructed by social discourses on teachers and the teaching profession.

The comparative study reveals both similarities and differences between prospective student teachers from mainland China and those from Hong Kong in terms of their motivations for entering a teaching program and their commitment to teaching as a career. The prospective student teachers identified similar intrinsic, altruistic and extrinsic reasons for entering the profession (Sinclair, 2008); despite this, almost all admitted having entered the teacher education program because low college entrance examination scores precluded other options, rather than by choice. Moreover, mainland Chinese prospective student teachers chose to enter a teacher education program in Hong Kong specifically, because they saw it as a desirable place to learn English and felt that studying in Hong Kong offered more opportunities for self-development outside of the teaching profession.

Despite having similar perspectives on entering the program, the two groups developed different levels of commitment to teaching by the end of the program's first semester. Both groups were mediated by contextual factors; Hong Kong prospective student teachers developed an interest in putting the theory into practice and became more committed to teaching, while their mainland Chinese counterparts reassessed the suitability of teaching in a unfamiliar cultural context and became uncertain about the degree to which they could develop, personally and professionally, by teaching in Hong Kong. This shows how individuals from different cultural backgrounds may interpret similar contextual factors in very different ways. Perhaps it is for this reason that, although mainland prospective student teachers were impressed by the high-quality teacher training the program provided and were strongly motivated to learn English and how to teach English, they nonetheless saw English proficiency and the ability to teach as gateways to advanced educational degrees or other, non-teaching, career opportunities.

Commitment to teaching was found to be part of an imagined teaching identity (Day et al., 2005). The findings indicate that prospective student teachers' imagined teaching identities are historically and socially constructed. Generally speaking, the mainland prospective student teachers at the Institute came from families with higher socio-economic status than did their Hong Kong peers; the formers' parents tended to expect more of their children, partially explaining why some participants envisaged becoming researchers or university-level educators rather than working in primary or secondary schools. The fact that most mainland prospective student

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teachers at the Institute were academically high achievers also contributed to their tendency to imagine other career possibilities beyond a life-long career teaching in primary or secondary schools (Hart & Murphy, 1990). Moreover, they imagined having a deficient identity in local schools, positioning themselves between local teachers and native English teachers and weakening their commitment to teaching in Hong Kong schools.

Mainland prospective student teachers transferred the prevailing social discourse on teachers and the teaching profession in mainland China to Hong Kong. The combination of the teaching profession's low social status and the intense social demands placed on teachers made them less committed to teaching in the new context. This seems to correspond to Gordon's (2000) findings that high social standards for teachers in Chinese culture weakened the commitment to teaching among Asian minority students in the United States. Hong Kong prospective student teachers, on the other hand, appreciate the relatively high salary and social respect afforded the teaching profession in Hong Kong (Lai *et al.*, 2005).

How to retain non-local 'elite' prospective student teachers in the teaching profession is a serious problem facing Hong Kong education stakeholders. In the case of mainland Chinese prospective student teachers, they apply their own values to teaching and the teaching profession into the new context, and chose this program largely due to the numerous extrinsic opportunities offered by Hong Kong. While the quality teacher training education they receive prepares them to teach in Hong Kong, they are likely to transfer the knowledge they have acquired to other careers once they realize the difficulties they may experience as non-local teachers in Hong Kong. It would be desirable if their unique resources could be employed and recognized in order to help them find a legitimate position in the teaching profession. More supportive strategies are thus required to be developed by teacher training institutions to help such prospective student teachers in the process of becoming teachers (Cruickshank, 2004; Manuel & Hughes, 2006).

The findings indicate that the participants' motivation to teach and commitment to teaching are contextually, socially and historically constructed, which suggests that the professional community and school administration could assume some role in retaining non-local teachers. For example, based on a stereotype of the teaching profession, some participants with little teaching experience see it as a repetitive job and consequently opt for more challenging professional activities. It would therefore be helpful if teaching practices were arranged early in the program to allow new prospective student teachers to experience the real, and very challenging, nature of teaching.

Also desirable would be school-developed measures to support non-local teachers' integration into the Hong Kong teaching profession and to help them gain a legitimate position within the linguistic and cultural repertoire of local Hong Kong schools. It would be useful for teacher training institutions and local schools alike to recognize and acknowledge the unique strengths such prospective student

teachers bring to the Hong Kong educational environment. For example, mainland prospective student teachers' and in-service teachers' Putonghua proficiency could be exploited and their identity as multilingual speakers constructed; alternately, they could be assigned to set up exchange programs between Hong Kong and mainland Chinese schools. Above all, it is important that their voices be listened to when developing measures to integrate them into the Hong Kong learning and professional community. Enhancing not only their knowledge of the local schools and local culture, but also their sense of belonging to the community, would help to retain and sustain cross-border prospective student teachers in Hong Kong.

Due to increased international migration and the globalization of higher education, the demographic composition of both prospective and in-service teachers is becoming more and more hybrid in educational settings throughout the world (Menard-Warwick, 2008). Therefore, this study also sheds lights on how to sustain non-local prospective student teachers' motivation to teach and commitment to teaching, how to ensure their full participation in teaching practices after graduation, and how to retain young qualified teachers in the teaching profession, in educational settings elsewhere. Furthermore, this study raises the question how the prospective teachers can best use the linguistic and cultural diversity in modern educational settings to further their professional development.

This study was based on the accounts of prospective student teachers after their first semester of study at a teacher training institute, at which time they had not yet had the chance to observe or experience teaching in actual Hong Kong schools. Their motivation to teach might well change as they gain more and better understanding of the sociopolitical contexts of Hong Kong education and the institutional culture of Hong Kong schools. Thus, a longitudinal study following prospective student teachers over time to investigate fluctuations in their motivation to teach might provide insights into the interaction between their assessment and re-assessment of socio-cultural contexts, their evolving teaching identity and their motivation to teach.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> Motivation research has tended to follow a cognitive psychology approach, which seeks to provide a detailed and systematic account of motivation by examining various internal factors that may sustain teaching. Some of the main cognitive psychology theories that have been applied in motivation research are attribution theory, achievement theory, expectancy-value theory, values theory and goal theory. Researchers have made efforts to develop a comprehensive model of motivation in order to capture the dynamic interactions among motivation variables (Dowson & McInerney, 2003; Maehr & McInerney, 2004; McInerney, Marsh, & Yeung, 2003).

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