

A Biographical Narrative Inquiry into Teachers' Knowledge: an Intergenerational Approach

Hong qin Zhao

Louise Poulson

Education Department University of Bath
UK

This study is an investigation into Chinese EFL teachers' knowledge and understanding of teaching English as a foreign language within the context of a time of tremendous social change in China. In a medium-sized city, biographical narrative interviews and observation were used to three Chinese secondary EFL teachers, of three successive generations. An in-depth narrative analysis interpreting their metaphors, and constructing their life stories is employed to understand the biographical narrative data. It indicates how individual teacher's knowledge is both constrained and enabled by themselves and by the wider society they live in, and how change and continuity are intertwined in the teaching and learning practices of the three generations. This paper also addresses certain key issues in biographical narrative studies, namely subjectivity, representation, and cultural bearings, and teachers' knowledge, all of which constitute a form of pedagogy in educational research.

Key words: Biographical narrative inquiry, teachers' knowledge, Intergenerational approach

Introduction

This paper explores the dialectic relationships between individuals and the context in which they work. This is done by examining the acquisition and construction of knowledge and understanding of teaching and learning, through the participants' narratives of their educational experience; the represented self-image formation and transformation; and by investigating the continuity and change of teaching practice through a social-historical point of view. This work is part of a study based on a larger inquiry into Chinese secondary EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers' understanding of their practice, in a time of radical social and economic change in China. Out of the total 17 participant EFL teachers in a medium-sized city in the People's Republic of China (China), it focuses on the analysis of a case study involving three

teachers of three successive generations. The fieldwork took place from September to December 2004. This generated a unique arena for studying the change and continuity in itself as well as the teachers' practice in the field of English as a foreign language teaching and learning over a period of more than three decades. It also offers an opportunity to observe the three individual teachers self perceptions and how they interact with the changes within the wider society, through the analysis of the biographical narrative interviews and participant observation notes. The three teachers are referred to by pseudonyms. Ms Tang (age 55), represents the first generation, a retired senior teacher, Mr. Cheng, a middle-aged teacher (46), represents the second generation, and is a former student of the retired teacher, and Ms Xu, a younger teacher (31), represents the third generation, and is a former student of the middle teacher. In what follows, we will firstly review the literature on teachers' knowledge studies, and then center on the method of biographical narrative inquiry; this is followed by the presentation of the narrative data, analysis and discussion, before conclusions are made.

Hong qin Zhao, Louise Poulson, Education Department, University of Bath, UK. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Hong qin Zhao, Education Department, University of Bath, BA2 7AY, UK, email : edmhzh@bath.ac.uk

A Brief Review of Teachers' Knowledge

The search for a scientific and humanistic basis to understand and improve teaching, and therefore student learning in education has raised awareness of the importance of teachers' knowledge studies (Elbaz, 1991; Carter and Doyle 1996; Poulson, 2001; Goodson, 2003). This study examines this issue through the prism of the teachers' perspective of knowledge to explore the teachers' experience-based understanding of their practice, as a result of their own learning and teaching experience. This kind of knowledge embedded in teachers' experience and practice is termed "practical knowledge" by Elbaz (1983:3) in the literature. It describes the knowledge the teacher has about themselves, their students, their working context, curriculum, etc. (Elbaz, 1983). Along this continuum, Connelly et al (1997: 666) have developed this concept as "personal practical knowledge" and they investigated the teachers' knowledge of their professional landscape. The notion of teachers' personal practical knowledge is explored through a narrative inquiry into teachers' experience of teaching. Based on this, Connelly et al (1997) have developed constructs to manifest personal practical knowledge, as stories, images/metaphors, personal theories, etc. This line of research has generated insights into understanding something so intensely personal as teaching, "it is critical we know about the person, who the teacher is and the context in which they teach" (Goodson, 2003, p.2).

However, the limitation of teachers' personal practical knowledge studies is that it has not incorporated enough information on the socio-cultural and historical context in which teachers and their knowledge and thinking exists and develops. Goodson and Numan (2002:272) have realized that the risk of a mere focus on personal and practical knowledge is that "it can rupture the links to theoretical and the contextual knowledge. Only if these new modes of research link to wider narratives about social change in the society in which teachers live and work will teachers' knowledge become fully generative, and socially and politically efficacious." Goodson and Numan (2002) further point out that the genre of stories in educational research are specific to local situations, but are often divorced from understanding of social context and social process; studies which locate these lives in their full context have been much less common, and sadly neglected, until recently. Goodson (1992:4) continues to argue that: "Researchers had not confronted sufficiently yet the complexity of the schoolteacher as an active agent making his or her own history" under other constraints, he advocates to "tell the story of action within a theory of context" using

biographical methods. Therefore, a study that links teachers' knowledge to the wider society will, no doubt, contribute to the literature, and to a better understanding of teachers and their knowledge development.

For that reason, there is a need to connect teachers' knowledge studies to the wider cultural and historical environment, and the interaction between the conditions and factors that enable and constrain teachers' experience, to provide a broader view on teachers and their working knowledge. As such, this study goes beyond the notion of teachers' personal practical knowledge, presenting the three participant teachers' knowledge and understanding of teaching in the light of the wider social, economic and historical change and development in China, listening to the teachers speaking for themselves in the context of their life history and cultural significance.

Method: The Biographical Narrative Inquiry

In educational studies, a biographical narrative inquiry is used as a way of studying how people experience the world, which is increasingly legitimised as a qualitative research design (Denzin, 1989; Polkinghorne, 1995; Bruner, 1996; Goodson and Sikes, 2001; Roberts, 2002). According to Denzin (1989) and Polkinghorne (1995), it is a subset of qualitative research, as a mode of inquiry, which is used to solicit accounts of actions, moments, events and happenings and people whose analysis produces stories (e.g. biographies, work histories or case studies) as a form of knowledge. The forms of narrative research into teachers and their practice can be a process of gathering information or data from natural discourse or speech, field observational notes, original interviews, and other forms such as journal writings and drawings (Sparkes, 2002).

Biographical narrative research is increasingly used to draw research "up close" to teachers and their knowledge in their working lives (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Gudmundsdottir, 1997:1; Olson, 1995). According to Gudmundsdottir, (1997) narratives of teachers' educational biographies refers to the formative experiences which serve as the basis for, and has influenced, the ways in which teachers think about teaching and subsequently their actions in their practice (see also Knowles, 1992; Tripp, 1994). Knowles (1992) asserts that biography is progressively being recognized as having a significant bearing on the practice of teachers. They are a significant source of, and have a powerful effect on, the development and formation of

teachers' knowledge, such as beliefs, images and role-understanding that manifests itself in their day-to-day practice. Knowles (1992:105) further finds, through his case studies of how biographies affect teachers' teaching, that teachers' own learning and teaching biography influence their classroom practice in a number of ways, such as: "Confidence displayed in the classroom; relationship with students; and personal work habits, planning and organizational skills."

A narrative of teachers' biographies is a powerful pedagogical tool for representing aspects of teaching and capturing the understanding and imagination of teachers, given that teachers know most about teaching phenomena, namely, teachers themselves, the activities and context in which they teach (Doyle, 1997). Narrative accounts of learning and teaching biographies configure the actions, happenings, events, metaphors, influential people and critical moments in teachers' life history to produce coherent biography providing explanatory background of their knowledge. Biography is a form of sociologically-read life history, which gives access to social relations and the doings of others with the participant giving an account of their own lived life experience (Bertaux, 1981). Elbaz (1991) argues that authentic teachers' knowledge is grounded in the biographical story. Therefore, the use of biographical narrative inquiry as a form of qualitative research into the participants' educational experience will allow the time and space for the participant teachers to relate their backgrounds to the way they approach teaching now, and position them in a social and historical context, and a wider landscape as a knowledgeable being.

Therefore, instead of using other methods to obtain quantitative data, for this piece of research, the biographical-narrative interview was utilized, as a lightly-structured interview design, addressed by Wengraf (2001:116), to collect narrative accounts of the participant teachers' educational experience, supplemented by observation in the field. The participants were invited to talk in a timeline along their learning experience, work history and future plans in the form of an oral life history of their education with the researchers' observation of their current practice. The interviews probed these issues with such questions as follows: please share with me your experience of learning and teaching English; when did you start learning English, how it was taught; what is your typical day; and how do you plan and teach a typical lesson, what is your future plan... The biographical narrative interviews and observations were conducted in the participants' first language – Mandarin -

,recorded and transcribed, and then translated from Mandarin into English, by one of the authors who is Chinese and can speak and write both English and Chinese fluently. Each interview lasted from 1.5 – 2 hours. This was followed up by giving back the transcriptions and translations to the participants for their review and confirmation of the accuracy of what they were ready to share. This has naturally captured three teachers out of three generations from the total 17 participants of the biographical interview – Ms Tang was Mr. Cheng's secondary school English teacher, Mr. Cheng was Ms Xu's secondary school English teacher. This paper centers on the analysis of these three teachers' biographical narrative data.

Narrative Analysis and Discussion

The narrative data and observational notes were thoroughly read and analyzed, with the narrative analysis approach described by Polkinghorne (1995). According to Polkinghorne (1995), narrative analysis differs from thematic analysis in a way that the narrative accounts of actions, moments, metaphors, happenings, events and people are synthesized or condensed to produce plotted and coherent episodes, or stories, to give meaning to, and make sense of, the biographical data, rather than break it down into categorizations.

This narrative analysis focused on identifying and then interpreting metaphors and constructing stories or condensed narrative episodes (Polkinghorne, 1995, Bruner, 1996) that leads to their becoming and being a teacher, looking at teachers' self image and their transformation over their career; clearly their self image constitutes a major construction in their narratives of their personal experience. Self as a significant manifestation of teachers' personal practical knowledge (Connelly et al, 1997), concerning who they are and how they come into being themselves, is the major thread of their narratives. It is closely related to how they are influenced by the critical moments they have experienced, and the people who had a part in the making of their professional and personal self, and in the way they conduct their practice of EFL teaching, as they relate in their narratives. These self-images and personal experience are formed through their life stories, and are found to be highly conceptualized and synthesized by their use of metaphors, which are anchored in their narrative accounts of their experience. A metaphor, as a tool of thinking, can illustrate well people's deeper conceptual systems, grounded in their

experience and socio-cultural world (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Metaphors used by teachers can be seen as “archetypes” of teachers’ thinking and teaching knowledge. They have exploratory power, and an ability to structure information, articulate and conceptualize teachers’ experiences, and illuminate understanding (Martinez et al, 2001). Metaphor has emerged as a way of generating meaning in the study of teacher knowledge and its development (Carter, 1990; Berliner, 1990; Connelly et al, 1997). Carter (1990:110) argues that metaphors can be used as a vehicle for “modeling teachers’ comprehension of their work” and for communicating messages and meanings, which are difficult to access in literal language. Therefore, metaphor is a valid source and analytical device for gaining insights into teachers’ thoughts and feelings regarding their work and life. As Miles and Huberman (1994) assert, they have an immense and central place for the development of theory.

For example, Ms Tang (aged 55), representing the first generation, is a senior teacher coming up to retirement who had taught for more than 30 years across junior and senior secondary levels. Humorously, she used a metaphor that illustrated her life-long experience as a teacher, calling herself as “teacher³” - teacher “cubed” - by which she means that she is a teacher who has taught a lot of students, and of several generations, including Mr. Cheng - now a senior, middle-career teacher, representing the second generation. This depicted an image of a veteran teacher and conceptualized her more than 30 years of teaching experience.

The Self in Dialectic Relation to Society

Pollard (1985, in Woods, 1987) argued that the self is the teacher’s primary interest-at-hand, manifested in aspects of enjoyment, workload, health and stress, autonomy and maintenance of self-image. It should be in line with the conception of teachers’ knowledge and understanding, and therefore self-knowledge becomes the result of analysis in this study, which will be presented in relation to the themes - self and society, public and private, change and continuity. These relationships, through analysis, are further crystallized through stories and metaphors.

Every aspect of the participants’ narrative knowledge demonstrates a strong connection between the impact of the wider society on the individual and a communication between the cultural setting and the protagonists themselves. It illustrates how change in the wider society is present and

produced in individuals’ everyday life and impacts on themselves. For instance, the first two generations, Ms Tang and Mr. Cheng, both relate an historical event – the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) - as the turning point of their lives, by interrupting their education, and, as a consequence, they have had to struggle throughout their lives to claw back education for themselves.

Ms Tang’s biographical narrative shows her as a female veteran teacher with a unique history of becoming and being a teacher. She repeatedly emphasized the image of having a thirst for knowledge, struggling for a university degree from which she was deprived by the historical events of the Cultural Revolution. The following is her story of her pursuit of a degree.

“The start of the 10 years of chaos of the Cultural Revolution interrupted my schooling, and I followed the ‘political flood’ of people heading for the countryside, which at the same time carried away my opportunity of going to study at a university. As a senior secondary school leaver, I did well in my personal revolution to become part of the ‘Proletariat’, I was forwarded to become a schoolteacher and a communist party member in a rural area where I settled. In the “university of life”, I later was recruited to be a worker in the Ge Zhouba Project [a multi-purpose water control and power generation project on the Yangtze River] promulgated by Mao Zedong, (who authorized it’s construction in 1970). In the “university classroom” of the open air and the workshop, I was eager to change myself to the bone so as to really be a part of the working class, when one’s class status was important and the workers held a relatively high political status as members of a ‘proletarian’ occupation, at a time [1966-1976] when intellectuals were politically vulnerable and sometimes harassed. As a model worker and a keen revolutionary, I was recognized as an ‘iron lady’. With the establishment of a school at this Ge Zhouba Project, as I had previous experience of teaching English, I was again picked out to be forwarded to teach in the project school. In 1971 university admission was resumed, after 5 years of closure from 1966 to 1971. The universities opened their doors for workers, peasants and soldiers without entrance examinations. However, entrance was more or less determined by class status, as mentioned earlier. I did not get a recommendation to go to study at university because my class origin was not ‘proletarian’. Nevertheless, I did get an opportunity for professional

development with a year studying at a teachers' university with undergraduate students. After the Cultural Revolution, intellectuals gradually regained better status. In the system with a 'meritocracy' mechanism, status was given according to the level of academic degree. In this time of paucity of teachers, I trained some of my students, and some workers, to be teachers. I felt it ironic that the teachers I trained were given the status of scholar, but I remained unscholarly because I did not have any university degree. In the 1980s, I continued to fight for a degree. I had an opportunity to study on a Television University programme when I got married. This was like a long-awaited drink for my thirst for learning, and later I studied in a teachers college from 1993, and 3 years later I was rewarded with a BA degree. My pursuit of my BA degree was like a long war (like the 'Anti-Japanese War' [1937-45])."

Mr. Cheng presented himself as a person whose early education was stunted by the Cultural Revolution, with a relevant narrative here:

"My school time mostly was in the Cultural Revolution. It was a period of time when studying was regarded as useless, success and failure at schoolwork would have no bearings on one's future; academic excellence was not rewarded or even permitted; learning was to be combined with labour and students simply stopped paying attention in class. I almost learned nothing academic at that time, but did learn to play musical instruments, and I was active in propaganda. As a result, when university entrance was resumed in 1977, I tried but failed the examination. I was recruited as a worker in the Ge Zhouba Project later. Then I was forwarded to be an English teacher in the project school. Luckily, I was given a recommendation and thus was selected to go to a college in 1979 to study Electrical Engineering. As my English was ranked first in the class, I was forwarded to study English at another university and was supposed to come back and teach English at the college. In 1982, I graduated from the university English course, but, due to the change of the policy at that time, I did not stay at the college, instead I was returned to the project school to be a teacher. I constantly perused further education. Recently, I have just passed my MA dissertation."

For many people and the society at large, the beginning of the Cultural Revolution was a watershed. The Cultural Revolution was the most wrenching and complex mass movement resulting from a political and power struggle in modern Chinese history. It also had a tremendous impact on people in the midst of it - professionally, emotionally and mentally. Having experienced a series of political movements, which were followed by the Cultural Revolution, such as the Anti-Rightist Campaign (1957), The Great Leap Forward (1958-61), Ms Tang used a metaphor: *"At that time of madness, the society was handicapped"*. Even many years later she felt bitter about her status as a teacher for not being treated as a scholar, as reflected in her narrative:

"I was not given the status of an intellectual like other teachers. My colleagues told me that you've taught so many excellent intellectuals; it's a greatest irony that you were not viewed an intellectual. So I feel I am a handicapped person". Ms Tang also has insight into this aspect and said: *"Education in our country has changed according to the political climate. Its success or failure depends on the government. Therefore, it is difficult for people like me to obtain my dream"*

Although the social cultural setting and other people provide the context and limits within which they act, they do make choices in order to be able to pursue their particular goals, for example, becoming a scholar. As illustrated by the above narratives, each of these individual's lives acknowledges their active agency in constructing them. Ms Tang, when a school leaver, as a teenage girl, did excellently in her personal revolution, wanting to *"change to the bone"*, in order to be a part of the privileged class of "proletarians" during the Cultural Revolution. As a result, the opportunity to teach in the school was open to her, while many of her peers remained working in the fields, or as construction workers. This may gloss over the reality that their success in the selection was, in fact, due to their own efforts and their resistance against historical mischance. A case in point is Ms Tang's constant efforts to pursue her university degree, which were realized later in her career life. Constraints can also be enabling (Fairclough, 1989).

The teachers of the first two generations claim they were individually luckier than their peer group at that time, because of being specially selected for preferential treatment. When Mr. Cheng was asked about his reflection on his life experience by the researcher, he said: *"I had the opportunity to go to university, I am lucky, many of my schoolmates had*

little schooling and education.” Their reluctance to attribute their success to their own personal effort most likely stems from the Chinese belief that *“the nail that stands proud gets hammered flat”* (He, 2002), on the other side, it also shows their modest character.

The third generation, represented by Ms Xu, was educated in a Post-Cultural Revolution era, and has no explicit accounts of the impact of the Cultural Revolution. She experienced no interruption in her education and started her teaching already having gained a higher education degree. However, the social environment does have a similar impact on the three generations’ work in terms of the imposition of examination, as can be seen in Ms Xu’s narrative. It shows her as a teacher feeling that the current assessment regime delimits her enjoyment of English teaching and learning, as shown in the following:

“Putting the aspect of examinations aside, teaching English can be complete and enjoyable, by teaching with games and singing English songs etc. However, when teaching and learning English is connected with examinations, every decision-making is associated with what and how English might be examined in order to get high marks. English is then not treated as a language at all. I often switch to Chinese when teaching grammar. Teachers teach what might be examined. Teacher appraisal is conducted, and the schools are ranked, according to the examinations scores. I feel I am fighting against the boredom and the students’ depressive feelings caused by the current assessment system.”

Working toward clinical accountability resulted in Ms’ Xu’s feeling like a *“Robot”*. The dialectic between the social and political context and self knowledge is seen as important in the participants’ lives. This aspect of teacher stories is seldom touched on, or presented, in the literature. Goodson (1997) explains that personal practical knowledge, with personal narratives, has a particular Western individualistic version, which is unrecognizable to much of the rest of the world. Or perhaps it is particular in China because teachers are living in a radical transition of the economy, society and ideology.

Public and Private Self

Human behaviors are purposeful; they are guided by

both instincts and intentions. The recollection of lived experience constitutes a psychological decision-making process of both the researched and the researcher, where people see what they want and need to see, and actively construct and portray a desirable or “preferred” identity and self (Convery, 1999), although they may not do so consciously. The construction of a desirable self meanwhile discloses other sides of the self, all of which constitute a whole self image of the participant. In voicing narratives, teachers shape their knowledge combined with aspects of critical moments, metaphors, significant events, actions, and influential people with whom they have had contact. When they present their public knowledge about self, they reveal private knowledge of the private side of self. This may also be illustrated in contradictions in the representation of ‘self’. In the case of Ms Tang, she presented herself as an open-minded teacher who loves to bring life into the classroom:

“I did not like teaching to be merely transmission; I thought if teaching is from the mouth to the textbook and from the textbook to the mouth, then it was dead. I enlivened the class and let the students learn through play and from the use of the language. I often set up the context for students to practice and use the language. Teaching is open-ended and there is no certain model to follow. I do not believe in blind imitation.”

On the other hand, her account also reveals the other side of her teaching style, to teach by transmission, and for her students to learn by rote. She believes students should learn knowledge from the teacher - in other words, the teacher is the knowledge provider and the model for students. She requires her students to memorize English textbooks, and trains her students to take dictation, which is, perhaps, shaped by the condition that students have to learn to pass examinations, and there is no genuine language environment for learners to use English in. This demonstrates the contradictions between her personal preference for loving challenges and open-ended teaching and actual teaching practice (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996). The distinct individual is socio-historically and personally blended. Thus the conscious representation of the public self is accompanied by deliberately filtering material from their memories, which is further interpreted by the researcher, and therefore is made with subjectivity. The identity might be floating according to individual needs and comprehensions of expectations. As a result, when listening to teachers’ stories, we should be aware of representational practice in biographical narrative studies

(Convery, 1999).

In the case of Mr. Cheng, while his narrative demonstrated him as a devoted and well-established EFL teacher worked as the head of English subject in his school, he was aware that, in China, at the senior secondary level, teachers are working long hours every day, usually for six-and-a-half days a week. He realized that teaching is a career that demands heavy self-investigation while providing insufficient sense of achievement. This is reflected in his metaphor for himself as a “ferryman”:

“Year after year, taking people [students] from one side to the other, the teacher remains forever on the river, without any sense of high achievement. I am worried that the secondary-school teaching occupation cannot attract intelligent people, and China should adjust its educational policies, increasing investment in compulsory education.”

Having worked at the secondary school level for more than 20 years, he wanted a change in his life, so that he could do something for himself - for instance, working on his MA dissertation, or editing a book. Therefore, he became a coordinator of English subjects for the district rather than continuing teaching in the classroom, so that he could have some time to pursue his private interests.

The third generation, Ms Xu, had largely positive experiences and felt complete as an EFL teacher. On the other hand, her metaphor for herself as working like a “robot” and “skilled work” revealed the “grind” side of teaching that she could feel.

To sum up, the public and private sides of teachers’ narrative in one way demonstrated the full picture of the participant’s self-image, and, in another way, revealed their honest stance in their telling of their stories. Therefore, the biographical narrative generated dynamic balance in sharing teacher’s personal, practical knowledge.

Change and Continuity

Change is obvious in participants’ language of their ambitions, expectations and their awareness of teachers’ status in society, and in their views on textbooks, which also demonstrates the change in teachers’ identity when teachers actively make their own history, according to their own aspirations and purposes. They unconsciously use metaphors they live and teach by as tools to help make sense of their lived educational experience, and to present themselves. It

also confirms that language is both a site of, and a stake in, educational change and development (Fairclough, 1989). In this study, teachers use metaphorical thinking to conceptualise their work and structure their experience and knowledge of themselves and their understanding of their practice. Ms Tang described herself as an “iron lady”, after having experienced various hardships in adapting to life in the countryside and as a construction worker. This means she could do the work of a man. Despite this, she felt herself handicapped, as was also society, living through the time of turmoil of the Cultural Revolution and the years of its aftermath. That period of history had a tremendous impact on her. This is also reflected in her metaphors, such as the classroom being a ‘*battlefield*’, the expectations for their students to be a “*general*” rather than only a “*soldier*”. On the other hand, it also reflects the competitive situation in education in Chinese culture.

However, the second generation also used post-revolutionary professional terms, such as the teacher being a facilitator rather than a transmitter. The third generation did not use any revolutionary vocabulary at all.

In terms of their image of teaching, the teacher from the first generation felt to be a teacher was a glorious occupation, something to be respected. She is content. The second generation, Mr. Cheng, was aware that although teaching has been nationally regarded to be “*the most glorious occupation under the sun*”, in being “*the engineer of the human soul*”, nevertheless, having seen through the “*laurel wreath*” of various titles, and feeling teaching to be a tedious job, he realized that the image of teachers is that of “*burning candles*”, in the culture of China, and the pay of secondary teachers in China has remained “*almost unchanged*” in recent years, while the salary of people working in higher education has increased a lot; and he is conscious of these dilemmas of education. He used the metaphor of a “*ferryman*” for himself. He has taken action to make changes in his life, taking a modern two-day weekend, and so has just become an English education coordinator, even though the pay is less.

The teacher of the third generation said she felt like a ‘*robot*’ when correcting student homework, and she felt correction to be useless; but if the teacher doesn’t correct homework, students would not take it seriously. After working like this for 12 years, she felt herself, in her repetitive routines, to be like a “*skilled worker*”.

Other aspects of change can be envisaged through their narratives, knowing the context they live in. One recurring theme is the change of textbooks, which have undergone three rounds of changes; the content is added and changed

with time, requiring a more communicative view of teaching. Their view of students reflects a wider change in Chinese people's financial and social life, which consequently has had an impact on her teaching, as can be seen in Ms Xu's narrative about her feeling that students are becoming more difficult to teach:

"I have a strong feeling that students are more difficult to teach compared to when I started teaching. Society has developed along with the economic improvement. The relations between people are getting indifferent. Education is easier to get, and not the only way to make a living. Students from One-Child Policy families take for granted what they get without hard work. Students are not so attentive to education as previous students."

Across nearly four decades of teaching practice, the "state" of teaching has remained virtually unaltered, consisting of teaching from the book, transmission and rote learning. The continuity is adequately demonstrated and explained with the inter-relationship between the cross-generation narratives. Ms Xu, as the representative of the third generation, has given a vivid narrative about how her English teacher (Mr. Cheng) taught English to them:

"In senior secondary school year 2, we had a new English teacher Mr. Cheng, who was 'young and handsome' and could speak 'good English'. He usually explained grammar in the textbook in tremendous detail, with many example sentences. He could write 'four sections of blackboard full up', and we took notes from it."

People are historical beings, retaining as part of themselves their previous experiences (Polkinghorne, 1995). This is also reflected in the "apprenticeship of observation" perspective, in terms of the teachers' previous learning experience having an impact on the way they teach (Calderhead, 1987). This further explains why Ms Xu carries on the tradition, and teaches to the book using the transmission method, which is reflected in her narrative when she was asked to describe how she taught a unit in the textbook:

"I teach almost the same way for each unit. First, I start with teaching vocabulary, and then I come to study the text. I read it before explaining the language

points. If there is an important grammar point contained in the text or dialogue, I usually present the grammar before studying the text and dialogue. After the text, we do exercises, which may take 2-3 sessions."

The tendency of one generation to form the next leads to a continuity of the same teaching practices, which might not be appropriate in the face of an increasingly developing and pluralistic society (Ben-Peretz et al, 2003).

Conclusions

This study has shown that teachers' knowledge has its contextual constraints as well as constructed and reconstructed characters. The intergenerational approach to the analysis of their biographical narrative has revealed an interesting facet of the public and private sides of their self-representation, the rapidity of change, and yet also the persistence of continuity over a period of great social upheaval. Further research along these lines is sure to uncover even more remarkable evidence of similar phenomena.

On the other hand, the researchers' role in analysis is not neutral, but influenced by their own values and interests that further filter the representation of people's experience (Sikes, 2005). Rather it is to compose a representation that conforms to the current conventions of grammar and conceptual framework of the language in which the life experience is expressed (Clifford, 1986). Naturally, there will be selection and rejection of material, mainly by reason of the large quantity obtained, and the criteria for this will have an impact on the overall impression. In order to present a verifiable account of the narrative analysis, there must be a constructive interaction between analyst and subject, so as to bring out those aspects, through story, which have particular interest to, and bearing on, the topic the researcher is investigating, in the same way as a visual artist does not record a scene as a random photograph, but selects and composes images into a meaningful whole, as a means of arriving at a greater understanding of what relationships lie beneath the surface as well as in plain view.

In the case of this study, the researcher was concerned with teacher construction of their knowledge. The researcher's background in teaching EFL in China made it possible to access the particular cluster of teachers and pick out the culturally and professionally significant points in their narratives. The researcher's interest in metaphors was

rewarded by the teachers' spontaneous and natural use of rich and colourful examples, which further demonstrates the change of teachers and their practice through generations.

References

- Ben-Peretz, M., Mendelson, N. and Kron, F. (2003). How Teachers in Different Educational Contexts View Their roles. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 19 (2). 277-290.
- Berliner, D.C. (1990) If the Metaphor Fits, Why not Wear it? The Teacher as Executive, *Theory into Practice*, 29 (2) , 85-94.
- Bertaux, D. (1981). From Life-History Approach to the Transformation of Sociological Practice, In: D. Bertaux (ed.) *Biography and Society the Life History Approach in the Social Sciences* (pp. 29-47). London: Sage.
- Bruner, J. (1996). *The Culture of Education*. Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Calderhead, J. (1987). The Development of Knowledge Structures in Learning to Teach. In: J. Calderhead (ed.) *Teachers' Professional Learning*. London: The Falmer Press.
- Carter, K. (1990) Meaning and Metaphor: Case Knowledge in Teaching. *Theory into Practice*, 29 (2) , 109-126.
- Carter, K. and Doyle, W. (1996). Personal Narrative and Life History in Learning to Teach, in: J. Sikula, T. Buttery and E. Guyton (eds) *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education*. (pp. 120-142). New York: Macmillan Library Reference.
- Clandinin, D. J. and Connelly, F.M. (2000) *Narrative Inquiry Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Clifford, J. (1986). Introduction: Partial Truths, in: J. Clifford and G.E. Marcus (eds.) *Writing culture: the poetics and politics of ethnography* (pp.1-26). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Connelly, F. M., Clandinin, D. J. and He, M.F. (1997). Teachers' Personal Practical Knowledge on the Professional Knowledge Landscape. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 13 (7), 665-674.
- Convery, A. (1999) Listening to Teachers' Stories: Are We Sitting Too Comfortably? *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 12 (2), 131-146.
- Cortazzi, M. and Jin, L. (1996) 'Changes in Learning English Vocabulary in China'. In: H. Coleman and L. Cameron (eds.) *Change and Language* (pp. 153-165). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters LTD.
- Denison, J. (2006) The Way We Run, Reimagining Research and the Self. *Journal of Sport & Social Issue*, 30 (4), 333-339.
- Denzin, N. (1989) *Interpretive biography*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Doyle, W. (1997). Heard Any Good Stories Lately? A Critique of the Critics of Narrative in Educational Research, *Teaching and Teacher Education*. 13 (1), 93-99.
- Elbaz, F. (1983). *Teacher Thinking: A Study on Practical Knowledge*. London: Croom Helm.
- Elbaz, F. (1991). Research on Teachers' Knowledge: the evolution of a discourse, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 23(1), 1-19.
- Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and Power*. London and New York, Longman.
- Freeman, D. (1996). "To Take Them at Their Word": Language Data in the Study of Teachers' Knowledge. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66(4), 732-761.
- Goodson, I. (1992) *Studying Teachers' Lives*. London: Routledge.
- Goodson, I. (1997). Representing Teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 13 (1), 111-117.
- Goodson, I. and Sikes, P. (2001) *Life-history research in educational settings: learning from lives*. Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Goodson, I. and Numan, U. (2002) Teacher's Life Worlds, Agency and Policy Contexts, *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 8(3/4), 269-77.
- Goodson, I. (2003). *Professional Knowledge, Professional Lives: Studies in Education and Change*. Maidenhead & Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Grant, G. (1992). The Sources of Structural Metaphors in Teacher Knowledge: Three Cases, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 8 (5/6), 433-440.
- Gudmundsdottir, S. (1997). Introduction to the Theme Issue of "Narrative Perspectives on Research on Teaching and Teacher Education. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 13 (1), 1-3.
- He, M. F. (2002) A Narrative Inquiry of Cross-cultural Lives: Lives in China, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 43 (3), 301-321.
- Josselson, R. (1996). Imaging the Real Empathy, Narrative, and the Dialogic Self, in R. Josselson and A. Lieblich (Eds) *Interpreting Experience the Narrative Study of Lives* (pp. 27-43). London: Sage.
- Knowls, J. G. (1992) Models for understanding pre-service and beginning. teachers' biographies: illustrations from

- case studies, In I. Goodson (Ed) *Studying Teachers' Lives* (pp.99-153). London: Routledge.
- Martinez, M.A., Sauleda, N. & Guenter, L.H. (2001) Metaphors as Blueprints of Thinking about Teaching and Learning, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 17(8), 965-977.
- Miles, M. and Huberman, A. (1994) *Qualitative Data Analysis*. Thousand Oaks California: Sage publications.
- Olson, M.R. (1995). Conceptualising Narrative Authority: Implications For Teacher Education. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 11 (2), 119-139.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1995). Narrative Configuration in Qualitative Analysis, in Hach, J.A. and Wisniewski, R. (eds.), *Life History and Narrative* (pp. 6-23). London, The Falmer Press
- Poulson, L. (2001). Paradigm Lost? Subject Knowledge, Primary Teachers and Educational Policy. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 49 (1), 40-55.
- Roberts, B. (2002) *Biographical research*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Sikes, P. (2005) 'Storying Schools: Issues Around Attempts to Create a Sense of Feel and Place in Narrative Research Writing'. *Qualitative Research*, 5 (1), 79-94.
- Sparkes, A. (2002) *Telling tales, in sport and physical activity, a qualitative journey*. Leeds: Human Kinetics.
- Stables, A. (2003). Reading the Teacher; Writing the Lesson. *Language and Education*, 17 (6), 450-461.
- Wengraf, T. (2001) *Qualitative Research Interviewing, Biographic Narrative and Semi-Structured Methods*. London: Sage Publications.
- Woods, P. (1987). Life Histories and Teacher Knowledge. In: J. Smyth (ed) *Educating Teachers Changing the Nature of Pedagogical Knowledge* (pp. 121-134). London: The Falmer Press.

Received August 30, 2005

Revision received August 5, 2006

Accepted November 30, 2006