

# A Chinese Teacher's Perspective on Professional Development in Literacy Education

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## *A Chinese Teacher's Perspective on Professional Development in Literacy Education*

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper presents the teaching and learning experiences of a Chinese literacy teacher in narrative form. The participant's story is presented in his own voice, as constructed from interview transcripts. Challenges and struggles faced by the participant include limited professional autonomy in a hierarchical school system, awareness of conflict between educational theory and classroom practices, and lack of social and institutional support for teachers' professional development initiatives. This narrative is situated in China, but the challenges faced by the participant (Hao-Ying) are similar to my own experiences (as a teacher in Pakistan and Canada) and may strike a chord with other literacy teachers.

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*"The question that I would ask is how can a teacher improve him or herself, without positive reinforcement and encouragement from school authorities?"*

The question above was posed by my research participant, an international graduate student from China, Hao-Ying<sup>1</sup> who, through learning and teaching experience in literacy education, was committed to developing himself as a professional. This paper presents his experiential narrative in story form, as constructed from interview data using the method of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Hao-Ying's question raises an important point about the effectiveness of professional development initiatives for literacy teachers in his home country of China.

Narratives are formed in three-dimensional space; they occur in a particular time, historical, political, and cultural context, and geographic place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Hao-Ying's story is situated in contemporary China, a communist republic with an autocratic educational system. As a literacy teacher and teacher educator in Pakistan, a so-called democratic republic recovering from colonial aftershocks, with a British-model educational system, I was surprised by similarities between my own experiences (Syed, 1999) and the experiences of Hao-Ying. I suspect that Western readers will also find resonance between their experiences and the challenges faced by Hao-Ying in his efforts to become a professional literacy teacher. It is my hope, while reading this paper, teachers and educators will, likewise, reflect on the efficacy of professional development initiatives in their own professional institutions. Before presenting my participant's perspective, it is necessary to define what professional development means in the current context of literacy education literature.

### **What is 'Professional' Development?**

Continuous, global, professional development initiatives are essential if literacy teachers are to effectively respond to the complex and rapidly changing demands of today's students (Darling-Hammond, 1993a). I use the term "professional" development because I understand teaching to be a professional enterprise. Professional teachers draw upon specialized knowledge to perform their duties (Brandt, 1993). In the performance of their duties, they hold themselves accountable to the highest possible standard-addressing their students' and their own evolving learning and teaching needs. To address these learning needs, teachers must be committed to inquiry, an ongoing, lifelong learning journey (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992). This journey may take an inquiring teacher along untrammelled and unpredictable paths.

Brandt (1993) described the present-day drive for professionalism as originating in the mid-1980s, when policy makers identified the teacher as the critical factor in students' learning and stated that "the quality of students depends on the quality of instruction, and the quality of instruction depends on their teachers" (p. 234). Knowles (1980) envisioned education as "a lifelong process of continuing inquiry . . . The most important skill of all for both children and adults is learning how to learn; the skills of self-directed inquiry" (p. 41). Not only must professional teachers be lifelong inquirers if they are to meet their own and their students' learning needs, they must also be exemplars of active inquiry to their students.

Like Knowles (1980), I define professional literacy teachers as those who participate in self-directed literacy learning and teaching inquiries, which lead to improvements in their practice. While I am arguing that teachers must establish their own professional inquiry agendas, I am not advocating that teachers (or any other learners) learn best when they learn alone. Rather, based on my own understanding of learning as a social enterprise, and drawing from the literature on professional development, I would anticipate that where schools foster a democratic, professional culture, teachers have the potential to grow beyond the expectations they might have set for themselves as individuals. Barth (1990) emphasized that "the professional growth of teachers is closely related to relationships within schools, between teacher and principal, between teacher and teacher" (p. 51).

In the current, global context, teaching and learning are complex processes. Darling-Hammond (1993b) noted:

There is a little room in today's society for those who can not manage complexity, find and use resources, and continuously learn new technologies, approaches, and occupations. In contrast to low skilled work on assembly lines, which was designed from above and implemented by means of routine procedures from below, tomorrow's work sites will require employees to frame problems, design their own tasks, plan, construct, evaluate outcomes, and cooperate in finding novel solutions to problems. Increasing social complexity also demands citizens who can understand and evaluate multidimensional problems and alternatives and who can manage even more demanding social systems (pp. 753-761).

To rise to the challenges of modern social complexity, professional literacy teachers must be able to analyze their practices, recognize problems, and self-direct their professional development to address identified shortcomings. It is important for teachers to engage with their own professional development by situating themselves as active participants in its design and implementation. Too frequently, however, professional development initiatives are coordinated by national or provincial ministries of education, or, in third world countries, international development agencies such as the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO; Matsuura, 2002). In the complex and multi-layered world described by Darling-Hammond (1993b), it is difficult to imagine that successful professional development could emerge from programs dispensed to teachers who were not consulted in externally devised agendas.

### **Listening for Teachers' Voices**

My purpose in this study is to examine the experiential narrative of one Chinese literacy teacher, to assess the challenges and successes he has experienced on his way to becoming a 'professional' literacy teacher. At the time of data collection, my participant was enrolled in graduate studies in education at a Western Canadian university, and planned to return to a teaching career in China upon graduation. He hoped to gain knowledge and new perspective into literacy teaching theory and methodology from Western educational theorists. It is my hope that his story will reciprocally provide insight about systematic factors that can encourage and support literacy teachers' quest for professional development.

I have narrowed the focus of my research to professional development in reading education in the early years of schooling. I appreciate that the interrelationships among reading, writing, drawing, and spoken language in children's literacy development (Pearson & Stephens, 1994) may make it difficult to separate reading, from other aspects of literacy. However, given my focus on professional development, I felt it necessary to limit the scope of my discussion.

I am specifically interested in my participant's perceptions of his own professional development needs, with respect to both societal expectations and his own assessments of students' present and future literacy needs. I am also interested in learning about what enhances or interferes with teachers' professional inquiries in literacy education. The complexity of these questions requires that they may be approached through in-depth study of individual learning and teaching narratives. This paper presents one narrative, from a literacy teacher from China and I hope that it will prompt readers to reflect on their own experiences of professional development in literacy education.

## **Methodology**

The teacher's narrative presented in this paper was developed through the method of narrative inquiry. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described narrative inquiry as a process of telling and re-telling stories to study experiences that are both personal (i.e. what the individual experiences); and social (i.e. how the individual interacts with society). Life of a teacher is conceived as being "embedded within a larger narrative of social inquiry . . . contextualized within a longer-term historical narrative" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.19). Narratives are constructed from experience and, according to Dewey (1938), experience arises from interaction and should "do something to prepare a person for later experiences of a deeper and more expansive quality" (p. 47). Thus, narrative provides continuity between past, present, and future experience. I anticipate that the narrative presented in this study will spark reflection to prepare future literacy teachers for in-depth and expansive professional development.

The narrative presented in this study was constructed from data collected from six one-on-one audio-taped interviews, which were conducted in English. These interviews allowed me to learn about my participant's attitudes, beliefs, understandings, and professional practices and experiences. I attempted to create a friendly environment and encouraged honest communication, beginning each interview with general questions such as: "Tell me about your experiences of teaching and professional development." "Have you had the same kinds of experiences I have had?" "How are your experiences of teaching and professionalism different from mine?" Later interviews progressed to focus more specifically on his perceptions of professional development experiences in literacy education. I wanted my participant to draw upon his perceptions of students present and future literacy needs from: current societal demands with respect to literacy; his own learning needs with respect to the knowledge base in literacy education; and, the conditions which had enhanced or interfered with collaborative professional inquiries and collegial dialogue. I took field notes on my participant's body language, and episodes in the interviews when questions and requests for clarification arose, etc. The audiotapes were transcribed immediately after each interview.

A follow-up interview was arranged after transcribing the data, in which the participant reviewed and commented upon the authenticity of my transcription. This also provided me the opportunity to clarify the concepts.

### **Constructing the Narrative**

The audio-taped interview conversations and field notes were transformed into narrative, with minimal interpretation; effort was made to maintain the essential characteristics of my participant's voice. By creating a narrative, I hoped to present an in-depth picture of my participant's experiences and beliefs. The point of narrative inquiry is to evoke a fuller, more textured sense of truth than would be possible in a single-voiced, expository text told from my perspective. As a researcher, I was not a distanced observer. Rather, I was positioned as a co-learner in the interviews, trying to grow and gain insight from my study participant's experiences of teaching, learning, and professional development. The narrative text I created from the interviews is what Barnieh (1989) described, as a "plurivocal" story. This text offers a place in which my participant's and my own voice meet in conversation. I encourage readers to reflect on their own stories, alongside the one represented here.

Hao-Ying's narrative of teaching, and ongoing learning and professional development is presented without further analysis or interpretation, in words true to his voice.<sup>2</sup>

### **Who is My Participant?**

I purposefully selected my participant according to two criteria. Firstly, he has several years of teaching experience in literacy education. Secondly, his current enrollment in graduate studies in literacy education demonstrates his commitment to becoming a professional teacher. Hao-Ying is from China, a country, like my home country of Pakistan, where professional development agendas are designed at upper (national/international) levels and imposed on teachers who have little opportunity for input. Both Hao-Ying and I also share the experience of coming to Canada to further our professional development through graduate studies. I hope that his story also has relevance to readers from other countries.

Hao-Ying obtained his first degree from Normal University, and then received a teaching certificate from Teachers' College. With this education, Hao-Ying taught for six years at Yudai Elementary School, in China, and then came to a Canadian University's Faculty of Education to explore new methods of teaching and learning. His passion for learning and inquiry has taken him half way across the world. His international graduate program was funded by a tuition scholarship from the hosting Canadian university, while room and board were provided by a Christian host family. Hao-Ying hoped that graduate studies in Canada would provide him with the opportunities to develop diverse skills in English language reading, writing, listening, and especially, speaking. From his host family, he learned about Canadian culture and practised communicative English. This learning adventure was not always easy. He faced many cultural and linguistic hardships while studying in Canada. He considered these hardships to be outweighed,

however, by personal and professional growth. Hao-Ying's journey to a foreign country has been part of his inward search for his own professional identity. His story is told below.

### Context of Hao-Ying's Teaching Experiences

It is important to situate Hao-Ying's narrative within his personal, social, and political context, such that it can be understood in 'three dimensional space' (Lo, 1984; Clandinin & Connlley, 2000). My participant's narrative was told 'backwards,' with reflection on past experience, and is thus 'reconstructed.' It was also related 'out of place,' as it describes experiences in China, but was constructed at a Canadian University. In Canadian Graduate programs, literacy is viewed as both a set of methods for decoding and reproducing text, and a broader ability to 'read' social and political contexts, and create a personal world view (e.g. Friere, 1970). In China, however, literacy is taught by authoritative transmission which supports technical learning and memorization, but discourages internalization, 'meaning-making,' and reconstruction of new knowledge (Lo, 1984; Watkins & Biggs, 2005).

Literacy is important for employment and daily activities in China (Burnaby & Sun, 1989); education is widely accessible and academic performance is of high social value (Li & Nirmala, 2000; McCarty & Perez, 2004). Since the late 1970s, however, Chinese education has followed a two-track educational system. Government schools, located in urban centers, focus on preparing students for further academic accomplishment, whereas rural, people-run schools focus on preparing students for skilled labor (Lo, 1984). Both school tracks utilize enforced curricula and teacher education is also conducted under authoritative curricular guidelines. The ideal teacher education curriculum focuses on four concepts: (1) development of teacher political and professional dedication; (2) development of specialized teaching knowledge bases; (3) transmission of pedagogical principles and methods; and, (4) analysis and discussion of educational problems (Lo, 1984). In practice, according to Hao-Ying, however, emphasis is placed on development of specialized subject area knowledge, and there is little opportunity for teachers to become involved in theoretical discussion, or practical problem solving, because their education is controlled in a linear, top-down model without teacher input (see Figure 1).

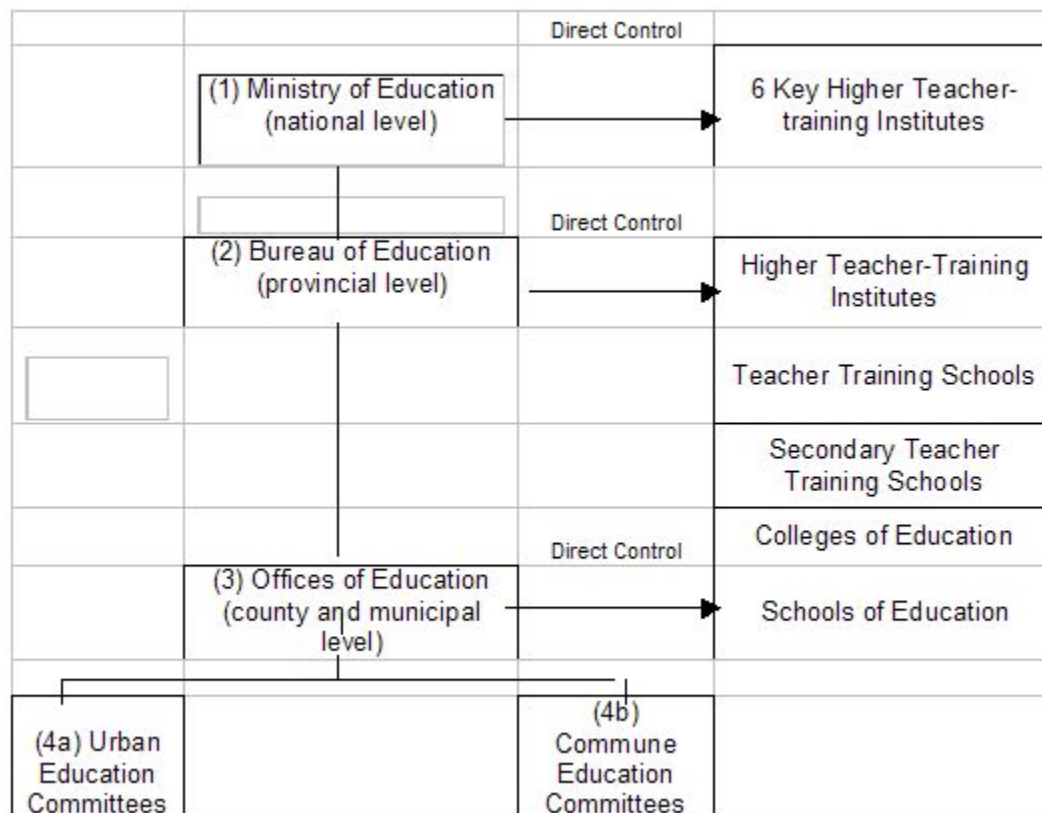


Figure 1. Flow chart after Lo (1984) illustrating autocratic control of curricula for teacher education from four government levels.

Educational reform initiatives have been ongoing in China since the 1970s, but changes have been gradual, with

minimal influence on classroom activities or teacher development. The classroom curricula delivered by Chinese teachers are also developed by administration (personal communication with Hao-Ying), and are designed for well-equipped urban schools with low student to teacher ratios (Hayhoe, 1984). Rural and urban schools in smaller centers commonly lack both material resources and appropriate 'intellectual atmospheres' required for curricula to be applied with success (Hayhoe, 1984; McCarty & Perez, 2004). Non-academic schools do not have specially constructed curricula, but work with 'watered-down' versions of academic curricula that fail to accommodate local labor needs or indigenous knowledge (Lo, 1984). Professional autonomy afforded to teachers is limited by teaching to a pre-determined, examination-driven, standardized curriculum that emphasizes rote memorization (Watkins & Biggs, 2005).

The professional status of teachers in China is lower than in Western Countries. They are among the worst paid educated professionals (compared to nurses, store managers, etc.), and have an accordingly low social status (Burnaby & Sun, 1989). Paine (1991) quoted from a revealing article printed in a Chinese newspaper, which lamented generally negative views of the teaching professionals:

{Why are there} still people who look down on teaching as a profession and some secondary and elementary school teachers who look down on their own vocation? ... There are some among these people who today still consider teaching to be work that has no future (Paine, 1991, p. 221).

Hao-Ying's narrative of personal and professional experience explores the challenges of a teacher struggling for professionalism in the unsupportive climate of China's educational system.

### **Hao-Ying's Story**

Hao-Ying's experiences of learning and teaching are both situated in and reflective of the literature reviewed in the previous section. In the story that follows, I present Hao-Ying's narrative under five themes that emerged from our discourse: (1) Hao-Ying's Perspective on Professionalism, (2) Institutional Support for Teacher Professionalism, (3) Influence of Imposed Curricula on Teacher Professionalism, (4) Teaching Traditions and Socio-political Influences, and (5) Hao-Ying's Reflections on Literacy (reading) and Teacher Professionalism. Hao-Ying's elaboration upon these themes reveals his dedication to professionalism in teaching, and provides insight into how teachers' personal quests for learning are born and evolve in social contexts.

#### *Hao-Ying's Perspective on Professionalism*

*Teaching is not easy work. As a teacher, I care about my students' learning and I feel the pressure of wanting to make a difference in their lives. Professionally, it is my responsibility to know the subject matter of what I am teaching as well as the 'why' and 'how' of my teaching. I think that a professional teacher teaches to learn. As students' needs evolve and change, the teacher needs to respond. This means that there is a need for a teacher to be researching all of the time. Professional learning could go on forever and ever.*

*As a teacher of language and literacy, I feel that I too need to be involved in regular reading, writing, and researching myself, for my own personal and professional learning. And, while I know that what I believe as a teacher affects my actions in the classroom, I also recognize that my actions inform what I believe. Theory and practice need to be examined together, throughout a teacher's career.*

#### *Institutional Support for Teacher Professionalism*

*Unfortunately, what I have just described is not what happens by way of professional development in China. At home, professional development seminars are organized by school authorities. Seldom are teachers' needs assessed. Never are teachers' voices included in these seminars. Instead, authorities lecture teachers. These authorities do not address the teachers' inquiry questions. Nor, is there any attempt made by these authorities to think about a teacher's needs, problems, concerns, or frustrations.*

*Sadly, professional development is a joke. Professional development in-service sessions and workshops are considered by teachers to be quite useless—a waste of time, money, and energies. Few sessions and workshops have any affect whatsoever on what teachers do in their classrooms. If a teacher wants to be promoted or to receive a pay raise, though, he or she had better not miss one of these professional seminars. Usually, teachers meet once-a-week to listen to administrators' instructions about policies or regulations on school affairs from the government. The*

teacher's job is to follow these directives. Reflection on and any democratic discussion of these directives is not encouraged or valued. Teachers do not participate in sharing their ideas during these meetings, nor do they ask questions about how they might inquire into something back in their classrooms. Generally, there is a lack of democracy, trust, and openness in Chinese schools. The question that I would ask is: 'how can a teacher improve him or herself, without positive reinforcement and encouragement from school authorities?'

In Chinese schools, the principal and other administrators (a large school would have a principal, a couple of vice-principals, a political instructor, a general secretary of the Communist party, and a student advisor) have many rights and much more power than teachers. In fact, a principal can determine a great deal of what a teacher can or cannot do in his or her classroom.

#### *Influence of imposed curricula on teacher professionalism*

The decision-making of the principal, however, is restricted by a curriculum which has been designed and issued by the central government. Official curricula documents dictate everything that is to be taught. Chinese teachers do not have the right to change any of this content. While teachers do not have the freedom to think about what is worth teaching in their own classrooms, they can decide how they will go about teaching this pre-designed content. After a few years of teaching this same material over and over again, however, no matter how creative the delivery, teaching becomes very mechanical and without much thought. Locally developed curricula would be more relevant and meaningful to students and this would help to make teaching more interesting.

#### *Teaching Traditions and Socio-political Influences*

I do not like the top down transmission system because each individual student has his or her unique character, learning style, diverse learning needs, and abilities that need to be addressed. But this is the educational tradition in China. In addition to tradition, this transmission approach to teaching is also a consequence of large class sizes and pressures teachers feel to cover the curriculum and mark students' assignments. In some densely populated areas, there could be as many as sixty students in one classroom. In these teaching conditions, it is almost impossible to give children any individualized attention. Some students get lost. If their parents are well off they can hire older students as tutors.

As you can tell, I would prefer a learner-centred curriculum for both children and teachers. This does not mean that I would back out and let the students take over. They are limited in their knowledge: they do not always know what they want, where they want to go or how to get there. But, students should have some say in what and how they learn. Teachers need this too in terms of their own personal and professional growth.

Moving toward learner-centred education in China would not be easy. Parents are used to judging good education on the basis of grades on exams. The students are also satisfied with high marks. Passing exams can get you into a higher level of education. There is much competition for higher education.

#### *Hao-Ying's Reflections on Literacy (reading) and Teacher Professionalism*

I believe literacy is more than a score on a test. Literacy is education for life. Reading should fulfil both a student's intellectual and his or her aesthetic needs. Instead, in Chinese schools what children read and write about may be totally removed from their experience. There is also much more emphasis placed on completing written exercises than on reading. If I had any say in what happened in schools, I would love to see young children being encouraged to choose their own story books to read. I would also encourage children to respond to shared reading experiences. Personally, I value children's participation as central to the literacy process. Children understand when they contribute their connections to what they read. Exchanging ideas with others also allows children to grow socially as well as individually. A teacher must be knowledgeable about these ideas if he or she is to make a difference in the child's education.

It is ironic that while the government expects teachers to develop students' reading comprehension abilities so that they can use the knowledge that they have gained, seldom do the exams attempt to measure comprehension or application of ideas. Most exams are tests of memory. Again, teachers have been left out of this process. Teachers are not happy about this, especially since the parents' evaluation of the teacher is based almost entirely on exam results.

In terms of teacher education, the same kind of exam-driven thinking applies. In universities and teachers' colleges, teachers study student learning and teaching methodologies, but in most cases they take these courses just to get credits and a degree. The most important reason for taking these courses is to pass the test or to get a good mark on a paper, so that you will be qualified to teach.

*I don't want to be too bleak about teaching in China. There are several professional development projects in literacy education that I know about. This has involved teachers visiting other-usually more experienced-teachers' classrooms. Through observation and dialogue these teachers expand their professional skills. I hope there will be more of this kind of professional learning, where teachers learn from one another. It is also becoming possible for teachers to take a leave for a week or two, with pay, to attend classes and to read.*

*I don't expect that there will be too much change in professional development, however, until teachers are better paid and more highly-respected and valued. Teaching cannot be seen by the society to be just an occupation.*

### **Researcher's Reflection on Hao-Ying's story**

Listening to Hao-Ying constructing his narrative, I was reminded of Carr's (1986) statement that "narrative structure ... is the organizing principle not only of experiences and actions but of the self who experiences and acts" (p.73). Narrative structure creates coherence through experience, "a need imposed upon us whether we seek it or not" (p.97). Crites (1971) similarly, conceived narrative as "a way of expressing coherence through time" (p. 294). Our experiences have continuity in that past events color the way in which we experience the present. Reflecting on past experience, we construct and re-construct narrative. Narrative inquiry embodies a continuum within a personal experience that provides meaning.

Through constructing Hao-Ying's narrative, I gained a new appreciation for the universal challenges faced by teachers who value their own professional development, and the 'professional' nature of the teaching profession. Although Hao-Ying's struggles were located in China, I suspect that many teachers, in diverse geographic or political contexts, encounter similar frustrations to their professional development. Teachers like Hao-Ying may be passionate about their profession and committed to the success of their students, but have little power to bring their own agenda to the centre. Hao-Ying's perspectives are commonly echoed in western educational theory (Syed, 1999).

Hao-Ying described that, in the Chinese school system, teacher professional development initiatives are delivered by authorities who lecture teachers, without addressing their questions, concerns, or frustrations. Obviously, this limits the relevancy of professional development workshops to the teachers who attend them. Accordingly, Hao-Ying reflected, teachers attend them out of obligation, pressure from authorities or principals, or for 'unprofessional' reasons, including salary increases.

Educational theory emphasizes that learning is most successful when it is learner-directed (Dewey, 1938). Hao-Ying's depiction of professional development programs in China indicates that they are undermined by a gap between educational theory and practice. He identified learning gaps between both Chinese teaching practices and Chinese educational theory, and Chinese teaching practices and Western educational theory. Both Eastern and Western educational theory emphasize the importance of internalization for literacy learning. In Hao-Ying's classrooms, however, he had neither the time nor resources to facilitate personalized learning among his students. This experience may be widespread in Chinese classrooms, Hayhoe (1984) and Lin (1993) discuss a similar disconnect between curricular intent and effect. Burnaby and Sun (1989) also identified similar Chinese teacher concerns that ideal teaching methods were undermined by imposed curricula, teacher-centered Chinese classroom traditions, large class sizes, tight schedules, limited resources, and the low institutional status of teachers charged to teach communicative and practical rather than analytic literacy.

In Chinese classrooms, where parents and authorities place emphasis on test results and memorization (Li & Nirmala, 2000), children have little autonomy to direct their learning (Watkins & Biggs, 2005). Teachers' evaluation is dependent on the opinion of parents who value grade achievement, and on that of authorities who value implementation of centrally-designed curricula. Hao-Ying emphasized that, as a Chinese teacher, his job was to follow directives, not to question them. Teacher's professional autonomy is limited when positive reinforcement and encouragement is lacking. Teachers require professional autonomy in order to first identify their needs, and secondarily address their needs by making changes to their practices (Barth, 1990).

Hao-Ying described a situation in China in which teachers are viewed as tools for student's success rather than as professional facilitators of learning. Although authorities in China are concerned with educational theory (McCarty & Perez, 2004), large class-sizes make it nearly impossible to address individual student needs (Lin, 1993; Watkins & Biggs, 2005). My conversations with Hao-Ying reminded me of professional literature regarding the current knowledge base in reading which stresses that learning to read means learning to make sense of text. As Smith (1992) reminded us, teaching is most effective when the educational text is meaningful to the children, and as it relates to their life experiences. Hao-Ying related frustration with teaching non-local, non-indigenous course content that was not best-fitted to his students' needs. Ironically, the leaders of the externally-devised professional development seminars that Hao-Ying was obliged to attend were also constrained to teacher development curricula,

and unable to accommodate the local needs of teachers.

I also believe that, like knowledge construction, reading is a social process, wherein readers freely contribute their ideas to create mutual understandings (Friere, 1970). If we talk with others about what we have read, we can revisit the text with perspectives we would not have had on our own. Sometimes, in discussion about a reading, we make connections we had not previously put together. Or, at other times, others confirm what we thought or felt about a reading. In this way, teacher and students become co-learners in the reading process. As readers, we can think together as collaborators (Woodward & Serebrin, 1989; Watkins & Biggs, 2005). Both Hao-Ying and I agreed that an integral part of professional development in literacy education involves creating space for teachers and children to select and read texts together as co-learners.

Researchers find it challenging to address the tensions that arise during the integration of educational theory and practice. Throughout Hao-Ying's career in China, and now in his graduate studies in Canada, he remains engaged in an ongoing professional struggle to fit theory to practice. The lack of fit between what Hao-Ying had learned, about the reading process in theory and what curriculum documents and standardized tests required of his teaching, created enormous professional tension. Future analysis of individual teacher narratives, to investigate the sources and situations of professional tensions, may provide new insights into the relationships between school culture, societal culture, and professional development. Teachers, as literate persons, ought to be involved in discussion and debate of curriculum texts, in the same way that they would respond to any other text. Curriculum documents ought to reflect the best of what we know in both theory and practice. They ought to support teachers in their work, rather than restricting their professional roles (Lo, 1984).

### Summary

Through this study, both Hao-Ying and I came to better appreciate the knowledge, struggles, plans, and hopes of teachers regarding their own professional development (Syed, 1999). In reading his story and reflecting on my own experiences, I recognize that geography, traditions, and politics alter the context of a teacher's story, but that much of this story is universal. Teachers usually enter their profession out of a conviction that education is socially important and will benefit their students. As a student in a classroom, teachers appear to wield great power. Becoming a teacher, and realising that your autonomy is, to varying degrees, limited by institutional policies which may or may not suit your students' needs can be heartbreaking (Syed, 1999). Whether it is overcoming cultural barriers on behalf of your students, or accommodating individual learning needs in an overpopulated classroom, teacher's must exert professional energies to serve their classes (McCarty & Perez, 2004). Teaching is about establishing and nurturing learning relationships (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). When teachers are learners, their own learning process needs to be supported and nurtured too.

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### Endnotes

1 In this paper, a pseudonym is used to protect the anonymity of the participant.

2 Hao-Ying's narrative emerged from transcribed interview conversations, reformatted into continuous prose. 'Spoken' grammatical conventions (contractions, slang, etc.) and errors (pluralities, gender indicators) were converted and/or corrected where appropriate, with consultation between the researcher and participant to preserve the meaning of original responses.