



# The practicum experiences of English Language Major student teachers during a period of profound curriculum reform in China

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

The practicum  
Curriculum reform  
Student teaching

## ABSTRACT

This paper provides an analysis of the issues faced by Chinese student teachers and, by extension, their supervisors, when curriculum reform challenges existing practices in schools and universities. The paper draws on the experiences of 10 English Language Major student teachers as they think about, make sense of, and undertake their extended practicum in the fourth year of their teacher education program. The students, from the School of Foreign Languages at a major teacher education university in the northeast region of Mainland China are challenged by the complexity of the practicum as they attempt to negotiate the differing expectations of their school advisors and university supervisor. The analysis highlights two related issues: the difficulties faced by reform efforts in China and the disjuncture between school and university expectations for practicum students in light of these initiatives. Importantly, these results add to and prompt further development of the nascent literature on the student teacher practicum in China.

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## 1. Background and context

Pre-service teacher education in China has typically been characterized by its:

...subject-centred emphasis, theory-laden orientation, and centralized state management. Such an approach has provided pre-service teacher education with a degree of stability despite significant social and economic changes in recent decades. However, this approach can hardly suffice the kind of transformation that the Chinese education system is currently experiencing.

Lo (2008, p.1)

In an attempt by the Chinese government to modernize its education system and ensure its economic competitiveness in the 21st century, two recent initiatives were developed. First, a national school curriculum reform effort, beginning in 2001 (MOE, 2001), that sought to change school curriculum from its highly teacher-centered to a more student-centered focus. Second, in direct response to the first, a national teacher education curriculum reform effort beginning in 2006 (MOECE, 2005) and

continuing thereafter (MOECE, 2011) that sought to move teacher education from its strong disciplinary or subject-bound focus to one with a greater emphasis on pedagogy. One outcome of the national teacher education reform effort is the heightened role of the student teacher practicum in teacher education. For example, the expectation for time spent on practicum has doubled to approximately six months over the four years of a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree program in China. Leading urban universities such as Beijing Normal University in the capital, East China Normal University in Shanghai, and Northeast Normal University in Changchun have adopted this approach since 2007. The specific context for this paper is the newly instituted six-week final practicum for high school student teachers in the fourth year of Northeast Normal University's (NENU) B.Ed. program.

Of particular significance to the current study is a special University-Government-School (UGS) initiative at NENU that emerged during the growing tide of school and teacher education curriculum reform in the first decade of the new millennium. NENU was faced with a dilemma: official pressure to increase practicum time for student teachers, on the one hand, and urban schools' reluctance to allocate more classroom time to student teachers, on the other. This latter challenge is especially difficult in major cities where universities, such as NENU, are located. The urban schools' reluctance to host student teachers can be attributed to the prevailing view that student teachers "disturb the school's normal teaching order" and therefore undermine the pupils' preparation for the university entrance exam competition.

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In order to address this problem, NENU deliberately sought to develop UGS partnerships in three outlying provinces: Heilongjiang, Liaoning, and Jilin—all situated in the northeast region of Mainland China. The UGS initiative is now in its third year of operation. The 10 English Language Major students who are the participants in this study were assigned to a rural high school as a part of the UGS initiative.

We chose the practicum setting for this study because it brings together key stakeholders in the complex and sometimes contested work of teacher education: student teachers, classroom teachers, university supervisors, school administrators, teaching research officers, and pupils. For example, due to the pressure of the nation-wide university entrance exam, senior high school teachers and principals are faced with many tensions and dilemmas that impact the learning experiences of student teachers in their schools. Further, universities and schools are challenged by the disconnect between their two worlds, especially as manifest in the current curriculum reform efforts and the espoused and actual application of those efforts at the school level.

### 1.1. *The school curriculum reform: promises and challenges*

The national school curriculum reform (MOE, 2001) has experienced 11 years of experimentation. A central aim of the reform is to transform the traditional examination-oriented and teacher-centered school system to a more inquiry-oriented and student-centered system. The school curriculum reform deliberately set out to change teaching practice from “rote learning and mechanical training” to one which “encourages students to have hands-on experience and participate in the exploration of knowledge” (MOE, 2001, p. 6). Moreover, an important aim of the reform is “to foster in students active and unique ways of learning through teacher-student interaction, ...encouraging autonomous learning, and inquisitive spirit in practice...” (MOE, 2001, p. 6). Like all curriculum reform efforts, the success of the Chinese initiatives hinges on bringing the reform documents to life in schools and for teachers to use these documents in planning, teaching, and assessing student learning. Unfortunately, there is conceptual confusion about the reform in schools and researchers have noted that teachers find it hard to incorporate the reform's new ideas and approaches in their current classroom contexts (Liu and Fang, 2009; Zhao and Qiu, 2010; Joong et al., 2012). As has been reported earlier in the Western literature, espoused and enacted curricula are often two different things (Goodson and Ball, 1984). Thus, despite some inspirational examples of the curriculum reform in schools, recent reports suggest that the basic orientation of Chinese schools remains largely unchanged, particularly at the secondary school level (Zhong, 2005; Ma, 2009; Wang and Zhao, 2010; Wu, 2010; Yu, 2011). A potential issue here lies in the fact that some stakeholders think that concepts such as constructivism and inquiry-learning are ‘foreign imports’ and that they do not fit well into the Chinese context. However, it is our experience that Chinese teachers understand that knowledge is personally constructed and socially mediated but they struggle with how best to organize classroom activities that fully honor these perspectives on learning in their daily classroom practice. We note and attend to Watkins and Biggs (1996) caution here, and Saravanamuthu (2008) subsequent critique, that such polarized distinctions between East and West lead to quick (and often simplistic) analyses that a deeper appreciation of the Chinese culture might temper. This paper pursues the latter route. In general, research in China suggests that there are three responses by school administrators and teachers: (1) enthusiastically engage; (2) ‘wait-and-see’; or (3) ignore (Yin and Cao, 2008).

Two major obstacles are cited for the challenges faced by Chinese teachers with respect to the reform efforts: lack of

professional development support and the ‘Gaokao’ (the university entrance exam). Research indicates that there is a lack of preparation and resources to assist teachers with the school curriculum reform and therefore it is quickly dismissed as being of little significance or having a low priority at the school level (Huang, 2003; Jin and Yin, 2008; Yu and Tian, 2008; Zhang and Fang, 2009). This problem is compounded by the Gaokao which is regarded as the single most important marker of a school's success and constitutes one hundred percent of the assessment for university entrance. As such, few teachers are willing to experiment with new concepts and approaches to teaching advocated by the reform lest they drift too far from their primary mission of exam preparation. This phenomenon, sometimes known as “negative washback,” whereby a future practice adversely effects current practice (Taylor, 2005, p.155), is very much evident in the Chinese school system. Hence, the curriculum reform efforts face continuing difficulties which are further compounded by other factors such as: (1) resource disparity between urban and rural schools; (2) classrooms with enrolment of up to, and in some cases in excess of, 60 pupils; and (3) a concern by classroom teachers that universities are too theoretical and fail to understand of the realities of daily classroom practice.

### 1.2. *The teacher education curriculum reform: promises and challenges*

Since the initiation of teacher education curriculum reform at the advent of the new century, the state has issued many directives and devised a number of measures to enhance the capacity of the teaching force in China. The state's intention to improve the quality of teachers is further articulated in a more specific policy to provide tuition-free education for students in teacher education at selected normal universities (MOE, 2007a). This initiative aims to attract high academic achievers into the teaching profession by (i) offering them tuition free university education, (ii) providing a specially designed program of study, and (iii) guaranteeing employment upon graduation. The students selected for this initiative are required to sign a contract with local education authorities agreeing to serve in local schools for 10 years after graduation. Further, their course of study differs from those in ordinary teacher education programs in that their curriculum has a stronger emphasis on educational studies and practice teaching. For example, the practicum is extended to at least six months in the programs' four-year curriculum. Also the tuition-free students are taught by “highly qualified teachers.” Upon graduation, they will work in schools in their provinces of their origin without having to suffer the hardship of job seeking in a highly competitive employment market. For those students who are interested in pursuing a teaching career, especially for those from poorer families who would otherwise not have the means to pay for university tuition, the new policy indeed provides a much welcomed opportunity. When the academic year began in September of 2007, over 10,000 tuition-free students were admitted into the universities (MOE, 2007b) as part of this initiative.

The six designated Normal universities responded to the new policy enthusiastically. New curricula were developed for the tuition-free students consisting of four main areas of study: educational theory, educational inquiry, pedagogical skills, and educational practice. It is noteworthy that educational practice, which includes school experience and teaching practice, is given a role of unprecedented importance. The proposed curricula of some of these normal universities indicates that close to half of the credit units for teacher education are given to school experience (e.g., Beijing Normal University, 2007; East China Normal University, 2007; Northeast Normal University, 2007) including the six-week

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