



Narrative inquiry for teacher education and development: Focus on English as a foreign language in China

Shijing Xu ^{a,*,1}, F. Michael Connelly ^{b,2}

^a National Research Center for Foreign Language Education, Beijing Foreign Studies University; Faculty of Education, University of Windsor, 401 Sunset Avenue, Windsor, Ontario N9B 3P4, Canada

^b Department of Curriculum Teaching and Learning, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, 252 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Ontario M5S 1V6, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Teacher education and development takes place within an encompassing local system of education and ongoing forms of school improvement. Critical to successful teacher development when Western ideas are being adopted in other cultures is narratively linking development programmes to this local education system, such as in China, and to its culturally established ways of knowing and being. This paper presents a narrative inquiry approach to teacher development that builds on the existing educational system, ongoing school reforms, and culturally established ways of knowing and being. The paper concludes with the potential of teacher development to shape global values that may be shared among cultures.

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1. Introduction

The theme of this paper grew out of a consideration of teacher education and teacher development for the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) in China. China is undertaking a national reform of EFL teacher education. Michael was invited to give keynote addresses to two national conferences on EFL teacher education and to discuss the application of narrative inquiry to the Chinese situation. Shijing, who taught English as a foreign language in China, and who works collaboratively with Michael in Canadian school-based studies of Chinese immigrants, also spoke at these conferences. These conferences were designed with speakers from abroad who were expected to bring forward outside, international, views and knowledge. Local Chinese speakers brought forward internal Chinese knowledge, views and problems (e.g. Wang, 2007; Wu, 2007a, 2007b; Zou, 2008). Shijing, having taught and worked

in both China and Canada, brought both an insider's and an outsider's perspective. This dual stance is reflected in the fact that she holds a faculty position in a Canadian teacher education institution while also holding an affiliated Research Associate post in China's National Research Center for Foreign Language Education. Our purpose in this article is to draw on this experience, and to think through some of the possible consequences of narrative inquiry for teacher development in settings where Western ideas are being adopted for use in other cultures. The specific tension that runs through this paper, and which explicitly shows up in the set of considerations for EFL teacher education and development that concludes the paper, is how to create balance and harmony between Western imported ideas and ideologies and Chinese cultural knowledge strengths. As Zongjie Wu (2007b), a Chinese language scholar, agonises while reflecting on the recent history of Chinese language reform, "The Western educational system that accompanied Western knowledge became the only acceptable system of study in schooling. Confucianism as a form of pedagogy was thoroughly marginalized" (p. 2). Based on her "New Basic Education" project initiated in the 1990s, Lan Ye (2006) discusses Chinese cultural roots and strengths in education and sees the need for a balance between Chinese traditions and western ideas.

Our specific focus in this paper is on EFL teachers in China though we believe the ideas presented herein are applicable

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 519 253 3000x3828; fax: +1 519 971 3694.

E-mail addresses: shijing@uwindsor.ca (S. Xu), mconnelly@oise.utoronto.ca (F.M. Connelly).

¹ Shijing Xu is Affiliated Research Associate of National Research Center for Foreign Language Education, Beijing Foreign Studies University, China. This work was sponsored by the Center.

² Tel.: +1 416 978 0254; fax: +1 416 926 4769.

elsewhere, and to teachers in other areas. We make the case that educational reforms in teacher education and development in English as a foreign language in China, and elsewhere, need to begin with local cultural knowledge before importing ideas from abroad. We develop two main threads to make this case: the place of teacher development in educational reform, and narrative inquiry as a way of thinking about teacher education and development. We develop this general stance by first discussing China's educational reform context as a positioning frame for our discussion of Narrative Inquiry. We summarise the concept of narrative inquiry as it applies to English as a foreign language teacher education and development, and we conclude with a set of considerations for English as a foreign language teacher education reform in non-Western settings.

2. The reform context

English as a foreign language in China is undergoing reforms in keeping with China's overall development (Zuo, 2008). According to the Higher Education Department of the Chinese Ministry of Education (2007) "College English is not only a language course that provides basic knowledge of English, but is also a capacity enhancement course that helps students to broaden their horizons and learn about different cultures in the world" (p. 17). The focus on English is relatively recent and reflects a shift in the relative influence of Russia and America in the world and on China. Moreover, as Li (2006) observes, China's emphasis on educational reform is part of China's overall modernisation effort. Modernisation, some argue, is prerequisite to successful national development (Inkeles, 1975; So, 1990). Li (2006) points out that the People's Republic of China has been focused on modernisation since the late 1970's in an effort to catch up with the West.

These developments in modernisation, and the emphasis on English, are directly connected with the events that brought us to the China language conferences and to the writing of this paper. It is well known that Confucian values place a high emphasis on education and that teachers have a special place in Chinese thought (Xu, 2006). The result is that teacher education, and its reform, is a high priority in China (China Ministry of Education & State Commission of Education, 1996; China Ministry of Education and Training, 1999; Wu, 2007a; Xie, 2001; Ye, 2006; Zou, 2008).

The priority given to teacher education reform was enhanced by China's curriculum reform policy in the face of internationalisation and globalisation of education (see, Li, 2006; Ye, 2006; Zha, 2003; Zou, 2008). The New Curriculum System for Basic Education is designed to replace a curriculum that was seen by Chinese authorities, as overemphasizing learning of disciplinary knowledge and being isolated from the needs of the times, social development and students' individuality (Xie, 2001; Ye, 2006; Zou, 2008).

There appear to be strong links between policy development, teacher education reform, and curriculum reform in the overall reform of education in China (Ye, 2006). To the extent that this is an accurate picture of the Chinese educational reform context it differs significantly from reforms in North America and Britain which have tended to be dominated by curriculum development, teacher development and, recently, achievement testing and accountability policies. What is different is that one or the other of these reform types has tended to be pursued aggressively and somewhat independently in the West while in China the reforms run in tandem. China's teacher education and curriculum reforms are related and are part of a larger educational policy whole (Wang, 2007; Ye, 2006). Recent policy initiatives, particularly in the United States (US Department of Education, 2007), have focused on achievement and accountability with little emphasis on teacher education and curriculum though these matters, of course, were impacted and changes were made as a result of the achievement-accountability

policy. For a comprehensive general discussion of this educational reform literature see chapters by Apple (2008), Cochran-Smith and Demers (2008), Pinar (2008) and Welner and Oakes (2008) in *The Sage Handbook of Curriculum and Instruction* (Connelly, He, & Phillion, 2008). Westbury (2008) provides a comprehensive overview in which he discusses reform from the point of view of central governments.

2.1. What works?

The literature on educational reform is somewhat discouraging. Chinese educational reforms and studies, those in EFL curriculum and teacher development in particular, tend to be conducted mostly within Western research and development norms and drew heavily on the Western literature for its discussion. On the other hand, the overwhelming impression left from reading reviews of American and European reform implementation (e.g. Fullan, 2008) is that nothing works as planned. It may be that, like stories in the popular media, bad news sells. But it is deeper than this. Education, in its deepest philosophical sense is, as Dewey (1938) said, the other side of the coin to life. Life is education; education is life. In practice, of course, education and life may seem far apart. Western reforms in recent years have often seemed to separate life and education, for example, the accountability and achievement testing oriented reforms of the No Child Left Behind Act in the United States (US Department of Education, 2007). When life and education stray apart, or collide, Dewey wrote that the effect would be "miseducative" (Dewey, 1938, p. 25), something that Valenzuela (2005) says has occurred for dispossessed groups in the United States. In the Chinese educational context, as Wu (2006, p. 343–344) points out, "students are constantly tested and compared to make them aware of their 'weaknesses' in comparison to standards of evaluation. Various public terms are invented to differentiate students, and put them into relationships of competition. Many students are thrown into an inner struggle to make sense of themselves according to these terms".

When educational change and improvement is thought of in terms of life and living, it is not surprising that an educational intervention does not change life as expected. This is especially true when planned changes appear to be distant from life. Life is complex and much of what we value is hardly measurable. The richness and complexity of these matters led Eisner (1994) to write that schools teach three curricula; the explicit, the implicit, or "the hidden" (Jackson, 1968), and the null (things excluded from the explicit curriculum). Educational reform is inevitably focused on the explicit. But the implicit, hidden, curriculum of unanticipated effects and learning are also inevitably influential in student lives, as are the assumptions built into leaving things out of the explicit curriculum i.e. Eisner's null curriculum. This is so because of the fundamental truth in Dewey's equation of life and education. A reform programme may be designed with little regard for how learners, and teachers, experience schooling but, regardless of pre-established reform plans, learners and teachers live out school lives. Life goes on with unexpected results. Life, in Eastern views, is a continuity of being. With discrepancy between theory and practice and discontinuity in our educational programmes, reform plans may go awry and programmes may be poorly implemented, as Fullan and Steigelbauer (1991) and Zou (2008) show, or lives may be damaged with miseducative consequences as Valenzuela (2005) and Wu (2006) show. This way of thinking about educational change helps explain why teachers are often blamed for failed education reform. Policies and curriculum programmes have built in explicit expectations for students. When the implicit overwhelms the explicit and expectations are not met because educational life is more complex than can be imagined ahead of time by policy makers and other reformers, teachers are seen as the culprit.

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