

A Case Study of Chinese Novice Teachers' Agency in the Context of International Schools in Mainland China

Su Tian

Beijing Xueda, No. 4 Xibahe beilijia 100028, China

Abstract

Due to a combination of subjective and socio-cultural factors, Chinese novice teachers have a relatively weak sense of professional agency in the contexts of international schools. International school leadership plays a weak role in facilitating these teachers' exercise of professional agency. The findings indicate that multi-professional support is the solution for Chinese novice teachers to gain positive experiences, thus help with their agency promotion and identity renegotiation. Besides, another indication is teacher qualification makes no proof of a qualified teacher, and teacher education in mainland China has a long way to go.

Keywords

Professional agency; Chinese novice teachers; professional identity; leadership; international schools.

1. Introduction

In Finnish educational system, the basic qualification for a primary school teacher is the Master's Degree in Education. Teacher education is a must for teacher qualification. Besides, Finnish teacher education provides a research-based approach for student teachers, aiming to educate autonomous, reflective, and research-oriented teachers. It is the key element of Finnish teachers having a high degree of autonomy and a strong sense of professional agency at work. However, in mainland China, teacher education is not a must for teacher qualification but pass the National Teacher Qualification will gain whoever wants to be a teacher an admission ticket. Though such qualification makes teachers seem eligible to teach at the respective level, it is hard to be a substitute for academically oriented teacher education at a university level. In addition, many factors such as the teacher's personal commitment, bilingual communication skills, and school leadership, etc, are affecting, in different levels, Chinese novice teachers to practice and exert their professional agency in the context of Chinese international schools

2. Literature References and Methodolgy

2.1. The Concept of Agency and Main Research Methods

The concept of agency has become increasingly widely involved and adopted in education, the social sciences, and psychology, as well as in working-life studies and gender research. However, the nature of agency is still 'lack of clarity'; 'slippery' and 'contested'; 'instability and uncertainty' in a long-standing structure-agency debate in sociology. Bandura (1989) asserts that 'agency' is not just an innate capacity but achieved by humans through an interaction between ecological conditions and personal capacities. This viewpoint later has been developed into an ecological view of agency, which sees agency as an emergent phenomenon.

Goller and Paloniemi conclude two dimensions of the conflict— (a) agency as personal capacity versus agency as behavior; (b) agency as an individual phenomenon versus agency at a collective level (i.e exercised by groups of individuals), but with no further discussion in neither aspect. In the meantime, Eteläpelto et al. (2013) categorize those different approaches to

conceptualizing agency into four types in terms of their academic domains, as (i) social science discussion, (ii) post-structural discussion, (ii) socio-cultural learning research, and (iv) identity and life-course notions of agency. And they propose a subject-centered social-culture (SCSC) approach for agency conceptualization because it is considered as the most relevant approach for future research on developing professional agency at work.

2.1.1. Agency-as- achievement: An Ecological Approach to Teacher Agency

Based on the theory of Bandura (1989), Emir Bayer and Mische (1998) suggest that agency should be understood as a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past, oriented toward the future, and “acted out” in the present. They argue that the achievement of agency is through a configuration of influences of these three dimensions as a ‘chordal triad’ of agency, which are the iterational dimension (past), the projective dimension (present) and the practical-evaluative dimension (future).

Thus, agency is characterized as ‘an emergent phenomenon’, something that ‘occurs or is achieved within continually shifting contexts over time and with orientations towards past, future, and present’^[1]. The key implication of the ecological perspective is that agency is achieved in contexts rather than seeming merely as the capacity of an actor.

2.1.2. A Subject-centred Socio-cultural Approach (SCSC) to Professional Agency

Eteläpelto et al. (2013) argue that professional agency should be conceptualized from a subject-centered socio-cultural and life-long learning perspective, which contains several major features: first, a life-long and development perspective is unavoidable, because to understand individual subjects, for example, how subjects learn and participate in school contexts linked with how they learn and participate in their working life, a developmental perspective is necessary. Second, a life-course perspective is necessary to understand how subjects ‘renegotiate their work identities when they move from one working context to another’, or when they ‘navigate their pathways across workplace reforms’ ;Third, in terms of the socio-cultural context, ‘how agency is practiced, resourced, constrained’, and bounded by contextual factors, including ‘power relations and discourses’, ‘material conditions’, and ‘cultures of social interaction’, those external factors constrain or resource subjects’ exert their professional agency. Fourth, a subjective-centered approach, which goes further in addressing the processes of subjectivation, interdepends on the socio-cultural contexts. Fifth, professional agency in the domain of SCSC approach is ‘how the subject learns through processes of actively creating subjectivity’^[2].

In this perspective, working subjects learn not only the knowledge and skills they need for work, but also ‘act as feeling and willing subjects’ actively ‘prioritize, choose, and consider’ what is worth in their life aspiring, and then practice their agency accordingly in their life. They also actively construct the conceptions of their identities—who they are, and where they belong to, and this process of ‘reforming, re-negotiating, and reshaping of identity’ has become a long-term task as the central part of their workplace learning. Generally speaking, this subject-centered socio-cultural approach sees an adult’s role as an active learner and a relational participant in social communities, within and beyond working life.

2.2. Leadership and Teacher Agency

It is argued that school leadership is connected to ‘professional agency and creativity (Collin et al., 2018)’ and professional learning (Mullen, 2009; Wynne, 2013) as support and space provided for professionals, prioritization of work tasks, an offering of work process knowledge. To be a significant supporter of creativity, a leader must show his or her professional agency in his or her own role and be a role model for others.

Day and Gu (2007) argue that there is a discrepancy in teachers’ trajectories and professional learning and development that the teachers are at greater risk of being less effective in later

phases of their professional lives. The novice teachers, who are within their 0-3 years of professional life phase, are at a high level of commitment to teaching and building their identities. This period is of significance to provide a journey for novice teachers to engage in professional learning and development activities and enhance classroom competence, to raise their morale and strengthen their confidence in the classroom. According to Day & Kington (2007), the extent to which school leaders plan interventions that bring a variety of learning and development opportunities, which satisfy both instrumental needs and those designed to support teachers' commitment, will decide teachers' capacity to engage in learning and development activities in a productive way. It is the influences of school head teachers, at this period, as well as colleagues and school cultures that are pivotal to their growing and developing into professionals. Therefore, focus on building novice teachers a sense of professional identity is probably the most important for school leadership practice.

2.3. Conceptual Framework of Professional Agency

According to the SCSC approach, firstly, it is in the context of classroom that teachers are most likely to practice their professional agency. And their professional agency is generally exercised through teaching practices and classroom management, which include making professional decisions based on their own ways of teaching, applying different pedagogical ideas, and dealing with students' social-emotional issues. And the agency only appears when teachers feel they have a sense of control based on the choices they make at work, and when these choices are aligned with their professional aspirations and interests. Secondly, the exercises of professional agency also take place in the context of work community. And this kind of agency is exercised through teachers' participating in developing educational activities, negotiating their thoughts and trying to make an influence at a community level.

Thirdly, within the lens of SCSC, subjects' professional identities are closely related to their sense of professional agency. Professional identity is seen as a critical indicator of teachers' senses of their professional agency, including teachers' current perceptions of their professional ideals, commitments, motivations, goals, and interests, their ethical standards and commitments, and their professional knowledge (subject matter knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and didactic knowledge). In the process of renegotiating these components of identity at work place implies the practice of teachers' agency. And it is the teachers' agentic actions that transform their professional identities.

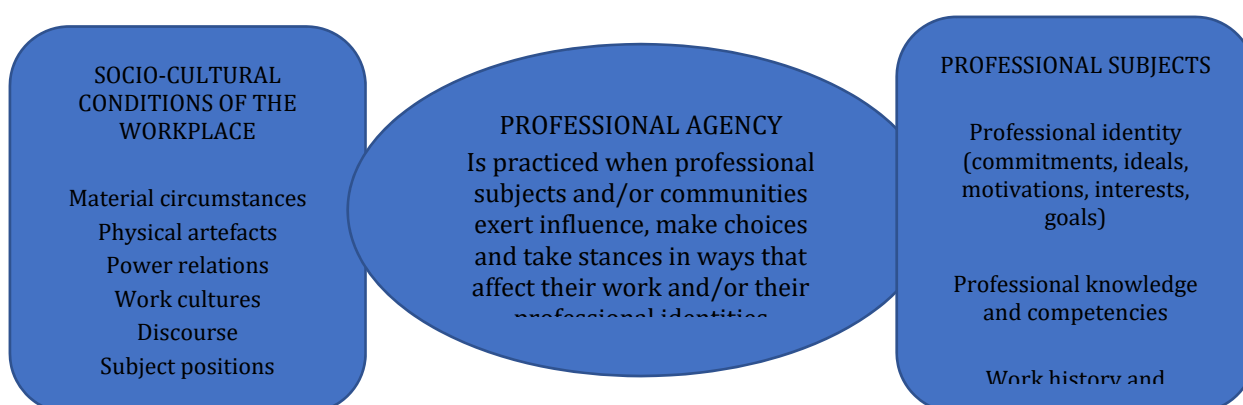


Figure 1. Professional agency defined with a subject-centered socio-cultural framework

3. Findings

3.1. Chinese Teachers' Autonomy Is Still Underdeveloped

The evidence so far has shown that Chinese novice teachers have a relatively strong sense of agency in terms of making choices in choosing teaching material, pedagogical methods, new ideas and activities, and making changes to the national curriculum for particular needs. However, they have a relatively weak sense of agency in independent teaching and applying those new ideas in their first year. Besides, as to classroom management, it is found that novice teachers have a fairly weak sense of agency in dealing with students' socio-emotional issues.

The evidence shows that international schools in mainland China provide a more autonomous environment than public schools for teachers. Nonetheless, when Chinese novice teachers enjoy such freedom in choosing what they need, they feel being challenged at the same time. In Finland, teachers are highly qualified and academic-trained in teacher education programme with minimal constraints on their autonomy. Hence, the professional independence of teachers is one of the teacher educational goals for Finnish teachers [3]. However, in the context of mainland China, traditional Chinese education is the initial teacher education for Chinese teachers, which is Gaokao-oriented, with a traditional 'teacher-centred' approach. Besides, teacher qualification in mainland China is not all academic based. A large number of young people obtain their teaching certificates by taking examinations within several months. Under such circumstances, Chinese novice teachers will have a bigger difficult transition when they join in a free context of an international school [4].

Since the late 1990s, Chinese teachers have been getting more and more academically educated. However, it does not mean they are more and more professional in the meantime. According to the current teacher qualification system, it has less chance to attract the right teacher candidates due to the low validity of the teacher qualification examinations, teaching interview process, and the culture of these qualification exams in current society. According to Gu et al. (2017), for such an immense educational system of China, there is a long way to go. All in all, teacher education which shapes teachers' past experiences in the present is of great significance. Chinese teacher education and teacher qualification need to make effort to promote teacher autonomy by educating ambitious prospective young people to become professionals before they step into workplace.

3.2. Multiple Professional Supports Are Needed for Student's Social Management

How to make bricks without straw? How to solve problems only with freedom? The findings show another negative feature—novice teachers' weak sense of agency in dealing with students' socio-cultural issues. In their testimonies, these issues have caused the biggest frustration of novice teachers in their first school year, and the worst case is teacher burnout and resignation. Novice teachers reported their need for multi-professional resources and support.

The finding shows that all Chinese novice teachers are homeroom teachers. Besides teaching, they have the extra responsibility for coping with students' affairs. The findings imply they feel 'powerless' when facing difficult students and their emotional problems, because this added role is poorly supported and resourced, and requires a large amount of time and energy devotion. A lack of external resources and personal competences causes those novice teachers a fairly weak sense of agency. Eteläpelto et al. (2015) suggest that a multiple-professional team is needed, which would consist of a psychologist, a school nurse, a social worker, a specialist, and the principal.

3.3. Chinese Novice Teachers Need More Mentoring Instructions

The findings reveal Chinese novice teachers' weak agency practices in their transition time, both in teaching practices and social management of students. If they want to survive in a hectic everyday working situation, they need to practice strong agency to reshape their original professional identities. But because of a lack of sufficient competences and pre-service practices, they need multi-professional supports, particularly one-to-one mentoring instructions. Successful practical experiences can push teachers to practice agency. Before giving independent classes, those teachers need to gain successful teaching experiences. That is why mentoring and shadowing for Chinese novice teachers are the most important surviving tools in an international school context [5].

3.4. The Subjective Factors as Resources and Restrictions for Chinese Novice Teachers to Exercise Agency

According to the SCSC approach, professional subjects' unique experiences, knowledge, and competences function as their development affordances and resources to exercise agency at work. The findings indicate that Chinese novice teachers have a discrepancy in sense of their professional identity when they try to exert an influence in their work community. The differences are rooted in various subjective aspects. The evidence shows that teacher commitment, international mindedness (IM), and other individual capacity are the main resources and restrictions for Chinese novice teachers to exercise agency at workplace.

Perseverance might be the most important character for novice teachers in their transition year. The discrepancy between their professional ideals and the practical situations needs one to be tough to overcome. And a unique personal experience, such as teacher 5's five-week oversea educational programme, which is a positive resource to international mindedness.

The main issue here is language. English seems a big problem for Chinese novice teachers. According to the interviews, it is common that these teachers feel difficult to express themselves in a clear, two-way, and ongoing way. In the interviews of teacher 2 and 3, both of them reported they terminated a two-way conversation with their western colleagues when they started to feel awkward in expressing themselves.

3.5. Negative Effects of High Mobility of Foreign Teachers

According to the SCSC framework, the socio-cultural conditions of the workplace include material and financial conditions, power relations and hierarchy, work cultures, etc. In the interviews, there were no complaints of Chinese novice teachers about the power relations and hierarchy, material, and financial conditions of their schools, but one teacher's testimony reveals an interesting factor, the precariat teachers, who likely exert a negative influence on novice teachers.

4. Conclusion

In this dissertation, the author aims to probe into how the selected Chinese novice teachers in international schools of mainland China sense their professional agency at the work place. By means of the research questions, this study has concluded four main findings as follow:

Generally speaking, Chinese novice teachers have a relatively weak sense of agency in international school contexts, particularly those with a lower sense of teacher commitment.

Bilingual communication skills, as one of the subjective factors, is the biggest issue for the Chinese novice teacher.

Among the needed multi-professional supportive resources, one-to-one mentoring and shadowing instructions are most needed for Chinese novice teachers in the transition period.

Western international school principal has a weak impact on Chinese novice teachers' professional agency practices and professional identities renegotiation.

In international school contexts, Chinese novice teachers have a relatively weaker sense of agency. Teacher commitment seems the key to a novice teacher to exercise agency and reshape professional ideal. A combination of factors of sufficient professional knowledge and competences, teaching practices, oversea experiences, and character play an important role, which heavily influences on novice teacher exercising their agency to learn and adapt in a diverse cultural work place. The result shows that there is still a long way to go for teacher qualification and teacher education in mainland China. We should reflect on how Chinese novice teachers exercise their professional agency to enhance their capacity of teaching practice, pedagogical innovation, student management, and wellbeing. Also, we should rethink about what kind of leadership strategies and practices could maximize their benefits in these regards.

Moreover, bilingual communication skill seems like the biggest obstacle for Chinese novice teachers to exercise agency in a cross-cultural environment.

Another conclusion is the international school leadership plays a weak role in facilitating Chinese novice teachers to exercise their agency. With multiple responsibilities of both teaching and student management, these teachers lack a set of tools to solve practical problems. However, these teachers' needs are not identified, or are neglected. According to the findings, the most frustrated experiences of the teachers are social management of students. Thus, a whole set of competencies and tools, including special education, inclusive education, emotional management, communication skills, etc., would allow novice teachers to be more confident in dealing with these problems, increase positive experiences, and thus sustain and promote their agency and identity. The findings indicate that middle school leadership seems to exert less influence on Chinese novice teachers than the principal does, and novice teachers are more sensitive to the quality of headship in international schools. Therefore, how does school leadership, the principal, in particular, promote Chinese novice teacher's sense of agency should be further studied.

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