

## **Learning to Teach in the Beginning Years: Contradiction Analysis of a Secondary English Teacher in China**

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### **Abstract:**

The beginning years are generally considered the most difficult in a teacher's career. The study of how novice teachers learn to teach is of great importance for teacher education. This narrative study follows one female secondary English teacher in an urban city of China for two years. Her process of learning and development is captured from data that included interviews, classroom observations, reflective journals and personal correspondences. Contradiction analysis within the framework of Engeström's expansive learning theory is used to analyze the learning process and development of this novice teacher. The analysis reveals how this teacher develops teaching practice by dealing with conflicts and contradictions. This study shows the role of personal history, induction, mentoring and school culture in the professional learning and growth of the novice teacher. Implications for teacher education are also discussed.

**Key Words:** Teacher learning, Novice teacher, Narrative inquiry, Contradiction analysis

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The beginning years are generally considered as the most difficult period in a teacher's career. How do novice teachers learn to teach? What supports can facilitate their teaching practice and foster a better understanding of the teaching profession? The answers to these questions will bring tremendous insights to teacher educators and policy makers. However, fewer endeavors have been made to listen to the voices of novice teachers and to capture the complexities of their learning process (Farrell, 2008; Jiang Meiling, 2008).

Novice secondary English teachers in China are facing greater challenges than ever before with the implementation of the national pedagogical reform. Exploring their inner landscapes can provide a better understanding of how novice teachers learn to teach and thereby can better inform the design of novice teacher induction programs. Nevertheless, the vast majority of literature surrounding new teachers' experience is void of the Chinese context.

The present narrative study explores the learning process of a novice English teacher in a Chinese secondary school. It aims to reveal how this teacher develops more effective teaching practice and makes sense of the profession by dealing with disturbances, conflicts, contradictions and tensions.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, I will first review a pluralistic view of teacher learning. Then, I will introduce relevant teacher learning researches on novice teachers. Finally I will state the power of contradiction analysis in tracing the development and growth of individual teachers.

### 2.1 Teacher Learning

How teachers learn to teach has been given considerable attention in recent years, as researchers have realized that the core of teacher education is teacher learning (Johnson, 2009). In studies of teacher learning, however, differences exist in defining the concept of learning. There have been 3 different views of teacher learning, namely, the traditional, the constructivist and the sociocultural. The traditional perspective on learning is often associated with passive reception of knowledge and changes of knowledge and skills are considered evidence of learning (Meirink, Meijer, Verloop and Bergen, 2009). The constructivist view of teacher learning involves teachers as the active constructors of knowledge who make sense of the world and learn by interpreting events through their existing knowledge and beliefs (Williams and Burden, 1997). Teacher learning traced from a sociocultural perspective sees knowledge as constructed by individuals through social interactions within specific contexts (Johnson, 2009).

A satisfactory definition of teacher learning should be able to answer these three questions (Liu Xuehui, 2007): What do teachers learn? How do teachers learn? And why do teachers learn?

The traditional view of teacher learning aims to address what teachers learn, but downplays the learning process and conditions. Besides it only stresses the acquisition of technical skills and neglects that learning to teach also involves emotional and spiritual changes or growth (Palmer, 2007). The constructionist and the sociocultural view can both answer questions of how and why teachers learn, however, the former mainly highlights the role of the individual and downplays the importance of the context, while the latter brings forth the importance of the context and somewhat holds back the agency of the individual. Only by combining the three perspectives of teacher learning discussed above could we get a satisfactory conceptualization of teacher learning. Safard (1998, cited in Meirink, Meijer et al. 2009) also argues that that pluralistic view of teacher learning is helpful in understanding and improving teacher learning and is conducive to better research. Therefore the present study adapts and synthesizes the above three views and defines teacher learning as an ongoing process of interaction, inquiry and reflection that leads to intellectual, emotional and spiritual changes or growth.

## **2.2 Novice Teachers**

New teachers often assume the complete duties of a veteran teacher and often find themselves in a “sink or swim” situation. Apart from being extremely hectic, the first years are generally considered the most difficult in a teacher’s career (Fantilli and McDougall, 2009). The study of how novice teachers learn to handle the initial years will be of great importance for teacher education and policy-making.

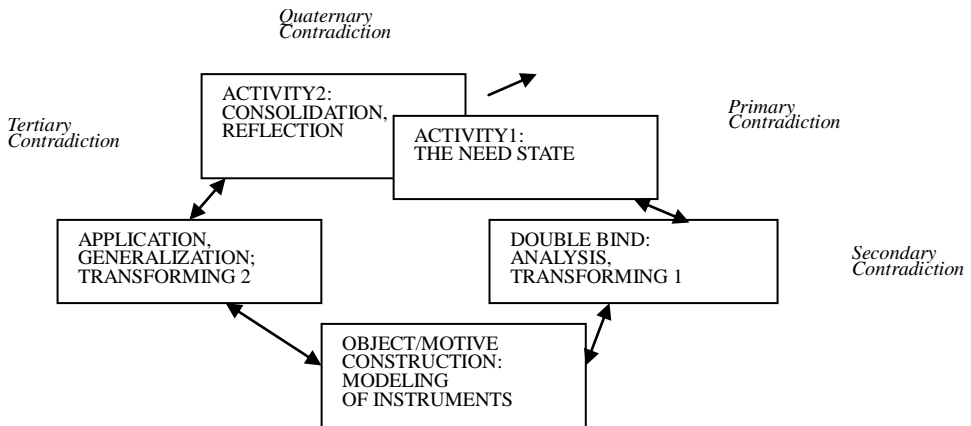
The studies on novice teachers basically fall into five categories: teacher concerns (e.g. Farrell, 2008, Fantilli & McDougall 2009), teacher attrition (e.g. Scherff, 2008), stages of development (e.g. Calderhead, 1988), expert-novice comparisons (e.g. Tsui, 2003; Wang Jun, 2009) and teacher learning (e.g. Feiman-Nemser, 2001). In the field of foreign language teacher education, teacher learning is still understudied (Freeman, 1996) and even less has been done about how novice teachers learn to teach. Among the fewer studies on how novice language teachers learn to teach, the focus has been on the role of teacher induction (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002; Wang & Odell et al, 2008), the effects of mentoring (Harrison, S. Dymoke et al. 2006; Hobson, Ashby et al. 2009; Devos, 2010) and teacher knowledge (Zhu Xiaoyan, 2004). Detailed studies outlining the complexities of how novice language teachers learn to teach are rare (Farrell, 2008; Watzke, 2007).

## **2.3 Contradiction Analysis**

Engeström (1999) puts forward the expansive learning theory, which sees learning as a cyclic process of dealing with contradictions within activity systems. Engeström (2001) suggests that contradictions can be identified at four levels (see Figure 1). The cycle begins with individuals questioning or criticizing the practice of the activity they are the part. The questioning reflects a need for change because of primary contradictions, which are inner conflicts between an ideal type of work and reality in practice. The second step is initiated when secondary contradictions arise between the components of activity systems, for example, changed objects or new tools

may conflict with an unchanged division of labor or rules. People often find themselves in a double bind situation, which pressures them to search for solutions (Jöhansdóttir, 2010). The third step involves forming new models for improved practice. The fourth step is the implementation of the new model which may cause tertiary contradictions between new and old forms in the system, as the conventional activity might continue to be the general practice. The last step in the expansive learning process is evaluation and consolidation of the new form of practice, which might lead to quaternary contradictions.

Using contradiction analysis within the framework of the expansive learning cycle opens up an opportunity to study the development of individual teachers in the context of collective activities (Jöhansdóttir, 2010). It is generally known that novice teachers often find themselves in double bind situations but little is known about how they overcome the difficulties and challenges. Contradiction analysis will provide understandings of how an individual teacher overcomes the difficult situations and develops better teaching practice and understanding of the profession.



### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Method

This research adopts narrative inquiry as a method of research. The conceptualization of narrative inquiry is grounded in Dewey's (1916, 1933) educational philosophy, which, at its core, argues that we are all knowers who reflect on experience, confront the unknown, make sense of it, and take action. Yet how we reflect on experience and how we make sense of our experience are often achieved through the stories we tell. Through narratives, human beings play an active role in constructing their own lives and seeking to make sense of their experiences. Following this mode of thinking, many researchers (e.g. Clandinin and Connelly, 1995, 2000) have placed narrative centre stage in teacher education as a method and object of inquiry. Clandinin and Connelly (2000:63) discussed the terms that narrative inquirers use, which are personal and social; past, present and future; combined with the notion of space. This set of terms creates a metaphorical three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, in which narrative inquirers would be able to look backward and forward, inward and outward, and would be located in place. The present study aims to relive the experience of a novice teacher and unfold her experiences of learning to teach.

### **3.2 Participant**

Xia was 25 when she started to teach in Haihua Secondary school, a key middle school in an urban city of China. Xia was well prepared to teach, with a master's degree in Applied Linguistics, a year-long internship in a training school and most importantly a love for the teaching profession. She also found herself in an open and supportive working environment.

My first meeting with Xia was in Dec. 2009 and since then I had kept close contacts with her until November, 2011. I followed her development very closely by observing her lessons, reading her lesson plans as well as reflection journals, interviewing her before and after class, spending time with her students, talking to her mentors and note taking important events of her school.

## **4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

To vividly depict how Xia learned to teach in the first two years, such literary elements as background, conflicts, resolutions and epilogue are applied to her story (Scherff, 2008).

### **4.1 Background**

Xia grew up in a provincial capital city in the North China. Both of her parents received college education and they expected her to get the most from school. Xia lived up to the expectations set for her by her parents and did very well in schools. However, she said that while in secondary school her real interest was in natural science, not in English. But her father encouraged her to choose liberal arts as her major, which he thought would be more suitable for girls. Xia followed her father's advice and was accepted by a renowned university as an English language major. After coming into college, Xia started to feel great pressure:

Most of my classmates were from secondary language schools. I was far behind them. My intensive reading teacher was somewhat shocked by my poor English. But I was not frustrated. I told myself that I had to catch up. With the teachers' help, I read a lot and gradually improved my English. By the time I was to graduate from the university, I had already been among the top five in my class. And I passed the graduate entrance examination easily and became a graduate student of applied linguistics.

During her graduate studies, Xia found a part-time teaching job in a local training school and was well received by the students. After getting her master's degree, Xia decided to choose teaching as her future profession and she soon got an offer from Haihua Secondary School, a key school. She clearly remembered the day when she received her employment letter:

It was a cold winter afternoon. Christmas was around the corner. I heard some people singing when I was on the way to my dorm after taking a shower in the public university bathroom. There I saw a teacher singing Christmas carols with a whole class of students. The beautiful singing mingled with the twirling snowflakes. It was such a nice feeling. I stayed there for a long time until I found my feet icily cold. I realized that I even did not have my socks on. "I am going to have my own students. I can teach them to sing Christmas carols. How wonderful it will be!", I thought to myself.

## **4.2 Conflicts**

In September, 2009, Xia started her life as a new teacher. She was hectically busy, but was excited about every meeting with the students. The initial transition was rather smooth, but Xia soon found the negative aspects of being a new teacher. What disturbed her most were failures in classroom management and formation of her own teaching style.

### **4.2.1 'I have no authority!'**

Xia found that the students did not take her very seriously and it was hard to discipline them. She said that she just couldn't implement many of her ideas. Her students didn't turn in their homework on time. And even the quietest girl in her class dared to challenge her directly. What was worse, there was a boy in her class who always punctuated her talks with "Haha" and "Qie" (Chinese interjections to show despise). This boy studied in the United States for a couple of years and had native-like English proficiency.

Xia viewed those experienced teachers with great admiration, for in her eyes, they symbolized authority. This "I have no authority" complication bothered her a lot and she sought every opportunity to build up her authority. One impressive example was her experience in a school trip:

The school asked me to accompany my students to an extreme sports camp for a field trip. The students were required to challenge different types of demanding exercises. Can you imagine that I even climbed onto a 50-meter high pole and then did sort of bungee jumping? I'll tell you why I did that. The boys in my class challenged me to do that. They said "Miss Xia, if you dare to jump down from that pole, we would behave well in your class and we would turn in our homework on time." So I did climb onto that

tall pole and jumped down. What happened later, however, turned out to be very disappointing. Those students never kept their promises and they still didn't take their homework seriously.

Another interesting incident was about her attempts of "punishing" her students, just like what all the other experienced teachers did. She asked those students who failed to turn in their homework on time to stand in the hall, which had been a usual practice among experienced teachers. However, after ten minutes, she asked the students to come in, because she felt very guilty of doing so. "I hate myself of being so mild!", she commented, "I hate myself of being so mellow!"

#### **4.2.2 "When Can I find my own voice?"**

Chinese secondary schools adopt a mentoring system, that is, every novice teacher has an officially identified mentor once entering the profession. Xia was assigned a mentor, Ms. Lu, who was very outgoing and supportive. "Her classes are very engaging", Xia commented, "She gives most of the class time to her students". But after one semester, Ms Lu was transferred to another team and Ms Yang became her second mentor. Ms Yang was as equally supportive, but her teaching style, was quite different from that of Ms Lu. "She talks most of the time in class", said Xia, "but the students willingly follow her." Xia imitated and adopted the work-well methods of both mentors. She seemed to be quite happy with this imitation and appropriation in the initial period. But as time went by, she started to feel confused:

I did a very messy job last week. The main cause is that my present mentor's teaching belief is so different from that of my former mentor. My present mentor, Ms. Yang, emphasizes a lot on controlled language practice such as blank fillings, translations and sentence makings. My former mentor, Ms. Lu, however, focused a lot on guided meaningful practice, like free talk, presentation, team activities etc. I used to follow Ms Lu's style, but now I have to go through lots of changes. I've learned a lot from both of them, but sometimes I just got confused. I think I need to form my own teaching style, otherwise I could only imitate others. I just feel that what Ms Lu said is right, and then in a second I'll feel that what Ms Yang said is also right. I'm very frustrated. When do you think I can find my own voice?"

Xia's confusion and frustration were evidenced by my classroom observations. Here is an excerpt from my research journal:

In the past month, I've been paying particular attention to Xia's reading comprehension instruction. In the first few sessions, she tried to adopt her mentor's teaching style, making the class more learner-centred with lots of discussion activities. Yet she found that the students were not doing as well as she expected. So she then switched to a more teacher-centred approach and asked the students to do more exercises like dictation, translation and multiple-choice items. Again, she said that the students were not doing well. She said that she might need to go back to the learner-centred approach. Xia named this process as "always back and forth."

#### **4.2.3 "Is it the right way to teach language?"**

At the end of the first term, Xia received an e-mail from the monitor of class 2. In this message, the boy directly labeled Xia as “a very inexperienced teacher”. He also commented that although the lessons seemed fun, the students hadn’t learned much. He suggested that Xia spend more time on grammar practice. Xia felt deeply hurt:

What made the students feel that doing grammar exercises should be the focus of English lessons? Is there a problem with their learning style or is there anything wrong with my teaching approach?

In Xia’s teaching team, there were several experienced teachers who were very good at teaching grammar. Xia observed their lessons many times. She found that the teachers dominated the class talk and there was little interaction between the teacher and the students. Xia was somewhat resistant to this type of teaching:

I somehow feel that the English language should not be taught so. Learning a language takes time, and so does language teaching. The students always complain that I am not doing sufficient grammar practice and that I am not covering sufficient language points. If I teach like what the experienced teachers do, maybe they will feel better. But should language be taught so? Do I have to be like that?

### **4.3 Resolutions**

In the previous sections, I outlined the tensions, conflicts and struggles of Xia. In this section, I will unfold how Xia managed to “keep her head above the water” by ways of seeking for community help, giving demonstration lessons and developing classroom management skills.

#### **4.3.1 “I learned a lot from others.”**

Xia was aware of the importance of the support systems surrounding her and welcomed and sought assistance from them. She learned to handle her conflicts by observing lessons, getting the most out of in-service training activities and taking part in an action research project.

Xia had lots of opportunities to observe the lessons of other teachers. She frequented not only the classrooms of her mentors and experienced teachers but also those of her peers. She remembered observing the lesson of Xiao Hua, another novice teacher:

I was sitting in the very back row, but I still could hear every word Xiao Hua said. She looked confident and all the students were following her. She started to teach only half a year ago, but she managed the class very well. I suddenly realized the importance of building up “rules” or “routines”.

For in-service training activities, many teachers were quite resistant. Xia, however, was quite positive:

I am very positive about the in-service teacher training at the district level. Sometimes teachers from different schools take turns planning lessons and explaining the rationale. Different schools have different styles. I learned a lot from them. For example, last week, a teacher from a key secondary school talked about how to teach grammar. She said that we should not spend too much time on rules or grammatical knowledge, instead, we should give students more chances to practice. For instance, when you talk about



future tenses, you can choose many articles from New Concept English and guide the students to discover the rules. I benefited a lot from her talk.

Apart from these learning activities, Xia also joined a university-secondary school action research project. The university researcher's regular visit offered great learning opportunities for Xia, who experienced the whole cycle of doing action research (finding a puzzle, getting responses from university researchers, work out a plan, implement the plan as well as evaluate and reflect on the plan) and finally wrote an outstanding research report.

#### **4.3.2 “Giving demonstration lessons does not mean to put on shows.”**

During the first two years of teaching, Xia gave at least four demonstration lessons, which as she said are “great opportunities to learn.” In her third term of teaching, Xia was recommended by her team leader to attend a national teaching contest. All the team members were asked to contribute to her lesson planning. Xia tried different lesson plans out with different group of students for ten times and finally came up with a satisfactory one. She won the first prize, a rare honor for a novice teacher. Xia showed me all the materials she prepared for this national teaching contest. I was amazed to find such files like lesson plan, students' learning guide, rationale of the lesson plan and self reflections. Xia recalled this experience with gratitude:

Many teachers regard giving demonstration lessons as putting on shows, but I do not think so. Preparing for the contest was very challenging, but I learned how to compose lesson plans, how to make my teaching objectives manageable, and how to make sure the teaching activities are learner centered. I gained a better understanding of secondary English teaching.

I congratulated Xia on her amazing achievement, but she looked rather calm:

There is not much to be proud of. I am just being lucky. So many teachers are out there to help me. This lesson plan is a collective effort. Many of the ideas are my mentor's, not mine.

#### **4.3.3 “I now know how to handle trouble students.”**

In February, 2011, I came to visit Xia at noon time. It has been half a year since I met her last time. During this period I was abroad for an academic visit. My research journal recorded this meeting:

I came into the office and saw Xia making a phone call. She gestured me to find a place to sit. Soon I saw a tall boy come in and walk to her desk. I recognized that it was the boy who often challenged Xia in her lessons. He looked like a young kid who had done something wrong. Xia looked up and said rather harshly “Now you read the passage aloud! And then you can go back to your class!” The boy did as he was told.

It was time for Xia's afternoon lessons. I came into the classroom and found a seat at the very back of the classroom. Xia was talking to a girl in the back row very loudly “Don't fall asleep in class again. If you do, you will get punished. See what I mean?” I recognized that girl, another trouble student who often dozed off or read Chinese novels in Xia's class.

I was very surprised to find such dramatic changes in Xia. We chatted after the class and Xia said “I think my biggest change is that now I am no longer afraid of disciplining the students.

#### **4.4 Epilogue**

Teacher learning is an ongoing process. It is very hard to find a clear ending point in Xia’s story. Starting from September, 2011, Xia began to teach grade 12 students. This was a daunting task, for she had to prepare the students for the upcoming college entrance exam. She became extremely busy, having to work even on weekends. I came to visit her on a Saturday afternoon. Xia was alone in a quiet office. She was surrounded by piles of test papers and exercise books. She said that they no longer used any textbooks. What they did every day was to let the students do exercises. When she talked about this, she looked rather calm and no longer showed any distaste for the grammar-centered training. I mentioned her dream of leading a whole class of students to sing Christmas carols and asked how she had been trying to seek this balance between dreams and realities. She responded to my questions in this way:

Every individual seeks for benefits and tries to avoid pitfalls. Before I came to this school, I dreamed of having a whole class of students to myself and leading them to sing Christmas songs. But after I came here, I said to myself “How can that be possible? Are you crazy?” What the students really need is more systematic and more practical training. I have to adapt my lessons to their real needs. I should be down-to-the-earth. But I can still show my students some English movies and share with them great English songs. I try to make my lessons more interactive. It is possible to strike a balance. In my team there is one senior teacher who successfully combines grammar teaching with meaningful language practice. I need to learn from her. I might have been too down-to-the-earth.

I also chatted with Xia about her “I have no authority” complication. She said that her confidence level had greatly increased with the gaining of more teaching experience. And she jokingly said “I’m harsher with my students. Teaching makes me a cruel person. I am not a cruel person in nature, but it seems that there is no other way out at the current stage.” Xia added that maybe after a certain period, she could be more like herself:

I attended a book club for teachers in my school. In this club, there was a very experienced geography teacher, who was about to retire. Unlike many senior experienced teachers, he looked kind and mild. I shared my puzzles with him and asked whether I should be harsher with my students. That teacher said “No, you don’t have to. Just be yourself.”

Xia smiled while she recalled this story and commented “I still have a lot to learn. I am still learning how to be myself.”

## **5. INTERPRETATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **5.1 Facing the contradictions between dreams and realities**

Novice teachers often find them in a need state of the expansive learning cycle, because of the inherent conflicts between the ideal type of work and the reality. The beginning of Xia's teaching was filled with conflicts and contradiction, which was not unlike that of countless other first-year teachers (Fantilli & MacDougall, 2009). The primary contradiction in the case of Xia arose from two aspects, that is, firstly her understanding of the teaching profession and the reality of working as a secondary English teacher, and secondly her view of language teaching and the popular practice in the school.

In terms of understanding of the profession, Xia dreamed of herself as a conductor of a harmonious chorus, but later finds that actually the choral members do not want to follow this new conductor, who is young, inexperienced and mild-looking.

As for language learning and teaching, Xia was not in favor of a grammar-focused teaching style. Her own language learning experience, "apprenticeship of observation" (Lortie, 1975), played a big role in forming her own conceptualizations of language teaching. Xia thought that language teachers should not spend too much time on mechanical practice, however, her students and many experienced teachers held the opposite view. Obviously, Xia encountered a set of norms and behaviors that clash with her experiences, as previously have been noted for many novice teachers (Feiman-Nemser & Buchman, 1987; Flores & Day, 2006; Sabar, 2004; discussed in Scherff, 2008). As a result, Xia engaged in a struggle trying to create her own social realities by trying to make her own work match her ideals, and at the same time being subjected to the norm practices within the work place.

This big dream-reality gap filled Xia's initial period of teaching with drastic emotional fluctuations. Learning to teach then occurred as the result of repeated emotional crisis, 'provoked by the subject's recognition that he or she lacks a competence necessary to participate in the changing institutional situation' (Wardekker, 2010:242 ).

## **5. 2 Breaking the double-bind situation and making transformations**

The dream-reality shock caught Xia in a double bind situation, and consequently she was obsessed with the negative feelings of having no authority and having no personalized teaching approach. Xia soon realized that there was a need to change, a need to learn to adapt to the realities. Her experiences of breaking the deadlock and making changes provide much evidence that support Vygotsky's social learning theory.

In Xia's case, human mediation and a supportive school culture have been particularly conducive. Xia benefited a lot from the interactions with her mentors, team leaders, peers and the university researchers. Various forms of human mediation constructed a ZPD for Xia's professional development. Data collected supports the view of the teacher learning process as socialization from informal self-directed learning and learning with role models to activity-based teacher group learning. Xia was also surrounded by a healthy school culture. She had access to such a whole variety of teacher learning activities as collective lesson planning, peer class observations, in-service teacher trainings and university-secondary school joint

research programs. These activities provided a good social space for her to share information and knowledge, negotiate meaning, solve problems and most importantly serve as stimuli for ongoing learning and change.

### **5.3 Making Consolidations and reflections**

Xia's journey of learning to teach is not straightforward and linear and therefore her story is not one with a Hollywood plot. The present study suggests that Xia has gone through many complications and changes on her way to learn to become a teaching professional. Her journey of learning is filled with ups and downs, gains and losses, ecstasies and depressions. Xia never stopped enduring the pains of transformation, for instance, while she proudly claimed that "I am no longer afraid of disciplining the students", she also sighed "teaching makes me a cruel person"; while she was happy to be awarded so many honours as a young teacher, she also commented "It was not actually my lesson planning. It was mainly my mentor's ideas". These painful experiences of making transformations led to further consolidations and reflections on her teaching practice and professional growth. For example, Xia consolidated that she would no longer despise the explicit teaching of grammar and that she would try every means to adapt her teaching to the real needs of her students. But she also reflected that she might have been too down-to-the-earth and that she should learn to make a better balance between grammar teaching and meaningful practice. These consolidations and reflections motivated Xia to take further steps in learning to teach and thus stimulated the cycle of expansive learning.

## **6. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

This narrative study traces the learning of a novice secondary English teacher. The study offered a better understanding of a novice teacher's initial years of teaching and unfolded the factors that caused their discontent and self-doubt. Contradiction analysis within the framework of Engeström's expansive learning theory is used to analyze the learning process and development of this novice teacher. The analysis reveals how this teacher develops teaching practice by dealing with conflicts and contradictions and how this teacher expands her learning through consolidation and reflection. The study shows the role of personal history, induction, mentoring and school culture in the professional learning and growth of the novice teacher. These findings suggest certain implications for teacher educators and policy makers.

Firstly, this study suggests that there is a need to recognize the role of prior experiences in novice teacher induction and education. Scherff and Daria (2010) argues that there are many different types of new teachers with different life history and therefore induction and education programs should take these differences into account. Xia experienced tremendous emotional struggles while she started her teaching because her own language learning experiences strongly clashed with the school reality. She entered the profession with strong idealism, which unfortunately was not noticed and cared about by teacher educators. If she could be engaged in

critical conversations about her prior belief of language learning and teaching, if she could be engaged in dialogic discussions about her idealism and the school realities, she would not have felt like a failure during the initial period. There is a need for further exploration of the relationship between novice teachers' prior experiences and the effectiveness of teacher induction and education programs.

Secondly, this study implies that mentoring programs should be structured and strengthened. Mentoring for novices from experts has become the leading form of teacher induction. Novice teachers in the Chinese context, as in any other countries, have a strong need for qualified mentors who are organized professionals with sound teaching practice (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009). They need to work with an experienced teacher with whom they have a comfort level and are compatible with, and they need to have frequent meetings with mentors in order to focus attention on a wide variety of individual needs. Mentoring in Chinese secondary schools, however, tend to be rather random and unstructured. Normally one experienced teacher is assigned to a novice teacher without selection or consideration of compatibility and no specific criteria is outlined in terms of the responsibilities of the mentors. Consequently, the quality of mentoring differs drastically from school to school. In this study, Xia was lucky to have two mentors who were supportive and dedicated. The two mentors provided effective support by having lesson-based dialogic interactions with Xia. However, their different teaching approaches and ways of mentoring also caused lots of disturbances and doubts for Xia. The study suggests that mentors might play a constraining role and therefore calls for a more structured mentoring system, in which a board of mentors with diversity work collaboratively with novice teachers and offer opportunities for reflection.

Thirdly, the study shows that a healthy school culture is highly conducive to the professional development of novice teachers. The study echoes previous studies that a sound school culture is highly valuable to the growth of novice teachers (Wang et al, 2008). Xia was embraced by a very supportive situation, having the opportunity to observe others' teaching, to be observed by colleagues, to have chances of giving demonstration lessons and to take part in research projects. The accepting school culture accepting school cultures can create more opportunities for teacher learning, such as imitation of mentor teachers, observation of all kinds of second language classrooms, challenges to one's teaching beliefs, reflection on one's own teaching practice and discussions with colleagues and others (Tarone & Allwright, 2005). Policy makers and school administrators should aim to build sound and embracing school cultures.

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