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EFL Preservice Teacher Identity Formation in School-University Partnership: Cases in P.R.C.

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This study investigates the teaching practicum (TP) of a cohort of EFL (English as foreign language) preservice teachers in a partnership school. Drawing on Situated Learning Theory, Social Theory of Learning, and Activity Theory, student teaching is regarded as an ongoing trajectory of identity formation in the community of practice, and the school-university partnership is conceptualized as an activity system of learning community comprising of co-learners of student teachers, mentor teachers, and university supervisors. An interpretive qualitative case study is adopted and data collection methods include observations, interviews and documents. Research findings indicate that the student teachers underwent legitimate peripheral participation during student teaching. The tensions and interpersonal relationships within the school-university partnership had an impact on preservice teacher identity formation. These institutional factors were affected by both social educational factors and personal factors such as teacher professional knowledge, prior experiences, and personalities.

Key words: identity formation; preservice teachers; school-university partnership

Introduction

The notion of identity has been proposed as an analytic tool for understanding the relationship between education and society (Gee, 2000). Researchers have studied teacher identities from different perspectives (Beijaard et al., 2000; Clarke, 2008; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Tsui et al., 2009). Teacher education needs to pay attention to teachers' identities, which means teachers' "professional self", how teachers feel or perceive themselves professionally as teachers (Kosnik & Beck 2009; Ponte & Chapman 2008). In teacher education studies, school-university partnership is a new proposal which joins schools and universities for the simultaneous renewal of both schooling and education of educators (Goodlad, 1995). School-university collaboration has been developed in different countries and regions where significant effects have been achieved in teacher professional development (Bloomfield, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2005; Tsui et al., 2009). In China, researchers have also proposed the necessity of establishing collaborative partnership between schools and universities (Wang, 2006; Zhan, 2008).

Although many studies have been conducted on teacher identities, those in TESOL are still scarce (Tsui, 2007). Previous studies indicate that preservice teacher identity formation is better understood in school-university partnership (Clarke, 2008; Mayer, 1999; Tsui, et al., 2009). However, previous research on school-university partnership was mostly methodologically weak and lacking a sophisticated theoretical framework (Edwards et al., 2009). This research is pedagogically significant as it associates the concepts of teacher identity and school-university partnership, both of which are essential to teacher education. It also has theoretical significance as it examines identity construction from a new angle---the sociocultural perspective, drawing on theories including Situated Learning Theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), Social Theory of Learning (Wenger, 1998), and Activity Theory (Engestrom, 1987). It also applies the concept of “boundary crossing” (Engestrom et al., 1995) to the scope of teacher education, which is regarded as a new attempt (Tsui & Wong, 2009).

Literature review

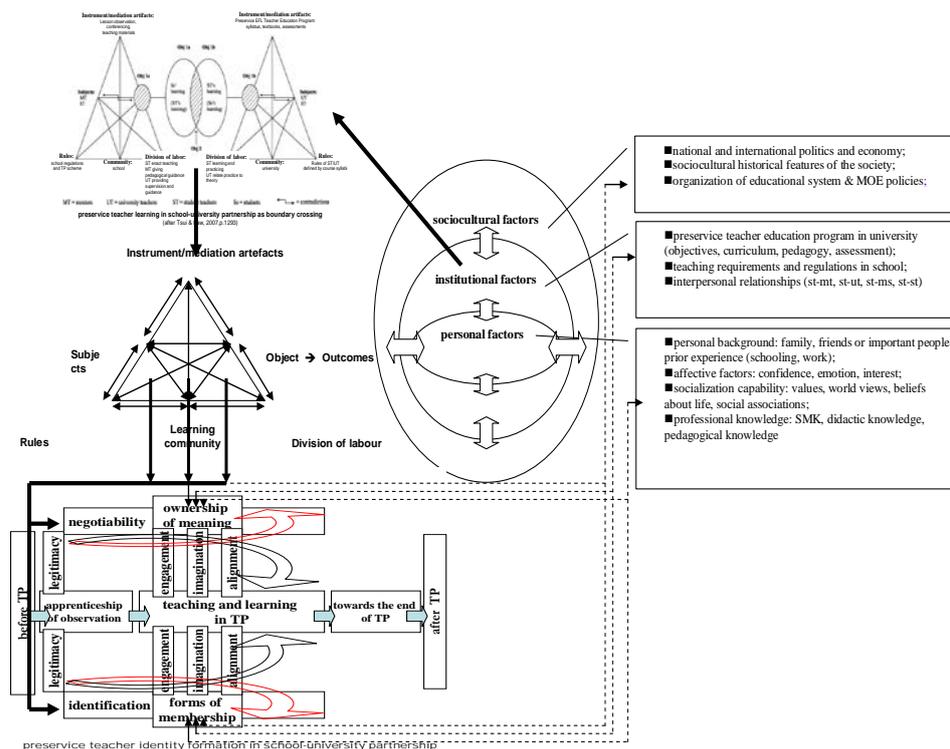
Identity refers to the various meanings or knowledge which people attach to themselves or are attributed by others (Beijaard et al., 2000; Clarke, 2008). Preservice teachers’ identity is understood as “the professional self they construct and reconstruct in becoming and being teachers” (Ponte & Chapman, 2008, p.242). Various factors have been reported to have an impact on teachers’ professional identities including social factors, institutional factors, and personal factors (Kosnik & Beck, 2009; Ponte & Chapman, 2008). Social factors refer to national politics, economic and educational policies (Flores & Day, 2006; Williams, 2009); institutional factors include school teaching requirements, program elements, and interpersonal relationships (Beijaard et al., 2000); and personal factors such as teachers’ social background, prior education experiences (Zeichner & Gore, 1990), teacher professional knowledge (Beijaard et al., 2000), and their personalities and beliefs (Flores & Day, 2006; Walkington, 2005). Teacher identity is *dynamic* and *ongoing*, associated with both *person* and *context*, including several *sub-identities*, and exercising *agency* based on the goals pursued and the resources available in the context (Beijaard et al., 2004). These characteristics echo with the characterizations of identity proposed by Wenger (1998) according to which identity is *a negotiated experience, a community membership, a learning trajectory, a nexus of multimembership, and a relation between the local and the global.*

According to Social Theories of Learning (Wenger, 1998), learning is a social process closely related to the concepts of community, practice, and meaning. By practicing and negotiating meaning of being a member in the community, the learner develops his identity. Identity formation is developed through *legitimate peripheral participation* (Lave & Wenger 1991). It is necessary for learners to obtain legitimacy of access to practice (Edwards & Tsui, 2009). At the beginning of TP, student teachers are at a relatively non-participating position. If they are keen on obtaining full participation and are enabled by the community, they may have peripheral

participation, lead an inbound learning trajectory, and develop peripheral identities. However, if student teachers do not wish to obtain full participation and are not encouraged to move away from the non-participating position or even restricted from trying out their own ideas, they may have marginalized participation, leading an outbound learning trajectory and developing marginalized identities. Edwards and Tsui's (2009) study resonates with Wenger's (1998) concept of identity formation which is a dual process involving *negotiability* and *identification*. According to Wenger (1998), the learner is constantly trying to invest his experiences of association and differentiation, trying to identify with the community and obtain membership. He is also negotiating meaning valued by the community and trying to obtain ownership of meaning. Wenger (1998) indicates that both negotiability and identification have three modes of belonging as their sources: *engagement*, *imagination*, and *alignment*. He also puts forward the concept of *boundary practices* which consists of two *communities of practice* whose joint enterprises are to resolve boundaries, reconcile perspectives, and find solutions.

The concept of boundary practices is also mirrored in Activity Theory which is based on the assumption that learning is a goal-directed mediated action (Vygotsky, 1978) embedded in an activity system (Leont'ev, 1981). Engestrom (1987) develops the theory that the activity system is further embedded in a community with rules and divisions of labor mediating the object into an outcome. Engestrom et al. (1995) put forward the concept of *boundary crossing*, emphasizing the productivity of learning in new territories. This concept is applied by Tsui and Law (2007) to examine student teaching in school-university partnership. The authors find that contradictions exist in the boundary zone, as a result of the inconsistent objects between the school and the university, and the asymmetrical power relations within the *boundary zone*. To solve the contradictions, Bloomfield (2009) proposes, it is necessary to establish a new activity system of learning community, involving student teachers, school mentors, and university supervisors as co-learners. Bloomfield further argues that, by establishing such a new activity system, the contradictions may be turned into potentially effective learning opportunities.

Grounded in previous literature, a conceptual framework is established as follows.



The Study

Based on the conceptual framework, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the main factors that affect preservice teacher identities? How do they affect preservice teacher identities?
2. What are the interpersonal relations and tensions in school-university partnership? How do these contradictions contribute to the development of preservice teacher identities?

An interpretive qualitative research design was adopted to obtain different sources of data naturally in actual situations and to analyze the data from an emic perspective (Merriam, 1998). A case study design was also used to obtain in-depth and holistic data about the ongoing identity formation process of particular individual student teachers (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002).

This study is concerned with a cohort of fourth year EFL undergraduates in China who had teaching practice in the placement school which had eight-year collaboration with the university. The two student teachers were Laura, head of the cohort, who taught a fast-class, and Samuel who taught a slow-class in the middle school. Four school mentors responsible for both Laura's (Ms Ni, and Ms Ying) and Samuel's classes (Ms Qian and Ms Chen) participated in the research. Two university teachers also joined in the study, including the leading teacher of the TP cohort, Miss Wen, and another supervising teacher, Mr Xia.

Three data collection methods were adopted. The student teachers' lessons were observed and they were interviewed about their thoughts and attitudes towards the TP activities and interpersonal relationships. Documents were collected, including the TP scheme, and student teachers' reflections on teaching and student management. During data collection, the researcher was an "observer as participant" (Merriam, 1998). As the main part of the data collected included interview transcripts, observation fieldnotes, and documents, content analysis was adopted to identify the meaning and recurring themes during data analysis (Patton, 2002). The method of modified analytic induction was also used to reexamine and reformulate the tentative conceptual framework by locating the contrasting and negative cases (ibid.). Constant comparative method was employed during coding and categorizing of the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). After analyzing the data of the two individual cases, cross-case analysis was conducted (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Trustworthiness was addressed from four aspects: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) by using triangulation of data, member check, thick description, negative case, peer review, and audit trail (Merriam, 1998).

Results and discussion

Laura

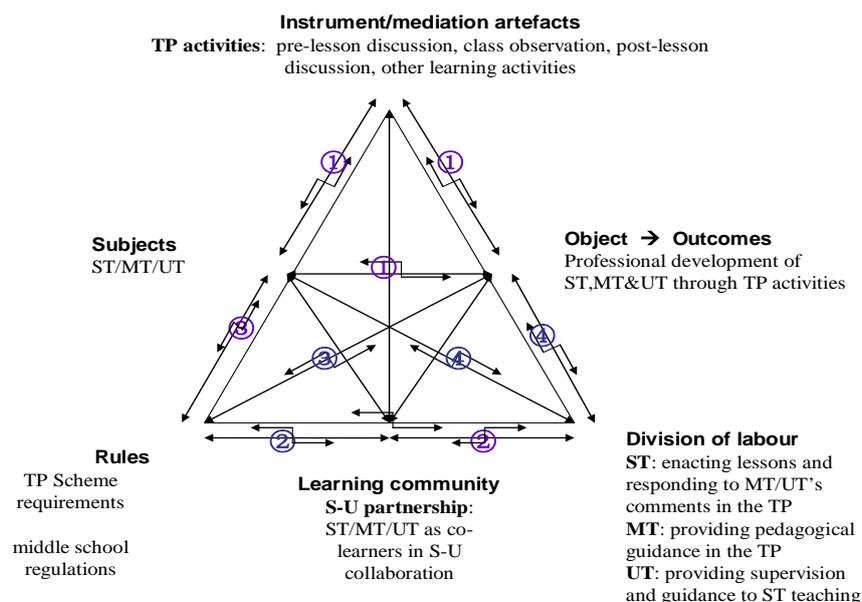
Laura was born in an ordinary city family. Her parents could not help her much in her study, but she was independent, active, and studied very well. She had many hobbies and had long been "head of class". She was a family tutor and had once participated in voluntary teaching activities. She found the English Method Courses very "*professional*" because they made her "*feel like a teacher*" and helped her "*upgrade*" herself. Before the TP, Laura took part in a Department Teaching Skill Competition and won the support of both her classmates and teachers. She was eager to have the TP, and wanted to be "*a teacher whom is loved and respected by her students*". During the TP, Laura taught a fast class and had freedom in lesson planning as her course mentor, Ms Ni, did not give her strict requirements for lesson planning. Laura kept friendly relationship with her students and she felt very proud of her experience as a class-teacher because her devotion helped her earn the support of her students and the trust of Ms Ying, her class-teacher mentor. As Laura was the head of the TP cohort, she was much busier than her peers and sometimes had to delay her own lesson preparation because of public matters. Her responsibility and hard work were recognized by her peers, school mentors, and university supervisors.

Samuel

Samuel was born in a peasant family in a small village. He began to learn English two years later than the city learners. English was not a valued subject in the village school. In Samuel's opinion, neither teaching methods nor facilities in his school were as good as those in big cities, as he said, "*I had to depend on myself.*" He felt that although he studied hard, his English was inferior to those of his city peers, especially in oral English, which he referred to it as "*dumb English*". When he

entered the university, he was lonely and could not discuss learning problems with his peers. He found the theories of Method Courses difficult to understand. He also took part in the voluntary English teaching and tried hard to get over his nervousness in front of an audience of students. Samuel taught a slow class during TP and was worried about whether he could finish the task as required because his students were very naughty. He sought help from Ms Chen, the class-teacher mentor, and was later accustomed to the student management work her guidance and encouragement. His course-teacher mentor, Ms Qian was very concerned about whether Samuel could teach the lesson according to her requirements. She checked Samuel's PPT courseware carefully and gave suggestions about either addition of more language points or revision of some examples. Samuel was over-anxious about the lessons before he had the first lesson, but by and by he got over his anxiety and tried to overcome his weaknesses by reflecting on his lessons and others' comments and suggestions.

Contradictions in the school-university partnership as an Activity System



Activity system of school-university partnership and contradictions
(after Engestrom, 1999)

As indicated in the above model, the TP in this study which took place in the school-university partnership context is conceptualized as an Activity System (Engestrom, 1999). The findings in this fieldtrip seem to indicate various contradictions existing among the different interrelated elements.

Contradiction 1:

inconsistency of objects among the subjects as co-learners

Laura	<i>"To teach and to learn".</i>
Samuel	<i>"Overcome timidity, show myself."</i>
Ms Ni (Laura's mentor)	<i>"TP is a process of 'mutual learning'. Although I am more experienced than the student teachers, I have learned a lot through observing and reflecting on classes, and comparing their teaching designs with mine."</i>
Mr Xia (university supervisor)	<i>"First, I must help the student teachers to integrate the theories they learned from the university with the local practice in the middle school...It is very necessary for university teacher educators to know more about the middle school context. I learned the practical situation of ELT in middle school through class observations."</i>
Ms Qian (Samuel's mentor)	<i>"First, I will start from my students' learning, I must make sure that my students' learning meets our teaching effects, and then from the learning of the student teachers...However, I will declare that all student teachers, during mentoring them, I learned something from them..."</i>

The TP involved different participants indicated as subjects in the Activity System. Although student teachers (ST), school mentors (MT) and university supervisors (UT) were co-participants, their objects did not seem to be consistent with each other. These inconsistent objects contradicted with the object of the Activity System model which emphasizes the co-development of the three parties (**Contradiction ①**). This contradiction might give rise to the contradiction between the subjects and the instrument (mediating tool) in the model in terms of how the TP activities should be carried out to achieve their objects. This contradiction could be evident in the disagreements between the university supervisor and the middle school mentors about how the lessons should be designed.

A post-lesson discussion between Mr Xia, the university supervisor, and the student teachers mentored by the same school teacher, Ms Qian

Mr Xia: *I'll say something about the listening part. What you were teaching is listening, not reading. You need to make clear the lesson types. When your students could not find the answer by listening, you asked them to read. They could answer the questions later, but they actually got the answers by reading instead of listening.*

Samuel: *So I asked them to listen and read.*

Mr Xia: *How can they listen and read?! Do you listen and read when you have your own listening class? There wasn't enough listening...*

ST1: *Mr Xia, because our students don't like listening, they usually just listen and read.*

Mr Xia: *Ok! There's no need to say anything. No need. Not necessary. Not necessary at all. It's not necessary to say any more then.*

ST1: *Our mentor sometimes also asked us to let them listen and read.*

Mr Xia: *Then, I won't say any more about it. Now you treat listening, reading, and writing all in the same way. I have no comments.*

ST1: *Last time, I played the tape twice. Ms Qian said I let them listen too much.*

Mr Xia: *It is not the issue of more or less. The point is, listening is not testing. Now you treat listening practice totally as testing exercises. How can you do that?! It is the listening strategies that should be emphasized...*

The different requirements of the university and the school led to the UT and MT emphasizing different aspects of the ST's teaching. This kind of contradiction is also evident in Lopez-Real et al.'s (2009) study, which might result from the conflicting relationship between university theories and school practice. The conflicting opinions between the UT and the MT might make the student teachers confused as to whose suggestions they should follow. This confusion might lead to student teachers' frustration and bewilderment during the process of achieving their objects of professional development.

Contradiction 2:

cultural dissonances between the two collaborating institutions resulted in inconformity of both the rules and the division of labor with the learning community

- **Impracticality of the rules**

Principal: *I should say the overall arrangement and organization of the TP is careful and thorough. Every time the TP begins, I will read the TP Scheme, I feel it is well designed. **If there is anything that needs improvement, it may be the practicability of the Scheme. Because of the different situations, there may be moments when some of the requirements cannot be met.***

- **Unequal division of labor**

Ms Qian: *Frankly speaking, we (middle teachers) are actually more tired than the university supervisors. Ha, ha! I feel a bit tired. Yes! Middle school teachers are the most tired ones. In terms of mentoring, **I think the university supervisors, actually, middle school teachers give the guidance most of time, isn't it?***

As shown in the Activity System, the process during which the three parties try to achieve their object of professional development through the TP activities was

embedded in the learning community of the school-university partnership context. Due to the cultural dissonances existing between the two institutions, another type of contradiction was produced concerning both the rules and norms of the TP activities and the division of labor among different participants (**Contradiction ②**). The design and finalized draft of the Teaching Practicum Scheme were all decided by the university, while its implementation had to depend on the middle school's practical situation. Therefore, the TP arrangements might be indefinite or even incongruent with the placement school context. Similarly, although both the university supervisors and school mentors were supposed to provide professional guidance on student teaching during the TP, as university teachers only went to the placement school two days a week due to heavy workload of university courses, the division of labor might appear unequal to some of the school mentors.

Contradiction 3:

impact of the unclearness and incongruity of rules on the subjects and their objects

- **The unclearness of TP Scheme requirements**
TP Scheme requirements--Four out of eight weeks of TP activities were *“to be confirmed by the specific placement school”*.
- Laura:** *It (The TP Scheme) is just like the wall of the Forbidden City--you are not able to know the details inside the palace at all. You need to figure it out step by step. To carry it out, you don't have the final say. The whole process starts from the top, connecting various aspects.*
- **Incongruity of rules and the objects of the Activity System**
The objectives of the TP Scheme (drafted by the university)
-to help student teachers realize teacher responsibilities and strengthen their determination to be a teacher
-to enable student teachers to apply what they have learned in the university to the actual teaching practice
-to foster student teachers' ability to conduct educational research
-to obtain feedback and reference for teacher education enhancement and reforms in our Department
- Principal:** *The TP should be a boost to the subject education development in our school. I would not talk about the development of the student teachers first, but admit that it has played an important role in the promotion of the development of the subject education in our school. I'll always insist on this.*
- Principal:** *No matter class teachers or English teachers, I have required them to regard the student teachers as teachers and allow them to work without being framed by many rules. Too many constraints inhibit their work; however, it is also necessary that they are “framed” by some basic principles of the school (laughs). They may make decisions on small issues. This is more beneficial to their development (laughs).*

The indefiniteness of the TP Scheme as the rule and norm of the Activity System gave rise to further contradictions (**Contradiction ③**). The vagueness of the rules had puzzled both the student teachers and their mentors. Since many of the arrangements must be approved by the university. The student teachers could not know the specific requirements or the details of the tasks. Being the head of the cohort, Laura was always bombarded by her peers' questions. To her, the TP Scheme was just like *“the walls of the Forbidden City--you are not able to know the details inside the palace at all”*

The incongruity between the objectives defined by the TP Scheme and those practiced by the school might in turn affect subjects' perceptions of the objects of the Activity System. Among the four objectives of the TP Scheme, three aimed at the professional

development of the student teachers and one at the enhancement of the teacher education program and teaching reform in the university. However, nothing was mentioned about the professional development of the school teachers or the ELT reform of the middle schools. On the side of the middle school, the principal viewed the significance of the TP from a different perspective. Although he attached great importance to TP activities, he did not regard the object of TP as including the development of the UTs or the teaching reform in the university. He gave some freedom and support to the STs; however, he emphasized that the TP activities should follow the basic principles of the middle school's regulations. From the rules of the Activity System which consisted of both the university TP Scheme and the middle school regulations, it seemed to indicate that although both institutions regarded the professional learning of STs as the fundamental object of their partnership, their objectives and practices were inconsistent. This inconsistency may have an impact on the attitudes and behaviors of the different participants in the learning community.

Contradiction 4:

influence of the unequal division of labor on the subjects and their objects

Ms Qian: *Frankly speaking, we (middle teachers) are actually more tired than the university supervisors. Ha, ha! I feel a bit tired. Yes! Middle school teachers are the most tired ones. In terms of mentoring, I think the university supervisors, actually, middle school teachers give the guidance most of time, isn't it?*

Miss Wen, who visited the placement school less frequently, was complained by some student teachers including Samuel.

Samuel: *Why I appraised Miss Wen like this?!* *In fact, I said I would give her one more chance and see whether she would change. From the beginning, I told myself not to give a negative judgment about someone in haste. I tried to give her more time. But I ...*she really disappointed me...* Although we are teachers here, we are still students at "half-state". Therefore, we need a leader. I am not saying that we need a leader following us every day; however, we really need a leader here. At least, if not every day, twice a week, OK? Right? Or since class observation is usually once two days, come every other day, OK? It won't be too difficult, right? Similarly, there are some important decisions, right? *She should at least help us apply for something! I could feel nothing done by her. She only emphasizes, "We must pay attention to our manners and outer appearance. Don't wear collarless T-shirt, etcetera, etcetera ..."* What's the point? Keep talking about all this over and over. Nothing meaningful!

(*STs also appraised their supervisors as required by the university)

The contradiction of uneven division of labor resulted from the cultural dissonances between the university and the school also in turn led to contradictions between the actual division of labor and the participants' perceptions of such inequality of labor division as well as the effect of such division of labor on the object of the student teachers during the TP (**Contradiction ④**). Not only did school mentors like Ms Qian compare the amount of mentoring provided by the university supervisors and the school mentors; the student teachers were also concerned about the supervision and guidance from their mentors and supervisors. According to the Teaching Practicum Scheme, both the school mentors and the university supervisors were responsible for giving guidance to the student teachers. However, due to a busy course schedule and lack of teacher educators, each student teacher's class was observed by only one

supervisor for only once. The student teachers whose lesson was observed by the university supervisors would try to ask for comments whenever it was possible because there would be no more chance being observed by the university supervisor. Therefore, Miss Wen, who visited the placement school less frequently than Mr Xia due to a full schedule in the university, was complained by some student teachers. It seemed that student teachers like Samuel would like to have a supervisor to rely on either for supervision or for guidance and assistance during TP to achieve their goal. Due to the limited time staying in the placement school, in order to cover all the student teachers' lessons, every time a supervisor visited the school, s/he had to observe different student teachers' lessons one after another, even at the last class of the day. As there were very few opportunities for tripartite discussion and most of the discussions were between STs and MTs, there seemed to be fewer voices representing the university in the discussions of the student teaching.

Interplay of factors affecting preservice teacher identity formation

The four types of contradictions might result from two interconnecting factors belonging to the **social level**: first, the development of national economy in mainland China; second, the effect of current educational reform in the country. Due to the current rate of economic development, education resources in China were still limited. The differences caused by historical and geographical reasons have led to the uneven allocation of educational resources. Under these social circumstances, education development in the country is facing various challenges. National basic education has encountered problems from various perspectives, among which the debates are still heated between the traditional “**exam-oriented education**” and the currently advocated “**quality-oriented education**” (Liu, 2008; Shu, 2004; Wang, 2009). The findings in this study seemed to indicate that the **tension** between the two controversial types of education was one of the key factors which led to the various contradictions within the school-university partnership context in the present study.

Tension 1:
quality-oriented education vs. exam-oriented education

Mr Xia: *It is not the issue of more or less. The point is, listening is not testing. Now you treat listening practice totally as testing exercises. How can you do that?! It is the listening strategies that should be emphasized...*

Ms Qian: *In my opinion, I'll have the lesson this way... ..This must be explained together withxxx. This must be covered. You may write two examples on the blackboard to make it clear. This is the focus of the lesson, do you know? This is what will be tested. If you just explain everything, students will know nothing about the test.*

- **The principal commented on the relation between exam-oriented and quality-oriented education.**

Principal: *It is improper for theorists to separate exams and learner qualities mechanically. The current national development reality determines that people's thoughts and behaviors are still largely influenced by examinations... This is social reality. In the field of basic education, exam scores seem to be the fairest instrument... For the time being, learner qualities are still reflected by scores... Overemphasis on score is not right, while ignoring scores in education is unrealistic.*

The principal's remarks on the reality of basic education seemed to imply that exam scores were still one of the powerful screening instruments in the middle school, as might be represented by the exams in the provincial and national level, the emergence of famous private school or common schools in Guangzhou, and the division of slow class and fast class in the middle school of this research. As exam-oriented education still being the "social reality", it seems "justifiable" for employers, parents, and school teachers to seek higher scores by all means. Traditional allocation of resources and views of functional competences seemed to have formed a boundary between the universities and schools. This may be represented by the conventional belief that university teachers are more theoretical while school teachers were more practical (Bullough & Draper, 2004; Lopez-Real et al., 2009). In this study, the tensions were evident between the university supervisor's (Mr Xia) views about language teaching and those of the school mentors (both Ms Qian's and Ms Ni). The **tension of theory-practice dichotomy** may also have an impact on student teachers' conceptions toward their professional learning.

Tension 2:
Theory-based vs. Practice-based

Laura: *Mr Xia is quality-oriented. His views have been influenced by the methodology theories which are actually introduced by EFL researchers from foreign countries. Due to different languages and backgrounds, it is bound to be different. Mr Xia's concept is "quality" rather than "exams", while on the middle school side we are actually affected by our mentors who will emphasize that "language points" are a must.*

Samuel: *Well, Emily, if what we learn in the university classroom, referred to as theories, is helpful for us, why do we need to come here for practice? If there were any help, it would be trivial. Theories are for thinking, not for behaviors or practices.*

Apart from the socio-economic and sociocultural factors, the practical problems remaining in the educational system were not negligible. Relevant to this study, the route of the reform of teacher education programs and systems remained tough (Liu, 2008; Shu, 2004; Wang, 2009; Wu, 2005). Funds in universities for teacher education seemed to be diminishing as reflected from the marginalization of teachers' colleges nation-wide (Mei, 2008). The shortage of fund may cause insufficient sources for TP programs to attract more TP supervisors or to upgrade teacher educators' qualification. Tensions might also result from the insufficient research on school-university partnership in the mainland context, although this practice has been advocated by scholars (Wang, 2006).

The different stories of Laura and Samuel in the fieldtrip seemed to demonstrate that preservice teacher identity development has been closely affected by the above **contradictions**. The complicated **interpersonal relationships** existing among different parties of learners seemed to be crucial factors on student teacher identity formation during the process of TP learning activities.

Interpersonal relationships

Laura: *I learned a lot about how to deal with people and things in the society...I've not only learned teaching, but also managing students...**the interpersonal relationships in the placement school involve different aspects: the first must be the superordinates** which can be divided into two sides---the one from our **university**, the other from the **school**; and then comes to the relation with our **peers**, and finally with our own **students**.*

Samuel: *You ask me if there is any difference between **Ms Chen** and me in managing students. Yes, absolutely! **I think I am now at the stage of learning to teach, I cannot be independent. I have to learn from her.** It is incomparable because **now I need to base on her, and then change myself.** Because she is familiar with the work, I certainly need to learn from her...*

Laura: ***Ms Ni** is just like a senior classmate to us. She is approachable...but sometimes I am still afraid of **Ms Ying**... **Mr Xia** is very supportive. He has done what he could... Miss Wen? **Miss Wen, Er, I don't know what she is doing? I don't know how many things she has to deal with...***

Samuel: ***Mr Xia** is a respectable teacher. He gives you general guidance... **Ms Qian** is like a parent helping his/her kid toddling ahead...*

MS10*: *Sir, you are nobody but a 'class teacher in name', aren't you?*

(*MS10=A middle school student in Class Ten, a slow class)

MS6*: *Miss, you are the most competent student teacher. I love you. I think you will be an excellent teacher. I miss you...*

(*MS6= A middle school student in Class Six, a fast class)

Laura: *We (**peers**) are the animals on the Noah's Ark. We are on the same boat. Every one is **doing the same thing**, helping each other. **Cooperation is important.***

The various **interpersonal relationships** arising from factors at **the institutional level** may produce positive effect, on the student teachers' identity formation, for example, support, guidance, friendship, cooperation, reassurance, and praises may affect student teachers' **engagement, imagination, and alignment** by which they **negotiate meaning** and **identify themselves** with the community of practice. The encouraging interpersonal relationship becomes an enabling force for the student teacher to **participate** and follow a **peripheral trajectory**, for instance, the relationship between Samuel and Ms Chen, Laura and Ms Ni, Laura and Mr Xia, and Laura and her students in Class Six. On the other hand, the discouraging interpersonal relationship, for example, doubt, distrust, imposing, ignoring, complaining, and mocking are debilitating factors which lead to the **marginalized trajectory** in the learning process. Such negative interpersonal relationships were exemplified by Samuel and Ms Qian, Samuel and his students, and also Miss Wen and the student teachers.

The identity formation processes of Laura and Samuel seemed to illustrate a trajectory of **legitimate peripheral participation** (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The process of identity construction reflects the interplay of social structure and individual agency. Given the contradictions existing among the sophisticated interpersonal relationships, the student teachers **personal factors** play an important part in the formation of one's identity. Just like legitimacy of access, participation may be both other-oriented and self-oriented (Wenger, 1998), the different professional knowledge, personalities, and socialization abilities owned differently by the two student teachers explained their different learning trajectories to some extent.

Personal factors:

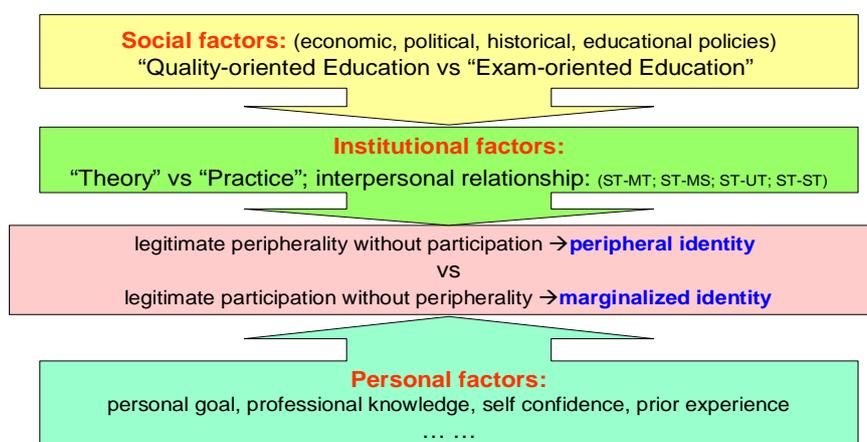
teacher professional knowledge, prior experiences, personalities

Laura: *There are many things which I am proud of during the TP. I'll actually regard the smooth proceeding of every activity as my achievement... I found that Ms Ying would accept me. I felt she has changed her attitude towards me after my preparing of the wall newspaper. She may find me full of ideas.*

Samuel: *I feel I still cannot achieve the role of a class teacher... I would give my work a 50 at most. Although Ms Chen has handed over all her work to me, I still feel that she will keep an eye on my work. I still think that she will not trust me.*

The contrasting personalities shown in Laura and Samuel may arise from their family background, past experiences, above all, their professional knowledge and skills. These **personal factors** interacting with the **institutional** and **social factors** contribute to the formation of preservice teacher identities in the school-university partnership context. Crossing from one community to another, it seemed that the characteristics of the preservice teacher identities in the school-university partnership may be summarized by Mr Xia's comments "*Neither fish, flesh, nor good red herring*". Learning in the school-university partnership context which consisted of contradictions caused by factors from the **global social context** and the **local community context**, student teachers' identities are pivots connecting their social and individual world (Wenger, 1998). They tried hard to identify with the practical placement school context, while struggling to negotiate the ownership of meaning about what they have acquired in the university. This seems to explain why Samuel understood his experience as a "*half-state*"---"*Although we are teachers here, we are still students at the university.*" Teaching their students in the placement school is itself the process of learning, as Laura's expectation said, "*To teach and to learn*". This **identity as nexus of multimembership** provides plenty of room for thought and reflections on the significance of the TP as well as the school-university partnership practice. The application of the boundary crossing theories (Engestrom et al., 1995) and the activity system theory by Engestrom (1999) seem to enable this study to identify the complicated tensions, and contradictions existing in the school-university partnership context, which, as indicated in this study, is crucial for the practice of teacher education, as Tsui & Law (2007) argue, "the contradictions can give rise to tensions which may render the activity system dysfunction if unresolved" (p. 1298).

Interplay of factors affecting preservice teacher identity formation



Conclusion

Research findings in this study imply the necessity to study teacher identity issues from a sociocultural perspective. Adopting Activity Theory, researchers are able to explore the complexities of teacher education contexts, such as school-university partnership. It would be illuminating for future research to explore the trajectory of preservice teacher identity formation process and to identify more contributing factors of various contradictions and their possible impact on the identity formation of EFL preservice teachers in the school-university partnership context.

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