**(RE)CONSTRUCTING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES:**

**TWO CHINESE STUDENT-TEACHERS’ PRACTICUM EXPERIENCES IN THE FREE TEACHER EDUCATION (FTE) PROGRAM**

A Candidacy Paper Presented to the

Faculty of the College of Education

University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

By

Gang Zhu

March 2016

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Approved by Candidacy Committee:

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**Abstract**

This narrative research contextualizes two student-teachers’ practicum experiences in the Free Teacher Education (FTE) Program in China. The overarching question is how the student teachers (re)construct their professional identities in the practicum. Throughout the discussion, special attention is paid to the collective influences of multiple contexts: the Free Teacher Education (FTE) program pilot policy, post-national curriculum reform in China, and the characteristics of the Asian workplace. Additionally, as active and reflective practitioners, the research participants develop their narrative authority (Olson & Craig, 2001) in different versions of knowledge communities (Craig, 1995; 2002).

**Keywords:** Free teacher education, student-teacher, professional identity, knowledge communities, narrative inquiry

**Chapter 1: Introduction to the Inquiry**

"Do not follow where the path may lead. Go instead where there is no path and leave a trail."

--Ralph Waldo Emerson

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| **My schooling experience in China** |

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| **My student teaching experience** |

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| **Crafting Professional Identity** |

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| **My university supervision experience** |

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| **My teacher training experience** |

Figure 1: My professional stories in varying landscapes

In this first chapter, I story my schooling experience, student teaching experience, university supervision and teacher training experiences in China. Throughout these shifting story contexts, a commonly-themed thread unfolds: crafting professional identities in multiple contexts. Specifically, one enduring question hovers in my mind: As an educator, how do I craft my evolving professional identity which greatly influences my commitment to the profession? Collectively, my student teaching, preservice teacher supervision and teacher training experiences channeled my inquiry into Free Teacher Education (FTE) students’ professional identity (re)construction. In the following section, I detail my story excerpts related to my research themes.

**“Carp Leap over the Dragon gate”: My schooling trajectory**

To begin, I will narrate my personal schooling experience in China, which assists me in contextualizing my research backdrop. I grew up in populated rural Henan Province, [[1]](#footnote-1)where I also attended middle school. Some of my peers dropped out because of low academic performance and the less-than-stellar teaching quality there. However, I worked hard and was accepted by the best high school in my hometown. After four-years studying in the high school, I then went to a provincial college. After I matriculated with honors in the college, I began my graduate study with full funding at a prestigious research university, which has the best education and psychology program in China. In sum, my schooling experience is a process of “carp jump[ing] over the dragon gate”[[2]](#footnote-2) in the Chinese social context. Specifically, for students who live in the traditionally impoverished regions in China, the most important way of changing destiny is through college education. Accordingly, the watershed event was the National College Entrance Exam (NCEE) in each June. If the students perform well in that standardized exams, they can be admitted to one of the prestigious universities in China. After graduation, they can land respectable jobs with decent salaries in major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. Arising out of the aforementioned reason, the whole educational process is usually encapsulated in the Chinese metaphor “carp jumps over the dragon gate.”

Since I originally came from a rural region in China, I have very similar socio-economic backgrounds as many Free Teacher Education (FTE) students.[[3]](#footnote-3) Thus, I became interested in the Free Teacher Education (FTE) policy when it was initially piloted by the central Chinese government in 2007. The overarching purpose of the Free Teacher Education (FTE) policy is to facilitate educational equity by bridging the increasing gaps between the rural and urban regions in China. Most of the students admitted into the Free Teacher Education (FTE) program come from the under-developed provinces in western and middle China. According to the policy, all the admitted candidates into the program have to sign a required service contract before officially entering the teacher education program. Per the contract, the preservice teachers have to work at least 10 years in the rural schools where they originally they came from. Meanwhile, the preservice teachers in the Free Teacher Education (FTE) program can enjoy some bonuses from the program. Their tuitions and accommodation fees are waived and they receive monthly stipends from the program during their 4-year college period. So this policy is a doubled-edged sword for them. On one hand, the preservice teachers can relieve their family’s financial burdens. This monetary incentive policy is attractive for those who come from lower-income families. On the other hand, the FTE students have to go back to their original places of birth and fulfill their 10-year teaching obligations, which will hinder their desires for upward social mobility (Wang & Gao, 2013). Consequently, the Free Teacher Education (FTE) policy has triggered potential tensions for the preservice teachers in the program. In this context, how do the preservice teachers (re) construct their professional identities? How do they perceive their multiple roles in the program? Does the monetary-incentive policy serve Free Teacher Education (FTE) students’ professional goals? This candidacy paper revolves around the aforementioned questions. Specifically, I will explore the dynamics of the preservice teachers’ professional identity in the Teacher Education (FTE) practicum.

**Looking backward and moving forward: My student teaching experience**

Looking backward, my undergraduate student teaching in the placement school made a difference on my professional journey. Through this three-month practice in the local middle school, I was given the opportunity to reflect the dynamics of the field experiences in two ways: (1) the relationship between the coursework and the realities of the classroom; (2) the formation of my professional identity.

Based on my actual field experience, I wrote a paper titled “Collaborative and Reflective Student-Teaching for Profession-read Teachers” that was published in the Texas ASCD journal *Leaders of Learners* (Zhu, 2014). In that article, I discussed my student teaching experience at a high school in China. In my reflections, I identified and provided examples of three components beneficial for student teachers to become full-fledged teachers: (1) Collaboration for professional learning community membership; (2) Reflection through lesson study and journaling; (3) Interactive residency in the school. My student teaching experience resonated with the editor who responded: “Gang provides fresh perspectives and hands-on practical knowledge in the area of preservice teacher preparation and professional development.” (Zhu, 2014; p. 15)

At the beginning of my student teaching, I felt depressed and frustrated. The main problem was that what I had learned in the college classroom could not be directly applied to the middle school classroom. For instance, I had learned Ralph Tyler’s *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* (Tyler, 1949/2013) and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1962). However, they were both abstract theories for me then. I did not know how to integrate these kinds of theoretical constructs in my daily classroom instruction. Consequently, I always blamed my teacher preparation courses for not being effective and meaningful for me. My assumption was that the university-based teacher education courses were mainly decontextualized, abstract and based on universal rationales for curriculum and instruction. As expected, the courses did not sufficiently prepare me professionally to tackle the various complexities in the rural Chinese K-12 classrooms.

Later however, through engaging in the professional learning community ( In China, it is literally called Teaching and Research Group) with my cooperative teachers and peers, I gradually accumulated some hands-on experiences in the classroom. Also, I reshaped and reflected on my professional identity on the journey. The transition from a preservice teacher to the realities of the classroom settings was not smooth. Indeed, it was full of confusions and challenges. I had to reconcile the disjointed sometimes even conflicting expectations placed on me by the university supervisor and cooperative teacher. For instance, my university supervisor emphasized constructive learning approach but the cooperative teacher prioritized drill and practice. So I had to work as a reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983) to combine these two orientations in specific contexts. When I taught the 7th grade student English grammar, my university supervisor hoped that I could design some hands-on classroom activities for students to internalized the new grammatical knowledge. On the opposite, my cooperative teacher advised me that some of the activities were irrelevant and might take up too much time within the limited instruction session (45 minutes). To solve the dilemma, I introduced new knowledge with engaging group activities. Then we gradually moved to the key points in the course. For the rest 5-10 minutes, I guided the students to summarize and reflect what they had learned from that class. In this way, I learned that each class was flexible and should be designed on specific situation.

**An aid or a hindrance: My university supervising experience**

During my second year of my master’s degree, I was selected as a teaching assistant for the cohort of post-bachelor teacher education students in Beijing Normal University. The members of the cohort all came from disciplinary majors such as Chinese language, mathematics, English, physics and chemistry in a myriad of schools. The students in the cohort all majored in these subjects during their undergraduate programs. However, they all majored in curriculum and instruction during their two-year master’s degrees. After graduation, most would work as middle and high school teachers.[[4]](#footnote-4)

As a teacher assistant in this class, one of my main responsibilities was to facilitate their educational theory learning and practice development. For the former part, I introduced them to some key educational theorists in China in the hope of expanding their horizons of knowing. For the latter part, I helped them when they did micro-teaching in the laboratory classroom. Also, I supported them in a variety of ways when they student taught in their placement schools.

When reflecting on my university supervision experience now, I question whether I was a legitimate aid in the formation of those preservice teachers’ professional identities. My sense is that I did a superficial job. One example is that when the exams were approaching, I only helped them to memorize the key knowledge points to better tackle with the tests. Did I really transform them into profession-ready teachers in the program? Did I helped them develop professional identities conducive to future teaching? I am afraid not! I did not achieve these goals. On the contrary, I may have hindered the preservice teachers’ professional development to a certain degree. Looking backward, this university supervising experience helps me to reflect how to more productively facilitate preservice teachers’ growth, especially their professional identities.

**How to authentically facilitate teachers’ development: My teacher training experience**

When I worked as an emerging teacher educator in China, I wondered how educational research could better inform practice and policy. My professional identity prompted me to think about the effective approach to facilitating teachers’ professional development in the context of national-wide curriculum reform. The curriculum reform initialized in 2001 advocates the radical teaching shift from the traditionally “teacher-guided, classroom-centered, and textbook-based” to progressively “student-focused, activity-involved, and inquiry-oriented”. Facing the challenge, many teachers did not know how to cope with the new curriculum guidelines. To locate teachers’ difficulties and real concern, I visited 4 local elementary and middle schools in Hebei Province with my master advisor in winter 2011. After systematic investigation, I hoped I could better support teachers to improve their daily instruction.

After received my MA degree in curriculum and instruction, I worked as a full-time research associate at the Center for Teacher Education Research of Beijing Normal University. As a national research center affiliated with the Ministry of Education, PRC, I often engaged in the National Program for Elementary and Middle School Teacher Training (NPEMTT). I found that the instructors in the centers mainly *lectured* the inservice teachers and principals who came to receive professional development. The instructors attempted to *transfer* their expertise to the trainees. I supported the instructors during their sessions. Later, I found the teachers and principals were more interested in the real problems in their own educational contexts such as how to better engage students in classroom learning, how to facilitate home-school partnerships, etc. The teachers and principals preferred “theory-in-action” (Argyris & Schon, 1974) rather than “rhetoric of conclusions” (Schwab, 1958). They wanted to solve the problems troubling their practice and they were not interested in grand educational theories which are usually decontextualized and abstract. Yet the college instructors always emphasized the logic and rigor of the research. As a result, the college instructors did not authentically address the teachers and principals’ real *concern*.

Another problem continually plaguing their teacher professional development was that teacher educators always dispense “knowledge for teachers” instead of empowering teachers to develop their “teacher knowledge”. Connelly and Clandinin (2000), who with Craig (2015), made a distinction between knowledge for teachers and teacher knowledge. “Knowledge for teachers” can be identified, put into a curriculum, taught so that it becomes an attribute of the teacher, and may be tested (Phillion & Connelly, 2004; p.465). In the same vein, Craig (2015) posits that for proponents of knowledge-for-teaching, such knowledge can be determined by others and ‘tested, packaged, imparted and sent like bricks across country to build knowledge structures that are said to accumulate’ (Eisner, 1997, p.7). For these individuals, improving educational practice is simply a matter of mandating more or better knowledge for teachers to use. Accordingly, teachers merely transfer legitimate prescribed knowledge and plans (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; Craig & Ross, 2008). On the contrary, “teacher knowledge”, which aims to understand teaching in teachers’ own terms, is the knowledge that teachers produce in the throes and, as a consequence of, their daily practices (Craig, 2015, p.2). In summary, the knowledge is rooted in experience

When re-examining current teacher professional development programs in China, the dominant approach that can be found is dictating “knowledge for teachers” instead of cultivating “teacher knowledge”. In line with this argument, deficient assumptions about teachers abound: “teachers are empty barrels”, “teacher lack theoretical knowledge”, “teachers need drill and practice guided by teacher educators”, etc. However, these images do not fit the real picture. Teachers usually have their own personal practical knowledge (Clandinin, 1985; Clandinin & Connelly, 1986; Connelly& Clandinin, He, 1997) which is developed during their daily classroom instructional activities within varying landscapes. If teacher educators do not pay due attention to teachers’ personal practical knowledge, we cannot essentially facilitate pre-service, beginning or experienced teachers’ professional development.

**The Multi-facets of the Chinese teachers’ professional identities**

Since middle school, I have often heard widely-used metaphors to describe Chinese teachers’ duties and responsibilities such as teachers are “engineers of the human soul,” “gardeners of young minds”, “the ones holding the golden keys,” and “developers of intellectual resources” (Paine, 1990). This storehouse of figurative description is deep planted in students’ and parents’ minds. A common image for a Chinese teacher is someone who is a good moral role model, represents authority, is knowledgeable in subject matter, and enacts the parental role to some degree (Li & Du, 2014). In accordance with these widely-acknowledged images, Chinese teachers should not only master subject area knowledge but also cultivate students’ positive characters such as honesty and persistence. From the perspective of many educational administrators, teachers’ morals are more important than their subject background and pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986; 1987). Specifically, if a teacher behaves inappropriately toward the students, he or she will be disqualified for any award or prize nominated by the school. Because of this reason, Chinese teachers are normally respected by the whole society.

Apart from emphasizing teachers’ morals, Chinese teachers’ jobs are stable and the salaries are comparatively reasonable. For these two reasons, China has a nation-wide stable teaching force. Additionally, the preservice teachers in China are mainly female. In the Chinese educational context, teaching is less stressful than business and other professions. This characteristic attracts many female students into the teaching profession and thus influences their professional identities. Specifically, rooted in the gendered stereotype of the teaching profession, the female candidates in the FTE program assume that teaching is an appropriate occupation for women. When working as a teacher, they can better balance work, child-bearing and the family.

When I interviewed one mathematics senior in the Free Teacher Education (FTE) program in China, she accounted for her entry into the teaching profession this way:

My grandparent and parents deeply realize the importance of working as a *former worker* in an institution. Without the quota, my future will be unstable and unpredictable. A telling example is my uncle, who worked as an *informal worker* in China, has no pension when he retired. This has brought heavy financial burden on him. Personally, the most important attraction to the Free Teacher Education (FTE) program is that I can secure a guaranteed job after graduation. (Field note, 03/2016)

When I interviewed another preservice teacher in the Free Teacher Education (FTE) program, she expressed a similar viewpoint. From the interviews, it can be found that the job guarantee is a major incentive for entering into the teaching profession. My interviews also corroborate Wang and Gao’s finding (2013) that due to the expansion of higher education in China in the late 1990s, employment for university graduates had become a significant challenge for both the government and college students.This explains why a guaranteed job is especially appealing to the college graduates.

Looking at the macro-policy contexts in 2001, the Ministry of Education in China initiated a national school curriculum reform that aims to shift the school curriculum from its highly teacher-centered to a more student-centered focus. In direct response to this longitudinal reform, a national teacher education curriculum effort beginning in 2006 (MOECE, 2005) and continuing thereafter (MOECE, 2011) that sought to move teacher education from its strong disciplinary or subject-bound focus to one with greater emphasis on pedagogy (Wang & Clarke, 2014). To align with this newly emergent requirement, the teachers need to shift their image from “teachers as curriculum implementers” to “teachers as curriculum makers” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; Craig & Ross, 2008; Craig, 2012). Moreover, nestled within these varying landscapes, the FTE students have to reconcile their university coursework with their practicum experiences in the schools. Consequently, the FTE students craft their professional identities within divergent, sometimes conflicting backdrops.

**Chapter Two: Review of Related Literature**

Urging all of us to open our minds and hearts so that we can know beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable, so that we can think and rethink, so that we can create new visions, I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions ─ a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom.

– bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress

In this chapter, I reviewed current literatures related to FTE students’ professional identity in China. First, I outline the landscape of FTE program in China. Then the researcher critiques research on student teaching, professional identity, teaching and teacher education in China, and knowledge communities. All these aforementioned areas are related to FTE student teachers’ professional identity (re)construction in China. Finally, I summarize current research on student teachers’ professional identity.

**Free Teacher Education (FTE) program in China**

The K-12 school system inChina is highly imbalanced between urban and rural schools (Wang, 2011a, 2011b; Chu, 2009; Hannum, 1999; Li, Huang, &Li, 2010). To solve the alarming and deteriorating gap between the rural and urban schools, the Chinese government piloted thee Free Teacher Education (FTE) program in 2007 in the six top normal universities (teacher education universities) with the aim of enlisting highly-qualified young graduates to join the teaching profession and to improve education in China’s underdeveloped rural regions.[[5]](#footnote-5) The FTE program is a political means to coordinate the redistribution of educational resources, which has the potential to diminish the regional disparity in the teaching force, enhance the quality and quantity of teachers in rural areas, and promote educational equity for school-age children in China (Hu, 2007; Sun, 2007; Yang & Wang, 2007).

The FTE program offers enrolled students an attractive package of financial benefits, which include tuition exemption, free accommodation, and a monthly stipend (Ministry of Education, 2007). Along with the economic benefits come obligations. After graduation, the FTE students are required to serve for a period of ten years in primary or secondary schools in their home provinces. These teaching positions are guaranteed by the government. Those FTE students who find employment in urban schools are obliged to teach in rural schools for two years first. Should they break the contract, FTE candidates must bear the consequences of refunding all educational costs, paying a certain amount penalty, and being blacklisted in the Credit Record Archives that are to be established by the educational authorities (Ministry of Education, 2007, 2010).

The FTE program thus relies heavily on utilitarian, particularly financial, incentives to attract candidates. Recent research shows that the financial incentives of the FTE program have been effective in motivating applicants (Fang & Qi, 2011; Li, 2010; Li & Xu, 2011; Ye, Sun, Liu, Zhu, & Xiao, 2010; Zhou, 2010.) However, excessive reliance on utilitarian incentives is likely to trigger a conflict between students’ educational aims and the goals of the FTE program (Wang & Gao, 2013). In Zhou’s (2010) study of the employment plans of 1800 FTE students, more than 80% of the students showed a strong willingness to break the contract and move to other occupations. Another survey at Central China Normal University found that only 5.2% of 400 FTE students in the study were willing to work in the underdeveloped rural areas, while 78% of the surveyed students aspired to obtain positions in urban elite schools, which offer excellent working conditions and premium compensation (Li, Ren, Zhang, & Wang, 2011). Thus, according social equity to students while suspending their own social mobility represents a major obstacle to reducing the disparity in educational quality (Wang & Gao, 2013).

**Teaching and teacher education in China**

The Chinese education is greatly influenced by traditional Chinese culture (Gu, 2006). Grounded in Confucian norms of orthodoxy, now reinforced by a concern with making teaching “scientific” in accordance with “educational laws,” (Paine, 1990), Chinese teachers are endeavoring to combine the “artistic” (personal teaching aesthetic)and “scientific” (content knowledge) aspects of teaching all the time. For this reason, the Chinese teaching can be summarized as “virtuoso” model (Paine, 1990) which contains three elements:

1. The central aim of teaching is to provide knowledge for students. It is an act of transmission, its movement unilateral. The teacher plays the leading role.

2. Knowledge, at the core of all teaching, is the most important requirement for a teacher. A good teacher, an excellent one, is distinguished by possessing an exceptional amount of knowledge.

3. Students are expected to receive the teachers’ knowledge as it is presented. Construction or transformation of that knowledge is not an essential part of learning or teaching. (Paine, 1990; p.50-51)

In accordance with this model, the virtuoso teacher is one who has mastered the technical knowledge of the text so that she or he is able to transcend it, adding a piece of one’s own self, one’s own interpretation, in organizing the presentation, communicating it (transmitting the knowledge), and rendering it understandable for the audience (Paine, 1990).

Resonating with this internalized image, the Chinese student teaching usually emphasizes knowledge acquisition and pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986; 1987). Accordingly, the Chinese student-teachers mainly adopt two models in the practicum: the apprenticeship model and the virtuoso model (Tsui &Wong, 2010). The former model in China has been referred to as “the old guiding the young” (*lao dai qing*). “Old” and “young” refers to experience rather than age, though the two are not unrelated. Specifically, each new teacher is assigned a mentor who is a backbone teacher in the school within the same lesson preparation group in order to give daily support to him or her in terms of pedagogical skills and subject matter knowledge (Tsui &Wong, 2010, p 10). For the latter model, as mentioned in the preceding discussion, teachers’ professional learning in China gives central importance to subject matter knowledge. This means teachers need to explicitly spell out the aspects of the topic or concepts students need to learn, the key aspects or concepts in that topic and the aspects or concepts that students find most difficult. After this, careful planning of the lesson is done with every step choreographed under the guidance of mentors, teacher research organizers and master teachers. The lesson will be taught numerous times, critiqued, and modified until it becomes almost like a standard piece in a performance repertoire which will be practiced and rehearsed again and again until the teaching becomes automatic (Paine, 1990; Tsui &Wong, 2010, p 12).

All in all, preservice teacher education in China has typically been characterized by its subject-centered emphasis, theory-laden orientation, and centralized state management. Such an approach has provided pre-service teacher education with a degree of stability despite the significant social and economic changes that have taken place in recent decades. However, this approach is hardly sufficient for the kind of transformation that the Chinese education system is currently experiencing (Lo, 2008; p.1).

The teaching and teacher education I have described above in China rationalize the FTE student teachers’ learning and practicum experience in different ways. The FTE students are influenced by the status quo of the background directly or indirectly. The teaching and teacher education contexts serve as important factors for the FTE students’ professional identity formation.

**Student Teaching**

Scholars have shown that student teaching is an important professional phase for pre-service teachers, especially for their professional development (i.e. Tabacbnick& Zeichner, 1984; Feiman-Nemser, 1987; Calderhead, 1991; Cochran-Smith, 1991; Zeichner, 2002; et al.). During this practicum period, the student can reexamine the connections between campus courses and field experiences (Zeichner, 2010). Additionally, student-teachers are shaping their professional identities (Timoštšuk& Ugaste, 2010; Lamote &Engels, 2010; Schepens, et al., 2009) by wrestling with the dichotomies between theory and practice (Standal, Moen, & Moe, 2014).

The quality of student-teachers’ learning experiences in the field is of great concern to those involved in initial teacher preparation. Consequently, field experience has been regarded as the most favorably component of initial teacher education in contributing to student-teachers’ professional learning (Ben-Peretz, 1995). Other components worthy of attention are the roles that cooperative teachers and university supervisors play in student teaching. Researchers find that “guided teaching” relationships between the student teachers and the cooperative teachers and the university supervisors are very limited (Borko & Mayfield, 1995). Only tiny portions of cooperative teachers and the university supervisors play essential role in student teaching.

In her qualitative study on the dynamics of student-teachers’ professional learning in the field, Tang (2003) discovered that student teachers construct their teaching selves in three facets of the student teaching context: action context, the socio-professional context, and the supervisory context. Also, her research points to four possibilities of professional learning: stasis (low challenge, low support), confirmation (equilibrium, and resonance), retreat (tension and dissonance) and growth (from tension to equilibrium, from dissonance to resonance) (Tang, 2003; p. 493). Similarly, the Chinese student teacher have to negotiate the different expectations of their school advisors and university supervisors, especially the disjuncture between school and university expectations for practicum students (Wang& Clarke, 2014).

Overall, there is little systematic research on Chinese student teachers’ practicum experience. The dominant literatures on student teaching are generated by western educational researchers mainly including Ken Zeichner and Sharon Feiman-Nemser.

**Professional identity**

In the last decade, teachers’ professional identity has emerged as a separate research area (i.e., Bullough, 1997; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Knowles, 19992; Kompf, Bond, Dworet, & Boak, 1996).As reported by Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) in their review of research on teachers’ professional identity, identity is a concept with different meanings and definitions in the more general literature as well as in the domain of teaching and teacher education. Furthermore, researchers suggest that preservice and beginning teachers’ professional identity is related to teachers’ concepts or images of self (i.e.,, Knowles, 1992; Nias, 1989). It is argued that these concepts or images of self strongly determine the way teachers teach, the way they develop as teachers, and their attitudes toward educational changes. In other studies of professional identity, the emphasis is placed on teachers’ roles (i.e., Goodson, & Cole, 1994; Volkmann & Anderson, 1998), whether or not in relationship with other concepts, or on concepts like reflection or self-evaluation that are important for the development of professional identity (i.e., Kerby, 1991; Cooper & Olson, 1996).

From the socio-cultural perspective, becoming a teacher means developing a professional identity. This involves the development of a professional framework of interpretation regarding education and regarding oneself as a teacher in that educational practice (ten Dam & Blom, 2006). Furthermore, Cattley (2007) analyzed the potential influence of reflective writing upon the emergence of a professional identity during pre-service teachers’ practicum placements. This suggests that reflective writing is a valuable tool for professional identity formation (Craig, Zou & Curtis, 2015). In the similar vein, Antonek et al. (1997) argue that student teacher portfolios are a viable, effective, and appropriate tool in promoting student teachers’ reflective and thoughtful practice.

In her mixed-methods which included 84 participant surveys, and 27 interviews from four groups of participants at different stages of teaching, Hong (2010) divided teachers’ professional identity into six factors: value, efficacy, commitment, emotions, knowledge, beliefs, and micro-politics. Her research showed that pre-service teachers tended to have naïve and idealistic perceptions of teaching, and those who dropout of teaching show the most emotional burnout (Hong, 2010). Similarly, Lamote and Engels (2010) found that students with work placement experience developed a more “realistic” view of learning and teaching compared to students without this experience. Additionally, another important difference in professional identity is based on students’ gender: white male students tend to attach more importance to discipline in the classroom whereas their female counterparts focus more on student involvement (Lamote & Engels, 2010).

What these various research studies have in common is the idea that identity is not a fixed attribute of a person, but a relational phenomenon. Identity development occurs in an intersubjective field and can be best characterized as an ongoing process, a process of interpreting oneself as a certain kind of person and being recognized as such in a given context (Gee, 2001) Furthermore, the researcher concur with Mishler’s (2009) realization, that there is not one identity, but rather sub-identities that may sometimes conflict or align with each other within individual teachers. His metaphor about identity as “our selves as a chorus of voices, not just the tenor or the soprano solist [sic]” (p.8) is apt as the researcher analyzed the expressions of personal and professional identity offered by these FTE student teachers.

Jean Clandinin (2010) said that the purpose “….is not to create spaces that educate us for fixed identities, fixed stories to live by. It is to create an education space in which teachers can compose stories to live by that allow them to shift who they are, and are becoming, as they attend to shifting subject matter”

To sum up, as a unique group of “contract-restricted” preservice teachers,[[6]](#footnote-6) there is a paucity of research on the student teachers’ professional identities in the FTE program in China, especially how the preservice teachers (re)construct their professional identities in the practicum.

**Knowledge communities**

In recent years, scholars have studies the formation of teacher communities and the possibilities they provide for the development of teacher knowledge and teacher identities, particularly for new teachers (See Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001; Lieberman & Miller, 2008). Similarly, when examining their identity formation, it can be found that the student-teachers learn to teach and articulate their growing sense of professional identities in knowledge communities (Schultz &Ravitch, 2012).

In her research on narrative inquiry groups, Craig (2007) noted that knowledge communities are places where teachers negotiate meaning for their stories and experiences. In these groups, teachers make public their knowledge, practices, and beliefs through conversations with other beginning teachers. In their focus on the development of teacher knowledge narrative authority, Olson and Craig (2009) illustrate how teachers’ narrative authority is nurtured in knowledge communities and through stories or narratives of experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). As they explain,

Knowledge communities are the places where each individual’s narrative authority is recognized and developed. As such, individuals can tentatively articulate how they are making sense of situations, explain their own actions, and examine their stories in concert with others. In knowledge communities, it is possible for individuals’ narrative authority to be articulated, examined, and confirmed, expanded, or revised in light of others’ experience and others’ reflections and responses to our experiences. (Olson & Craig, 2009, p. 670)

Furthermore, Craig (2012, p.108) compares knowledge communities and professional learning communities developed by DuFour (e.g., DuFour 2001, 2004; DuFour & Eaker, 1998) below:

|  |
| --- |
| *Knowledge Communities Professional Learning Communities* |
| Organically lived Administratively introduced  Can be found or make Expected to be present  Commonplaces of experience Focus on learning rather than teaching  Relational among individuals and across Collaboration anticipated at the outset  groups; Collaborations emerge  May exist within member of various groups; Any visible group within a school/organization  also occur between teachers who interact for  their own purposes  Accounts of practice Accountable for results |

■ Practical View of Knowledge ■ Formal View of Knowledge

From the perspective of knowledge communities, we can trace and explore how the student-teachers form their professional identities by recognizing their narrative authority in multiple knowledge communities. As Schultz and Ravitch (2012) suggest, people construct professional identities in relation to context and experience and in relation to one another. These identities are not intrinsic or separate from social contexts and interactions; rather they are embodied and enacted in practice (p. 37). In this vein, student-teachers do not acquire their professional identities on their own. Rather, the professional identities formation process is deeply connected to the communities in which they learn to teach and to their interactions with colleagues, students and families as they engage in learning pedagogical practice.

**Summary and Reflection**

By reviewing the related literatures, a critical gap emerges between the FTE program and the FTE student teachers’ professional identity. Specifically, as a group of “contract-signed” preservice teachers[[7]](#footnote-7), there is a paucity of research on the student-teachers’ professional identities in the FTE program, especially how the student teachers (re)construct their professional identities in the practicum. Arising out of this consideration, the researcher sets out to bridge the gap between former research on teachers’ professional identity and the FTE student teachers’ professional identity in the practicum. Thus, three research questions surface: (1) What are their motives and professional visions entering into the FTE program? (2) How do they craft professional identities by coming to grips with the FTE program policy, national curriculum policy and placements school requirements? (3) How do the FTE student teachers improve their professional capacities by engaging in knowledge communities (Craig, 1995a, 1995b, 2007; Olson & Craig, 2002)?

**Chapter Three: Methodology**

The world in which we live is a narrative world, created by and in our stories. We like to think that there is a world out there, quite concrete and objective and reliable, only to discover that thought, too, is just another story…(Funk, 1988,x-xi)

As a relatively new and constantly evolving qualitative methodology, narrative inquiry is the study of experience understood narratively (Clandinin &Huber, 2005). Narrative inquiry follows a recursive, reflexive process of moving from field (with starting points in telling or living of stories) to field texts (data) to interim and final research texts (Clandinin &Huber, 2005). As narrative inquiry is being accepted internationally by more and more researchers, narrative inquirers understand that:

Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 375).

Following this line of thinking, narrative inquiry is a way of understanding and inquiring into experience through “collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interactions with milieus” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.20). Three commonplaces of narrative inquiry, temporality, sociality, and place, specify dimensions of an inquiry and serve as a conceptual framework.

**i. Temporality**

According to Connelly and Clandinin (2006),“events under study are in temporal transition” (p. 479). The importance of temporality in narrative inquiry comes from philosophical views of experience where the “formal quality of experience through time is [see as] inherently narrative” (Crites, 1971, p. 291). Drawing on philosophers such as Carr (1986) who explains that “we are composing and constantly revising our autobiographies as we go along” (p. 76), narrative inquirers attend to the temporality of their own and participants’ lives, as well as to the temporality of places, things and events.

**ii. Sociality**

Narrative inquirers attend to both the personal conditions and, simultaneously, to social conditions. By personal conditions, “we mean the feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions and moral dispositions” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p.480) of the inquirer and participants. Social conditions refer to the milieu, the conditions under which people’s experiences and events are unfolding. The social conditions are understood, in part, in terms of cultural, social, institutional and linguistic narratives.

**iii. Place**

Connelly and Clandinin (2006) define place as “the specific concrete, physical and topological boundaries of place or sequences of places where the inquiry and events take place” (p. 480).

Temporality

Sociality Place

Figure 4: The three commonplaces of narrative inquiry

**Introducing the Inquiry**

Against the backdrop, the overarching research question is how do the FTE student teachers (re)construct their professional identities in their practicums? To address this research question, five sub-research questions emerge:

(1) What are the pre-service teacheres’ motives and professional visions into the FTE program?

(2) How does the FTE program policy affect the student teachers’ identity perception?

(3) How does the national curriculum reform policy affect FTE student teachers’ practicum including their belief and behavior change during the practicum?

(4) How do the cooperative teacher and the university supervisor shape the student teachers’ professional identities in the field?

(5) How do the FTE student teachers improve their professional capacities by engaging in knowledge communities?

This research study is presented in the form of a narrative exemplar (Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002; Mishler, 1990, Craig & Olson, 2002). According to Lyons and LaBoskey (2002), narrative exemplars are ‘concrete examples…elaborated so that members of a relevant research community can judge for themselves their “trustworthiness” and the validity of observation, interpretations, etc.' (Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002, p. 20, italics, in original). These co-constructed exemplars, irrespective of the topic of investigation, share five characteristics in common. They:

(1) capture intentional human actions that not only tell a story, but convey developing knowledge of those involved;

(2) are lodged in socially and contextually embedded situations;

(3) draw other people into the mix as the narrative exemplar is unpacked;

(4) implicate people’s identities;

(5) focus on interpretation, often including different points of view (Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002).

In summary, a narrative exemplar, such as both Xiaoya and Wenting’s student teaching stories, present for reflection and analysis a storied life lived in relationship with people, places and things.

In terms of the research tools, the researcher adopts observation and interview protocols and creates an artifact and field note collection. To observe their student teaching, the researcher will observe their classroom instruction in the placement school and talk with their cooperative teachers. The interviews will mainly be face-to-face semi-structured interview and email correspondence interviews. Sometimes Skype conversations may take place. By combing these three ways, the researcher can give the interviewees flexible space for reflection. Third, the research will collect the participants’ reflective journals and student-teaching reports, which can provide another way of analyzing their professional identity evolution in practicum.

**Introducing Research Participants Xiaoya and Wenting**

*“I want to break the contract. I do not want to be a teacher after graduation…”*

Xiaoya (pseudonym), a current 4th-year Chinese language major in the FTE program, is the first of two research participants in this study. Xiaoya was born and grew up in eastern Shandong province. During her high-school period, Xiaoya moved to Tibet with her parents when they transferred for work reasons. But later, Xiaoya experienced a severe disease in Tibet due to the challenging environment there. The disease almost killed her. To make things worse, when living in Tibet, Xiaoya’s parents divorced and Xiaoya gained a stepmother. In her interview, Xiaoya stated that: “My stepmother also works in Tibet. So I do not want to go back to Tibet. I do not want to be treated badly there.” Another reason that Xiaoya does not want to teach in Tibet after graduation is that she cannot envision any promising prospects for her there. Xiaoya explains:

The best school choice in Tibet is Lasa Middle School. But the daily life there is boring and I have no expectation on the life there. Considering these factors, I really do not want to work as a teacher after graduation. Even though I have to refund the costs, I can pay them by securing another profession after graduation (Interview, 2016).

If things happen as expected, Xiaoya will have to pay the fines based on the FTE policy contract. Consequently, there will be a potential tension in her professional identity construction.

Currently, Xiaoya is student-teaching in one middle school in Beijing. In the practicum, Xiaoya interacted with her cooperative teacher and students in the placement school. When she managed the classroom, especially the students with misbehaviors, she had to communicate with the parents. Gradually, Xiaoya’s professional identities gradually emerged. She does not only need to work as a Chinese language teacher in the classroom, but also a “coordinator” between the school and the parents. When communicating with the at-risk students’ parents, she has to make continuous efforts to support the parents so that they can assist the students in homework assignments and other educative activities. In the professional knowledge context, Xiaoya also needs to deal with the Chinese language curriculum reform guideline, how to design lesson plans, and how to improve her classroom instruction skills, etc. Collectively, these factors have created a dynamic and shifting landscape for her and for me, as an educational researcher, as we simultaneously develop an inter-personal, context-based relationship with one another (Craig, 2007).

*“I am not competitive in terms of my pedagogical skills…”*

Wenting (pseudonym), a current 4th-year mathematics major in the FTE program, is another participant in the study. Unlike Xiaoya’s single family background, Wenting was born and grew up in a large metropolitan city in a northwestern province in China. Wenting’s parents were both middle school teachers. During her elementary school period, Wenting’s academic achievement was low. But later in the middle school period, Wenting made great progress. This life-changing experience inspired her. When talking with the students in her placement school, Wenting shared her story with the students. Wenting hopes that she can motivate her lower-achieving students.

Also, Wenting states that she had not specific plan for her future and career during her high school period. Furthermore, Wenting was influenced by her parents then. Following her parents’ advice, she finally chose the FTE program with a concentration on mathematics in a prestigious normal university. Later however, Wenting found that the university did not attach importance to teachers’ basic pedagogical skills such as classroom management, student engagement and teacher calligraphy. So Wenting:

…communicated with some pre-service teachers in several normal universities. Many provincial normal universities emphasize pre-service teachers’ practical skills. One normal university even changes teacher calligraphy into a required course for pre-service teachers. Although the pre-service teachers in her university [were] more selective, when comes to practical ability, [they] do not necessarily perform better than [their]counterparts. Thus, the graduates from the less prestigious normal universities are more welcomed by the local K-12 schools. …

She further explained:

Part of the reason is that [my] university is aiming to become a leading research-intensive university in the world. So lots of funds and energy have been invested on research. Pre-service teachers’ practical abilities are not worth enough consideration. (Interview, 2016)

As the research unfolds, I will transcribe the interim filed notes into research notes.

**Analysis Tools**

Three analytical tool-broadening, burrowing and storying and re-storying (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) –help me to analyze and seam together the narrative materials that I will gather. With the assistance of these interpretive devices, I am able to transition my interim field texts into research texts (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000). Through the use of broadening, I will situate both Xiaoya and Wenting’ s practicum experiences not only in the literature having to do with professional identity and learning to teach but in their personal biography as well, as reviewers are anticipated to see. By engaging in burrowing, my second research tool, I then repeatedly examine what bubbled to the surface when both Xiaoya and Wenting connect their student teaching practice to divergent contexts. The third analytical tool, storying and re-storying, allow me to situate both Xiaoya and Wenting’s evolving professional identities in their unfurling professional trajectory. Taken together, broadening, burrowing and storying and re-storying are the original research tools used in school-based inquires (Craig, 2015).

When promoting the student teachers to share their practicum experiences, I would like to use “telling stories” method (Craig, 1999), which incorporates two types of meaning recovery: the first variety, collective constructions of ‘stories of school’ (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996) that differ from building to building; the second variety, personal constructions of teacher stories which vary from context to context. The parallel stories methodology includes the substantive, theoretical and conceptual understandings that arise from the inquiry as well as the implications the approach holds for teacher education program (Craig, 1999; p.397-398).

In terms of organizing the story excerpts that I have collected, “parallel stories” methodology may take place. “Parallel stories” is a research method which captures shifts in a beginning teacher’s interpretive knowledge as she moved from context to context. The methodology evolves from Clandinin’s narrative method (Clandinin, 1986) and Craig’s ‘telling stories’ method (Craig, 1997)

The methodology in this chapter can be seen below:

Figure 5: Overview of the methodology

**Timeline**

The proposed timeline for my dissertation is illustrated below:

Figure 6: Proposed timeline

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1. Henan province is in the middle of China. It has the largest population in China, which amounts to more than 100 million recently. As a result, it is extremely competitive for a high school student in Henan Province to be admitted into a prestigious college or university. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Carp jumps over the dragon gate” is a widely-used metaphor in China. It comes from the Chinese legend that when the carps in the Yellow River jump over the dragon gate, they will become dragons. It originally meant that the ancient Chinese people succeeded in the civil service examination. But gradually, it began to mean making a successful of oneself, and succeeding in high-stakes exam in highly competitive, modern China. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Contrary to the rural ones in North America, the rural regions in China are usually poor and underdeveloped. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The program was called “4+2” teacher education program in Beijing Normal University. The aim of the program was to cultivate expert teachers for middle and high school teachers. The program selected applicants who were basic disciplinary majors in Beijing Normal University. If admitted into the program, the applicants were exempt from the national graduate admission exams. Through two-year graduate education, they could get MA degree in curriculum and instruction. Most of them would work as middle school or high school teachers in resource-affluent schools throughout the country. But they were not obligated to enter K-12 teaching. Some of the graduates in the program pursued their PhD degrees inside or outside China. The “4+2” teacher education program stopped in 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In China, the six key normal universities under the direct leadership of the Ministry of Education are Beijing Normal University, East Normal University, Central China Normal University, Northeast Normal University, Southwest University and Shaanxi Normal University. These six universities are famous for cultivating quality teachers and education research. All of them are Tier 1 research-intensive research institutions in China. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. All the preservice teachers have to sign a service contract before officially entering the teacher education program. Per the contract, the preservice teachers have to work at least 10 years in the rural schools where they originally they came from. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. All the preservice teachers have to sign a service contract before officially entering the teacher education program. Per the contract, the preservice teachers have to work at least 10 years in the rural schools where they originally they came from. If violating the contract, they will be heavily fined by the local educational administration. Additionally, the teachers will get discredit records in the profile system. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)