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To be or not to be: Shifting motivations in Chinese secondary school English teachers' career narratives

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As English is now promoted as an academic subject in primary and secondary schools, creating an enormous demand for qualified English teachers in China, there is a need to understand English teachers' motivation and commitment to the teaching career. In this paper, I report on a biographical study of twelve teachers who taught in schools in Chinese hinterland areas so as to understand why they first joined and then left the teaching profession for post-graduate studies. Through interpreting their professional experiences, I came to understand their ambiguous attitudes towards the teaching profession and their fascination with the English language. Initially, many of them were unwilling to become teachers but were attracted by the teacher education programmes to learn more English. Many of them became more committed to teaching after they had positive professional experiences. However, their sense of satisfaction and achievement were undermined by the challenges that they had to cope with as well as an awareness that they were unable to sustain their professional competence. In order to retain such teachers in the profession, there is a need for teacher educators and educational administrators to work out strategies to support teachers' demand for linguistic and professional improvement in remote rural areas on the Chinese mainland.

Keywords: motivation, professional development biographical method, Chinese cultural tradition, contextual mediation

Introduction

In the last three decades, there has been an unprecedented enthusiasm for the learning of English on the Chinese mainland, causing its rapid expansion at all educational levels (Dooley 2001; Hu 2003, 2005; Jin and Cortazzi 2002; Ouyang 2004; Qu 2007). Given the country's size and limited educational resources, millions of learners and teachers have been making strenuous efforts to promote the learning and teaching of the language on the Chinese mainland. 'To do justice to the efforts and perseverance millions of Chinese teachers and learners have exerted' (Gu 2002, 2), there is a need to capture their experiences and voices, in particular, those of thousands of English teachers toiling in schools in the Chinese hinterland provinces, who often go unacknowledged in published research. As English is now promoted as an academic

subject in primary schools, creating an enormous demand for qualified English teachers, it has become a critical issue for schools in these provinces to retain and develop English teachers. Consequently, there is also a need to understand these English teachers' motivation and commitment to the teaching career.

In this paper, I report on a biographical study of twelve teachers who taught in schools in Chinese hinterland areas and left the teaching temporarily for studies at Y university as postgraduate students in the Department of English. Y University has recently become a new university in the municipality of Yichang, at the western end of Hubei, a central Chinese province, with the merging of a local teachers' college and a few regional tertiary institutes. The inquiry aimed to examine these teachers' professional experiences and explore the following questions:

1) How were these teachers drawn to the teaching profession?

2) Why did they leave the teaching profession for further studies?

Before I address these questions with findings from the inquiry, I will first describe the Chinese educational context and highlight the need for qualified English teachers in Chinese schools.

To Be or Not to Be: The Teaching Profession on the Chinese Mainland

Education occupies a central position in the Chinese cultural tradition and remains a top priority among Chinese people's concerns (Elman 2000; Lee, H. 2000; Lee, W. 1996; Miyazaki 1976; Thøgersen 2002). Cultural discourses, especially writings by Confucius and on Confucianism, emphasise learning for one's own self or moral perfection and the critical role that such individual perfection could play in social transformation. Drawing upon these cultural discourses, Chinese people adopt a pragmatic approach to education and consistently expect to acquire skills, social

mobility and personal development through education (Bai 2006; Miyazaki 1976; Thøgersen 2002). In essence, educational efforts are widely seen as a means of investment for many Chinese to acquire desirable social and cultural capital (Norton 2000).

Despite these cultural discourses and beliefs concerning the importance of education, students of Chinese ethnicity in various cultural contexts outside and within China were found to be unwilling to become teachers. Gordon's (2000) study on Asian minority students in the United States revealed that the participants, largely of Chinese ethnic origin, did not wish to become teachers even though they valued the critical role of teachers in their educational progress. In Hong Kong, high school students in Lai et al's (2005) survey ranked 'teaching' among the top 3 of 20 occupations as their 'most wanted' and 'most respected'. The survey also revealed that students in schools with low university admission rates and from families with a low monthly household income were more interested in becoming teachers than those in schools with high university admission rates and from families with a high monthly household income. On the Chinese mainland, Su et al. (2001) discovered that many of the participants in their research disliked the teaching profession and that they found their way into teacher education programmes due to low university entrance exam scores and lack of financial support. At the same time, though many Chinese students were found to be unwilling to become teachers, research also found that they were favourably disposed towards the English language teaching profession (Gao and Trent 2009). The student teachers in Gao and Trent's (2009) study believed that they as English teachers possessed valuable social and cultural capital in the form of English competence and had more career alternatives and social advancement opportunities.

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Research suggests that individuals could be attracted to the teaching profession for various reasons, including 1) altruistic reasons, when individuals perceived teaching as a socially important job and had the desire to help society and children improve through teaching; 2) intrinsic reasons, namely, the attraction of the job itself, including their interest in using their knowledge of a particular subject; 3) extrinsic reasons, i.e. attractions external to the teaching including pay and holidays (Kyriacou and Coulthard 2000; Kyriacou and Kobori 1998; Lai et al 2005; Manuel and Hughes 2006). Looking at the elite Chinese students' unwillingness to become teachers, we might put this down to the fact that, although they find the teaching profession in general appealing altruistically and intrinsically, it is not extrinsically unattractive. If so, this is most unfortunate as teaching English in schools on the Chinese mainland is a mammoth undertaking and, to cope with the task, a total of 1.23 million English teachers need to be recruited while many practising teachers are in need of further training (Hu 2005; Wen and Gao 2007). In Chinese secondary schools, about 0.65 million more English teachers are needed in addition to the current 0.60 million practising teachers to cope with the task of teaching English to 101.75 million students (Wen and Gao 2007, 224). Yet, as will be seen in the inquiry, there is a further need to deal with the loss of talented teachers from secondary schools to further education and other careers.

The Inquiry

The inquiry had as its focus secondary school teachers' professional experiences because most studies on English language teaching in China are about English learners and teachers in tertiary settings, where academics are based (Wang and Gao 2008). I started the inquiry into school English teachers' professional lives with the intention of understanding why they joined and later left the teaching profession for

postgraduate studies. In the inquiry, motivation was considered a dynamic process mediated by contextual conditions and personal experiences, rather than a static attribute (Sinclair 2008). All the participants grew up in rural areas and had taught in secondary schools in central and western Chinese provinces (see Table 1).

[Insert Table 1 here]

I came to know these participants with the help of a friend who was well respected by them as a lecturer in Y university. I was introduced to them as a recently graduated doctoral student who was willing to share my postgraduate experience with them. During my research stay, I made friends with my research participants. While they participated in the research, I also offered guidance on their master's studies as much as possible. Though such help might be seen as influencing the research process, the friendship established through mutual support can also be considered one of the important ways to get reliable data from the participants (Tillman-Healy 2003).

To capture the participants' professional experiences, I used the biographical method, where research participants' retrospective accounts of their experiences were collected and analysed. Many researchers (e.g. Benson, Chi, and Lim 2003; Johnson and Golombek 2002; Lin, et al 2002; Benson 2005) have found the biographical approach helpful in capturing research participants' voices and enhancing our understanding of their professional realities. The interviews were semi-structured (see the appendix), in which the participants were encouraged to recount their professional experiences freely. The interviews, normally lasting an hour or more, were conducted in Chinese and for this reason, the extracts to appear are all translations, which were double-checked to ensure their accuracy.

Given the large amount of data and research focus at hand, I used a paradigmatic approach to explore the participants' experiential narratives (Erickson

2004; Smeyers and Verhesschen 2001). I first synthesised their experiential statements into biographical narratives to seek a global understanding of each individual participant, as advised by Colley and Diment (2001). Then, I focused on the process of their entrance to the teaching profession and the master's programme so that I could identify why and how they made these critical career decisions. Guided by the research question, fine-grained findings emerge through a process of constant comparison and contrast across the participants' narratives (Patton 1995; Strauss and Corbin 1998), though my intention was to generate a research account that best captures these participants' professional experiences as a group.

Shifting Motivations in the Participants' Narratives

The participants' biographical narratives revealed that their motivation to teach had been shifting as mediated by contextual conditions and personal experiences (see Table 2). Initially, many of them were unwilling to become teachers but were attracted by the teacher education programmes to learn more English. Later they became more committed to teaching after having positive professional experiences. However, their sense of satisfaction and achievement were gradually undermined by the challenges that they had to cope with as well as the realisation that they were unable to sustain their professional competence. While postgraduate education was seen as a means for them to seek professional development, many of them were apparently on a one-way trip and moved away from their schools of origin even though they were ever more needed there.

[Insert Table 2 here]

Unwillingness to Become Teachers

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As recorded in Table 2, one of the most prominent themes arising from the narratives of these teachers' early lives relates to the circumstances in which they became teachers. Most of them, confirming the findings of previous research (Gordon 2000; Lai et al 2005; Su et al 2001), were not willing to become teachers and only became teachers because teaching presented itself as the only viable choice in their pursuit of social advancement through education. Some of the participants assigned teachers' colleges as low priority choices when they were taking the national university entrance exam. When making applications after the examination, they included teachers' colleges as their fifth or sixth choices and had no thought of becoming teachers then. One participant described her application process as follows:

> I realized that I did not have enough grades to go to better universities. […] So I just picked out a few institutions at random**.** I actually had no feelings about them at all. I did not choose at all (for I had no choice). (Zhang)

Zhang ended up in a teachers' college. Among the participants, some of them did not even have an opportunity to take the national university entrance exam. Upon graduating from their junior middle schools, they were already faced with a critical decision as to whether they should continue education in academic high schools or specialist/vocational schools (see Note1). Education in academic high schools meant that they had to take the national university entrance exam later, which determined whether or not they could become university students in the end. In contrast, education in specialist or vocational schools was a quick end to their educational expenditure and a speedy path to employment. While this required little consideration for those from better off families, the decision proved difficult for the participants who were from rural families with little financial resources for educational expenditure and for which the returns were uncertain. One should also note that, to get a place in teacher training schools was widely considered less difficult than in other

specialist schools such as schools of nursing or commerce. Consequently, teacher training schools became a relatively easy option for some of the participants, who could not afford to go to academic high schools. Duan found herself in the situation of having to study in a specialist school as her father did not regard education as something important for girls:

> My father likes boys more than girls. He believed that it was no use for me to have any further education after middle school if I could not go to university after my high school. I do not think that he had any faith in girls going to university at all. […] I spent three days crying because I could not go to high school. (Duan)

As a matter of fact, her father was not even supportive of her decision to study in the specialist school. However, English was a strong enough attraction for Duan to make a case for herself before her father. In the end, she went to a specialist school as an English major student.

The Attraction of English

Duan's struggle to get further education reflects another prominent theme in the participants' biographical narratives. The data reveal that most of the participants were apparently attracted to English (see Table 2), which corroborates the findings in Gao and Trent's (2009) study on mainland Chinese student teachers. Somehow, they came under the spell of the language through various incidents. An recalled that she was attracted to the language because of a Singaporean actress she saw on TV:

> You may not remember her. But I love her so much. I think that she was stylish. And she speaks such good English. Excellent English. At that time I thought I must learn English well. I wanted to specialise in learning English. I must become an interpreter. (An)

Similarly, other participants were deeply attracted by foreign cultures while they also sensed the bright prospects that a good command of English might open up for them:

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> I like English very much. I like to read novels, especially foreign novels. Sometimes, these novels are about cross-cultural communication. I am very interested in this kind of novel. To be honest, I had a strong desire to learn the language well. At that time, in the late 1980s, a good command of the language would also put me in a strong position when looking for jobs. (Ge)

Given the pursuit of social advancement desired by the participants, they saw the language as a means to empower them to leave their rural villages for better lives. Wan recalls her early attraction to the English language as follows:

> Maybe it was because I studied in a rural village school. The whole school had only some thirty students. Then the Chinese teacher always talked about education and schooling. There was something, you may call it 'sense of vanity', or intrinsic interest in language. […] My parents basically did not care much. You know, I lived in a rural area at that time. […] However, I just felt that I needed to learn something. I just wanted to learn it (English). I kept doing this. (Wan)

Consequently, the participants' unwillingness to be teachers and craze for more English sometimes put them in a difficult situation like what participants like Wang had experienced. Upon graduating from her school, she found herself in a situation where 'I had to become a teacher or I had to forget about English'. After careful consideration, she chose to study in a teachers' college even though she thought then that 'teaching is a meaningless, boring job'. For this reason, she cried at the moment she was entering the institute. Other participants in the inquiry made similar choices with less tears. After all, they at least could leave their villages for a better world outside as 'very few school graduates could go to university in our villages at that time' (Xing).

Increasing Commitment to the Teaching Profession

As they progressed in their studies, their motivation in respect of the teaching profession shifted while their interest in English was further strengthened (Table 2). They began to see the advantage of being an English teacher in a rural school as noted by Zhang:

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> English is a new school subject with great potential for further development. […] There were many teachers who specialised in English at that time. Those who were teaching were not that qualified. There were many English teachers who were not properly trained. In many rural schools, teachers even without higher education taught English at that time. (Zhang)

At least eight participants, who were unwilling to become teachers, claimed that they changed their attitude towards teaching during their field practice and at the start of their teaching careers. Their first encounter with students, if positive, mediated them to adopt a more favourable perspective on teaching as a career. For instance, Jiang experienced a sense of achievement in helping her students to learn English. She went to do her teaching practice in a rural middle school where the English teacher was hardly able to speak English:

> He could not speak English. But he kept talking in Chinese. His teaching was, well, very oppressive. Students could feel they were squeezed all the time. I started thinking that I should make my students feel happier in my class. […] These teachers just wanted to finish the teaching. […] I wanted them to have more pleasure. Well, you know they studied under great pressure. I was wondering how I could liberate them from study pressure. […] So I used some English songs. […] They had never learnt any English songs. Even those simple short children's songs. (Jiang)

In the process, she felt that as a teacher, she could make a meaningful impact on her students' learning and life, which enhanced her intrinsic motives for being an English teacher (Kyriacou and Coulthard 2000; Kyriacou and Kobori 1998).

In these participants' narratives, the rejection of the teaching profession in their early lives had been gradually transformed into acceptance when they felt that they could make some meaningful changes to students' lives. Such moments were critical to sustain their enthusiasm for teaching, as recalled by Wang:

> I have a student, a student who was passed on to me by other teachers. He came to me for extra tuition. Everybody else told me not to take him […] After coming to my class three times, he said to me that it was too late for him to meet a teacher like me. He said that his English would not be the same had he come to my class earlier. At that moment, I was deeply touched. I felt that teaching was really a worthy occupation. (Wang)

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Like Wang, Chang had enormous satisfaction with her teaching in a rural school, which changed her negative attitude to teaching as a career. According to Chang, she learnt how to teach English from her mentor and was good at creating a motivating class atmosphere for students, which 'fostered students' real interest in learning English'. As a result, she won a teaching prize in her county, one year after she became teacher. She was particularly proud of her insistence on the use of English as medium of instruction in her class:

> I used English all the time, with only a few Putonghua words. My students were really interested in my teaching. After I taught a few classes, even other teachers would stand outside my classroom listening. Well, you could go to that school and verify this. (Chang)

One might wonder how her students could understand her teaching if it was the first time for them to be exposed to a lesson delivered in English. Chang further explained that she had also developed a gesture system at the same time to have herself understood. The popularity of her class was very likely to be true as it was unusual for a rural school to have a teacher using English throughout a lesson. It is likely that Chang had outperformed many of her colleagues, which also impressed her students who must have been eager to learn English. Such a sense of satisfaction also encouraged Chang to see the potential impact that her teaching could have on her students. At the same time, she also began to concur with many other participants, in particular, female ones, on their view of teaching as a suitable job for women:

> I am still going to teach after I complete my master's studies. I like the profession. It is a good job for women. Relatively speaking. The job does not have the many complications that other jobs have. (Chang)

This gendered-related discourse about the teaching profession was found to be particularly influential partly because there were conservative ideas about what women could and should do in the rural areas. Upon her graduation from a specialist school, Duan was forbidden by her father to become a tourist guide or work in a hotel.

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Although she did not like teaching, she had to become a school teacher in her hometown. Fortunately, teaching turned out to be enjoyable as she found her school a 'simple but pure' place without many complexities. In the process, she developed deep relationships with her students:

> Duan: Shall I call it vanity? No. I do not think so. I think that we had very pure relationships. Everywhere I went, students would greet me happily. I worked in a school in a small town. My students would bring fresh eggs or food from their villages. You know, I lived quite far from my home and was only twenty years old.
> Gao: Wow. This is bribery.
> Duan: This is absolutely not bribery. Not at all. […] They just wanted to treat their teacher well. I was very happy then. I could go to catch crabs in the river with them. They taught me many things. […] they taught me how to catch crabs.

In the shadow of such rustic and happy school life, Duan also began to sense some insoluble contradictions in her teaching profession. The first contradiction was related to the promotion of foreign languages at the expense of her mother tongue. She noticed that the Chinese dictionaries were put aside while dictionaries for foreign languages, in particular, English, were put in the most prominent places in bookshops. Secondly, she found that her 'pure' relationship with her students was in conflict with the general trend in schools which put great emphasis on students' examination grades. Students with poor grades tended to be neglected, ostracised and even receive unfair treatment from teachers if they had problems with those students with good grades. She began to feel that education was not doing what education was supposed to do for her students. Lastly, as a teacher in a rural school, she often had to face a dilemma in which a student was needed to give a helping hand at home and was also expected to be in school because of the nine-year compulsory education. These insoluble contradictions gradually outweighed the joys and pleasure she had in the teaching process. Eventually, she left the rural school and became a teacher in a private tutorial

school in the provincial capital, where she worked to foster confidence among students who had low exam grades.

From Teaching to Uncertain Futures

Many participants' motivation to teach was undermined and they left the teaching profession for postgraduate studies for reasons similar to those of Duan (see Table 2). For instance, Jiang left her school because she felt the contradictions within the educational system:

> We always say that we need to promote humanistic education in teaching English. We need to enhance students' comprehensive skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, it was the national university entrance examination that determines how we teach. […] whatever is examined will be whatever we try to teach our students. (Jiang)

Younger participants left teaching because they had to deal with many challenges in teaching, such as student discipline problems. Some saw that students were no longer obedient and attentive to teachers in class. Instead, they constantly challenged teachers' authority and made the latter increasingly vulnerable. For example, Chen once worked in a private middle school, where the sole aim was to 'keep students under control'. In this school, some students were so badly behaved that they even dared to challenge the principal physically. In contrast, students' exam results in state schools were regularly compared, pressurising teachers to put more efforts into their teaching. In the end, such competition made participants like Wang, whose classes were always in the middle, lose interest in teaching in state schools.

The participants also complained about low pay, especially for those who worked in rural middle schools. Together with long working hours and little recognition of their professional achievement, the participants felt discouraged and their commitment to a teaching career was seriously undermined (Table 2). Moreover,

above all the complaints, they appeared to be much concerned with the fact that their professional competence would decline as they continued teaching. They all had a strong desire to maintain and even further develop their English competence and other professional competence. However, schools often turned out to be an environment where they were more likely to feel disempowered. An reflected on her teaching experience:

> Every day I had to teach in the classroom and talked about something I was very familiar with. […] I dreamt of doing the kind of job which required me to gradually expand my knowledge. However, as a teacher, my knowledge would become narrower and narrower. Then I would forget what I had learnt previously. Therefore, it was a waste of effort to learn these things. It was a terrible feeling. (An)

Another teacher complained about the environment for professional development in rural schools, a view shared by many other participants (Table 2):

> There were no proper development opportunities. In rural schools, English teachers had no environment for learning. Well, you may say that it was impossible for me not to read any related books or articles. I could tell you that it was indeed impossible. In the villages, there was no money for us to have any professional development. We could not go outside to see how English was taught elsewhere. I had to pay myself to come to the city so that I could attend a seminar given by an expert. If the school was nice, it might cover some travel expenses. […] Maybe such exposure was not necessary for teachers of other subjects. They were essential to us, English teachers. We just could not keep teaching with the world shut to us. (Tu)

In spite of the adverse conditions for professional development, most participants took great pains to improve their professional competence by themselves at their own cost. For instance, while working in a school in a remote mountainous area, Wu began to pursue a Bachelor of Arts in English through a self-study scheme as his employer did not support him to go to the neighbouring city for meetings as required of a distance education programme:

> Wu: I felt a strong need to learn more about my major. […] I tried to obtain my bachelor degree through self-study, a programme accredited by Wuhan University.
> Gao: What do you mean by 'trying'?
> Wu: Well, I was not allowed, not allowed to take a distance education course. Even though there was a place for me, I was not allowed to enrol for the programme. […] I was not supported to take the

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> distance education programme. So I could only take the self-study scheme. […] It took me an extra 4 years to complete the programme because I worked in the mountains. […] I had to travel to Wuhan (one day travel from the school) for exams of two courses including Spoken English and Thesis Defence.

In addition, postgraduate studies were also regarded by the participants as a way to improve their professional competence. However, most of the participants in the inquiry were not planning to go back to their original workplaces after completing their postgraduate studies. While one or two of them did consider giving up teaching for good, most, still committed to the teaching career, wished to teach in better schools or at higher educational levels such as universities. The attractions that teaching in universities had were exactly what were missing in schools. Teaching in tertiary institutions gave teachers more freedom and also meant more opportunities to use English, as pointed out by Wang:

> The most important thing is that university teachers do not have compulsory office hours. […] It is also an environment where I could use a lot of English. […] What I am learning here will not be used in high schools. (Wang)

The extract above again indicates the strong desire among the participants to sustain and enhance their professional competence, in particular, linguistic competence, which they had worked very hard to acquire.

Discussion and Conclusion

I started the inquiry with the intention of addressing the critical issue of retaining and developing English teachers in schools in contexts such as rural areas and hinterland provinces on the Chinese mainland. Through interpreting a group of teachers' professional experiences, I came to understand their ambiguous attitudes towards the teaching profession and their fascination with the English language. These teachers experienced joys and success in their teaching careers but they were discouraged by

various factors such as under-resourced working conditions, lack of opportunities for professional development, and the scale of self-sacrifice required of them by the profession. In one interview, the participant told me that it took his students half a day to come to the boarding middle school from their home. In another, I was told that he had to travel a day across mountains from his home to his workplace. There is no question that working conditions have to be improved so that these experienced teachers could stay on in their schools. In addition, they also need to be helped to overcome two fundamental contradictions underlying such a critical career decision.

First of all, the Chinese cultural tradition generates a strong impetus for individuals like the participants in the inquiry to see education as a means, in most cases, the only viable means, to achieve social mobility and have better lives (Elman 2000; Lee, H. 2000; Lee, W. 1996; Miyazaki 1976; Ouyang 2004; Thøgersen 2002). Such expectations meant that the path of the participants' educational efforts and professional development was essentially a one-way trip, unless there were significant improvements in their places of origin and their future exit to other professions blocked. They had worked hard to leave the rural and mountainous areas even though they were much needed there. Many, including the majority of the participants, would have to accept this as a failure if they had to return upon graduation.

Second, the appeal of English had proved critical in attracting the participants to the teaching profession, but the attraction of English could also undermine their commitment to the teaching career. As the participants worked hard to acquire English as if investing in their personal growth (Norton 2000), it is not surprising to see that many valued English competence as a valuable asset that they did not want to lose. Teaching in middle schools, especially in remote and isolated areas**,** meant that they had little resources and few opportunities to use English, making it impossible

for them to improve their English competence and further develop their professional competence.

Obviously very little could be done about the first challenge by individuals like teacher educators though the Chinese government has been making great efforts to improve infrastructure and socio-development in the Central and Western Chinese provinces over the years. With the deteriorating university graduate employment situation (Bai 2006), the participants who wanted to seek alternative careers through further education would be likely to see their dreams shattered. In fact, they had already foreseen such a possibility and began to brace themselves for it. However, there is much to be done by teacher educators and educational administrators in respect of the second challenge. There is a need for us to work out strategies to support these teachers' demand for linguistic and professional improvement. This may involve bringing teachers together into close and well-knit communities or groups of professional development. It also requires teacher educators, who are usually based in tertiary institutions, to be closely engaged with teachers in their professional development. While this certainly requires more resources to be invested, it also requires on our part unswerving commitment to promoting these school teachers' professional development, both in research and professional practices.

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Table 1: The Participants' Biographical Vignettes

No	Name (Pseudonym)	Biographical Vignettes
1	Xing	She was born in a mountainous area. After graduation from a teacher's college, she worked in a secondary school near her home for seven years before leaving for a temporary teaching position in a nursing school in Yichang.
2	Jiang	Failing to get a decent grade in the national university entrance exam, she studied at a local teacher's college in her county. After graduation, she worked in a middle school in Yichang for 11 years.
3	Zhang	She went to study at a teacher's college because of her low exam results. Upon her graduation, she and her husband went to teach in a rural school in Fujian province for seven years. Later she taught in private secondary schools in Sichuan and Anhui provinces.
4	Chang	She was an ethnic minority student growing up in a small village. Because of her low exam grades, she went to study at a local teacher's college. She taught in a middle school near her home village for six years. She was then transferred to a middle school in a nearby county because of her excellent teaching performance.
5	Ge	She grew up in a small town near Yichang and studied to be a tourist guide at the teacher's college. Persuaded by her personal tutor, she became an English teacher in a secondary specialist school (training tourist guides). The school was later upgraded to be a polytechnic.
6	Wan	She grew up in the suburban area of Yichang. She went to a secondary specialist school (training electricians) and became an administrator in the same school upon graduation. In the process, she took a distance education degree. Then she became a replacement English teacher in her school in 2003.
7	An	She grew up in a rural village in Jiangxi Province and studied at a teachers' college in the province because of her exam grades. She taught in a middle school for three years.
8	Chen	Upon graduation from a regional university as an English major student, she found that the only career option open for her was to be an English teacher. She worked in a middle school in her hometown for two years. In search of better pay, she left for teaching in a private middle school in Yichang.
9	Wu	Upon graduation from a teacher training school, he first worked in a middle school in a remote village for 5 years and then worked in a high school in a small town for another 5 years. In the process, he completed a degree in English through self-study.
10	Tu	He grew up in a village in the remotest county in the municipality of Yichang. Inspired by his teacher, he went to study at a local teachers' college. He had taught in a middle school in his hometown, the poorest town in the county, for nine years.
11	Wang	She went to study at the teachers' college because she had no other choices. Upon graduation, she taught in a middle school in Yichang for 6 years before she resigned and stayed at home running a small tutorial group.
12	Duan	She studied as an English major in a specialist school in Wuhan, the provincial capital. She taught for about 8 years in three schools in her county before she left to teach in a tutorial centre in Wuhan.

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Table 2: The Participants' Shifting Motivations

N=12

Career Stages	Reasons Underlying the Participants' Shifting Commitment to the Teaching Career	Number of Participants
In the beginning	Unwilling to be teachers	11
	Attracted by English	11
In the midst	Increasing commitment (Professional achievements)	8
Leaving the Career	Challenges and contradictions in professional practices	6
	Pay, working conditions, and professional recognition	9
	Improved English competence	10

1. Secondary schools in China normally have two tracks. After completing three years' junior middle school education, which is part of the nine-year compulsory education, students can choose to study in academic senior high schools or vocational/specialist schools. Some of the vocational/specialist schools in economically developed areas were transformed into vocational colleges or polytechnics in recent years (see Gao, Su & Hu, 2006).

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Appendix: Interview Schedule

1. Can you talk about your experiences before you joined the programme?
2. Why did you decide to join the programme?
3. Is there any particular person(s) or life event(s) that might have influenced your decision?
4. What are your perceptions of teachers and the teaching profession?
5. What are your perceptions of English language teachers and the English language teaching profession?
6. How did you come to have such perceptions?