Teacher Development: An international journal of teachers' professional development

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rtde20

Role management strategies of beginning teachers in Hong Kong
Pik Lin Choi & Sylvia Yee Fan Tang

The Hong Kong Institute of Education, Hong Kong
Published online: 15 Aug 2008.

To cite this article: Pik Lin Choi & Sylvia Yee Fan Tang (2005) Role management strategies of beginning teachers in Hong Kong, Teacher Development: An international journal of teachers' professional development, 9:3, 369-387
To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13664530500200260

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions
Role Management Strategies of Beginning Teachers in Hong Kong

PIK LIN CHOI & SYLVIA YEE FAN TANG
The Hong Kong Institute of Education, Hong Kong

ABSTRACT Beginning teachers encounter new challenges as the role system in contemporary society has become more and more demanding. By means of the life history method, role management strategies of four Hong Kong beginning teachers employed to cope with role demands and intra-role conflicts were located in their biographical, workplace and wider social-historical contexts. The study shows that strategies such as qualification matching, definition searching, strategic compliance and strategic redefinition were adopted in the professional socialization process. The employment of certain role management strategies, which was related to the novices’ human agency, the structure and culture in the workplace as well as the rewards and punishment embedded in the wider social context, had an impact on the development of beginning teachers’ professional identity.

Introduction
Studies on professional socialization since the Sixties have systematically identified a range of strategies that new entrants to a profession adopt to negotiate their roles (Becker et al, 1961; Lacey, 1977; Zeichner et al, 1987). How teachers manage their roles attracts new interest as intensification has become a new global work order in teaching (Hargreaves, 1992; Smyth et al, 2000). Contemporary teacher roles in Hong Kong SAR [1] are even more demanding because role expectations embedded in both Eastern and Western cultures are articulated. In addition to the roles emphasized in traditional Confucian culture such as teaching without discrimination, taking care of moral cultivation and acting as a role model with devotion to their career (Ashmore, 1997), teachers in Hong Kong are also expected to be a change agent, an accountable professional and a leader in education innovation (Darling-Hammond, 1992; Fullan, 1993; Caine, 2000; Wong, 2000). Thus we are concerned about how contemporary novice teachers in Hong Kong are socialized into teaching and to what extent they can develop their professional identity in the early years of teaching. While quite a number of classic studies...
on professional socialization have well-documented variables related to beginners' adoption of certain kinds of coping strategies, little inquiry has been made, from a life history perspective, into the contexts related to one's adoption of a particular role management strategy. The life histories of four beginning teachers in this study do not only unfold holistic contexts in which certain strategies are employed, they also illuminate the conditions under which a beginning teacher can or cannot shift to apply other strategies in the course of their role negotiation.

**Role Theory and Self-identity**

Biddle (1979) in his seminal work on role theory concluded that people are socialized into roles because of the consequences of being able or unable to meet them. Roles persist as they are often embedded within larger social systems. Individuals may find either joy or suffering in their role performance. Through the lens of role theory, the beginning teachers are seen to begin their negotiation process of a social position when they enter their workplace. They have to be socialized in the roles of a teacher to have appropriate role behavior. The professional socialization of beginning teachers is influenced by their awareness of role expectations. The professional identity of a teacher is built up over time, as the person participates in the teaching profession and identifies with others (Beijaard et al, 2004). Beginners negotiating the professional identity of a teacher need both their own efforts and the hard-won acceptance by others (Biddle, 1979). Intra-role conflicts will appear if major stakeholders differ, or are perceived to be differing, in the expectations they hold for the teacher (Biddle, 1997). Teachers in the present study, for example, experienced conflicting expectations from the government, their workplace and different groups of parents.

The rapid changes in a complex society induce more problems for beginning teachers' identity formation and continuity (Cooper & Olson, 1996). Chin & Horton (1993) in their study gave an example that teachers' new role behavior to meet technological innovations in the classroom has changed the 'centralized authority' identity they used to have in the traditional classroom. Hewitt (1997) recognized that an individual projects three major forms of identity, i.e. social identity, personal identity and situated identity. Both the social and personal identities reflect the essence of the self. Thus they must share a certain degree of continuity and harmony. When contemporary beginning teachers have multiple situated roles and identities, it is our concern to understand what coping strategies they employ to handle their intra-role conflicts so as to sustain the continuity of their self-identity.

**Professional Socialization and Coping Strategies**

The literature on teacher professional socialization provides insight for our understanding of the patterns of how teachers handle different situations in the
Role Management Strategies

Role Management Strategies

Different philosophical orientations underlie studies with different perspectives on professional socialization. Lacey (1977) gave evidence that normative role expectations do not lead inevitably to conforming behaviors because socialization is ‘the adoption or creation of appropriate social strategies’ (p. 96). Coping strategies ranging from strategic compliance, internalized adjustment and strategic redefinition were identified. The interactive perspective, nevertheless, emphasizes the actor’s active adjustment to the situation, which is different from the passive adjustment from a functionalist perspective. Zeichner et al (1987), in their study of beginning teachers’ professional socialization, found that the biographical and workplace variables contributed to the beginners’ successful or unsuccessful redefinition strategies.

Studies on teachers’ career cycle show that some teachers are able to resolve self-doubt and continue with their career while others leave with wear and tear (Huberman, 1993). How beginning teachers in contemporary society manage their roles in the process of professional socialization warrants our concern because role conflict and ambiguity are found to be major sources of stress facing teachers (Chan, 1998; Kyriacou, 2001). Biddle (1997) pointed out that few studies investigate how teachers cope with and resolve perceived role conflicts. The present study of teachers’ lives and career events attempts to identify the development of different role management strategies, which can contribute to our understanding of beginning teachers’ development of professional identity.

The Life History Method

The use of biographic methods offers much promise for capturing the socializing influence of the full range of life experiences that individuals bring to teacher education programs and teaching (Goodson, 1992). The life history method involves the collaboration of the storytellers and the researchers. Goodson advocates a methodological move from life stories to the construction of life histories, which employ a new range of interviews and documentary analysis to solicit contextual data (Goodson, 1992). Bogdan (1974) argued that the fully researched life history should allow us to:

see an individual in relation to the history of his time, and how he is influenced by the various religious, social, psychological and economic currents present in his world. It permits us to view the intersection of the life history of men with the history of society, thereby enabling us to understand better the choices, contingencies and options open to the individuals. (p. 4)

Sampling

Purposeful sampling serves as the guiding principle for the selection of informants for this study. The selection of the beginning teachers took into
consideration variations in gender, the types of teacher education programs they attended, subject specialisms, the characteristics of their workplace, their teaching subjects, and the number of years in teaching. Invitation to take part in the study was sent to graduates of two major teacher education programs run in The Hong Kong Institute of Education. Four informants, who were believed to be able to provide adequate information for the understanding of the functions of individuals’ biography and workplace contexts, were selected to participate in the study in the academic year 2003-04. The four teachers, two male and two female, either began their teaching in 2002 or had just entered teaching in 2003 when they joined our study. They were teachers of a variety of subjects such as Chinese language, Putonghua [2], mathematics, information technology, art and music. Although all the informants were trained for the teaching in the primary sector, one of them was employed by a secondary school (see Table I).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>May</th>
<th>Lawrence</th>
<th>Rosanna</th>
<th>George</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher education</td>
<td>PGDE*</td>
<td>PGDE*</td>
<td>B.Ed.**</td>
<td>B.Ed.**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject specialism</td>
<td>Putonghua,</td>
<td>Art, information technology</td>
<td>Chinese, mathematics, music,</td>
<td>Chinese, mathematics, art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Primary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year of teaching</td>
<td>1st year</td>
<td>1st year</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching subjects</td>
<td>Putonghua, Chinese, information technology</td>
<td>Art, Chinese (for both ordinary and remedial classes)</td>
<td>Music, Chinese, mathematics, general studies</td>
<td>Mathematics, art, Chinese, information technology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>May</th>
<th>Lawrence</th>
<th>Rosanna</th>
<th>George</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher education</td>
<td>PGDE*</td>
<td>PGDE*</td>
<td>B.Ed.**</td>
<td>B.Ed.**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject specialism</td>
<td>Putonghua, information technology</td>
<td>Art, information technology</td>
<td>Chinese, mathematics, music,</td>
<td>Chinese, mathematics, art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Primary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year of teaching</td>
<td>1st year</td>
<td>1st year</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching subjects</td>
<td>Putonghua, Chinese, information technology</td>
<td>Art, Chinese (for both ordinary and remedial classes)</td>
<td>Music, Chinese, mathematics, general studies</td>
<td>Mathematics, art, Chinese, information technology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I. Demographic data of the informants.

Method of Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with individual informants to collect both their full life histories and thematic life histories (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). The full life history constituted the major foci of the first interview and was an integral part of all the following three thematic interviews in the study period. These thematic life history interviews were scheduled throughout the academic year 2003-04 to make inquiries into the managing strategies employed to handle critical career events. Methodological and data triangulation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) was adopted to ensure the
adequacy required of qualitative research. A total of four in-depth interview-conversations were scheduled to follow through the informants’ life course. An interview was conducted with the informants’ significant others such as their colleagues or friends to seek an additional perspective on the informants’ personal and professional lives. In order to see the individuals in relation to their socio-historical context, a wide variety of documents were studied. For the understanding of workplace contexts, public school documents such as school magazines and websites, and semi-public information such as school calendars, teacher handbooks and teachers’ timetables, were collected. Policy documents concerning the teaching profession and statistical data in relation to the student population and teacher employment were also studied to capture the wider socio-historical context.

The interviews were transcribed and a computer package NVivo was used to assist the storage and retrieval of categorized data. The categorization of data was informed by the constant comparison method in a sense that the coding was grounded on the properties and dimensions of data collected (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The strength of the life history method allowed us to capture the uniqueness of each informant when we were building up the four informant profiles. With progressively deeper inquiry into individual biographies and the workplace information during different phases of data collection, we were able to portray the characteristics of each beginner’s role management strategies. Subsequently the informant profiles readily led to the process of constant comparison as they were used for within-case and cross-case analysis. Both commonalities and uniqueness emerged when we looked into the beginning teachers’ courses of professional development.

Role Management Strategies in Contexts

The findings of the study show that the role management strategies employed by the four informants are results of their biographical actions in their workplace. The teachers’ behavior represents an active and creative response to the immediate contexts of the classroom and the school, where the wider social structure seeks its expression (Pollard, 1982). In other words, teachers’ biographical dispositions and the structural contexts were mutually constituted in the course of their professional development (Kelchtermans, 1993). Drawing on the results of documentary analysis, the following sections outline the wider socio-historical context, the workplace context and the biographical context in which role management strategies of the sampled beginning teachers were located.

The Wider Socio-historical Context

Teacher unemployment and job insecurity in recent years have constituted a socio-historical context for beginning teachers’ professional socialization in Hong Kong. The problem is multifaceted. From a demographic perspective,
there has been a decline in birth rates from 7.8% to 6.4% in 1996 and 1997 respectively (Census and Statistics Department, 2004). A surplus of over 100 Primary One classes in the academic year 2002-03 had an impact at both school and individual teacher levels. At the school level, the decrease in the birth rate has induced keen competition among schools to attract student enrollment. At an individual teacher level, it has created difficulties for graduates to enter the teaching profession and anxiety about securing a teaching post in a school.

The cumulative effects of the Asian economic crisis, the aftermath of 9/11 and the SARS crisis on the economic situation in Hong Kong are other socio-historical factors that have intensified the instability of teacher employment (Morris, 2004). Owing to the huge fiscal deficit soon after the handover, a tighter control on government expenditure has been adopted (Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2005). A call was made to transfer the resources saved due to the drop in the primary and secondary school student populations to implement small class teaching by district and by grade, but this was rejected. Small class teaching was then reduced to an experimental scheme involving 37 schools (Hong Kong Professional Teachers’ Union, 2005). Over 1000 qualified teachers were reported to be on the verge of becoming redundant in the academic year 2003-04 (Ming Pao, 2003).

The policy and practice of teacher employment and discontinuation in schools make job security a grave concern for new entrants to the teaching profession. First, many schools still adopt the 'last in first out' rule to resolve the teacher redundancy problem because of the political concerns of the majority of tenured teachers. Beginning teachers in less competitive schools are the most vulnerable group. Second, schools tend to recruit teachers on a contract term rather than offering tenure automatically to teachers after their two-year probationary period – formerly a normal practice in teaching. Some schools are encouraged in their adoption of this practice as they perceive that competition for the renewal of contracts among the beginning teachers enhances teacher performance.

The professionalization project of teaching entails additional role demands for beginning teachers. In order to develop into a knowledge-based economy, the Hong Kong SAR government is eager to upgrade its citizens to be 'talented individuals who are biliterate (written English & Chinese) and trilingual (spoken Putonghua, Cantonese and English)' (Government Information Centre, 2004, para. 21). Subject knowledge competence and proficiency in the language they teach, thus, have become mandatory professional standards for language teachers. Language teachers should have a subject degree together with a postgraduate professional education major in that language subject (Standing Committee on Language Education and Research, 2003; Education and Manpower Bureau, 2004). The professional standard requirement of the Chinese language teacher gives rise to a professional identity crisis among many teachers in primary schools as Chinese...
language used to be regarded as a general subject that can be taught by all professionally trained teachers, with or without a subject degree in it.

Furthermore, teachers’ work has been increasingly subject to public accountability, which induces role strain among teachers. Teachers need to take on new roles to give account of what they have done to improve the quality of teaching and learning (Choi, 2001). The restructuring of school management to involve parental participation signifies a redistribution of governance power (Ng, 2000). The new relationship between parents and teachers, as we can see from the career histories of our informants, has an impact on the beginning teachers’ role management strategies.

The Workplace Context

School histories, school policies and school communities are important sources of professional socialization (Talbert & McLaughlin, 1994). The following sections outline the contextual variables of the four informants’ workplaces (Committee on Home–School Cooperation, 2004).

Meadow Secondary was in its fifth year when May joined it. As is the case for most newly established schools in a large public housing area, one significant feature was that the school had great challenges to promote its image. The principal also intended to improve academic achievement and student discipline to attract a better intake of students. It was engaged in a number of innovations in teaching strategies, one of which was to become a pioneering school adopting Putonghua to teach Chinese language. A keen competitive atmosphere could be observed among the novices because the yearly contract renewal was based on their performance. In addition to their teaching duties, teachers had to take up a number of extra-curricular activities as the school ran more than 40 kinds of extra-curricular activities for the students.

The Legend where Lawrence worked was a primary school with a 15-year history. The sponsoring body of the school had been planning to lodge an application for the school to be converted from an aided school [5] to the Direct Subsidy Scheme.[6] As this would change the employment conditions for teachers, a climate of uncertainty prevailed in the school. The Legend was also active in education innovations and teachers in general had a heavy workload.

The Gallop had been in existence for six years when George joined it in 2002. Although the school did not have an intake problem of Primary One students, it faced a class shrinking problem because of its unique school history. The standardized 30-class [7] primary school had expanded to 35 classes when it had merged with another school three years before. It followed that there would be surplus teachers in the school when those students graduated and The Gallop went back to its normal capacity of 30 classes of students. The Gallop was also actively involved in education reform. Parents actively participated in school management.
The Rainbow where Rosanna got her teaching post after graduating in 2002 was different from the other three schools in many ways. It was an ‘elite’ girls’ school with more than 80 years of history. The Rainbow enjoyed a good student intake and was still a half-day school with 24 classes of Primary One to Six students in 2003-04. The school premises were small but it had excellent social capital in terms of school reputation and parental support. The most distinctive difference between The Rainbow and the other schools was its inclination towards traditional teaching strategies and reservations regarding educational innovations.

The Biographical Context

Teachers’ upbringing and schooling experiences contribute to the ways in which beginning teachers manage their professional roles (Britzman, 1986; Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002). Beginning teachers’ emotions and their capability to maintain or lose self-respect in the challenges of teaching can be traced from their life histories. The biographical context of the informants, when analyzed together with the workplace and wider social context, provides a multidimensional background for us to understand the role management strategies they developed.

May was born in mainland China and had been educated in Hong Kong since Secondary Three. Both her father and mother were well educated. May had her primary school education in a famous school which enforced strict discipline. She was so unhappy that she had low motivation to learn. She also felt that teacher–pupil relationships throughout her education experiences were very distant. May decided to enroll in the Postgraduate Diploma of Education program (PGDE), after gaining some rewarding experiences in a period of supply teaching after her university studies in chemistry. May had Putonghua and information technology as her teaching subjects in her professional education. She lost all hopes of obtaining a teaching post in a primary school when a principal queried if she had received complaints from the parents about her Putonghua accent when she taught information technology in Cantonese during her teaching practice. May therefore seized the opportunity offered to her by Meadow Secondary, where she was assigned to teach Chinese language, integrated science and Putonghua. The inadequate subject knowledge in Chinese language and the lack of professional training in the teaching of the other two subjects at secondary school level made her beginning year of teaching particularly challenging.

Lawrence has a supportive family with parents and a younger brother. His schooling experience was not a pleasant one. His academic achievement was not satisfactory and therefore he was admitted to a design certificate course in a technical institute before he pursued a course of study at a university. Lawrence gained more confidence in himself when he succeeded in completing the projects with assistance from some helpful supervisors who suggested that he took up teaching as a career. Lawrence worked in an
George is the eldest son in a family of four children. His parents’ care of him when he had lung cancer had a great impact on his attitude towards his students. The experience of getting through the serious illness before he attended the School Certificate Examination also shaped his persevering and empathetic personality. George’s schooling experiences were not pleasant and his interest in teaching only emerged when he taught a tuition class during the summer vacation in Secondary Six. George’s schooling experience constituted what was for him a counter-example of good teaching. Since he disliked his teachers using corporal punishment, strict reprimands, teaching without preparation and rejecting feedback from students, he keeps reminding himself to be understanding to students and teach with good preparation. George’s adoption of a wide variety of extra-curricular activities during his professional education and his dedication to teaching made him a helpful member of the staff when he joined The Gallop in 2002.

Rosanna is the only daughter in her family. She has a close relationship with her parents and grandmother, who always give her emotional support. Rosanna perceives herself as an enthusiastic explorer but is not tactful in handling interpersonal relationship in the adult world. She had a positive school education experience although she found the primary school teachers too strict and traditional. Rosanna enjoyed her teacher education as she realized her suitability for teaching primary school children after her first year of study in the B.Ed. program. She was very serious about her studies and developed a wide range of interests throughout her teacher education period and managed to secure a permanent teaching post, although the employment market was rather unsatisfactory, in 2002.

Role Management Strategies

The life history study of the four beginning teachers allows us to see that a range of strategies was employed in role management and that one strategy shifted to another during the course of professional socialization. These strategies were conceptualized as qualification matching, definition searching, from definition searching to strategic compliance, as well as from definition searching to strategic redefinition. The kind of role management strategies they were able to apply was related to their biographical, workplace and wider social contexts.

Qualification Matching

Qualification matching was a role management strategy found in the cases of May and Lawrence. Both of them were assigned to teach Chinese language in their schools. The newly introduced policy of a mandatory requirement for a
practicing language teacher to have a relevant subject degree within five years of joining the profession caused them great anxiety because they neither had a relevant subject degree nor had received professional training in the subject. May was even more disturbed for she was trained to be a primary rather than a secondary school teacher.

She felt particularly inadequate in language teaching as she was a science stream student in her secondary school years. Since the competition for a teaching post in Meadow Secondary was so keen, May decided to enroll in a part-time degree program in Chinese immediately after she began teaching. The strategy May adopted to manage the role expectation of a language teacher was to match herself with the required qualification. Lawrence, similarly, felt the pressing need to pursue a subject degree because he was also assigned to teach Chinese language to a Primary Two class:

I'm terribly busy. There are so many things waiting for me to do. I need to study Chinese language first, then, Putonghua. I feel inadequate. There's a trend for the Chinese language teacher to teach the lesson in Putonghua. I intend to enroll in these courses but give up the plan due to my heavy workload. I may study Putonghua two years later .... I have to set a priority list for further study. If I'm still assigned to teach Chinese next year, I need to start my study or I'll lose my competitive power. (Lawrence, Interview 1)

Qualification matching is a kind of situational adjustment that leaves few alternatives to teachers like May and Lawrence (Becker et al, 1961). The enrollment in a subject degree course served as observable evidence which May could show the principal to prove that she had the commitment to upgrade her professional qualifications to meet external requirements. However, qualification matching has limitations in helping her establish the role-identity of a Chinese language teacher in her classroom:

The longer I teach the less confidence I can maintain. I cannot teach well although I'm studying a Chinese course. Chinese language is related to Chinese history. Then am I going to study Chinese history as well? For example, when I taught a lesson about Yue Fei [a patriot] of ancient times, I found I'm not familiar with Chinese history. (May, Interview 1)

Lawrence shared a view similar to May in that the functioning of a language teacher role is more than getting certification of a subject degree. About one and a half months after he began his teaching career, a Quality Assurance Inspection was conducted in the school. His lessons of art and Chinese language were both observed by the inspectors. The Chinese language class Lawrence taught was a remedial class of 11 pupils. Lawrence received unsatisfactory comments on his Chinese lesson. He realized there was something more than subject knowledge for successful teaching in the remedial class:
Perhaps the problem is that, apart from my limited experience, remedial teaching requires professional training. I haven’t received such training. Thus it ends up with a poor result. (Lawrence, Interview 1)

Inadequate professional training has long been recognized as a common problem experienced by beginning teachers (Veenman, 1984). Novices are frequently overwhelmed by the need to translate knowledge-for-practice learnt in teacher education into their daily teaching practice and generate knowledge-in-practice of their own (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Professional growth involves the investment of time. When higher expectations for language teachers in Hong Kong society are translated into normative requirements for their professional qualifications, teachers who do not have such qualifications have to invest considerable time in the pursuit of paper qualifications to maintain their competitiveness in the employment market.

**Definition Searching**

In the process of negotiating a teacher identity, a definition searching strategy was frequently observed in situations related to subject teaching and classroom management. Beginning teachers brought to the workplace their personal experience of teaching and learning and pedagogical insights gained in their teacher education. Many of them, like May, George and Rosanna, found that their personal role expectations of an instructional designer and class manager were different from those of the workplace. Definition searching was found among the novices to handle intra-role conflicts.

May, for example, was self-disciplined and disliked strict punitive teachers when she was a high school student. She had to search for a definition of her role as a class manager when she found that Meadow Secondary was enforcing a strict discipline system to establish an orderly learning environment. May was uncertain about her role for several reasons. First, the principal conveyed the message of maintaining good discipline to teachers verbally on formal and informal occasions. The vice-principal also monitored the disciplinary policy by conducting daily patrolling outside classrooms. However, May’s co-class teacher believed that understanding the background of the students was a prerequisite for good classroom management. Strict discipline hindered the development of a trusting relationship with the students. Although May did not want to be a punitive teacher, she experienced intra-role conflicts and was undecided with her responses to the unruly and irresponsible behavior of her class.

There are so many difficult students in my class. The students are fond of my partner and are very distant from me. I wonder if I’m too strict or if my partner is too lenient. In fact I’m not sure what the school expects of us. At one time she [the principal] said I was too stern and at another time she stressed the importance of good discipline. As a member of the
Discipline Committee, I found the school rules too harsh and harmed students’ sense of belonging to the school ... Before Christmas I wrote each of the students in my class a Christmas card, telling them my feeling about them and my expectations for them ... I don’t know if this helps. (May, Interview 2)

May was engaged in definition searching to cope with her uncertainty about the class managerial role throughout the first year of teaching. The uncertainties were complicated by the perceived inconsistent expectations from the principal, the different standards between her and the co-class teacher as well as the techniques she was able to master in classroom management. Up to the end of the first year of teaching, May was still searching for her boundary with regard to student discipline.

From Definition Searching to Strategic Compliance

While definition searching was common for the novices to handle intra-role conflicts, some beginning teachers moved from definition searching to other role management strategies more readily than the others. Rosanna demonstrated to us the process of definition searching when she experienced intra-role conflict as a mathematics teacher. However, she shifted to strategic compliance in the second semester of her first year of teaching. When Rosanna began teaching at The Rainbow, she realized that teachers used traditional methods and students were expected to ‘learn’ quietly in the lessons. Rosanna used some innovative ideas in her teaching and soon found that she had offended her colleagues. Rosanna noticed the constraints in the workplace and became reluctant to introduce creative teaching methods publicly. She was frustrated for a while but she decided to try out what she had learnt in her teacher education privately in her own class.

The principal expects the students to sit and learn quietly ... I tried some games that won’t make too much noise. I asked the students to keep it a secret. The students are happier when I incorporate these in the lesson. (Rosanna, Interview 2)

The processes of Rosanna’s coping with reality shock involved several signposts. First, she sensed that the school structure and culture did not encourage teacher autonomy in catering for individual students’ learning needs. Structurally, it was stipulated in their Staff Handbook that the production of a worksheet for her class had to be agreed and signed by all the teachers involved in the same grade before she could send it to the office for printing. Culturally, teachers were reluctant to consider suggestions of additional work as they did not see the need to change. Second, Rosanna felt a complete loss of her professional identity if she could not put her personal theories into practice. Third, she made a compromise by experimenting with various means to practice her beliefs about pedagogy. Her personal beliefs and
expertise in mathematics teaching enabled her to try out methods which could meet the institutional norm and form part of her personal expectations. Thus strategic compliance was gradually consolidated as Rosanna’s coping strategy in her intra-role conflict. In her second year of teaching, Rosanna became even more confident of her private teaching methods:

Now I’m more or less trying something ‘illegal’. I send some exercises or games to my students by email. I asked them to give me their personal email addresses as our school did not yet have an intranet for students.
The school may stop me if it gets to know this ... However, the feedback of parents gave me encouragement. (Rosanna, Interview 2)

From Definition Searching to Strategic Redefinition

While Rosanna was not able to change the definition of the authority in the school, George had successfully redefined his role to the parents of his students as a competent subject teacher for an elite class. The successful redefinition was an achievement of the joint efforts of George and the senior management of the school.

George was assigned to the Deputy Panel Chair in his second year of teaching because he was the only person among the colleagues that had professional training in mathematics. The school expected George to initiate pedagogical innovations and he was assigned to teach the best of the seven Primary Six classes. Similar to May, George disliked fiercely reprimanding students and preferred a counseling approach to discipline because of his past learning experience. Some parents complained to the principal in mid-October about his ‘inadequate’ classroom management. They were skeptical about George’s pedagogical innovations as they did not have confidence in a beginning teacher or in ‘new’ ways of teaching.

As I’m not stern in the lesson, comparatively speaking my class made more noise than others. Some parents could not accept this. I give fewer exercises for my class. I don’t see the use of mechanic drills ... The parents don’t want their children to be taught by a new teacher as they want them to go to a first rank secondary school. Some parents initiated a meeting and a name-signing campaign. They requested the school to change the mathematics teacher for their children. (George, Interview 1)

George’s confidence in teaching the elite class was shaken by the parents’ negative appraisal although his principal had observed and acknowledged George’s performance in his trial teaching of the same class in the previous year.

This [complaint from the parents] took place on around Thursday and Friday ... My emotions were heightened to exploding point over the weekend. On Sunday I walked to and fro mindlessly in my flat and I knew
I could no longer stand unless I shared this with my brothers and sisters in the church. (George, Interview 2)

On the following Monday, George went to seek advice from the principal, who reassured him of his capability and his leading role in pedagogical innovations. The discipline master was then asked to pay a visit to the class and advise the students to show respect to new teachers. Support from the senior management showed the parents the school’s affirmation of George’s instructional leadership and professional identity. George went on with his instructional approach and made greater efforts to improve his pedagogical techniques in accordance with his definition of desirable teaching and classroom management.

One week later, some parents sent a gift to George via the principal. More and more parents gradually told George that they would support him and would not join the name-signing campaign. Some even showed their appreciation of George’s teaching strategies. George kept improving his teaching strategy by allowing more student participation in the learning process. His efforts began to bear fruit in the examination of the first semester:

The principal told me that the top elite class on average usually scores 5 marks higher than the second best elite class in their average scores ... The examination result shows that my class scores 6 marks higher. (George, Interview 2)

George found the examination results answerable not only to the parents but also to the educators as professionals. In an era that emphasizes consumerist accountability and parental choice, school educators as a whole become disempowered. The successful strategic redefinition, in George’s case, was a joint effort of educators in different positions in the school. It did not only help George develop his professional identity in the community of the parents, it also changed the parents’ interpretation of good teaching.

**Conclusion and Implications**

The beginning teachers sampled in this study employed varied role management strategies to cope with their role expectations and intra-role conflicts. The adoption of these strategies was situated in the biographical, workplace as well as the wider socio-historical contexts.

People are agents who are endowed with autonomy to counteract the external world, although not without limitations (Archer, 2000). All the beginning teachers in this study were involved in definition searching when their personal beliefs about teaching were challenged in the workplace. However, some shifted to strategic compliance or strategic redefinition more readily than others. Beginning teachers who have stronger convictions in their own beliefs and better pedagogical skills, as in the case of Rosanna and George, can exercise more autonomy in trying out their preferred teaching approaches.
When compared with May, they do not have a prolonged period of definition searching. A move to strategic compliance or redefinition indicates that they have better knowledge about themselves in terms of what they want and who they are as a teacher. Strategic compliance and redefinition enable them to develop a professional identity that is in harmony with their personal self-identity (Hewitt, 1997; Bullough & Young, 2002).

The cases of George and Rosanna show us that the structure and culture of the workplace mediate the strategies that the beginning teachers are able to employ. Certain conditions contributed to George’s successful redefinition of his role as a professional teacher for an elite class. First, George dealt sensitively with his role strain. His past experience in handling life stress was an asset to him. He was active in seeking emotional support. Second, his professional training in the teaching of mathematics and his successful experience in meeting the external success criteria were strong building blocks for his professional identity. Third, the principal’s affirmation of George’s competence and the discipline master’s class visit constituted strong support for George to address the challenges (Tang, 2003). As for Rosanna, she experienced subtle rejection of her innovative ideas in teaching. The adoption of strategic compliance could be, first, attributed to her personal beliefs about learning, which was at odds with the dominant school culture. Nevertheless, Rosanna gained positive feedback from her students and their parents, though this was not strong enough for her to strategically redefine the role of a mathematics teacher in the school.

Definition searching, unfortunately, did not seem to exist in the situation where the beginning teachers faced changing societal requirements for professional qualifications. May and Lawrence, who had not obtained the required qualifications, had no alternatives other than situational adjustment when they wanted to secure their employment. The beginning teachers strove to gain paper qualifications to avoid social sanction. A total lack of room for definition searching implies, on the one hand, overwhelming institutional power over the individuals in the context of high rates of unemployment. On the other hand, the novices’ instant compliance did not allow room for their personal self to dialogue with their professional self, and thus inhibited the development of their professional identity.

The non-existence of a prolonged period of engagement in definition searching strategies among the beginning teachers is found to be related to their biography, workplace conditions and the broader social contexts. Variations in role management strategies are conditioned by the beginning teachers’ human agency, the structural and cultural contexts in schools as well as the reward and punishment mechanisms embedded in the wider society. The life history study on the role management strategies of the sampled beginning teachers in Hong Kong illuminates the personal and professional problems they face in contemporary society. It uncovers not only the source of their role demands and role strains but also the impact on the development of teachers’ professional identity. This study, though contextualized in Hong
Kong, might provide insights for understanding problems that are typical in the postmodern world, i.e. where roles are multiple and the task of achieving continuity of one’s self-identity has become more and more complicated (Giddens, 1991). It might also provide a basis for further efforts to inquire into the contextual conditions that can enable teachers to adopt or move towards constructive role management strategies in their professional lives.

Acknowledgement

This article is one of the outcomes generated from the research project ‘Teachers’ Professional Lives: managing professional roles (Phase 1)’ funded by the Hong Kong Institute of Education.

Correspondence

Pik Lin Choi, Department of Educational Policy and Administration, The Hong Kong Institute of Education, 10 Lo Ping Road, Tai Po, New Territories, Hong Kong SAR, China (plchoi@ied.edu.hk).

Notes

[1] HKSAR is an abbreviation of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. Hong Kong is one of the Special Administrative Regions after its reunification with the People’s Republic of China on 1 July 1997.


[3] The school sector advocated a reduction of class size from 35 to 23 pupils in the primary sector to enhance quality of student learning in HKSAR. The government responded by initiating a three-year longitudinal study on small class teaching from September 2004, involving 37 schools, to investigate the best teaching strategies and the necessary support measures for a small class environment locally.

[4] Cantonese is the spoken language for the majority of people in Hong Kong. It is also the medium of instruction adopted by the majority of primary schools.

[5] An aided school is a school operated by a sponsoring body and mainly financed by the government through the Unified Code of Aid in HKSAR.

[6] The Direct Subsidy Scheme was first introduced in 1991 to subsidize and encourage the growth of a strong private school sector. Direct Subsidy Scheme schools are given freedom with regard to curriculum, fees and entrance requirements that are consistent with basic educational standards.

[7] The standardized school premises in the Nineties were designed to accommodate 30 classes of students.

References

Role Management Strategies


Ming Pao (2003) Urging for Assisting Surplus Teachers, PTU Hunger Strike on Saturday, 29 June.


