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Teachers’ professional lives and continuing professional development in changing times
Sylvia Yee Fan Tang* and Pik Lin Choi

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This paper presents a qualitative study about how teachers entering the profession at different times over the last five decades made sense of their professional lives and continuing professional development (CPD) experiences against the backdrop of the CPD policy infrastructure and wider educational context in Hong Kong. The life history method was used. The findings of the study show that teachers’ self-directed professional development was driven by a commitment to the moral purposes of teaching, characterized by their active agency in professional knowledge construction, and supported by facilitating organizational conditions in schools. The study also reveals that fierce competition among individuals and schools, intensification of work, stress, uncertainty and alienation on the part of teachers evidenced the de-humanizing effects of an increasingly managerialist and market-oriented approach to school education. Implications for educational leaders at policy and school levels and teachers will be discussed.

Keywords: continuing professional development; teachers’ lives; professionalism

Introduction
The quality of the teaching force is crucial to the quality of education. Different education systems invest a lot in continuing professional development (CPD) as it is a means to the end of developing a quality teaching force. This paper presents a qualitative study of teachers’ professional lives in Hong Kong. By examining the perspective of teachers entering the profession at different times in Hong Kong, the paper identifies the features of teachers’ professional lives and CPD in changing times. Specifically, it explores the effects of an increasingly market-oriented approach to school education. Implications for educational leaders and teachers are discussed.

Understanding teacher development
Kelchtermans (2004) defines continuing professional development (CPD) as “a learning process resulting from meaningful interaction with the context (both in time and space) and eventually leading to changes in teachers’ professional practice (actions) and in their thinking about that practice” (220). This definition highlights the interactionist character of CPD – a two-way “dialogue” between the context and the teacher’s self mediated through interactive processes of interpretation and meaning. Three strands of literature inform our understanding of this interactionist character of CPD. First, the literature on teachers’ development of knowledge and skills helps understand changes in teachers’ professional practice. Second, the ecological approach to teacher development examines the context, i.e. “space”, in
which CPD takes place. Third, the biographical approach looks into the teacher’s self and the temporal context of teacher development.

**Teacher development as development of knowledge and skills**

One perspective is to conceptualize teacher professional development as teachers’ development of knowledge and skills. Shulman (1986, 1987) identifies the various domains of knowledge that a teacher possesses – content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, knowledge of learners and their characteristics, knowledge of educational contexts and knowledge of educational ends, purposes and values and their philosophical and historical grounds. Eraut (1994) highlights the theoretical and practical forms of professional knowledge. While Shulman (1986, 1987) and Eraut’s (1994) work focuses on the domains and forms of professional knowledge, other researchers conceptualize the growth/development of professional knowledge in different ways. Berliner (1994) characterizes growth of professional knowledge in terms of elevation in the levels of professional competence through stages of development. Dall’Alba and Sandberg (2006) depict the horizontal and vertical dimensions in professional knowledge and skills development: “The horizontal dimension relates to the skill progression that accompanies experience; the vertical dimension refers to variation in embodied understanding of practice” (Dall’Alba and Sandberg 2006). Levin (2003) portrays professional development in terms of increasing congruence between thinking and actions in pedagogy and growth in articulation, differentiation, integration and sophistication in pedagogical understandings.

Putnam and Borko (1997) emphasize the situated, social and distributed nature of knowledge. The situated nature of knowledge assumes that knowledge is inseparable from the contexts and activities in which it develops. This implies that teachers can create new knowledge within the crucible of the classroom (Grossman 1995). Putnam and Borko’s (1997) view that knowledge is socially constructed further implies that teachers learn through interaction in groups and with more knowledgeable others and that different participants bring different but equally valuable expertise to conversations about teaching.

**Ecological approach to teacher development**

The ecological approach emphasizes the contextual character of teacher professional development. Bottery’s (2006) work illuminates our examination of teacher development at meso, macro and global contexts. At the school organization level, i.e. the meso context, Hawley and Valli (1999) draw our attention to the symbiotic relation between professional development and school development illuminated by research on school improvement. The approach stresses the importance of creating organizational conditions that make the working environment as a learning environment for teachers (Kwakman 2003). Such organizational conditions include resource, time and structural conditions that facilitate teachers to have space and energy to devote to their professional development, as well as culture and ethos of the school that genuinely support teacher professional development (Little 1999; Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinback 1998). Hoban (2002) puts forward a systems view and stresses the importance of creating synergy of these conditions. Given the differences between schools, Hargreaves (2003) stresses the importance of adopting a differentiated rather than “one size fits all” solution to school improvement and professional development.
In the macro/wider educational context, teacher professional development can be examined at the policy level. Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1999) stress the importance of policy coherence and the creation of a policy infrastructure that create webs of learning opportunities in professional communities that are connected to teachers’ practice and develop capacity for teacher decision making rather than seeking to mandate the procedures of teaching. This policy infrastructure is rooted in the context of an education system and is often “the product of unique and dynamically changing sets of circumstances – political, economic, social, cultural, historical, professional and technical – in that system” (Bolam and McMahon 2004, 35). The changing sets of circumstances can be understood in the global context. Bottery (2006) argues that economic globalization is an immensely powerful force in which the market-oriented approach has migrated to affect the structure and practice of public sectors, including education, around the world. We shall see in later sections of this paper how notions of professional autonomy are eroded in the globalization process.

Mockler (2005) brings together the school organization and wider educational contexts, and argues that “the development of a transformative teaching profession requires an education community, which on both school and system levels, not only tolerates risk-taking, but embraces it as a path to authentic relationship, critical and innovative practice, and ongoing growth and transformation” (742). She also stresses the importance of having educational leaders, at different levels, who are willing to adopt a transformative stance and who give sustained and comprehensive support to the development of a transformative teaching profession.

**Biographical approach to teacher development**

The biographical approach directs our attention to the temporal context of teacher professional development. Kelchtermans’ (2004) idea of “situatedness in time” implies the view that teacher professional development can be understood properly when situated in the broader context of a career and a personal life history (Kelchtermans and Vanderberghe 1994). Huberman, Thompson, and Weiland’s (1997) work on teachers’ career stages inform our understanding of teachers’ lives and the implications for professional development. Teachers at different points in the life cycle have varied orientations to change and improvement as well as different professional development needs (Hargreaves and Fullan 1992). Other researchers conceptualize teacher development as the enactment of a long process of creating self, of making and living out the consequences of a biography (Kelchtermans and Vanderberghe 1994; Raymond, Butt, and Townsend 1992). Moore (1995) argues that the learning-to-teach process involves discovering, experimenting, reassessing, exploring and often redefining self as a person and as a teacher. Bringing together these researchers’ work, the examination of teacher professional development involves understanding how teachers make sense of self as a person and a teacher and how the context of development (both in time and space) is mediated through interactive processes of interpretation and meaning.

**CPD practices and competing notions of professionalism**

The conceptualizations enrich our understanding of the complexities of CPD, and constitute the theoretical underpinning of various CPD strategies/models at the
practice level. Day (1999) brings together the various facets of CPD practices in a rather comprehensive definition of CPD:

Professional development consists of all natural learning experiences and those conscious and planned activities which are intended to be of direct or indirect benefit to the individual, group of school and which contribute, through these, to the quality of education in the classroom. It is the process by which, alone and with others, teachers review, renew and extend their commitment as change agents to the moral purposes of teaching; and by which they acquire and develop critically the knowledge, skills and emotional intelligence essential to good professional thinking, planning and practice with children, young people and colleagues through each phase of their teaching lives. (Day 1999, 4)

Researchers use different typologies to examine CPD practices. Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1999) identify three types of CPD strategies:

1. standards-based strategies which set goals for teachers’ professional performance;
2. school-based reform strategies which focus on creating a school-wide approach for change; and
3. development-based strategies which emphasize the development of individual teachers’ capacities.

Kennedy (2005) puts forward a nine-model typology and examines the capacity of each model in supporting professional autonomy and transformative practice. Fraser, Kennedy, Reid, and Mckinney (2007) extend Kennedy’s (2005) classification and propose a triple-lens framework for analyzing various facets of teacher professional learning:

1. domain of influence;
2. capacity for professional autonomy and transformative practice; and
3. sphere of action.

Some researchers go beyond examining CPD at the practice level and point out the need to interrogate conceptions of professionalism inherent in CPD policies and practices. Patrick, Forde, and McPhee (2003) highlight the issue of how the profession characterizes itself through the CPD it offers. Bolam and McMahon (2004) argue that the discussion of CPD “must consider what it means to be a professional and the extent to which professionals should be able to exercise autonomy in their work” (37). In a similar line of thought, Day and Sachs (2004) put forward two distinct notions of professionalism – managerial professionalism and democratic professionalism. The debate over these contemporary notions of professionalism is “the struggle evident in social policy-making in general between the desire to promote education as a means of increasing productivity in the global economic arena, on the one hand and concerns over promoting social justices and welfare on the other” (Kennedy 2007, 101). The interrogation of notions of professionalism brings about questions regarding the purpose of CPD: Is CPD to train teachers to be “managed professionals” (Codd 2005) to enhance performativity? Or is it to enhance professional autonomy, to empower teacher agency and to educate teachers individually and collectively to act as shapers, promoters and well-informed critics of reforms? (Bolam and McMahon 2004; Fraser et al., 2007; Patrick, Forde, and McPhee 2003).

The study
Informed by the literature on teacher professional development, the authors examined the lives of teachers who commenced their teaching careers in each of the
five decades from 1960s to 2000s. Purposeful sampling guided the selection of informants, which took into consideration variations in their years of entering the teaching profession, gender, teaching subjects, the level in which they teach, and the characteristics of their workplace. The demographic characteristics of the five informants are shown in Table 1.

**Data collection**

Illuminated by Goodson’s (2000) work, the life history method was adopted to seek understanding about the life stories of teachers located within the soci-historical context of Hong Kong. Methodological and data triangulation were employed to capture the complexities of teachers’ professional lives. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with individual informants to collect both their full life histories and thematic life histories (Goodson and Sikes 2001). The full life history constituted the major focus of the first interview and was an integral part of the following thematic interview. An interview was conducted with individual informants’ significant others.

Table 1. The informants’ profiles.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Year of entering teaching</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Current rank</th>
<th>Teaching subjects in 2000s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eva (2000s)</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>2005–Present:</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>English; Chinese; General Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leo (1980s)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>1987–88: School 1 (Secondary)</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>English; Religious Studies; Civic Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steward (1960s)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td>1967–79: School 1 (Primary)</td>
<td>Senior teacher before retirement</td>
<td>English; Mathematics; Computer subjects</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The data were collected in 2006 and 2007.
such as colleague or friend to seek an additional perspective of the informants’ personal and professional lives. All these interviews were conducted in 2006 and 2007. Policy documents concerning the teaching profession and education sector were examined to see the individuals’ professional lives in relation to their socio-historical context.

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed and a computer package N-Vivo was used to assist the storage and retrieval of categorized data. The categorization of data was informed by the constant comparison method (Glaser and Strauss 1967). With a conceptual lens informed by different theoretical conceptualizations of teacher development, various CPD strategies and notions of professionalism, progressively deeper inquiry into individual biographies was made to portray the uniqueness of each informant’s professional life. In cross-case analysis, commonalities in the patterns of CPD activities were identified.

The findings reported in the rest of the paper will start with an examination of the ecology in terms of the changing wider education policy context and CPD policy infrastructure in Hong Kong. Against this backdrop, teachers’ professional lives and CPD will be examined later.

The changing Hong Kong education policy context

Teachers’ CPD policy infrastructure is rooted in the ecology of the education system in Hong Kong. Education reforms that change the core processes of education, and a managerialist and market-oriented approach to school education characterize the context in which CPD takes place.

From quantitative expansion to quality concern

Hong Kong’s education system experienced its quantitative expansion of school places at the primary and secondary levels in the 1970s and 1980s. Since the 1990s, educators’ focus on the school sector has shifted from quantity to quality concerns. The concern for improving the quality of school education has been cumulating to large-scale reform initiatives in the 2000s. Education reform initiatives like the 3–3–4 academic re-structuring, curriculum reform, assessment reform, inclusive education, etc. entail changes in the core processes of education, and require a teaching force with increasing sophistication in professional knowledge and skills. These reforms drive teachers to engage in CPD activities to learn new professional knowledge and skills to implement them.

The managerialist and market-oriented approach to school education

Parallel to the education reforms that change the core processes of school education, a quasi-marketplace has been created for school education in Hong Kong since the late 1990s alongside the global trend of adopting private corporate management practices in the running of public sector (Tse 2005). Choi (2005) concurs that education policies in Hong Kong have been increasingly underpinned by the market ideology and its regulatory structure. Practices of managerialism have been
evidenced in policies like School-Based Management, School Self Evaluation and External School Review, Performance Indicators, and short-term/project fundings. These managerialist practices are introduced in a context of falling birth rate and hence student population in Hong Kong. With this demographic trend, Choi (2005) argues that fierce competition and the fight for survival pushes the practices of managerialism to the extreme. Tse (2005) cautions that quasi-market strategies often strengthen control over human autonomy and result in de-humanization and alienation on the part of educational practitioners.

**CPD policy infrastructure in Hong Kong**

The gradual creation of a CPD policy infrastructure in the last decade in Hong Kong can be illuminated by Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin’s (1999) typology of CPD strategies: a) development-based strategies, b) school-based strategies, and c) standards-based strategies.

**Development-based CPD strategies and upgrading of teachers’ qualifications**

Development-based CPD strategies go side by side with raising teachers’ academic and professional qualifications, which has been a key aspect of the professionalization project of teaching in Hong Kong. In 1997 the government announced an “all professionally trained, all university graduate” policy for new primary and secondary teachers by 2007. Though this policy goal has not been fully attained in 2007, it has been a significant policy initiative in raising the qualifications of teachers as compared to the policy in the 1950s – a university degree for upper secondary teachers and a training college certificate for primary and lower secondary teachers (Mak 2003).

In 2000s, mandatory qualifications have been set for language teachers. All English and Putonghua language teachers have to meet the Language Proficiency Requirement in order to be deployed to teach the language subjects. In addition, Chinese and English language teachers are required to have a subject degree with a postgraduate professional education major in the language subject (Standing Committee on Language Education and Research 2003; Education and Manpower Bureau 2004).

Table 2 shows that the five informants were involved both in qualification-related programmes and programmes that enhanced their professional knowledge and skills. Charles, Leo, Wendy and Steward’s pursuit of qualification-related programmes reflect the professionalization move in terms of upgrading teachers’ qualifications to the graduate level. Charles and Wendy also undertook some programmes that helped to develop their professional competence at the managerial level of the school hierarchy. The mandatory qualification requirements for language teachers in 2000s, i.e. the Language Proficiency Requirement and the language degree requirement, also drove the two of them to upgrade their qualifications in language teaching.

**School-based reform CPD strategies**

Policies related to the “school development” movement create organizational conditions for teachers’ collective engagement in CPD activities at the school level.
Table 2. Informants’ major CPD activities: Award-bearing programmes & other courses, mandatory qualifications.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Eva</th>
<th>Charles</th>
<th>Leo</th>
<th>Wendy</th>
<th>Steward</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1968: Mathematics Training Course</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1977–78: Teacher Certificate in Children with Learning Difficulties</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1979: Teacher Certificate in Resource class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1979–80: Teacher Training Course in Junior Secondary Mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1997–00: B.Ed.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued.)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Eva</th>
<th>Charles</th>
<th>Leo</th>
<th>Wendy</th>
<th>Steward</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000s</td>
<td>2005: LPAT in English</td>
<td>Lots of short courses on</td>
<td>2000–02: Master (TESOL)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Middle Management in 1990s &amp; 2000s</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001–05:</td>
<td>BA(ELT)</td>
<td>LPAT in Putonghua</td>
<td>2004–05: Senior Management</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2005–06: Short courses on</td>
<td></td>
<td>Training Programme</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Girl Guide &amp; Drama in</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2005–07: M.Ed.</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2005–07: PGDE(P) in</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chinese Subject Knowledge &amp;</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pedagogy</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2005–06: Aspiring Principal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Training Course</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The data were collected in 2006 and 2007.*
Since 1999, all publicly-funded schools in Hong Kong allocate three school days per annum for school-based staff development purposes. To align with education reform, the government has introduced “school-based support services” in which external agents like curriculum experts, tertiary teacher educators, etc work with teachers on school-based projects which are closely linked to the school’s development plan, curriculum and teachers’ CPD.

Standards-based CPD strategies

The various government policies provide webs of CPD opportunities for teachers and constitute the gradual creation of a CPD policy infrastructure. The first move of institutionalizing CPD activities was evidenced in the Principals’ CPD Framework setting professional development requirements for principals with different lengths of service in 2002 (Advisory Committee on Teacher Education and Qualifications (ACTEQ) 2003). In 2003, the ACTEQ put forward the Teacher Competencies Framework and the Policy Framework for Teachers’ CPD which proposed all teachers to engage in CPD activities of not less than 150 hours in a three-year cycle. These CPD frameworks set goals/standards for school practitioners’ performance.

Self-directed professional development in teachers’ professional lives in changing eras

Against the backdrop of CPD policy infrastructure in Hong Kong, we examine how the informants made sense of their professional lives and CPD experiences in changing times. The informants’ life stories show that an essential feature of teacher professional development is its self-directed nature irrespective of the changing eras. Self-directed professional development was driven by a commitment to the moral purposes of teaching, and characterized by teachers’ active agency in the construction of professional knowledge through integration and contextualization. School contexts with supportive organizational conditions provided opportunities for the social construction of professional knowledge which facilitated teachers’ self-directed professional development.

Commitment to the moral purposes of teaching

Steward and Wendy’s professional lives show that a strong conviction of one’s own belief in the moral purposes of teaching (Day 1999) drives self-directed professional development. Steward, who started teaching in 1968 and retired in 2006, had taught in five different schools at the primary and secondary levels. He looked back at his professional life in a satisfying way:

I have a sense of achievement and worth in a teaching career with positive and negative experiences. (Life history interview with Steward)

Throughout his teaching career, Steward had a strong conviction that education is “using one’s heart to influence others” throughout his career. His strong conviction in the moral purposes of teaching in terms of influencing the lives of low-achieving students drove his development-based CPD experiences. Though there were not many mandatory qualification requirements throughout his career, Steward attended many courses and learned a lot of things beyond teaching. These rich “liberal education” experiences enabled him to go beyond developing competence in teaching, but in educating the “whole person” of low-achieving students:
These learning experiences, e.g. how to produce voice-recording devices, did not directly help my teaching. Yet they enrich my knowledge and are useful to my life... Such knowledge helps education ... as I can make use of them to interact with low-achieving students. (Life history interview with Steward)

Wendy joined the teaching profession in 1976, and received a number of promotions to her current position as vice principal in the school in which she had taught since 1982. She had a strong humanistic belief that “the school should not give up any student” throughout her career. Wendy participated in a number of qualification-related programmes and other non-award bearing courses in which she developed various aspects of professional competence in taking up new teaching and professional responsibilities, e.g. teaching special needs students, teaching new subjects, taking up counselling duties, assuming responsibilities at the managerial level of the school hierarchy. When she looked back at her professional life, she felt satisfying and said,

Fruitful experiences, no regret, thankfulness, having a sense of worth. (Life history interview with Wendy)

Construction of professional knowledge through integration and contextualization

Self-directed professional development is characterized by the teacher’s active agency in integrating different sources of knowledge and contextualizing knowledge in practice situations. Steward’s view revealed that the more theoretical forms of knowledge learned in CPD programmes needed to be integrated with one’s practical knowledge and contextualized in practice situations, and the teacher’s active agency in this knowledge construction process was important:

Teacher education faculty introduces teaching methods. Yet such methods are not alive. One has to think about how to make use of these methods to facilitate student learning... Teachers’ ways of doing things need to fit the context and the people [students]. It is meaningless to stick to one way of doing things. (Thematic interview with Steward)

Charles, who started to work as a primary school teacher in 1995, held a learning-oriented outlook and shared a common view with Steward on the importance of teacher’s active agency in constructing professional knowledge:

Learning is never-ending... One has to integrate what one learns in teacher education courses... This is a critical ability of teachers. (Life history interview with Charles)

Charles’ self-directed professional development was driven by his great commitment to nurture students, lead teachers of his school towards professional excellence and contribute to the profession at large especially on improving the quality of primary education in Hong Kong. His outstanding performance enabled him to get quick promotions his school in a relatively short period of time. He had been very active in sharing his professional knowledge in classroom management with teachers outside his school, and developing his leadership capacity over years.

Social construction of professional knowledge in context with facilitating organizational conditions

Professional knowledge is socially constructed when teachers interact in groups and with more knowledgeable others (Putnam and Borko 1997). Such interaction is likely
to take place in schools with organizational conditions that provide natural and structured opportunities of learning among teachers. The findings show that school-based CPD experiences in the form of mentoring and working with seniors in the school constituted teachers’ self-directed professional development.

Eva began to teach English Language in a secondary school in 2005. The organizational conditions of the school created structured learning opportunities for the social construction of professional knowledge. With the school’s structural arrangement of an experienced teacher as her mentor, she was well-supported personally and professionally in the beginning year of teaching. She described her relationship with the mentor as “just like teacher-and-student and friends”. Through interactions with her mentor, she constructed professional knowledge in authentic settings in areas like English Language teaching, and micro-political literacy of working in the school.

Steward’s informal mentoring of other teachers shows his initiative in creating natural learning opportunities for teachers’ social construction of professional knowledge. Driven by his strong commitment to the moral purposes of teaching, he worked closely with his partner, through spontaneous dialogue and collaboration, on how to work with individual “difficult” students at the early phase of his career. In another school which he taught later, Steward was very enthusiastic in sharing with beginning teachers his rich practical knowledge in handling students’ behaviour problems and was ready to provide a helping hand to them in handling student discipline matters:

I loved to teach other teachers, taught them how to interact with these [difficult] students... I tried to support them when there was difficulty in handling a mischievous student. (Life history interview with Steward)

During the course of their careers, Charles and Wendy were immersed in lots of natural learning opportunities in their interaction with seniors in the workplace, which gradually prepared them to take up senior positions in the school. Wendy’s interaction with more knowledgeable others provided her natural learning opportunities to learn about various aspects of school work. The professional knowledge she constructed in these interactions was important to her when she took up new responsibilities at different stages of her career:

I did not have a formal mentor. But some senior teachers serve as good models throughout my career... I observed my fellow experienced teachers’ interaction with students, and learned from their approach... I am not a careful person, yet I learn from another senior teacher’s careful way of doing things. (Life history interview with Wendy)

Charles constructed professional knowledge in leadership and management from the modelling of three successive principals in his school and his interaction with them. Such knowledge complemented his more theoretical forms of learning in a range of school administrator courses:

I learn different things from the three principals... The first principal is a very understanding person... I learn from him the importance of human relationships. The second principal showed that we need to think “broadly”. He showed the importance of allowing differences among individual teachers when one makes plan for the school... The third principal is a very principled person. I learn that as long as one adheres to a right principle, one may need to bear with the possibility of being disliked... I learn different management strategies from the principals. (Life history interview with Charles)
Teachers’ professional lives and externally-driven professional development in a competitive era

Despite the self-directed nature of CPD identified in the informants’ professional lives irrespective of changing times, this study shows that in an era which moved towards a managerialist and market-oriented approach to school education, there was a tendency for informants’ CPD to take on the form of externally-driven CPD activities. Besides, informants’ professional lives evidenced competition among individuals and schools, intensification of work, stress, uncertainty and alienation in one way or the other.

Catching up qualifications and overcrowded CPD activities

Mandatory qualifications and competitiveness in the job market of teaching probably engendered externally-driven professional development:

To keep abreast with the changing world, continuous learning is important. (Life history interview with Eva)

Eva held a forward-looking view in an era of change. Her learning-oriented outlook was characterized by an urge to be competitive in the job market of teaching. Eva indicated that although her degree qualification in English language teaching was adequate to meet the mandatory qualification requirements for language teaching, sitting for the examination of the Language Proficiency Requirement provided an “extra” credential for her in the competitive job market. She had a strong sense of purpose of engaging with CPD in English teaching, especially drama in education, in the context of the New Senior Secondary curriculum. She was rather purposeful in developing her expertise in drama in education as this put her on the competitive edge in the job market.

The demand of mandatory qualifications made Charles take many courses within a short period of time and the rapid pace of education reforms caused intensification in his work. Overnight work and a few hours of sleeping time were not uncommon as a result of his “over-crowded” CPD activities together with the middle management responsibilities in his school:

My kids sleep at 9:00 p.m. I re-started my work after 9:00 p.m... Sometimes when I am really very busy with lots of work, I have no time to sleep... I have to attend courses. Normally I sleep after midnight, and wake up at about 6:00 a.m. (Life history interview with Charles)

School-based CPD and competition among schools

In recent years, school-based reform strategies were often coloured by a competitive flavour and schools made use of school-based initiatives to demonstrate “performance” to the education authority and to parents. In her capacity as the vice principal of the school, Wendy led and created structured learning opportunities for other teachers in a government-sponsored school-based curriculum project. The project was featured by team teaching arrangements which aimed at English-medium teaching. While this initiative provided structured learning opportunities for teachers’ social construction of professional knowledge, participation in this project served the purpose of maintaining the English Medium status of the school which was perceived as important to enhance the school’s competitiveness in getting good student intake.
Eva had her first year experience in a learning-enriched school within a context of fierce competition among neighbouring schools. Organizing a lot of reform initiatives in English Language teaching was one of the strategies that the school adopted to compete with other schools. While she had lots of opportunities of social construction of professional knowledge in English language teaching and related activities, the intensification of work made her occasionally feel alienated:

There is no time for teachers to slow down to engage in real collaboration… We just keep on working on many things… There is no time for us to revise our teaching practices. How can we really produce quality work? How can we be happy and have job satisfaction? (Thematic interview with Eva)

Alienation, stress and uncertainty

Eva’s alienation was not surprising in an era characterized by education reforms that changed the core processes of education, as well as a managerialist and market-oriented approach to school education. Other informants’ lives also revealed alienation, stress and uncertainty. In a context with education reforms taking place at a rapid pace and on an enormous scale in the 2000s, Wendy experienced much stress in her vice principal position and she prepared for retirement in a few years’ time:

The principal delegates lots of responsibilities to us [the two vice principals]… I work closely with the other vice principal… We have to be responsible for the school’s development. I feel the pressure… The previous vice principal applied for early retirement when facing the many documents of education reform. At that time, education reforms just began and our school could wait and see… But now education reforms are so close to us, and our school cannot remain unchanged. We must “move”… Next year, there will be External School Review. I will be the person-in-charge. I’m also in charge of School Based Assessment, School Based Management, School Improvement Team… (Life history interview with Wendy)

Steward had great reservation with the External School Review which required schools to document their work according to a template of Key Performance Measures and Performance Indicators. He felt alienated that this managerialist practice looked for written evidence of what could not be totally verbalized in the core processes of education (e.g. caring students, supporting students to learn, etc.), and drew teachers away from what they regarded as the core responsibilities of their professional role:

The External Reviewer assesses your work/performance “presented in words”. We all know that a lot of work [of teachers] cannot be expressed in words. For example, how can I tell you my care of students? What I can write is “I care him/her”. [With such a few words] it is likely that this is not a “pass” grade [in my performance]. (Life history interview with Steward)

Leo’s professional life evidenced the uncertainties generated by an increasingly market-oriented approach to school education. He had taught in two secondary schools since 1987. He was a teacher with dedication in enhancing students’ learning, contributing to the computerization of school management and sharing his professional knowledge with other teachers in the profession. Being a teacher of computer subjects, constantly updating knowledge with computer software in the Information Era was commonplace to him. To him, CPD experiences which involved long-term engagement in systematic learning in qualification-related
programmes and inter-school curriculum project in his teaching subject engendered genuine professional development:

The knowledge accumulated [in the M.Sc. programme] is used in my teaching in computer subjects... I think “long-term” [and systematic] learning experiences with assessment requirements make me more serious with the learning. (Life history interview with Leo)

The curriculum and assessment reform in computer subjects in the 2000s was not aligned with his belief in what was meaningful student learning in the subjects, and caused intensification of work to him. The falling demographic trend and the fierce competition among schools in the 2000s made him feel the possibility that he would likely be the one to lose his job in case of “downsizing” in his current school. This probably caused doubts in his professional identity. He was in a process of reassessing and redefining his sense of self as a person and as a teacher. His interpretation of professional life was coloured with great uncertainties, and he focused more on the “here-and-now”:

I love teaching. Yet in the future I may not have opportunity to teach. I may have to re-assess my development – to think about what I can do if I cannot find a job in teaching... Now I am in my mid-life, perhaps mid-life crisis ... I face much stress. As my school is contracting in size, I don’t know where to go... I have no idea about how to summarize my professional life, perhaps just a concern of the quality of present generation of students. (Life history interview with Leo)

Discussion and conclusion

Though the study reported in this paper was conducted with a limited sample of teachers in Hong Kong, its findings enrich our understanding of teachers’ professional lives and CPD in changing times. Through studying the professional lives and CPD of five teachers who joined teaching in different decades, this study shows the features of teachers’ self-directed professional development irrespective of changing eras:

1. driven by a commitment to the moral purposes of teaching;
2. characterized by teachers’ active agency in professional knowledge construction; and
3. supported by facilitating organizational conditions in schools.

The findings also reveal that the increasingly market-oriented and managerialist approach to school education gradually shapes a “performativity” culture and professional development is more likely to become externally-driven. While the conceptual distinction between self-directed and externally-driven professional development enriches our understanding of how teachers make sense of CPD experiences in qualitatively different ways, caution is needed when regarding specific examples as neatly falling into a distinct type. Nevertheless, fierce competition among individuals and schools, intensification of work, stress, uncertainty and alienation on the part of teachers revealed in the study evidence the de-humanizing effects of the increasingly managerialist and market-oriented approach to school education. The extent to which such de-humanizing effects on teachers would distance them from the moral purposes of teaching is worth paying attention to.

The findings of this study concur with some researchers’ critique of the detrimental effects of the move towards marketization in education (Bottery 2006; Codd 2005;
Choi 2005; Day and Sachs 2004; Tse 2005). If what is reported in this paper is a widespread phenomenon, then there is a need for the education community and wider society to have a deep reflection on the perils of adopting quasi-market strategies in education. While counteracting the de-humanizing effects of quasi-market strategies in education is necessary, we need to address a more fundamental question: Do we need competent and “managed” professionals to work in education with a major aim of increasing productivity in the global economic arena or do we need a transformative teaching profession dedicated to education as a public investment for the creation of a prosperous, just and caring society?

At the policy and practice levels, educational leaders need to consider the following when developing CPD policy infrastructure at the system level and practices at the school levels:

1. the importance of reducing the overload of initiatives and creating time and space for genuine engagement with educational issues;
2. the need to have policies and practices that restore a culture of trust in schools and within the education community; and
3. the reconstruction of teacher professionalism in which the moral agency of the teacher is fully acknowledged.

While issues in the education ecology need to be examined and sustained and comprehensive support for teacher development need to be provided, teachers at the individual and group levels need to rethink their own agency in

1. sustaining and renewing their commitment to the moral purposes of teaching;
2. constructing professional knowledge through integration and contextualization; and
3. shaping organizational conditions to support the social construction of professional knowledge.

It is only through the synergy of efforts at the individual, collective, school and system levels to adopt a transformative stance that the development of a transformative teaching profession is possible.

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