

## **“My Two Masters”: Conflict, Contestation, and Identity Construction Within a Teaching Practicum**

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*Abstract: This paper reports the results of a qualitative study into the teaching practice experiences of eight preservice English language teachers in Hong Kong. Using in-depth interviews, the preservice teachers' practicum experiences are explored in terms of their understandings of the requirements of their teacher education institution and their teaching placement school, their relations with full time teachers within their placement schools, as well as their own beliefs about the teaching and learning of the English language. A contribution of this study is to examine these experiences through the lens of teacher identity construction. Results indicated that participants constructed rigid divisions between different identity positions that they took on, resisted, and rejected during their teaching practice experiences, and that relations between these identity categories were often characterized by antagonism. It is argued that such antagonism may be detrimental to the preservice teachers during their practicum and as they move into full time teaching positions. How these divisions might be challenged is discussed and implications for future research are considered.*

### **Introduction**

Teaching practice is regarded as “one of the most important aspects of a teacher education program for learner teachers” (Farrell, 2008, p.226). Gebhard (2009), drawing on the work of Richards and Crookes (1988), argues that the goals of the teaching practicum for student teachers include gaining practical classroom experience, applying theory and teaching ideas, discovering from observing experienced teachers, expanding awareness of how to set goals, and questioning, articulating, and reflecting on their own teaching and learning philosophies. An analysis of these goals suggests a pattern of key words and concepts - including applying, discovering, expanding awareness, questioning, and reflecting - which underscores the role the practicum plays in providing student teachers with an “awareness of their teaching practices, and the personal values and beliefs that underlie them” (Gebhard, 2009, p.251). The emphasis on awareness and questioning, as well as the importance of reflecting on values, beliefs, and philosophies, requires that the teaching practicum be viewed not solely in terms of the transfer of knowledge and skills into teaching careers, but as a crucial period of teacher identity construction, where identity refers to “our understandings of who we are and who we think other people are” (Danielewics, 2001, p.10). This approach is consistent with Britzman's (2003) rejection of the reduction of teaching to the application of decontextualized skills and predetermined images. Rather, learning to teach “is always the process of becoming: a time of formation and transformation” (p. 31). As Berci (2007) puts it, “teaching needs to be taken up as identity rather than as role in context of practical problems that need to be solved” (p. 63). For Gebhard (2008), attention to identity construction

highlights the dynamic and social nature of learning to teach, allowing teacher educators to focus student teachers' attention on how their practicum experiences inform their understandings of teaching. For example, Gaudelli and Ousley (2009) maintain that a focus on identity work in teacher education can help student teachers to negotiate sources of tension and conflict within their teaching practice, such as the gap between university education coursework and schools, by exploring how a sense of self can be established and maintained within this new teaching context.

While the practicum is considered "one of the biggest influences of the teacher education course" (Farrell, 2008, p.227) in terms of teacher development, studies of teaching practice have been dominated by accounts from the Western world and have given only limited attention to understanding the Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) practicum (Atay, 2007; Yan & He, 2010). In addition, although "much recent literature on teacher education highlights the importance of identity in teacher development" (Beauchamp & Thomas 2009, p. 175), very little has been done to understand the process of identity construction within the context of language teaching and teachers (Cross & Gearon, 2007). This study addresses these gaps in research by exploring the role of the practicum in teacher identity construction amongst a group of eight preservice English language teachers in Hong Kong. The paper begins by describing the theoretical framework this paper uses to understand teacher identity construction. This framework is then applied to examine the reflections of these student teachers on an eight week teaching practicum they completed within different secondary schools in Hong Kong. The results of this study are then discussed in terms of the theoretical framework used to investigate teacher identity construction and implications for teacher education, as well as opportunities for future research, are considered.

The following section describes the theoretical framework used to explore preservice teachers' identity construction during a teaching practicum in terms of both "identity-in-discourse" and "identity-in-practice" (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005, p. 39). First, identity-in-practice is discussed using Wenger's (1998) model of identity construction, and then identity-in-discourse is examined by drawing upon the work of Fairclough (2003).

### **Teacher identity construction: Discourse and practice**

Identity-in-practice describes an action-orientated approach to understanding identity, underlining the need to investigate identity formation as a social matter, which is operationalized through concrete practices and tasks. Wenger (1998) discusses identity construction as "an experience" (p. 163) in terms of three modes of belonging: engagement, imagination and alignment. Through engagement, individuals establish and maintain joint enterprises and negotiate meanings. Engagement allows us to invest in what we do and in our relations with other people, gaining "a lived sense of who we are" (Wenger, 1998, p. 192). Imagination refers to creating images of the world and our place within it across time and space by extrapolating beyond our own experience. Alignment coordinates an individual's activities within broader structures and enterprises, allowing the identity of a larger group to become part of the identity of the individual participants (Wenger, 1998, pp.173-174).

Wenger (1998) also investigates identity formation in terms of the negotiation of meanings that matter within a social configuration. For Wenger (1998), meanings exist within a broader structure termed the "economy of meanings" (p. 199), in which a range of meanings are produced, each of which competes "for the definition of certain events, actions, or artifacts" (p. 199). Within an economy of meanings, different individuals have varying degrees of control over the meanings that are produced, a situation Wenger (1998) describes

as the “ownership of meanings” (p.200). The diverse degrees of control different individuals have over meanings – the relations of ownership of meaning - shape the negotiability of meanings and result in some meanings having more currency than others. Negotiability then refers to the extent to which individuals can use, modify, and claim as their own the meanings that matter to them. If such negotiability is absent an identity of non-participation and marginality can result; the individuals’ experience “becomes irrelevant because it cannot be asserted and recognized as a form of competence” (Wenger, 1998, p. 203).

The other aspect of a comprehensive understanding of teacher identity construction, “identity-in-discourse” (Varghese, et al., 2005, p. 39), acknowledges that identities are discursively constituted, mainly through language. In poststructuralist theory, for example, identity construction occurs as individuals identify with particular subject positions within discourses (Weedon, 1997). In this view, language and identity are mutually constitutive; while language presents to the individual historically specific ways of giving meaning to social reality, “it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed” (Weedon, 1997, p. 21). Wenger’s (1998) framework for understanding identity construction has, however, been criticized for failing to develop a coherent theory of language in use (Creeze, 2005). To address this limitation, this paper draws upon Fairclough’s (2003) model of identity formation, which argues that “what people commit themselves to in texts is an important part of how they identify themselves, the texturing of identity” (p.164). Fairclough (2003) examines the commitments an author makes in terms of both modality and evaluation. Modality refers to what individuals commit themselves to in terms of truth, obligation and necessity, and is often displayed in the use of modal verbs, such as “should” and “must”, and modal adverbs, including “probably” and “possibly”. Evaluation describes what is believed to be desirable or undesirable and can be expressed in terms of what is considered good or bad, as well as useful and important. While such evaluations can be expressed explicitly, through the use of terms such as “wonderful” or “dreadful” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 172), they can also be more deeply embedded in texts through, for example, invoking implicit value systems that are assumed to be shared between author and interpreter. Finally, this paper examines the texturing of teacher identities in terms of “legitimation”, that is, the ways in which individuals explain and justify their various commitments to truth (Fairclough 2003, p. 98). The strategies for legitimation Fairclough (2003) considers include authorization, which occurs when reference is made to tradition, laws, or institutional authority, rationalization, which relies upon references to the utility of a particular course of action, moral evaluation, which appeals to value systems, and mythopoesis, legitimation derived from narratives.

To summarize, the analytical framework used in this paper responds to the need to investigate teacher identity in terms of both “identity-in-discourse” and “identity-in-practice” (Varghese et al., 2005). Although the understandings of identity construction proposed by Fairclough (2003) represent different emphasis from that of Wenger (1998) - the former concerned with discourse, the latter with practice - drawing upon both frameworks allows this paper to address calls for “multi-faceted” and “multi-layered” analyses of identity construction (Mendoza, Halualani, & Drzewiecka, 2002). Based on this theoretical framework, the collection and analysis of data was guided by the following research question: *How was the process of teacher identity construction shaped by the experiences of a teaching practicum for one group of preservice English language teachers in Hong Kong?*

## **The study**

### **Setting and participants**

The participants in this study were eight preservice teachers, four male and four female, all of whom were enrolled in the final year of a four year Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) program, majoring in English language teaching, at the Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIEd), a dedicated teacher education institution in Hong Kong. The B.Ed. program, designed to prepare students to take up full time English language teaching posts in local Hong Kong secondary schools, aims to develop candidates' proficiency and knowledge of the English language and culture. All B.Ed. candidates undertake two eight week periods of teaching practice during years three and four of the program. This practicum takes the form of full time placement within a local school and aims to provide student teachers with opportunities to develop and demonstrate competencies and readiness to enter the teaching profession. The responsibilities of student teachers throughout their practicum includes planning units and lessons, teaching English language classes, assessing students' learning, and reflecting on their own teaching. The role of the HKIEd supervisor is to support and help student teachers, as well as to assess their competence at the stage of development he or she has reached. In addition, each student teacher is supported within their practicum placement school by a full time teacher, whose role includes providing comments of a formative nature, designed to help the student teachers progress and improve their practice.

The student teachers who took part in this study were invited to do so because they had recently completed the eight week practicum described above and were willing and able to share their understandings and experiences with me. Sampling decisions also sought to achieve a gender balance amongst participants, as well as a balance amongst the different types of placement schools in which B.Ed. candidates complete their teaching practicum. For example, schools in Hong Kong are banded from one to three, with band one being the highest, indicating that students are of high academic proficiency. This study includes practicum placement schools from each of these three bandings: two band one schools, four band two schools, and two band three schools. As Duff (2008) points out, it is also helpful for researchers to clarify their role in the research process. While I teach on the B.Ed. program in which each participant was enrolled, I did not serve as the teaching practicum supervisor for any of these student teachers. It was felt that this relationship would allow me to better understand the practicum experiences of this group of student teachers by drawing upon my knowledge of the context without being so close to the participants that I could not explore and understand these experiences from different perspectives. The names of the participants in this paper are pseudonyms.

### **Data collection and analysis**

Semi-structured interviews, lasting between forty and fifty-five minutes, were conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of the student teachers' experiences of their teaching practicum. Interview questions reflected the belief that social conditions can be investigated at different levels (Fairclough, 2001, p.20). At the level of the social institution, participants were asked to describe and reflect upon their teaching practice experiences in terms of what they perceived to be the requirements for teaching within their placement school, as well as in relation to HKIEd. At the interpersonal level, the student teachers discussed their relations with supporting teachers within their placement schools, and with their HKIEd supervisor. At the intrapersonal level, the participants were asked to describe their beliefs about how the English language should be taught within Hong Kong schools.

Analyses of the data occurred in an iterative manner as I moved between the data and research literature on identity construction. As interview transcripts were reviewed multiple times, salient themes and tentative categories that appeared of potential relevance to answering the research question were constructed from the data rather than from any preconceived hypotheses (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For instance, the initial identification of key themes in the data directly reflected the language and concepts used by the participants. The development of these “indigenous concepts” (Patton, 2002, p. 454) is illustrated in the comments of one participant, Martin:

*As the teacher I'm just like the machine. I think this created a lot of conflict for me*  
Martin introduces the identity category “machine” to describe one of the teacher identities he took on throughout his teaching practice experience. Linguistically, he goes on to negatively evaluate this identity position using the term “conflict”, where it is implied that experiencing conflict during teaching practice is undesirable. As recurring themes were identified, more theoretical categories were constructed using the data and relevant literature. Examples of these categories included “engagement in teaching”, “imagination and teaching”, and “alignment with institutional goals and practices”. Provisional understandings about each individual participant in terms of their self positioning and their construction of teacher identities during their teaching practicum were then developed. These were compared with data from other participants and were confirmed, modified, or discarded. Participants were consulted for their interpretations and further refinements made.

## Results

### Placement schools and identity construction

At the level of social institutions, individuals confront already established forms of organization, as well as the relations of power which inhere in those organisations (Fairclough, 2001). For the participants, one of these organizations was their practicum placement school. The following comments were typical of the advice that participants reported receiving upon arrival at these schools:

#### Excerpt One

*The school told me the most important thing is that I have to keep good discipline; otherwise there will be big problems. So I became more the discipline teacher and not the English teacher. It's frustrating. (Beverly)*

#### Excerpt Two

*The school emphasized that it's absolutely important to be sticking to the syllabus, completing the syllabus on time. And I must get students prepared for exams; do past papers, then do checking, and then do it again. If I didn't then the school told me that the students might not do well in their exams and this would be bad for the school and I would look bad as a teacher. So, during teaching practice, I was a textbook, robot teacher, like lots of teachers in Hong Kong, getting students through exams but not learning English. As the teacher I'm just like the machine. I think this created a lot of conflict for me. (Martin)*

#### Excerpt Three

*We are in a struggle because during teaching practice we have to be robot teachers because schools tell us that we have to do all the textbook exercises, exams, grammar structure. (Keith)*

The themes in these excerpts include discipline, completing a syllabus, and examinations. The significance of each theme for the participants' experience of teaching in these schools is underscored by strongly modalized statements of belief about what placement schools demanded of these preservice teachers. Martin, for instance, pointed out that ‘sticking to the syllabus’ was ‘*absolutely* important’ at his school. Indeed, following the directions of the school became not one of choice but of necessity for these preservice teachers: ‘I *must* get students prepared for exams’ (Martin); I *have* to keep good discipline’

(Beverly). Legitimization of these demands took the form of mythopoesis; cautionary tales that were used by the placement schools to warn student teachers of the consequences of not maintaining good discipline ('otherwise there will be big problems', Beverly) and of not preparing students for examinations ('students might not do well in their exams', Martin).

Several identity positions, that participants argued they were required to take on by their placement schools, are named in extracts one to three, including 'discipline teacher', 'textbook robot teacher', and 'machine'. These identity positions are implicitly evaluated as undesirable; being a 'robot' and a 'machine', for instance, imply a mechanical approach to teaching that is devoid of both agency and emotion. For Beverly, rejection of the identity categories made available to her by her placement school occurred as she established an oppositional relationship between the identity positions of 'discipline teacher' and 'English teacher' ('more the discipline teacher and *not* the English teacher'). The negative consequences of attempts to position her as the former are underscored by her final expression of frustration. The participants' rejection of identity positions such as 'discipline teacher' and 'machine robot teacher' is also reflected in their descriptions of the 'conflict' (Martin) and the 'struggle' (Keith) that characterized their confrontation with existing relations of power within their placement schools. Keith's use of the plural 'we', claiming authority to speak on behalf of his fellow B.Ed. classmates, implies that these struggles were not isolated to the participants in this study, nor to the specific schools in which they undertook their teaching practice. One possible explanation for these relations of conflict is suggested in excerpts four and five:

Excerpt Four

*On the one hand, the school expects me to stick to a very tight teaching schedule, I had to teach a lot of things like one whole unit and all the grammar and the reading, but on the other hand (HKIED) needs me to contextualize teaching so I told (my HKIED supervisor) that it's very difficult for me to contextualize every lesson. I have to keep up with the teaching schedules. So there is this conflict between what I'm expected to do by my (HKIED) supervisor and what the school expects. The school doesn't care about contextualized teaching. So I have my two opposing masters; the school and (HKIED). (Phyllis)*

Excerpt Five

*(HKIED) expects to see skillful teachers, that we can be imaginative and creative teachers....we need to show skills like student-centered teaching, use group work, scaffolding, inductive learning, cater for the learner differences... when I'm observed by my (HKIED) supervisor, I have to think about the student activities, I must use the updated things to teach. But my school needs something different, they want teaching to the textbook...so it's very tough to do all this, to keep everyone happy. (Mandy)*

Excerpts four and five describe a second set of institutional forces that shaped the processes of identity construction for these preservice teachers: the 'wants' and 'needs' of their teacher education institution. Mandy's description, in the form of a list, is representative of what many participants understood these wants and needs to be, including learner centered teaching, group work and catering for learner diversity. Linguistically, both preservice teachers create a dichotomy between the perceived expectations of HKIED and those of their placement schools in terms of the meanings of teaching. For example, Phyllis begins by juxtaposing the wants and needs of the school and HKIED: '*on the one hand* the school...*but on the other hand* (HKIED)...'. She returns to the now familiar theme of "conflict", which was discussed earlier, in describing the relationship between these differing expectations, a view which is supported linguistically by the use of terms such as "opposing" and "different" throughout both excerpts. The commitment of Phyllis and Mandy to truth of the significance of these conflicting expectations in shaping their practicum experiences is underscored as both student teachers recast what are initially presented as expectations ('the school *expects*...'; '(HKIED) *expects*...') as fervent statements of necessity: 'I *had* to teach a

lot of things...'; '(HKIED) *needs* me to...'. This tension is evaluated as an undesirable aspect of both Phyllis and Mandy's practicum experiences, marked by terms including "difficult" (Phyllis) and "very tough" (Mandy), where it is assumed that difficult and tough practicum experiences are not desirable. The final comment by Phyllis further underlines the tension evident in these excerpts when she points to the differences in the meanings of teaching that she believed existed between her placement school and HKIED ('The school doesn't care about contextualized teaching'), going on to underline this division by casting her placement school and HKIED as her 'two *opposing* masters'.

#### *Interpersonal relations and identity construction*

At the interpersonal level, participants reflected on their relations with supporting teachers within their placement schools:

##### Excerpt Six

My supporting teacher was very nice, very helpful. From her, what I've learnt is how to manage my class, I learned a lot of classroom management skills. But I didn't learn much as to the real teaching, the real teaching techniques. I really need to learn the actual teaching techniques of English. (Joyce)

##### Excerpt Seven

*My supporting teacher was kind but his comments on my teaching were very exam focused, like 'don't teach too slowly, keep up with the curriculum'....it made me frustrated because I thought 'it's so limited'. From my course I know there is so much more to teaching than just this but that's all they gave me, they don't give me comprehensive feedback. What I didn't learn about was real teaching techniques just exam preparation and doing textbook exercises. (Brendon)*

Within excerpts six and seven, terms such as 'nice', 'helpful', and 'kind' convey a sense of the positive interpersonal relations participants reported experiencing with their supporting teachers. Joyce provides further evidence of the participants' endorsement of these relations when she refers to the 'classroom management skills' she believes she acquired from her supporting teacher, where it is assumed that acquiring these skills is a desirable outcome of the student teachers' practicum experiences. Joyce and Brendon however immediately qualify their positive evaluations of these relations, flagged linguistically by the term 'but', as well as in their selection of phrases such as 'so limited', 'what I didn't learn about was...', and 'that's all they gave me', a discursive strategy which signals limits to the type of learning that Joyce described. Both preservice teachers go on to then define these limits to learning in terms of knowledge about 'real' or 'actual teaching techniques'. Nevertheless, Joyce underscores her commitment to acquiring these techniques through emphatic statements of necessity: 'I *really need* to learn the actual teaching techniques of English' (Joyce). Brendon's pronouncements about these limits to learning draw upon institutional authority, derived from his participation in the B. Ed. course ('from my course'), and are underscored by a strong commitment to the belief that this program has equipped him with a breadth of knowledge he appears to find lacking in his interactions with a supporting teacher within his placement school: '*I know* there is so much more to teaching'.

#### **Beliefs about teaching and identity construction**

As Fairclough (2001) points out, 'whenever people speak or listen or write or read, they do so in ways that are determined socially and have social effects' (p. 19). This section therefore explores how, beyond the immediate social environment and the level of social institutions, broader social structures, as reflected in participants' systems of beliefs about

teaching and learning, also shaped their practicum experiences. Excerpts eight and nine are representative of statements the preservice teachers made about their approach to teaching and learning:

Excerpt Eight

I believe in task based teaching. I need students to see the meaning of learning English so that I can motivate them to learn. I want them to see the meaning of learning. So I will use a creative, modern, task based approach, give them a task to do and scaffold them, for example, language input ... the task can be derived from their daily life, using authentic material, so that students can relate it to their daily life, they can see the purpose of doing the task, not like robot textbook teaching. When it's a task, for example, students design a birthday party for their friends, it's more interesting than just the textbook topics, which can be really boring. With a task based approach, students will learn more. (Martin)

Excerpt Nine

*I believe students must be center stage; they must be active participants in class. That's the most important thing. So the main character, the main actors and actresses are students, not me. Students must not see me as a transmitter of knowledge but as a supporting role. However, I found from my experience that teaching practices in Hong Kong schools make it very difficult to do this because of the traditional teaching methods, which are teacher centered, and not good for language learning. (Keith)*

The participants describe their approaches to teaching and learning in terms of strongly modalized statements of belief ('*I believe in task based teaching*'; '*I believe students must be center stage*'). Although these are presented as personalized belief statements, evidence of the influence of modern educational discourses, which formed a crucial component of all the participants' experiences as student teachers, is embodied throughout both excerpts, as Martin and Keith refer to 'task based learning', 'scaffold', the use of 'authentic teaching materials', and students as 'active participants' in the classroom. The participants' commitment to truth of these beliefs about teaching and learning is reflected in the positive evaluations both preservice teachers offer of such educational discourses. Linguistically, this occurs through their repeated references to students being conscious of the 'meaning' and 'purpose' of learning, as well as to teachers motivating students and making learning 'interesting', where it is taken as self evident that meaningful and purposive learning, as well as teachers motivating and interesting their students in learning, are desirable outcomes. These commitments are also articulated not as recommendations about what should or ought to happen in the language learning classroom, but rather as forceful statements of necessity; '*I need students to see the meaning of learning*' (Martin); '*Students must not see me as a transmitter of knowledge*' (Keith).

Martin legitimizes his commitment to task based learning through rationalization, describing the utility of a task based approach in terms of gains to student learning ('with a task based approach, students will learn more'). Martin and Keith go on to reject those 'teaching practices in Hong Kong schools' which 'make it very difficult' to operationalize their beliefs about teaching and learning. Martin, for example, returns to the theme of 'robot textbook teaching', whose undesirability is established explicitly through the use of terms such as 'boring', as well as being assumed through its positioning in opposition to task based teaching in which students can 'see the purpose of doing the task, *not like* robot textbook teaching'. Similarly, for Keith, the 'traditional teaching methods' used in Hong Kong schools are negatively assessed as 'not good for language learning'.

## Discussion

Wenger's (1998) description of identity construction in terms of three modes of belonging – engagement, imagination, and alignment – is helpful in understanding the experiences of the preservice teachers through their teaching practicum. As Wenger (1998) points out, identity construction is in part experiential; “identity in practice is a way of being in the world” (p. 151). The experiences of these preservice teachers suggest that their ways of being in the world of teaching reflected different forms of engagement. For example, the participants' lived experiences of teaching practice reflected their situated participation in the community of their placement schools, a form of engagement which was underpinned by meanings of teaching and learning that valued discipline, keeping up with teaching schedules, and preparing students for examinations (excerpts one to three). However, the student teachers' being in the world of teaching also included participation in a community of student teachers undertaking the final year of a B.Ed. program. Membership of this community appeared to shape the student teachers' engagement in teaching practice in ways very different from that of their placement schools by assigning greater currency to those meanings of teaching and learning that positioned the participants as imaginative and creative teachers (excerpts four and five). The operationalization of these meanings of teaching and learning occurred, for example, through engagement in contextualized teaching (excerpt four), inductive learning (excerpt five), the use of task based learning (excerpt eight), and the positioning of students as active participants in the classroom (excerpt nine).

The work of imagination, which involves extrapolating beyond the here and now by making connections across time and space, “depends on the kind of picture of the world and of ourselves we can build” (Wenger 1998, p. 194). The preservice teachers constructed multiple pictures of the world of teaching, reflecting the different forms of engagement described above. For example, preservice teachers connected their engagement in teaching within their placement schools to the teaching practices of ‘lots of teachers in Hong Kong’ (excerpt one), producing pictures of the world of teaching that included images of ‘robot teachers’ (excerpt three). However, as Wenger (1998) points out, identity construction occurs through multiple trajectories, and participants experienced this image of the ‘robot’ teacher as ‘limited’ (excerpt seven) because they also imagined themselves as part of a community of student teachers, demonstrated, for instance, in Keith's use of the plural ‘we’ which claimed authority to speak on behalf of his fellow preservice teachers (excerpt three). It was this latter trajectory of identity construction that allowed participants to connect their engagement in teaching to images of teaching and teachers as creative and imaginative.

According to Wenger (1998), the work of imagination can yield either affinity or dissociation. In the case of this group of preservice teachers, dissociation was registered in their negative evaluations of the image of the ‘robot’ teacher, which underscored the undesirability of taking up such identity positions. In contrast, affinity with images of teachers as ‘creative’ and ‘imaginative’ was evident in the trainee teachers' alignment with certain elements of the discourse of contemporary language education that stood at the center of their B.Ed. program, including ensuring that students understand the meaning of learning and the positioning of the teacher in a supporting role within the language classroom (excerpts eight and nine). Allegiance to these ‘modern’ teaching principles was signaled linguistically in the preservice teachers descriptions of the utility, in the form of gains to student learning, that results from engagement in task based learning, for instance (excerpt eight). In contrast, alignment with the discourse of teaching and learning that the trainee teachers encountered in their placement schools appeared to be based on the need for compliance, enforced by cautionary tales of the negative consequences of non-alignment (excerpts one and two).

Each of these different modes of belonging appears to be underpinned by relations of conflict and opposition. For instance, the student teachers' engagement in teaching occurred as either keeping good discipline, keep up with teaching schedules, and preparing students for examinations or, alternatively, as contextualizing teaching, doing group work and adopting a student centered approach to teaching. Participants imagined themselves as either 'robot textbook teachers' or as 'creative teachers'. Allegiance to language teaching practices such as task based learning and the use of authentic material brought the preservice teachers actions and practices into line with the goals and methods of contemporary language education, while their alignment with the demands for teaching and learning encountered within placement schools appeared to be achieved through the need for compliance. These oppositional relations can be understood in terms of Wenger's (1998) observation that identity construction is "an experience and a display of competence" (p. 152). The participants' alignment with the practices and actions of modern educational theory meant that the competencies they valued were reified in, for instance, student centered classrooms and in the use of authentic teaching materials. However, the economy of meanings the preservice teachers confronted within their placement schools defined teaching competency in terms of maintaining discipline, keeping up with teaching schedules, and preparing students for examinations. Unable to negotiate the meanings of teaching and learning that mattered to them, as seen in Phyllis' description of the difficulty of contextualizing learning (excerpt four) and in Keith's admission of the challenges he encountered in taking a student centered approach to teaching (excerpt nine), participants described the frustration (excerpt one) associated with their marginalized identities within their placement schools.

Although Wenger (1998) acknowledges that conflict and contestation can be an important part of a community, his framework has been criticized for offering a 'benign' (Barton & Tusting 2005, p. 10) view that fails to fully theorize the role of power relations within a community (Fuller, Hodkinson, Hodkinson, & Unwin, 2005). Therefore, to understand the role that conflict and contestation played in the preservice teachers construction of teacher identities during their practicum experiences, this paper draws upon the work of Jorgensen and Phillips (2003), who argue that meaning is discursively created in terms of "logics of equivalence" and "logics of difference". The logic of equivalence works by ignoring or overlooking differences that exist within groups. The preservice teachers in this study created one such logic of equivalence around identity categories such as "robot textbook teachers", which was filled with meaning through its equation with linguistic signifiers such as "keeping good discipline", (excerpt one), "sticking to the syllabus" (excerpt two), and doing "all the textbook exercises" (excerpt three). In contrast, the logic of difference underscores division, as reflected in the preservice teachers' construction of an alternative discursive chain around identity positions such as "creative teacher", which was equated with "student centered teaching", "using group work", "inductive learning", and "scaffolding" (excerpt five). The relations between these different chains appeared to be characterized by antagonism, which occurs "when different identities mutually exclude each other" (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2003, p. 47). For instance, it did not appear possible to be simultaneously both a "robot textbook teacher" and a "creative teacher". These antagonistic relations were experienced by the participants as a series of struggles and conflicts, as they took on, resisted, and opposed the different identity positions made available to them within the dominant discourses of both HKIEd and their placement schools. As Alsup (2006) recognizes, such conflict can play an important role in preservice teachers' efforts to craft their own teacher identities. However, without appropriate support for negotiating dissonance, tensions can become too great, inhibiting students' ability to translate the competing demands placed upon them by their membership in different communities into identity growth (Alsup,

2006). The following section therefore explores how preservice teachers might be assisted to move beyond the antagonistic relations described in this section.

### **Overcoming antagonism: Implications for teacher education**

While it has long been acknowledged that an important source of tension for student teachers is disassociation between school and university courses, “very little work has been done to demonstrate ways of negotiating this two-world tension meaningfully” (Gaudelli & Ousley, 2009, p. 932). Such negotiation might begin by exploring how the experiences of a teaching practicum shape preservice teachers experiences of identity construction using “poststructuralist eyes” (Davies, 1994, p. 26). Central to a poststructuralist approach to teacher education is the concept of discourse, which refers to historically and socially constructed “frameworks for thought and action that groups of individuals draw upon in order to speak and interact with one another in meaningful ways” (Millar Marsh, 2002, p. 456). For the participants in this study, an explicit focus on discourse and identity within their B.Ed. program can reveal the ways in which they are caught up in multiple and potentially contradictory discourses, including the discourse of both their teacher education program and placement schools, as well as how such discourses constitute their identities as teachers. For example, learning to examine the dominant discourses of their placement schools might involve student teachers recording interactions between themselves, their supporting teachers, and their students, both inside and outside the classroom. This data could then be subject to critical scrutiny within their teacher education courses, with the aim of revealing how different discourses shape these students as teachers. A similar critical analysis could occur in terms of the different texts students encounter throughout their teacher education program, exposing such texts in the process of positioning the student teachers in particular ways. This awareness of how their teacher identities are constituted within different discourses is a first step towards providing student teachers with choice as they take on, resist, and reject the discourses they encounter both in their teacher education classrooms and their practicum placement schools. As Davies (2000) argues, “the possibility of choice in a situation in which there are contradictory requirements provides people with the possibility of acting agentially” (p.102).

Teacher education programs should also assist these preservice teachers to move beyond potentially antagonistic relations with experienced full time teachers. One way this might be achieved is by underscoring for student teachers the ways in which they construct identity categories such as “textbook teacher” and “creative teacher” as binary opposites. Awareness of the constituted nature of these oppositional relations might assist this group of student teachers to, as Alsup (2006) puts it:

*Find the borderland between two (or more) discourses in a sincere way and speak from this new space, this site of alternative discourse, to enact change in a particular community (p. 9).*

From this borderland position, it may then be possible to reveal as contingent, and therefore to disrupt, the binary divisions between these identity positions. For example, during a practicum student teachers can be required to observe the lessons of full time teachers and to reflect on and discuss with these practicing teachers the latter’s use of particular teaching methods, techniques, and materials. This process could make visible to the student teachers the assumptions they make about practicing teachers and to help them comprehend teaching from point of view of practicing teachers, thereby potentially overcoming the latter’s positioning as an “alien Other” (MacLure, 2003, p. 11) by the preservice teachers. This process could therefore assist these student teachers to see themselves not as either

“textbook” or “creative teachers”, but rather in both categories, and also in neither (Davies, 1994).

The focus on the role of the individual in the disruption of dominant discourses must remain sensitive to the importance of structural phenomenon in the positioning all teachers. For instance, if the binary divisions described in this paper are to be disrupted, teacher education programs must seek to shift the location of the antagonisms described above from the level of the individual student teachers to that of the social structures and institutions, including their university and placement schools, which surround and shape their understandings of learning to teach. This is because some aspects of the antagonisms described in this paper may not be made visible to student teachers if teacher education programs focus solely on observable behaviour and activities in particular settings, such as the classroom. This might include the ways in which preservice teacher identities are shaped by the different, conflicting expectations and agendas of different institutions, including the social relations of power underpinning these agendas. Therefore, the role of teacher education in alerting preservice teachers to how they are positioned within different discourses must seek to problematize the role institutional practices play in structuring and perpetuating these positionings. This analysis of teacher positioning within conflicting discourses could be further expanded to include the problematization of wider macro social features and processes, such as class, gender, and ethnic relations. As Britzman (2003) explains:

*We must be concerned with the local – what happens in the everyday world of the university and the school – and with the global – the social forces that organize, surround, and summon its institutions.* (p. 238).

## Conclusion

Amongst the challenges that preservice teachers may experience during their teaching practicum is a disassociation between the demands of their placement schools and those of their teacher education courses. A contribution of this study is to examine how preservice teachers’ perceptions of such differences shape their construction of teacher identities. As the student teachers in this study took on, resisted, and rejected different identities made available to them within both their placement schools and their teacher education institution, they constructed rigid divisions between different identities, which were underpinned by relations of antagonism. Moving beyond such antagonism could begin with school managers and teacher educators assisting preservice teachers to recognize the ways in which they are positioned within different discourses of teaching and learning, as a first step towards enabling trainee teachers to position themselves differently in relation to these discourses. Future research should explore the voices of not only student teachers but also those of other stakeholders, such as supporting teachers and teacher educators, in Hong Kong and other analogous educational settings around the world, who all play a crucial role in shaping preservice teachers experiences during a teaching practicum.

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