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Cross-cultural teaching and foreign teacher identity in Singapore

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The international movement of teachers is a global phenomenon that has seen an increasing number of teachers moving from one country to another. Although developed countries in the West are traditionally seen as attractive migration destinations for teachers, countries in Asia, such as Singapore, are also proving to be a draw for many foreign teachers. Despite studies of the experiences of foreign teachers, there are few studies investigating the influence of cross-cultural teaching on the development of the professional identity of foreign teachers. Using a narrative inquiry approach, this study examines how the cross-cultural teaching experience of a Chinese beginning teacher in Singapore influenced the development of his professional teacher identity. The story of the participant tells of why the participant became a teacher and how the change of teaching context from China to Singapore influenced his professional identity as a teacher. The study surfaced the large cultural difference between the two countries.

Keywords: cross-cultural teaching; teacher identity

INTRODUCTION

Globalization has led to an increased connectivity across borders (OECD, 2019). One of its outcomes is the migration and international movement of people. Major cities in the world have attracted migrant workers from around the world who are seeking better employment opportunities. The teaching profession is one of such mobile skilled labour forces (Appleton, Morgan, & Sives, 2006). This includes teachers taking up offers to teach in international schools and English Language in developing countries, and also teachers moving from developing countries to developed countries, such as the US (Dunn, 2011), UK (De Villiers, 2007; McNamara, Lewis & Howson, 2007) and Australia (Sharplin, 2009) to fill teacher shortages.

Such pull factors for migrant teachers also exist for Asian countries. A population census indicated that, at the end of June 2016, 29.8% of the 5.607 million residents in Singapore were non-Singaporeans (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2016). Although no official figures have been released, foreign teachers have been a significant and important source of manpower to address the teacher shortage in specific areas (Tharman, 2001). Both beginning and

experienced teachers from countries such as China, India, and the Philippines, have been recruited into the Singapore teaching workforce over the years.

Previous literatures on migrant teachers tend to focus on the entire process of settling down in the new environment, including the legal procedural experiences to school-based ones (De Villiers, 2007; Dunn, 2011; McNamara, Lewis & Howson, 2007; Shaplin, 2009), or surveying macro structural trends (Appleton et al., 2006). However, the significance of the life experiences of migrant teachers and the impact of such experiences on their professional identity development has rarely been examined. This study aims to fill this gap in research by examining how a Chinese migrant teacher's cross-cultural teaching experience in Singapore influenced the development of his teacher identity.

Previous studies have shown that a teacher's identity development can be influenced by his personal and prior life experiences (Olson, 2008), emotions (Zembylas, 2003), and the environment that he interacts with. These environmental influences refer to features of the teaching context, such as the wider socio-cultural environment, school culture, leaders, teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders (Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000; Day, 2002).

Due to the personal and relational nature of such experiences, it is necessary to explore, in-depth, the experiences of the participants in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of their experience. As such, it was decided to adopt a narrative inquiry approach (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000) and focus a study on a single participant.

In the next section, we will provide an outline of the literature on teacher identity development and the theoretical perspective for the study. This will be followed by the research design and methods. In the sections that follow, we will present our findings, and conclude with remarks concerning the implications of our findings on education policy and practices.

BACKGROUND

Although Singapore has been clustered together with Confucian heritage culture countries, such as China, Vietnam, South Korea, and Japan, its colonial past and the subsequent bilingualism policy of 1966 has left significant changes on the population. Despite the Chinese being the majority of the population in Singapore, the official language of communication in government agencies and most work environments is English. In education, other than when teaching mother tongue languages (Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil), subjects are taught in English. It is also common for professional workers, including teachers, to communicate in English at the work place. The Singaporean government has been actively attracting foreign workers to the Singapore labour market (Velayutham, 2007), however, in recent years, there is an increasing degree of xenophobia (Gomes, 2013) or dissatisfaction against the foreign talents of immigrants (Yang, 2017).

Shiraishi and Hau (2012) observed that Chinese descendants with Anglophone backgrounds tend to adopt an Anglo-Chinese identity. They speak English and have acquired Western customs and habits. Such Anglo-Chinese may speak non-English languages to interface with other Asians when necessary but they are more inclined to keep their Anglophone identities. It appears that the Singaporean public tend to consider Chinese talent immigrants as the most undesirable among foreign talents attracted to Singapore (Matthews, 2015; Yang, 2017).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this study, the focus is to discuss how a Chinese migrant teacher's cross-cultural teaching experience in Singapore influenced the development of his teacher identity. The notion of teacher identity is a complex and fluid one that has been explored from different angles within the literature on teacher development (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Thus, in this study, the development of identity of a Chinese migrant teacher will be analysed focusing on the relationships between the following three elements: (1) past experiences, (2) teaching context and (3) cultural issues. This is because teachers' professional identity is rooted in their past experiences, influenced by current teaching contexts, and, if the teachers are working in cross-cultural contexts, the cultural issues they face.

Past teacher experiences may include previous teaching opportunities and experiences in practical teaching (Lamote & Engels, 2010; Schempp, Sparkes, & Templin, 1999). Other social interactions, psychological, and cultural factors (Cooper & Olson, 1996) also intertwine to influence teacher identity in "mutually constitutive ways" (Olsen, 2008, p. 24).

Past experiences can also include teachers' early-childhood experiences in school, and interactions with teachers and family members who were role models (Schempp et al., 1999). These elements could provide reasons for entering the teaching profession (Groundwater-Smith, Ewing, & LeCornu., 2007; Lortie, 1975). Wright & Tuska (1967) observed that a person's decision to be a teacher is strongly influenced by his relationships with important adults and teachers early in life. Such experiences will, in turn, inform their future practices, decisions, and behaviours as teachers (Beijaard et al., 2004). Therefore, teachers, including beginning ones, are likely to reproduce the ways in which they were taught (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2007).

Teaching contexts are "the ecology of the classroom and culture of the school" (Beijaard et al., 2000, p. 752). The school environment and its stakeholders, such as school leaders, teachers, students, and parents influence a teacher's professional identity (Coldron & Smith, 1999; Fetherston, 2007; Reynolds, 1996). The wider teaching context beyond the school, including changes in government policies and education reform, have been shown to redefine teachers' expectations and roles and have a significant impact on how teachers perceive their professional identities (Day, 2002; Lee & Yin, 2010; Sachs, 2005).

A third area to consider in the formation of teacher identity is related to cultural issues. People belong to different social groups and are influenced by the social culture within those groups, which can be distinctly different from other types of culture in terms of attitudes and behaviours (Bullivant, 1993). Teaching practice, to a large extend, is also influenced by culture (Hofstede, 2010; Yueng, 2006). Teachers who are unaware of the cultural norms of their students can negatively affect the learning process (Darling-Hammond & Falk, 1997). As a result of their training and upbringing, teachers often assume a particular cultural stance with regard to the classroom interactions in which they engage (Lipka, 1991). It is thus inevitable that a certain amount of adjustment and acculturation are needed when teaching in a cross-cultural context; these can have a considerable impact on teacher identity. Previous studies have documented the challenges and struggles faced by teachers in cross-cultural contexts as they negotiate their professional identities and cope with cultural differences in their new environments (Trent & Decoursey, 2012).

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

The participant and the roles of the authors

The participant in this study is Wei Min, a 28-year-old male beginning teacher from Wuhan, China. The study centres on Wei Min's experiences during his first year as a Chinese language teacher in a government secondary school in Singapore and focuses on how he developed and modified his beliefs about teaching and how he negotiated his teacher identity to create a sense of self-efficacy. Through Wei Min's story, this research aims to illuminate the issues faced by foreign beginning teachers in Singapore and understand how these may shape their teacher identities. Pseudonyms are used throughout the report to protect the privacy of the participants.

A narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin, 1993; Clandinin, Downey, & Huber, 2009) was employed to study the lived experience of Wei Min. Limiting the study to a single participant allowed the researcher to delve deep into the narrative space of inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; 2000) to unearth the richness of the participant's stories. The goal of this research is not to generalize the findings but to yield results that were contextual (Creswell, 2011) and detailed (Patton, 2002).

Data collection

The first author heard of Wei Min's plight from her classmate, Claire, a School Staff Developer (SSD) in a secondary school, who said that Wei Min was a teacher from China who arrived in her school a year ago. Claire related the problems Wei Min had in school: how he fumbled during his first year, how he broke down in the classroom, his struggle with classroom management, and his adjustment to his tasks in the school.

Data collection was conducted from December 2011 to February 2012. The first author conducted two interviews with Wei Min, one interview with his Mentor Coordinator, Sue, and observed him in school for a day. The interviews were conducted using the semi-structured interview method (Patton, 2002). The interviews with Wei Min were conducted in Mandarin so that he could express himself freely in a language he was most comfortable in. Each interview lasted about one hour and was recorded, transcribed, and translated. The interviews were conducted in a meeting room at Wei Min's school, as suggested by him, because it was quiet and convenient. All interviews were conducted after Wei Min's last official activity of the day so that he would be more relaxed and not rushed.

In order to gain a more holistic view of Wei Min's life in school, the first author decided to interview his Mentor Coordinator, Sue, who is a Senior Teacher in her 50s. Sue frequently acted as Wei Min's unofficial counsellor and mentor. Because of her nurturing and caring nature, Wei Min frequently sought her advice when he encountered problems in school. As a result, Sue has a deeper understanding of Wei Min than do most of his other colleagues.

With the permission of Wei Min and his principal, the first author was able to "shadow" Wei Min for one day in school to observe his interactions with his students and colleagues to gain a more comprehensive understanding of his experience. Throughout the classroom observation, the author paid attention to how Wei Min interacted with his students, his way of communication and body language and how his students behaved and responded to him during the lessons. She also listened in on the conversation between Wei Min and his colleagues in the staffroom, at the cafeteria, and along the corridors, taking field notes on the content and nature and tone of the interactions. The insights gathered from interviewing Wei Min and Sue, and from observing Wei Min in his school environment allowed the first author to validate and

triangulate the data. As Creswell (2011) explained, having a combination of different types of data allows for corroboration, thus improving the validity and integrity of the findings.

Analytical method

To study Wei Min's cross-cultural teaching experience, the first author adopted a methodology to closely listen to Wei Min's stories (Clandinin et al., 2009) as a beginning teacher in a cross-cultural context. Through close examinations of the transcriptions of the in-depth interviews and field notes, the authors attempted to understand Wei Min's emotions and experiences and thus make sense of his identity as a foreign beginning teacher in Singapore. The qualitative data obtained from the sessions of in-depth interviews are transcribed and presented in the following section according to the guiding framework: (1) past experiences, (2) teaching context and (3) cultural issues. Other information, including classroom observations, interview with Sue and Wei Min's interactions with colleagues are also inserted where relevant to provide a more holistic understanding of Wei Min's experience.

WEI MIN'S STORY

Prior experiences in China

In recounting his early schooling experience, Wei Min shared that he was born the year before the Chinese government introduced the "one-child policy". Because of the large population of children at the time, Wei Min was always schooled in large classes: "Forty to fifty students per class in secondary school and seventy to eighty students in high school". Although the classes were large, they were not noisy. "Except for a few mischievous students who chatted among themselves during lessons, the majority of the students were quiet and attentive".

Wei Min believed that the large population in China had created a strong competitive culture and that the high student-teacher ratio had forced children of his generation to be fiercely independent and to take ownership of their own learning:

> There was much competition among us . . . we were all very disciplined and attentive in listening and taking notes . . . If we didn't listen, there would be nobody to help us.

The strong emphasis on academic excellence has resulted in an examination-oriented approach towards teaching and learning. Wei Min's lessons were always "chalk and board". Wei Min recalled that a native English language teacher tried to incorporate student group activities into her lessons, but failed; this was because the class considered them to be a waste of time.

Applying for a teaching job in China

Prior to going to Singapore, Wei Min had a three-month practical teaching stint in China. He noted that the experience of teaching in China was "totally different" from what he had experienced in Singapore.

> [M]y students (back in China) were very obedient; they would not walk about during lessons or chatter at the top of their lungs . . . There, any of my teaching methods could be practiced in real life—whatever things I learnt were put into use. Hence, my impression of teaching was that it was really, really easy. It was really a shock for me when I started teaching here.

Unlike many who entered the teaching profession with high aspirations and thoughts, Wei Min candidly shared that the key consideration for his decision to become a teacher was the relatively good job opportunities it offers. After high school, Wei Min had wanted to study environmental engineering at university but his parents advised him otherwise:

> My family members are very practically minded. They think that teaching is a profession that will never run out of jobs.

Although he was not keen to enter teacher training college, there was "no room for negotiation". His family is not well-off, and so his parents were very adamant that he choose an economically viable profession.

Teaching contexts in Singapore

Local knowledge.

Wei Min actually did not intend to come to work as a Chinese teacher in Singapore but as an assistant—thus he struggled to come to terms with his new identity as a Chinese Language teacher.

> [W]hen I first applied, I did not know I was applying to teach Chinese in Singapore . . . [I thought] I would be working as a Chinese Language Assistant. They are people from China who promote the Chinese Language . . . It was after I came to Singapore when I realised I would be a full-fledged Chinese teacher.

One of the major challenges faced by Wei Min was his lack of knowledge about the local educational landscape. The situation was made worse by his unfamiliarity with the English language, the official working language here. He reminisced that when he first arrived, he could not understand anything discussed at school staff meetings.

As a result, he was totally unprepared to teach on his first day, and he panicked when his Head of Department (HOD) told him to get ready for classes after the morning flag-raising ceremony.

> I did not prepare anything. There was nothing for me . . . Oh, there were textbooks, but I did not know how to begin teaching, as I was still unfamiliar with the students' standards. So, I thought, "What to teach?".

Wei Min remembered after he introduced himself to the students that he was left with 40 minutes of lesson time. Not knowing what to do, he started explaining classics of poetry (usually taught at the tertiary level here) to his first-year secondary students, unaware that the subject was beyond the students' level of comprehension.

> My HOD came to know of this matter and laughed really hard. Even now he finds it funny.

Colleagues, school culture, and environment

Wei Min described his relationships with the majority of his colleagues as generally very amiable. He was especially touched by their care and concern for him after a particularly stressful day during which he broke down and cried in the staff room.

> I found many cards and small gifts on my desk. They all contained encouragement from my colleagues who had seen me cry. I felt really touched by their gesture . . . Through this incident . . . I felt my colleagues were all very kind and friendly towards me.

However, Wei Min also hinted at tension in his dealings with some colleagues, remarking, "'Time will tell' is a very suitable adage to describe my interactions with them. Over time, you realise what a person is really like". He recounted a "counselling" session he had with his subject mentor who disturbed him greatly:

> He told me it's fortunate that the Normal Technical[1] students are not out in society creating problems and that they are controlled in a school environment . . . He said I have to change my mentality—that I should focus on changing as many students as possible . . . and I just have to not let . . . those whom I cannot influence . . . affect me in any way.

Students

Wei Min described classroom management as the most "pressing issue" of his early teaching days.

> I was totally clueless about classroom management, because the students in China were very obedient—I did not need to discipline them.

He also felt that his students may have discriminated against him because he was a foreigner. He recounted how he was treated by his students:

> No one stood up to greet me. In one corner, they were playing cards, and in another, they were playing with their mobile phones; another group was chatting. They simply ignored me.

When the first author observed Wei Min's teaching, it became evident that he was still grappling with classroom management issues. His classes were noisy, and his students were totally disengaged from his lessons; many were sleeping, talking among themselves, walking about, using mobile phones, eating, or even filing their fingernails during class. A few of the students treated Wei Min rudely, not showing him any respect. When he questioned a boy for walking out of the class, the boy shouted, "I am going to the toilet!"

The students were eager to leave the class. Five minutes before the lesson ended, students were already packing their books and stationery, getting ready to leave. Students packed up and began standing one by one.

Wei Min appeared tense throughout the observation by the first author; he was sometimes helpless and fearful in class, and he demonstrated poor classroom management. By choosing to ignore the misbehaving students, he avoided confronting and addressing the problems at hand. The stress of dealing with difficult classes has taken a toll on Wei Min: he looked tired and drained after only two hours of lessons.

Challenges in cross-cultural teaching

Identity confusion.

Wei Min noticed that teachers in China have a different perception of their role and identity. He observed that "the role played by a teacher in Singapore is a complicated one [which] does not stop at teaching and educating the students". He maintained that he understood the role of teachers in China and, therefore, when he came to Singapore, "[he replicated] the role of a teacher teaching in China over here in Singapore". Since then, however, he has encountered many incidents that challenged his perception of his role and identity and forced him to create a new teacher identity:

> I felt that my role of actual teaching has been engulfed by other activities; I found no time to prepare for lessons or search for course materials for my students—no time to design my lessons to make them crystal clear to my students. I am totally occupied by different competitions, school activities, and settling administrative matters.

[1] Students in secondary school are allocated into different streams (Express, Normal Academic and Normal Technical) based on their academic performance. The lowest performing students are assigned to the Normal Technical stream.

He confessed that most of the time, he would enter the class unprepared. "I would bring in my textbook and study the chapters on the spot (in class). There was absolutely no time for me to prepare". Sue, the school's Mentor Coordinator, also noted the dilemma faced by Wei Min. She observed that Wei Min "felt quite overwhelmed at having to juggle several duties, as he had only expected to teach lessons in his mother tongue and not to manage other professional duties as well".

Adjusting to local environment, standards, and pedagogy.

Having realised that teaching in Singapore is "totally different" from what he had experienced in China and that it is not as "easy" as he had thought, Wei Min concluded that he needed to make adjustments to his thinking and practices in order to be a better Chinese language teacher here. Thus, he began his journey to re-learn how to be a Chinese language teacher in the Singaporean context:

> I had to struggle, but I gradually adjusted and lowered my expectations to fit the level of the system here . . . even after half a year, my standards still did not perfectly accommodate theirs. Even during the second year, I was still adjusting my standards to suit them.

After he observed that his students frequently translated his instructions on the whiteboard into English when they communicate among themselves, Wei Min began to write the English translations for the more difficult Chinese words on the whiteboard. I also observed Wei Min using flashcards for his lower-ability classes, an idea he gleaned from his in-service training here. He shared that this year, he had learnt to differentiate his teaching resources depending upon the various ability levels of his classes; he expressed happiness that his students learn better with the differentiated materials.

Wei Min, however, described his adjustment process as painful. In learning to adjust his teaching to his students' needs, Wei Min struggled with the realization that he needs to put aside much of what he learnt in school.

Stressed, helpless, and fearful

Wei Min confessed that "the stress level [here] is very high", as he rushed to complete his tasks every day and felt as if he could never finish them. Wei Min recalled an incident that caused him to break down and cry in the staffroom:

> I remember one time . . . I took the largest class . . . which has a couple of mischievous boys . . . they were fighting in class, and it was my first time encountering such a problem. I was not sure why they did not take my teaching seriously; I felt like a failure.

At the same time, Wei Min was also overwhelmed by the need to attend to his extra-curricular duties and dealing with administrative matters in English, a language that he is still unfamiliar with. He recalled feeling as though "the problems were thrown in [his] face all at once, and [he] felt really indignant and cried".

Wei Min's action shocked his colleagues and made them more sensitive to his plight. Although nobody in the staff room walked up to console him, when he went back to work the next day, Wei Min found many cards and small tokens on his desk containing words of encouragement from his colleagues who had seen him crying.

> During this incident, I felt that my colleagues were all very kind and friendly towards me. Even if there were some communication problems with the students, at least my colleagues were still really kind to me. This gradually helped me get through the tough times and sort out my thoughts (smiling).

The stress of creating a new identity as a Chinese Language teacher in Singapore, coupled with the adjustment in approaches to teaching and classroom management and the need to be accepted by the students, created enormous amounts of stress for Wei Min:

> I felt really tired . . . the students did not accept me and even said nasty things to me; such encounters made me develop harsh thoughts. At times, I would think to myself, why did I come here? Why am I here to face all of this nonsense? (laughing).

Despite Wei Min's occasional laughter, the pain he experienced was evident: his voice became soft and weak when he narrated his adjustment process. At one point, the first author could see tears swelling in his eyes.

Table 1 below presents a summary of our findings in relation to the shifts in Wei Min's teacher identity as he transited from China to be a teacher in Singapore.

Table 1: The transition experienced by Wei Ming

	China	Singapore
Experience as a teacher	▪ Feels confident and professional as a teacher ▪ Chose to work as a teacher	▪ Feels less confident and is struggling in the profession ▪ Expecting to be a Chinese language assistant and not a teacher
Teaching contexts	▪ Students are docile, quiet and attentive ▪ Respectful towards teachers ▪ Competitive learning culture	▪ Students are noisy and mischievous during lessons ▪ Not as respectful towards teacher ▪ Foreign teachers may face discrimination by students
Cultural issues	▪ Role of teacher is limited to teaching and educating students ▪ Chinese Language is the official language and the main language of communication for most teachers and students	▪ Besides teaching, the role of the teacher also includes managing school activities and administrative matters ▪ English Language is the official language and the working language in school. ▪ Many teachers and students are more comfortable communicating in English.

As shown in the table, Wei Min's original identity was a confident teacher with expertise to maintain order in the classrooms. After transiting to Singapore, he became less confident and was expected to stretch his expertise in more challenging and complex circumstances.

DISCUSSION

Identity as a teacher

Wei Min's past experience provided him with a series of positive stories as a teacher in China which led him to be a confident teacher (Cooper & Olson, 1996; Lamote & Engels, 2010; Olsen, 2008; Schempp et al., 1999). These positive experiences, as well as the stable income and status, were pull factors that attracted him to be a teacher; these factors accord with previous findings of why people become teachers (Beijaard et al., 2004; Groundwater-Smith et al., 2007; Lortie, 1975; Wright & Tuska, 1967). Wei Min assumed that the classroom situation would be similar to what he experienced as a student and reproduced the ways that he was taught: this is also in accordance with the findings by Groundwater-Smith et al. (2007).

The teaching contexts in Singapore, in terms of the make-up of the classroom and culture of the school, were different from that Wei Min was familiar with in China, including the treatment of the teacher by students. This difference in teaching context affected Wei Min greatly and, consequently, his teacher identity (Beijaard et al., 2000; Bullivant, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Falk, 1997; Yueng, 2006). The assumption held by Wei Min was based on different contextual expectation (Lipka, 1991).

The majority of his colleagues neither recognized his struggles nor extended their help. Such situation led him to have a lower professional identity and become a less confident and struggling teacher (Coldron & Smith, 1999; Fetherston, 2006; Reynolds, 1996). If such notions of "needs" do not prevail at the school levels, migrant teachers would have to suffer as unwanted or neglected guests rather than professional teachers (Day, 2002; Lee & Yin, 2010; Sachs, 2005). Such phenomenon is also present in other Western countries (De Villiers, 2007; Dunn, 2011; McNamara et al., 2007; Sharplin, 2009).

Third, turning to cultural issues, Wei Min experienced a change in culture as he transited from being a part of a majority in China to becoming a minority as a migrant in Singapore. In addition, he needed to change his official language for daily communication in his workplace (Trent & Decoursey, 2012) from Chinese in China to English in Singapore. This was a source of struggle for him and has also affected his confidence and, consequently, his teacher identity.

Crossing borders as a foreigner: Its meaning in Singapore

Although the experiences of migrant teachers may differ for different schools in Singapore, the findings here are not unique to Wei Min. Thus, it becomes crucial to situate the case of Wei Min in the larger Singaporean contexts. There is a tendency for Singaporeans to view Chinese migrants in a negative light (Matthews, 2015; Yang, 2017) and this appears to be the case for Wei Ming. His negative experience in school made him feel inferior to other local Singaporean teachers and affected his teacher identity. In considering the challenges faced by migrant teachers, especially if there are gaps in languages, circumstances and organizational climates, there is a need for concerted efforts to support the assimilation of migrant teachers. Doing so will allow them to develop a stronger professional teacher identity, greater sense of self-esteem, and self-efficacy to contribute to the countries' teaching workforce (De Villiers, 2007; Dunn, 2011; McNamara et al., 2007; Sharplin, 2009).

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