

# A Study of Professional Development of College English Teachers through Narrative Inquiry

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**Abstract**—With the deepening of foreign language education reform of higher education in China, people begin to pay more attention to professional development of college English teachers. The paper, based on a theoretical study of professional development and narrative inquiry, conducted narrative inquiry among young college English teachers. The results provide useful insights both for the young college teachers themselves and teaching educators.

**Index Terms**—narrative inquiry, professional development, college English teachers

## I. INTRODUCTION

Professional development of college English teachers is a major concern of our current higher educational reform in China. It is generally believed that the essence of college English teaching lies in the college English teacher. The success of school improvement efforts will depend on the professionals within those schools. But in China, there were a lot of researches on students' English learning strategies, motivation and the like. Professional development of college English teachers as an approach to educational research and practice is something new for teachers. The factor of the teacher in education was relatively ignored. Fortunately, this problem has been noticed in recent years. Many researchers have tried to change the situation. They began to make research focusing on teacher development rather than on students. Although some experts and researchers have made significant explorations on teacher development, yet much has to be done in available and effective ways of how teachers can develop themselves.

Presently, young teachers account for the majority of college English teachers. The quality of young teachers is decisive for the overall quality of the college. However, according to our survey, young college English teachers are facing many problems. On the one hand, they are under great pressure of preparing lessons, checking students' homework and organizing extracurricular events. Besides, their status is low. Last but not least, most teachers get low salaries struggle with financial problems, and so many of them report themselves as overburdened and hardly able to afford their living costs. How can these problems be dealt with? A narrative inquiry seems to be an effective way to help us get all in-depth understanding of them, as stories may offer insights of and reflections on teachers' identity and their professional development.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Teacher Professional Development

Teacher professional development has long been a hot topic and the focus of the improvement of teaching practice. Professional development, in a broad sense, refers to the development of a person in his or her professional role. More specifically, "Teacher development is the professional growth a teacher achieves as a result of gaining increased experience and examining his or her teaching systematically" (Glatthorn, 1995, p.41). "Professional development includes formal experiences (such as attending workshops and professional meetings, mentoring, etc.) and informal experiences (such as reading professional publications, watching television documentaries related to an academic discipline, etc.)" (Ganser, 2000, cited in Vellega-Reimers, 2003, p.11).

For years the only form of "professional development" available to teachers was "staff development" or "in service training", usually consisting of workshops or short-term courses that would offer teachers new information on a particular aspect of their work. This was often the only type of training teachers would receive and was usually unrelated to teachers' work. Only in the past few years has the professional development of teachers been considered a long term process that includes regular training and experiences planned systematically to promote growth and development in the profession.

Development recalls change and growth. Teacher development is the process of becoming "the best kind of teacher that I can personally be..." is a continuous process of transforming human potential into human performance, a process

that is never finished. In this process of professional development, it is based on constructivism rather than on a "transmission-oriented model". As a consequence, teachers are treated as active learners (Lieberman, 1994; McLaughlin and Zarrow, 2001) who are engaged in the concrete tasks of teaching, assessment, observation and narrative inquiry and reflection.

Evidence shows that professional development has an impact on teachers' beliefs and behavior. With regard to the effect of teachers' professional development on students' learning, a number of studies report that the more professional knowledge teachers have, the higher the levels of student achievement. Borko and Putnam (1995) offer evidence to support the fact that professional development plays an important role in changing teachers' teaching methods, and the these changes have a positive impact on students' learning.

### *B. Narrative Inquiry*

In recent years, narrative inquiry has been put much attention to, which is considered as a way to carry out research.

Narrative inquiry is the interdisciplinary study of the activities involved in generating and analyzing stories of life experiences (e.g., life histories, narrative interviews, journals, diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, and biographies) and reporting that kind of research. Clandinin (2000) note that, "Humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and collectively, lead storied lives. Thus, the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world." (p.23) In other words, people's lives consist of stories. According to Cormelly (2000), narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. Counelly's ideas about narrative inquiry is agreed by Gudmundsdottir (1991) that stories are part of a narrative way of knowing that is basis to the ways in which human beings understand the world and communicate with others. And he further observed that narratives were constructed through the story schema and reflection.

Narrative inquiry, or narrative research, is a research methodology that is growing in acceptance and practice in such disciplines as nursing, medicine, and law, and especially organizational studies, therapy in health fields, social work, counseling, psychotherapy, and teaching (Clandinin, 2007, pp. xi-xii). Like other methodologies used by social science researchers, narrative inquiry "inquires" into--or asks questions about and looks for deeper understanding of--particular aspects of life experience.

Narrative inquiry has also found its way into the educational field of China. In 1998 Professor Ding Gang initiated a special magazine called Chinese Education: Research and Review for its further research. Zhou Yong(2004)gave a brief account of the development of narrative inquiry in educational field in China. However, on a whole, narrative inquiry as a research method in China is still new and most of the researches mentioned above were concerned with the perception of teachers and their daily lives.

## III. THE RESEARCH

### *A. Research Questions*

The research aims to seek answers to the following questions: (1) What is the present situation of the professional development of young college English teachers? (2) Is narrative inquiry effective in the professional development of teachers?

### *B. Subjects*

The study involves 30 teachers of English Departments coming from Ocean University of China, Qingdao University and Qingdao University of Science and Technology respectively. All the subjects are around the age of 35.

### *C. Research Methods*

The study mainly employs narrative inquiry about the events, beliefs, thoughts, feelings and attitudes concerning the situation and the characteristics of the professional development of teachers. The author performs this narrative study because she believed telling stories of experiences within teachers' own professional worlds will arouse their inner desire to understand that experience to reconcile what is known with that which is hidden, to confirm and affirm, and to construct and reconstruct understanding of themselves as teachers and of their own teaching.

### *D. Data Analysis*

#### *1. From all the subjects*

The interpretation of the data began with listening to and rethinking stories of the subjects. Based on the stories told by the subject, the current situation of young college English teachers is as follows. Most of the subjects are eager to develop themselves from every aspect but they feel very depressed facing great pressure of giving lectures, preparing lectures, checking students' homework and dealing with financial problems.

#### *2. From the author's narrative inquiry*

During her 6 years in teaching, she struggled to find her identity as a teacher. Her story of professional growth and development as a teacher represents a highly complex, emotional, and personal roller coaster ride. The author's inquiry combined the methodologies of action research and self-study as a means of examining her practice. The following

themes emerged from the inquiry and inquiry analysis: fear, responsibility, contradictions between her beliefs and practices and closed-mindedness. Fear was a recurring theme that impacted her attitude and behavior. Fear of idiocy and fear of failure prevent her from confronting problems and asking mentors or colleagues for help. In addition to fears, she was unable to take personal responsibility for her problems. She blamed others for her difficulties (students, counselors, parents, mentor teachers, colleagues). Another factor that emerged was the contradiction between her beliefs and teaching practice. Although she knew her mentor teacher was there to give help, she acknowledged that her pride and fear of looking stupid got in the way. Last, she relied on the way she was taught and was not open to taking risks. Her prior experiences as a student and her personal practical theories influenced her beliefs about teaching and learning.

#### E. Findings and Implications

From the study, it is clear that all of the subjects wanted and tried their best to be good teachers. But as time went by, they gradually became disappointed by many, many things such as the test system, promotional system, the environment in the school, the salary they get, the response of their students to their enthusiasm and hard work.

In this process of development, teachers must learn to keep on changing and growing, not only on the ways they teach, but also on the opinions about teacher, about teaching, about the students and the relations with them. Otherwise, teachers will feel heartbreaking. Just as Parker Palmer said: "Many of us become teachers for reasons of the heart, animated by a passion for some subject and for helping people learn. But many of us lose heart as the years of teaching go by....And teaching tugs at the heart, opens the heart, even breaks the heart-and the more one loves teaching, the more heartbreaking it can be"(Palmer,1998, p.17).

Teacher development is a long-term and continuous program which develops and changes teachers in many aspects, whether their professional knowledge, their opinion about teaching and students or their relation with students. Teacher change is also a never-finished process that would continue in teachers' whole lives. The success of school improvement efforts will depend on the professionals within those schools.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This study can help future young college teachers and teacher educators gain insight into the complex process of learning to teach. First, the insights gained tell young teachers that they must learn to assume personal responsibility for their actions and performance and not blame the students or others for their problems. Moreover, the insights gained from this study can encourage teacher educators to be sensitive to the range of experiences and emotions young teachers confront as they move from being a student to a teacher.

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