



Received: 13 July 2017
Accepted: 19 March 2018
First Published: 26 March 2018

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TEACHER EDUCATION & DEVELOPMENT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Success and failure in first-year teaching: Mainland Chinese ESL teachers in Hong Kong schools

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Abstract: This is a qualitative longitudinal study of the lived experience of four mainland Chinese ESL teachers engaged in their first year of employment in Hong Kong secondary schools. Based on multiple interviews and email contact conducted over the course of one academic year, the research explores the adaptive processes these beginner ESL teachers experienced to overcome adversity and to sustain their commitments to teaching, illuminating factors which contributed to the success and failure in their first year teaching, a career phase believed to have significant implications for new teachers' sense of efficacy and their survival in the teaching profession. Findings suggest that these teachers themselves were key actors in coping with the processes of teaching, socializing and adapting their working conditions, and in determining ultimate success or failure in their first year in school. The study highlights a need to establish supportive processes in the school environment that nurture first-year ESL teachers' active participation in and contribution to the school community, and facilitate their learning and construction of active professional agency. The importance of university ESL teacher training course affording opportunities and experiences for preservice ESL teachers to develop the capacity to operate with professional agency in real classroom situations is also discussed.

Subjects: Bilingualism/ESL; Secondary Education; Newly Qualified Teachers; Teacher Training; Teaching & Learning; Teachers & Teacher Education; Continuing Professional Development

Keywords: novice teachers; first year teaching in the classroom; ESL teachers; professional agency; Hong Kong schools

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The first year of novice teachers' career is usually the most essential stage of professional growth as a new teacher. However, most novice teachers encounter major challenges and are underprepared to deal with the problems and difficulties they face. These problems and difficulties include lack of subject knowledge, inadequate understanding of students, and classroom management. This study shows that novice teachers themselves are key actors in coping with the problems and difficulties they face, socializing and adapting their working conditions, and in determining ultimate success or failure in their first year in school. The study emphasizes the importance of establishing a supportive school environment that nurtures first-year teachers' active participation in and contribution to the school community.

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, there has been a wealth of research on the experiences of novice teachers. Drawing on early research into teachers' concerns, Fuller's widely cited theory of teacher development (Fuller & Bown, 1975) suggests a three-stage model of teacher development moving from concerns about self, to concerns about tasks, to concerns about students, and the impact of teaching. According to Conway and Clark (2003), Fuller and Bown's work on the progression of concerns that prospective and young teachers move through can be summarized as a general movement outward from concerns about self, changing to concerns about situation, and task then culminating in concerns about students. While Fuller and Bown's model endures and remains appealing despite an elapse of decades, it is argued that Fuller's model of teacher development ignores the possibility that novice teachers can engage in complex and sophisticated thinking (Burn, Hagger, Mutton, & Everton, 2000). For example, novice teachers in Conway and Clark (2003) study "represented their development as both an outward-oriented pattern, teaching subject matter and caring about students, and an inward oriented pattern, focusing on self-survival, identity, self-improvement and/or self-development." (p. 478).

More recently, Maynard and Furlong (1995) observed that novice teachers went through five distinct stages of teacher development. The first stage is early idealism where novice teachers identify with their students and are idealistic about what they feel toward their students. The second stage is survival where novice teachers lost idealistic fantasy of teaching when they face the contextual realities of the classroom alone and they are very concerned about their own survival. The third stage, according to Maynard and Furlong, is recognizing difficulties where new teachers become sensitive to the varied demands made on them and are keen to give an impressive performance. This stage is also characterized by new teachers beginning to focus on the needs of individual students and on the issue of teaching methods and materials, referring frequently to classroom constraints and lack of resources. The fourth stage is reaching a plateau where novice teachers have developed classroom management strategies as well as teaching strategies. However, at this stage they often find great difficulty in shifting from themselves to others (Maynard & Furlong, 1995). The fifth stage is moving on where novice teachers may eventually go on to experiment and show concern for pupils' learning but without positive intervention (Maynard & Furlong, 1995).

1.1. *First-year novice teacher learning and induction*

Despite an on-going debate and criticism of the theory of phases and the teacher development model discussed above, there has been general consensus in research about the early years of teaching as a fight for survival, having to deal with the reality shock and learning to work with colleagues of various types (Kyriacou & Kunc, 2007; Ulvik, Smith, & Helleve, 2009). It is recognized in research on learning to teach and teacher education that the first years of entry into the teaching profession tend to be an important segment of a novice teacher's career, having long-term implications for teacher effectiveness, job satisfaction, and career length (McCormack & Thomas, 2003). There is also agreement that the quality of a teacher's experience in the initial years of teaching is essential to form positive attitudes to teaching as a career (Bezzina, 2006). Positive first-year experiences tend to make new teachers more committed to teaching, and are often described as a more powerful socializing agent than teacher preparation training at universities. It is thus generally accepted that the most difficult part of novice teachers' career which usually lasts throughout the whole of the first year of teaching is the most essential stage of professional growth as a new teacher. It is during this first year of teaching that most novice teachers encounter major challenges and are overwhelmed and underprepared to deal with the problems and difficulties they face. Previous research has identified lack of subject knowledge, inadequate understanding of students, classroom management as the regularly cited problems a novice teacher encounters in their first year into the profession. As Feiman-Nemser (2001) points out, no matter what kind of preparation and training a novice teacher receives, some aspects of teaching can only be learned on the job. In other words, no teacher preparation course can teach a new teacher what to do in every situation they meet in the profession.

From a social constructivist perspective, novice teacher learning and induction can also be described ‘as a process of becoming a member of a sustained community of practice’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991). First, and most obviously, teaching is a job which involves interaction with people, especially large numbers of pupils who are frequently energetic, spontaneous, immature, and preoccupied with their own interests. Drawing on Nias (1989), Tang (2004) outlines how novice teachers construct their teaching knowledge in the two facets of the teaching context: the action context and the socio-professional context. According to Tang, in the action context, new teachers engage in teaching with pupils being the ‘critical reality definer’ who validates student teachers’ professional competence or makes them feel inadequate. Second, novice teachers interact with practitioners and peers in the socio-professional context, and get access to the practical knowledge possessed by these practitioners in the teaching community (Tang, 2004). However, as Farrell (2003) observes, the role of these interactions and the influence of the students and peers in novice teachers’ induction in the profession are not well understood. In spite of an increasing awareness that even ad hoc informal meetings between colleagues can serve a valuable professional development purpose in addition to being a mechanism for personal support (Williams & Prestage, 2000), one finding that often appears in the research literature is that first-year teachers often experience conflict in the socialization aspects of their new workplace. It is widely believed that inexperienced teachers and newcomers to a particular school learn most from those of their colleagues who are easily visible or accessible (Nias, 1989; Williams, Prestage, & Bedward, 2001). In other words, novice teachers’ relationships with their colleagues during their first years as teachers can be one of the single most influential factors that help new staff to become included and socialized into the culture of the school. Williams et al. maintain that a school culture of collaboration and collegiality tend to result in inexperienced teachers’ professional growth, personal satisfaction, ongoing development whereas a school culture of individualism can be potentially damaging to the new teachers’ induction processes and their professional development. According to Lipponen and Kumpulainen (2011), the notion of agency is that people do not merely react to and repeat given practices, rather, they have the capacity for autonomous social action during which they intentionally transform and refine their social and material worlds and thereby take control of their lives. Research has revealed that the social and emotional dimensions of the experienced learning environment are significant predictors of the development of teachers’ professional agency (Soini, Pietarinen, Toom, & Pyhältö, 2015). Soini et. al emphasize that a learning environment promoting active participation and belonging to a community, for example, a peer group, contributes to learning and construction of active professional agency. Consequently, forms of individualism such as unwillingness of some staff to allow novice teacher to observe their teaching may result in inexperienced colleagues’ feelings of isolation and frustration.

1.2. Non-native English teachers in English teaching profession in Hong Kong

The area of non-native English speaking teachers and native English-speaking teachers has been a major focus of research for about 20 years now. There is general consensus in the literature that non-native English speaking teachers and native English speaking teachers may have different strengths in the classroom, although it is often acknowledged that these terms are not ideal and have frequently been critiqued in the literature (e.g., Davies, 2003). The main strengths of non-native English speaking teachers are their familiarity with local syllabuses and examinations and their experience of learning English as a second or foreign language. As Carless and Walker (2006) point out, non-native English speaking teachers may thus be able to make profitable use of the mother tongue, with consequent richer resources for explaining some grammatical points. In Hong Kong, Ma (2012) observed that the non-native English speaking teachers and native English speaking teachers in Hong Kong do appear to be two ‘different species’ as what has been hypothesized in the literature. In relation to these two categories (i.e., non-native and native English speaking teachers), a further distinction that is becoming increasingly significant in the Hong Kong education system, between non-native English teachers who are local to the teaching environments in which they function, and non-local non-native English teachers of mainland Chinese origin, has been receiving considerable attention, as a result of an increasingly large recruitment of pre-service English language teacher education students from mainland China in universities in Hong Kong. Despite a recent trend for Hong Kong

schools to employ more non-local non-native English teachers of mainland Chinese origin, little is known about the school experience of these non-local non-native English teachers in Hong Kong schools after their graduation from university teacher training programs. Although the research literature on first year teachers is growing, in the Hong Kong context we know little about difficulties and positive experiences of the first year non-local non-native ESL teachers of mainland Chinese origin. This article outlines a qualitative longitudinal study of how four novice secondary ESL teachers of mainland Chinese origin confronted challenges and struggled to survive their first year of teaching in Hong Kong secondary schools. The main research question therefore is: what contributes to mainland Chinese ESL teachers' success and failure in their first year of teaching in Hong Kong schools? This study adds to research in that it presents four mainland Chinese ESL teachers' perspectives on teaching as they moved through the difficult first year of teaching in Hong Kong secondary schools.

2. This study

2.1. Context

Although English is a socioeconomically dominant language in Hong Kong society in the sense that proficiency in English has been regarded by Hong Kong Chinese as the principal determinant of upward and outward mobility, about 95% of its population is ethnic Chinese with 91% using Cantonese as their first language, and English is not used in everyday communication in Hong Kong (Kirkpatrick, 2011; Mak, 2011). In Hong Kong secondary schools, the medium of written and oral communication had been English for several decades until the government's introduction of the new language policy in 1998 which brought about a fundamental change in the roles of the English and Chinese languages in Hong Kong education at secondary level (grades 7–12) (Evans, 2002). This new policy required that most secondary schools in Hong Kong should adopt Chinese for teaching all academic subjects, starting with their 1998/1999 Secondary 1 intake and progressing each year to a higher level of secondary education, while schools wishing to use, or to continue with, English must satisfy Hong Kong's Education Department that their teachers and students are able to teach and learn effectively in English after China's resumption of sovereignty over Hong Kong in 1997 (Education Department, 1997). According to Evans (2002), this new language-in-school policy incorporates the principles set out by Swain (1986) in that it restricts access to English-medium schools only to those students who have attained the necessary cognitive and linguistic threshold levels which will enable them to benefit from a genuine immersion program. Currently, in around three quarters of the territory's secondary schools that adopt Cantonese as the medium of teacher instruction and campus communication, students study English as a subject, and the spoon-feeding and exam-oriented culture is deeply ingrained in the classroom (Evans & Morrison, 2011).

The Senior Secondary Curriculum Guide (Curriculum Development Council (CDC), 2009) stipulates that English is taught as a core subject in the secondary curriculum in Hong Kong. According to this curriculum and assessment guide, two overarching aims of the secondary English language curriculum (p. 2) are:

- (1) to provide every learner of English with further opportunities for extending their knowledge and experience of the cultures of other people as well as opportunities for personal and intellectual development, further studies, pleasure, and work in the English medium; and
- (2) to enable every learner to prepare for the changing socio-economic demands resulting from advances in information technology (IT) – demands which include the interpretation, use and production of texts for pleasure, study, and work in the English medium.

Despite a focus on providing opportunities for extending learner knowledge and experience of the target language cultures stipulated in the English Language Curriculum and Assessment Guide, the public assessment of the English language subject in Hong Kong secondary schools consists of a public examination component and a school-based assessment component (Hong Kong Examination & Assessment Authority, 2016). The public examination component is worth 85% of the total subject grade.

2.2. Participants and methodology

This study is part of a larger project concerning transition experiences of graduates of an ESL teacher training program during their first year of teaching in secondary schools in Hong Kong. The broader inquiry project followed these non-native teachers of English as a second language by exploring how they coped with their teaching contexts and how they developed the principles that guided their instructional behavior. According to Hayes (2005), whether biographical or autobiographical narrative, life history work can be viewed as ‘giving voice’ to and seeing events from the perspective of the teller of the stories. Teacher educators have increasingly recognized the importance of the individual teacher’s lived experience as relevant to the development of what he or she will bring to the classroom (Alvine, 2001). “Thus, the life histories of teachers have come to be seen as grounded experience for knowledge of teaching” (Alvine, 2001, p. 5). In the case of second language teacher education, autobiographical narratives may help researchers to “investigate how language teachers and learners are situated in specific social, historical and cultural contexts, in which the primary context is viewed as the teachers’ and learners’ lives” (Barkhuizen, Benson, & Chik, 2014, p. 11).

In this article, we focus on the experience of four ESL teachers of mainland Chinese origin with success or failure in surviving their first year of teaching. These four specific teachers, Hailey, Jiang, Jenny, and Candy, were selected as they represent information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the question under study (Patton, 1990). Each of these teachers completed their primary and secondary education in mainland China. After they graduated from the teacher training program in a Hong Kong university, they were employed as full-time ESL teachers in local Hong Kong schools. Their age varied from 22 to 23 years. All of them were female. Teacher 1, Hailey, graduated with First Class Honors from university and found her first-year experience in the Hong Kong classroom successful. Teacher 2, Jiang, believed that her first-year teaching experience turned out to be more positive than she had expected. Teacher 3, Jenny, experienced difficulties in collegial relationships and completed her first year without having her job contract renewed. Teacher 4, Candy, worked as a first year teacher for only eight months then quit her teaching due to severe difficulties in relationships with her students.

The study reported in this paper thus utilized a case study approach (van Lier, 2005) which allowed us to follow each of the four teachers in great detail, and as such ‘cannot be adequately researched in any of the other common research methods’ (van Lier, 2005, p. 195). We thus believed that case studies permit the articulation and explanation of individual perspectives and experiences in localized contexts of Hong Kong secondary schools. Data were collected over a period of one academic year. The primary source of data were three interviews conducted with each participant over a period of one academic year, each audiotaped and lasting about two hours. The first interview with each participant was conducted before they began their teaching in the school that employed them. The second interview with each participant was conducted at the end of the first semester of their first year, and the third interview with each participant was conducted at the end of the second semester of their first year. The interviews were conducted in line with the general interview guide approach (Patton, 1990), which entailed drawing up a list of subjects that functioned as a guide during the interview (Buitink, 2009). For example, the first interview with each participant focused on what motivated them to study in an ESL teacher training program in a Hong Kong university and what drove them to find a teaching position in a Hong Kong school. I started the second interview with each participant with general topics such as teaching philosophies and beliefs, school culture, induction into the school, curriculum planning and class management, and professional relationships and responsibilities. I started the third interview with each participant with topics such as instructional strategies, and socialization with colleagues and students. Within these subjects, I was further able to go on asking questions so that participants could spell out their responses in greater detail.

All the participants' first language was Mandarin, although each of them learned and acquired a generally good level of Cantonese during their four-year stay in Hong Kong. Interviews with the participants were thus conducted in Mandarin, transcribed verbatim, and later translated into English in their entirety, which was further checked by a bilingual colleague in the author's university to ensure accuracy of translation. Follow-up email correspondence with the participants was also used to probe further some points that emerged while the interviews were being transcribed and analyzed. Data analysis was based on the integration of within-case analyses (Ayres, Kavanaugh, & Knaf, 2003) and the constant comparison method, which illustrate and personalize the contextual and personal influences on the teachers' first-year experiences. Pseudonyms were used for these participating teachers to ensure participant anonymity.

3. Narratives of first-year Mainland Chinese ESL teachers in Hong Kong schools

3.1. Hailey

Hailey, the first teacher in this case study, attended a prestigious secondary school in a city in China before she came to study in a university in Hong Kong. The reason why she decided to come to Hong Kong was that she thought Hong Kong was an ideal place for language learning and career development. She was one of the five students in her class who graduated with First Class Honors. After graduation, Hailey, was employed in a Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS) school which stipulates use of English as the medium of communication within the school. Hailey felt her first year was successful although it was somewhat stressful. She was given three classes to teach, and she was appointed the coordinator of Form 2 (i.e. Grade 8) teachers. Every day, she arrived in school early in the morning, teaching, marking, attending meetings, and coordinating various other activities, and got back home almost in the evening. In addition, she also used either a whole Saturday or Sunday each week to prepare teaching. Because of her diligence, capability and her mainland China background, she was designated twice in her first year as leader leading student activities in Asian countries and in one Chinese-American community in the USA. In all these teaching and student development activities, she felt supported and appreciated by her fellow teachers and the principal who also had English teaching background. With this support and appreciation, Hailey was also able to study her own part-time master's degree course. She said she treated going to her evening part-time Master's degree course as relaxation from daytime school work.

The most satisfying part of Hailey's first year teaching experience was her successful implementation of communication-based grammar teaching in collaboration with her fellow colleagues. English teaching in her school was basically textbook-oriented. Teachers needed to follow the school curriculum closely and cover the content in textbooks and grammar books. Hailey tried to adopt a more task- or communication-based approach in teaching by applying what she learned in her university teacher training course and trying out communicative teaching principles. She cited her two native English speaking colleagues as instrumental to her successful innovative teaching. These two fellow teachers already got a couple of years' experience and thus were in a good position to assist Hailey in some regards because of closeness to her first-year status. Hailey had a good mastery of the English language grammar knowledge and communicative teaching principles, whereas the two native English teachers had a wealth of classroom activity ideas to contribute. Thus, three of them had a great willingness to trust and share with each other. They rented a flat and lived together, and this allowed them the time and space to reflect on their practice in dialog with one another as they planned lessons and discussed teaching strategies both at home and in school. "Native speakers have no concept of grammar, but I know what grammatical knowledge students need to be taught and what difficulty students may have in studying grammar", Hailey commented. Hailey also benefited from sharing the two native English teachers' experiences of catering to special needs students in class. "In addition, my spoken English is more fluent now as I speak far more English than I did during the four years at university", she added.

Due to Hailey's successful implementation of task-based grammar teaching, she became the coordinator of a problem-based teaching project in the second semester initiated by the school as part of a school-wide reform aimed at abandoning the traditional transmissional teaching model.

3.2. Jiang

Jiang was very thrilled to receive a job offer at a Chinese-medium school where she had fulfilled her pre-service teaching practicum placement. She commented that her first-year teaching experience was much more positive than she expected. She was very pleased with the working conditions at her school, particularly the work relationships she had with her administrators and fellow teachers, as can be illustrated in her remarks: "I still remember on the first interview with the vice principal of my school, she told me that she was impressed by my English and never ever imagined that a girl who had schooling in mainland China can speak English so well." She was assigned three classes in the first semester ranging from remedial and average class to elite class. Most of the difficulties she experienced came from the remedial class. Students in this remedial class were secondary Form 4 (Grade 10) students and most of them were repeaters who showed practically no interest in learning not only in English but also in other subjects, which brought about lots of pressure to Jiang at the very beginning of the first semester. As is well-known, across Hong Kong schools, remedial class students are notoriously difficult to teach largely due to their loss of motivation to learn. Fortunately, Jiang had a very supportive environment:

The panel-chair of the English department of my school was extremely supportive and friendly and some old colleagues in the English department were also very helpful. We are like families. They are willing to tell you everything about our curriculum and they'd also love to share their past experiences with you at any time you want.

In the first class with this group of remedial students, Jiang told them in Cantonese that her main goal was to help them to study and to get good grades in exams, not to discipline them. She also invited them to correct her Cantonese whenever she pronounced certain words incorrectly. To motivate her remedial class students to learn and also to win the respect of her students, the most important thing Jiang felt she needed to do was to build up a close relationship with these students. In her view, good relationship makes teaching easier, whereas poor relationship or discipline problem is the result of the inadequate efforts of the teacher in reaching out to the students. Thus, whenever she saw her students, she would say hello to them and talked to them a while. It was in this remedial class that Jiang invested most of herself and also developed the deepest feeling with the students. "Finally I succeeded in developing a very good relationship with them. These students became unexpectedly confident in learning English", Jiang recalled during the interview. She admitted that she simply relied on some 'primitive' teaching methods in class: "I barely spoke English to them, and I mainly focused on exam skills, which worked well in the following exams". She found that using Cantonese to teach these students English grammar and vocabulary was very effective in helping her students master the necessary exam skills. She was thus using Cantonese most of the time in class although she herself had not acquired a native-like mastery of Cantonese. "But my students enjoyed me using Cantonese to teach and they actively corrected my Cantonese pronunciation", Jiang reported. Toward the end of the second semester of the first academic year, her remedial class turned out to be one of the highest achieving classes in the end-of-the-term school examinations.

Another very positive experience she had with her remedial class was that she encouraged and helped these students to participate in a regional English song competition in the second semester. She devoted several weeks of time teaching them English songs and preparing them for this competition. To the surprise of the whole school, Jiang's remedial class obtained the championship, which created quite a stir within the school. "The only regret I had was that I was not able to attend the award ceremony as I had to attend my University Congregation that day", Jiang wrote in an email.

3.3. Jenny

When Jenny arrived in her school, she was not provided with any formal induction activities. The school had the tradition of assigning two head teachers for each class as a mentoring practice for novice teachers. Jenny was designated as one of the head teachers for a Form 2 (grade 8) class, with the other head teacher being her mentor. However, Jenny seldom saw her mentor teacher, and she often had to turn to other teachers in the school for information about her Form 2 class. Jenny also had a feeling of being isolated from colleagues who were teaching the English subject. Her English panel chair only talked to English subject teachers once, asking them to have their students keep a portfolio of their daily course work. Jenny told her students about the portfolio work in class in a timely manner. When the panel chair checked Jenny's students' portfolio work at the end of the semester, she criticized Jenny for not helping students prepare portfolio work appropriately, and showed Jenny a model of past student portfolio work. Jenny felt that if the model had been given at the beginning of the semester, her students would have prepared their portfolio work better. In the panel chair's view, however, Jenny's failure to follow her instruction demonstrated a lack of respect for her. Another incident was that her panel chair suddenly walked into her classroom and observed her teaching one day without any advance notice. In the middle of the class observed, her panel chair abruptly went to the front of the class and interrupted Jenny, and she took over the teaching from Jenny for the rest of the class, leaving Jenny standing by and feeling very embarrassed and awkward. The evaluation and feedback the panel chair gave Jenny for that lesson observed were all negative. These incidents resulted in Jenny feeling very frustrated about her relationships with her mentor teacher and her subject panel chair.

During the second semester, there was a feeling prevalent among the school staff that, at that point in time, the school principal happened to be preoccupied with some family matter and would retire very soon, and consequently no one took it to heart what new teachers really needed. By the middle of the second semester, no one had informed Jenny whether she could have her contract renewed. Jenny waited and waited, and then she was told one month before her contract expiry date that her contract would not be renewed. Jenny then immediately started looking for a new job in order to ensure that she could stay in Hong Kong legally. She was offered an administrative position in a university, and thus was able to have her Hong Kong stay permit extended.

3.4. Candy

The fourth teacher in this study, Candy, inspired by her successful student teaching experience before graduation, found a full-time teaching position in a Hong Kong school with an increasingly large enrollment of students immigrated into Hong Kong from China in recent years. She felt good about the school as the principal was considerably supportive and encouraged her to make good use of her advantage in Mandarin in communication with students from mainland China. Her English panel chair also gave her a lot of support. She was given three classes: a Form 1 (grade 7) class, a Form 2 (grade 8) class, and a Form 4 (grade 10) class. But her positive outlook on teaching was shattered with the realization that the Form 4 class, which comprised local Cantonese speaking students, had been the most difficult class in the school. She later learned from fellow teachers that it was a class almost no one else wanted to teach. Other subject teachers who were teaching this class generally adopted a laissez-faire or even apathetic approach. The students were so poor in English that they could not follow Candy's instruction. Candy felt that the knowledge she acquired before graduation about setting up the classroom and engaging students in activities was not applicable in this class. The discipline problems created formidable challenges. "Most of the time in class was spent maintaining class discipline. It is very difficult to get them to do anything, which left little time for actual teaching. For example, distribution of worksheets could sometimes take up to several minutes because of misbehaviours," Candy recalled. A few weeks into the first semester, her early passionate feeling of teaching enthusiasm had been dashed by the harsh classroom realities she faced. Candy struggled to keep going. But what Candy could not tolerate was that the students were often verbally abusive to her in class. In the second semester, things got worse. On one occasion when the class was out of control, Jenny had no choice but call the principal to the classroom. With the

principal's arrival in the classroom, the unruly class became silent. But the next day when Candy was in the class, the students remained as unruly as before. Candy vented her frustration with her school colleagues and her parents that she felt no sense of dignity when she was in this Form 4 class in the classroom. Her colleagues kept telling her to be patient and persevere. "The summer break is around the corner", they tried to comfort her. However, by this time, Candy was almost completely drained-mentally, physically, and emotionally. The breathing space provided by the subsequent Easter holiday time did not allow Candy to return to work rejuvenated. Two weeks after the Easter holiday in the second semester, Candy felt that she couldn't take it anymore, and she submitted a resignation to the principal. Although the principal and her colleagues tried to persuade her to continue teaching in the school, Candy still quit. After quitting her teaching, Candy began the application process for studying in a postgraduate program in a Hong Kong university. Candy's story did eventually have a happy ending, as she was employed in another secondary school after graduation from the one year full-time master's degree program.

4. Discussion

This study adds the first-year mainland Chinese ESL teacher voice to existing novice teacher research in the general education field. The experiences of the four ESL teachers of mainland Chinese origin documented in this study showed that their first years in Hong Kong schools appeared indeed to be a 'fight for life' where personal philosophies, knowledge, skills, and dispositions were thoroughly tested. The results showed that these teachers themselves were key actors in coping with the processes of teaching, adapting their working conditions, and in determining ultimate success or failure in their first year in school. These experiences were apparently both similar and somewhat different from those seen in stage models of novice teacher development in the literature (e.g., Fuller & Bown, 1975; Maynard & Furlong, 1995). On the one hand, Jenny and Candy experienced difficulty similar to that of teachers in the survival stage characterized by inability to teach effectively and have adequate control of their teaching context, and their main concern appeared to be their coping on a daily basis (Katz, 1997). On the other hand, Hailey and Jiang's first-year experiences somewhat challenge the conventional phase model about the pace and developmental direction of expressed concerns among beginning teachers, and provide evidence to Watzke's (2007) observation that novice teachers might go beyond the survival phase and have concerns for students as learners, and that they are capable of complex and student-oriented thinking. For example, classroom management is often cited as new teachers' most salient concern in the research literature, but this did not materialize in Hailey and Jiang's classrooms where we observed a focus on teaching techniques and effectiveness, and their impact on students' learning. In Hailey's case, she was apparently not only able to focus on instruction and individual students' needs but also able to try out innovative teaching and pursue her own higher degree studies concurrently. In Jiang's case, she succeeded in fostering greater levels of student participation and engagement in the learning process, and effecting some important changes in their students' academic performance and their lives.

Hailey and Jiang's experiences also illustrated the role of agency in confronting many challenges and overcoming conditions of adversity, echoing Lasky's (2005) view that human beings have the ability to influence their lives and environment while they are also shaped by social and individual factors. Jiang's experience with her remedial students affirms the agency of beginner ESL teachers of mainland Chinese origin to transform negative aspects of their environment, and demonstrated the effectiveness of a variety of locally contextualized ways to stimulate students to learn and lead to better learning performance. Hailey's successful collaborative and innovative teaching experience also shows that support and dialoguing with peer new teachers is critical in effecting change in practice. In other words, Hailey's sharing of expertise and/or experiences and dialoguing generated a zone of proximal development, which might be defined by the difference between the outcome of individual actions and the outcomes of a more advanced, collectively achieved activity (Engeström, 2001).

This study suggested that a full-time teaching position appeared to be a tough job for new ESL teachers of mainland Chinese origin, although what each teacher in this study found difficult appeared to vary with their classroom context, their philosophies and personality. In Jiang's case, her greatest initial concern was to motivate her students to learn and improve their English subject performance. She succeeded in achieving these goals through establishing an intimate relationship with her students. Use of students' first language Cantonese could thus even become a tool that Jiang frequently used to engage her students in the learning processes in class. In Hailey's case, her successful implementation of innovative teaching apparently had a lot to do with the supportive organizational climate and inspiring colleagues, which fundamentally explained why she was able not only to function as an effective teacher but also continue with her part-time master's degree studies. The largely negative experience of Jenny in her first year appeared to be the result of her mentor and panel chair being indifferent, which caused her to have no one to share knowledge and/or expertise with and thus feel isolated and frustrated. She admitted that not knowing how to flatter her panel chair could be the cause of a strained relationship with the panel chair, which eventually might have resulted in failure to get her contract renewal. In Candy's case, primary concern and source of pain and frustration was student apathy and discipline problem. After more than a semester's building of tension in relationship with one of her classes, a sense of complete loss of dignity eventually led her to make up her mind to quit teaching in her school.

Learning to teach can be viewed as a process of socialization, in which new teachers adopt the norms of the school context (Castro, Kelly, & Shih, 2010). The four beginner teachers' first-year experiences were apparently shaped by their relationships with, and by, their school environment. School environment mediated what supports they would receive, and what kinds of behavior were encouraged and discouraged (Scherff, 2008). Constructive relations between novice teachers and their fellow teachers contribute to the new teachers' self-confidence, and further to strong professional agency (Soini et al., 2015; Turnbull, 2005). This is best illustrated in Hailey and Jiang's first-year school experiences, which resonate with the observation that teachers can be change agents and activators at the classroom level, in order to make a difference in students' learning (Hattie, 2012; van der Heijden, Geldens, Beijaard, & Popeijus, 2015). It has been observed countless times in research that many difficulties that beginning teachers face stem mainly from their inability to adjust to the organizational norms of the beginner teacher's work environment, which might prevent them from developing a sense of self and professional assurance and consequently cause mental burnout (Gavish & Friedman, 2010). In other words, teaching can be physically and emotionally draining, as is well illustrated in Candy and Jenny's stories. Novice teachers need to feel a sense of involvement and belonging, and to believe that they are accepted in their work (Gavish & Friedman, 2010). Mentoring practices thus become critical to the newcomer's smooth induction into the teaching profession. The presence of mentoring practices in a school also helps the school to be a learning community (Le Maistre & Paré, 2010). These mentoring practices can scaffold situations to ease the difficult transition from student to beginner practitioner. In the case of Jenny in this study, her feeling of being ignored and isolated suggested a lack of effective mentoring practices. Although a sort of mentoring mechanism existed in her school, it did not work, and no meaningful support was provided. Her experience suggested that her school and departmental culture was not conducive to professional collaboration and sharing of teaching expertise. Consequently, changing the culture of school and department should be the key target of administrators' efforts to create a safe community in which beginner teachers can air concerns, seek assistance, and know how to respond appropriately to be successful within their school context.

5. Conclusion and implications

The results of this study show that in-system factors such as involvement with colleagues and communication with students could be cornerstones for success in first-year teaching in Hong Kong schools. Although some form of mentoring program or induction activities were provided at inception of teaching in each participant's school, what they appeared to need most to make it through their first years was ideas for curriculum planning and management, guidance for specific teaching skills, and assistance in managing the complexities of real classrooms. Without meaningful support

in these areas, and without addressing these teachers' emotional reactions and values or attitudes underlying these areas, one might not really help novice teachers develop their pedagogical skills needed to carry out their work effectively. This study thus points to the unequivocal importance of effective school practices and supportive organizational environment in the successful integration of ESL teachers of mainland Chinese origin in their first-year teaching in Hong Kong schools. Note that the social and emotional characteristics of the work environment that enhance teachers' engagement, empowerment and pedagogical innovations are the opportunities to participate and contribute to the school community as accountable authors (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011; Soini et al., 2015). Educators and school administrators thus need to be aware of the difficulties and basic needs of these new mainland Chinese ESL teachers and establish supportive processes in their immediate teaching environment that nurtures teachers' sense that they are in control of their teaching context.

The apparent lack of sense of professional agency reflected in Jenny and Candy's first-year teaching experiences in this study might also indicate ineffectiveness of their university English language teacher training course. The process of becoming a professional teacher is seen as involving not simply the development of procedural skills and subject-related competences, but also the ontological aspects such as agency (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011). Lipponen and Kumpulainen's research work shows how agency can be constructed through the situated discourse practices in the context of a teacher education program based on the collective inquiry approach. It is thus suggested that English language teacher preparation programs in the English as a second language context in Hong Kong need to be designed to promote developing skills in anticipatory reflection so that prospective English language teachers have opportunities to anticipate the uncertainties and tensions that will arise in school environment, and be alerted to increasingly complex classroom situations, and develop the transformative agency needed to resolve those uncertainties and tensions. For example, pre-service ESL teacher candidates can discuss case studies of novice teacher experiences, reflecting on what individual, social and institutional factors may shape their teaching and how they may transform the negative conditions of their work environment and thereby take control of their teaching context. When pre-service ESL candidate teachers have these kinds of experiences in their university course, they are likely to develop the capacity to operate with professional agency in real classroom situations, which is essential to creating meaningful and engaging learning environments to support their students' learning.

Funding

This work was supported by the University of Macau under [grant number MYRG 2016-00141-FED].

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Citation information

Cite this article as: Success and failure in first-year teaching: Mainland Chinese ESL teachers in Hong Kong schools, Zhengdong Gan, *Cogent Education* (2018), 5: 1455631.

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