1 Introduction

In the ten years between 1999 and 2009, China witnessed considerable efforts in the implementation of Basic Education Curriculum Reform. The aim of this curriculum reform was to improve the quality of education through the development of a range of skills and personal attributes to meet the challenges of global competition, including cognitive, non-cognitive, interpersonal, intrapersonal skills and capabilities, moral values and creativity (Kipnis 2006). ‘Guidelines for Basic Education Curriculum Reform (pilot)’ issued in 2001 and 2003 stipulated objectives for 15 subjects, related to learning content, pedagogical approaches and school management. These guidelines also emphasised a reduction in student workload, the cultivation of higher-order skills, and the broadening of students’ learning experiences (Zhong 2005). This nationwide curriculum reform was implemented in two phases: initially piloted in September 2004 in four selected provinces (Guangdong, Shandong, Hainan and Ningxia), and then extended to other provinces including Jiangsu, Fujian, Liaoning and Zhejiang. Implementation in the final few provinces was carried out in 2009.

In line with the general curriculum goals, the curriculum reform for English language, one of the main subjects which started at primary
three levels, mandated 5 parallel goals to foster students’ cognitive and personal growth to enable them to access global scientific knowledge as members of society and the world. These goals included language skills, language knowledge, affect (emotional attitude), learning strategies and cross-cultural awareness and competence (Yeung 2009; Wang and Lam 2009; Zhu 2007).

To develop the ability to use English for authentic communication and personal growth, the new English curriculum stipulated a transformation from the traditional approach to language teaching (that relies heavily on systematic and detailed study of grammar, extensive use of cross-linguistic comparison and translation, memorisation of structural patterns and vocabulary, painstaking effort to form good verbal habits, an emphasis on written language and a preference for literary classics) to constructivist pedagogies (such as inquiry-based learning and task-based instruction) and formative assessments. These expectations called for a major cognitive shift in how teaching is conceptualised and valued. It called on teachers to engage in a deliberate and ongoing process of unlearning, learning and relearning to meet the curriculum reform requirements in their classrooms (Qian and Walker 2013).

Nationwide initiatives to reform curricular materials and pedagogies were carried out. Textbooks were revised to be more engaging, more interactive and more relevant to students’ lives. Teachers were called upon to boldly experiment with new innovative approaches. Heavy investment was made in teacher training to provide teachers with pedagogical support. Additionally, research and teaching activities were organised on a monthly basis to facilitate teachers’ knowledge and application of the new curriculum, which were generally delivered by an expert from the local education bureau, who was either a textbook compiler, or a university-based teacher educator, or an instructional and research fellow from the Teaching and Research Department of the local education bureau. At the district and school levels, workshops and seminars were organised to enhance teachers’ knowledge of and implementation of the new curriculum. As well as teacher training activities, self-directed professional learning for teachers (to be done in their own time) was mandated. To help with this, online teacher training modules were delivered nationwide to create more learning opportunities and resources for teachers en masse.

However, while there has been an enormous investment in the reform process, implementation has not matched the curriculum goals, despite various policies and initiatives. Reports of limited success seem
to outweigh those of success. Teacher-centred didactic teaching remains prevalent in classrooms in both developed urban and less developed rural areas (Starr 2011; OCED 2010; Xu and Wong 2011; Yan 2012; Yan and He 2012). Various interrelated contextual factors, such as the nature of assessment, teacher resistance and pedagogical struggles, student resistance and limited school support have been found to contribute to the lack of change in different schools in both urban and rural areas. Teachers find themselves in a dilemma. They exert considerable effort to implement the new curriculum’s aims, yet these aims are incongruent with the aims of the student assessments. Formative assessment was conducted as a mere formality. As Qian and Walker (2013) observed, the damaging effect of an almost exclusive focus on examination performance still pervades.

Previous research in a range of contexts (e.g. Wang 2011; Zhang and Liu 2014; Riazi and Razavipour 2011; Hardman and A-Rahman 2014) reveals a plethora of attention to teachers’ pedagogical dilemmas caused by social external obstacles in the curriculum reform. However, there seems to be a paucity of research on rural school teachers’ professional and emotional well-being, which deserves equal, if not more attention because it may constitute crucial obstacles to curriculum reform and teacher development. Therefore, the case study that follows aims to provide a nuanced depiction of one rural senior secondary English language teacher’s perceptions of the tensions between the new curriculum goals and the national college entry examinations (Gaokao). The case highlights the teacher’s process of behavioural and emotional adjustments she finds herself making as a way of coping with the dilemma of trying to be a good, dedicated teacher to her students and meeting the educational aims of the new curriculum. I believe that examining the rural teacher’s life story and experiences in the recent English curriculum reform may help to shed light on other professionally dedicated senior school teachers’ experiences and feelings. In doing so, it aims to highlight the tensions experienced by those rural school teachers who have been exceptionally hard working to achieve both public and personal educational goals, but have negative emotions about their work due to the overwhelming pressure of the national high-stakes exam. I believe that such rural teacher experiences, feelings and responses to change deserve attention from all parties involved in the curriculum reform in China to narrow the urban–rural divide, the essence of curriculum reform. The case may also resonate with the experiences of rural teachers in other curriculum change contexts beyond China.
To gain a close-up view of the curriculum reform, Yao (pseudonym), a 40-year-old senior secondary English teacher’s perceptions and experiences were investigated. She works in a school in the suburb of a provincial capital city in Central China and teaches English classes for students aged 16–18. Before 1995, this suburb fell outside the official boundary of the provincial capital and was located in a rural area. However, since the boundary changes this suburb has been part of a new province, but can be considered ‘rural’ in the sense that it still lags behind other districts due to its location far from the city and its previous more rural status. There are only two schools in Yao’s district, and she and her colleagues find it difficult to travel to training events in the city due to the distance and local geography.

Yao is regarded as an exemplary teacher in her school based on her students’ remarkable achievements in the university entry examinations over the years of her career. She completed a part-time MEd between 2008 and 2014 and was under my supervision for her dissertation writing. I was deeply struck by her thirst for learning and yearning for quality-oriented education and her frustration with her career which she perceived as a failure.

2.1 Yao’s Professional Life

Yao has been endowed with teacher attributes, such as interest, passion, diligence and a sense of responsibility, since she became an English teacher in 1997 at a secondary vocational school after her graduation from a second-tiered university as a history major.

After graduation, she became an English teacher because there was no history subject in the secondary vocational school. Her life during this time was stress-free without any specific demands or uniform examinations. However, she felt stigmatised because of her non-English major background and the low status of vocational schools at that time. Her sense of inferiority drove her to pursue a bachelor’s degree in English Language and Literature through a correspondence course. The poor quality and low academic status of the certificate pushed her to work hard to obtain recognition in that school. She achieved this recognition within
the school, but since vocational schools continued to have a low status, she decided to move to a more prestigious senior secondary school. She secured an offer in one of the top suburban schools in the region located in the outskirts of the capital city. Her students performed impressively in the English test of the Gaokao, which enabled her to win a promotion to Senior-Level Teacher (gaoji jiaoshi) in 2005, the highest professional title in schools, which was an unusual achievement at her age. However, despite her remarkable professional performance, she has never felt herself to be a qualified English teacher.

In 2005, she decided to take the MEd examination to achieve her ambition of obtaining a formally recognised qualification in English to further her academic development. As she says,

My dream has always been entering a good university. I always longed to receive systematic training in English because I didn’t major in English but history. I want to improve my professional skills, upgrade and systematise my teaching ideas and methods through systematic academic studies in a reputable university.

Another reason for doing a MEd was her eagerness to get herself out of the rut of routinised teaching and recharge her batteries after working for over ten years. Although she gained admission to a nationally prestigious teacher education university, she had to postpone her entry for several years because her school was short-staffed. While she waited to be given a chance to start her MEd course, she continued to work hard at the school and her persistence and diligence were rewarded in 2010 with a 20-day trip to the UK. This was a rare opportunity which nobody else had ever obtained. In the same year, she eventually got approval from her school to undertake her MEd studies. This course gave her the opportunity to stop and think about what she had been doing in the classroom, something that a heavy teaching workload does not always allow for day-to-day teaching. Yao comments that:

I was a busy teacher who was worn out every day fighting for students’ scores. I was so occupied with heavy workload that I seldom stopped to think of some basic questions such as what, why and how. I only followed the conventions and never thought to explore a way that belonged to me. Through half a year’s study I begin to think like an educator with a thinking brain, which is the greatest benefit I have gained here.
2.2 Yao’s Perceptions and Experiences of Curriculum Reform

The previous section described how Yao is a hard-working and dedicated English language teacher who clearly wants to develop her own skills and expertise in teaching. From the conversations with Yao, it became apparent that this dedicated teacher encountered many struggles with coming to terms with the new curriculum. This section presents two sub-sections, representing two stages of Yao’s interpretation of and reaction to the curriculum reform. The first stage was characterised by her full endorsement of the educational goals mandated by the curriculum reform and her ensuing resistance to the existing exam-oriented education. The second stage was a transition from resistance to acceptance of the prevailing exam-oriented education. These two stages truthfully reflect her professional development trajectory and changed the state of mind influenced by the Gaokao-driven education environment. Her attitudinal change was both influenced by and resulted in the success of her students in the exams, a higher professional and social status as well as improved sense of self-efficacy.

2.2.1 Stage One: Embracing the Curriculum Reform and Resisting the Prevailing Exam-Oriented Education

Over a 10-year period, Yao experienced a change in her perception about her role as an English teacher in the curriculum reform climate. Initially, she fully embraced the goals of the new curriculum reforms to transform the exam-focused education to quality-oriented education in order to develop students’ practical problem-solving ability. She believed that the goal of education was ‘to cultivate physically and mentally healthy persons’. She challenged the exam-oriented education system that seemed to fail to cultivate students’ competence, as can be seen in her words below.

Why can’t our education cultivate first-class talents, say, Nobel Prize winners? Until today, our education and classroom practice still serve examination. Students in this education system have rich textbook knowledge but lack practical competence. They can’t fit in this changing society which needs all-round talents with rich knowledge, problem-solving ability, pioneering spirit and creative thinking. Obviously, our education system needs reforms and innovations.

She used a series of strategies to motivate students’ interest in English learning, such as using English as the main medium of instruction to
increase students’ exposure to English and arranging group work to create students’ teamwork spirit. However, the failure of her school’s experimentation with student-centred learning and formative assessment in response to the curriculum reform mandate caused her to think and waiver. Student-centred pedagogies were implemented as a pretence only in cases of school and teaching inspections conducted by education management. Inspectors tended to be concerned only with the superficial technical elements of quality-oriented pedagogies, talking lightly of the rationality of the objectives, procedures and learning activities. The formative assessment also turned out to be a pretence. It has never been carried out for those students whose final year is devoted to preparing for the Gaokao. In reality, the students gave themselves a mark with their teachers’ approval to contribute to their quality assessment results required by the local education bureau.

According to Yao, the pedagogical reforms tended to be flimsy and ephemeral ‘gimmicks’ that could not become normalised routine instructional procedures because of the irreconcilable conflict between the two educational philosophies, i.e. exam- and quality-oriented education. As Yao puts it:

Theoretically, quality- and exam-oriented education can be mutually integrated and facilitative. Theory experts (curriculum developers and university-based teacher educators) firmly believe that if students’ overall qualities and competence are raised, their exam competence should not be too bad. However, in reality exam-oriented education is prevalent. The pragmatic exam-oriented teaching is the norm in my school.

Yao acknowledged a number of hurdles in implementing the new curriculum including teachers’ limited professional competence (language proficiency and instructional skills), limited time to apply the theories on which the new curriculum goals were based, students’ reluctance to develop self-regulatory skills and their preference for the didactic information-transmission teaching.

Yao participated in many training courses. However, as she reports below, they were merely provided to meet administrative obligations and were unable to serve teachers’ real needs.

The training is carried out more through administrative orders than through teachers’ intrinsic needs and desires, so it’s weak, superficial and powerless. Under the orders from the above as a show of management competence, teachers are passively involved, running after a programme after another, and achieve little but feeling exhausted with such burdens and extra work.
Added to this, the training courses were discrete, unsystematic, theoretical and idealistic, lacking in practical suggestions on how to contextualise the theories and new teaching approaches in schools. This seemed to be because of either the time allocated for training or the teacher trainers’ superficial understanding and limited practice of those theories. Yao notes that we participate in many training courses that introduce new ideas and methods, such as giving more time to students for them to engage in autonomous learning, exploratory learning and cooperative learning. However, their impact is minimal. I don’t have the competence to balance quality- and exam-oriented education. I don’t have the time, energy and courage to take this challenge. We still use cramming for fear of missing one language point that might be tested. So we lecture all the time including in the evening self-study sessions.

The need to cover syllabus content for the exams considerably hindered teachers in carrying out skills practice and development which require more classroom and syllabus time, especially speaking. Her school tried innovations by duplicating instructional models of more successful schools. However, these failed to take root owing to tissue rejection (Holliday 1994) derived from a series of mismatches between the reform and school conditions.

After their visit to some successful schools, our principals required us to make detailed plans to implement their student-centred pedagogies, such as five-step instruction that requires students to self-teach the learning contents before class, and raise questions in class for teachers to give answers. However, after less than one month’s implementation, all teachers gave up because of its limited effect, only on good students, and other students can’t be actively involved.

Therefore, as Yao comments above, teachers’ experiments with new pedagogies were short-lived and superficial as a result of limited teacher expertise and time.

However, more significantly, it was the lack of instant improvement in exam results which led to Yao and her colleagues returning to their previous practices in which they had been expert. As Yao states,

we have to go back to our old ways because we can’t afford to fail. If we are allowed to fail, we would likely continue our experimentations.

She pointed out that the crucial reason for the ‘old wine in new bottles’ phenomenon was the washback of Gaokao-based school evaluation. As she revealed in her reflective journal,
In reality, few effective solutions have emerged to reduce examination pressures. On the contrary, the examination competition is becoming fiercer and fiercer. Up till now the curriculum reform’s quality-oriented education has been a mere formality in my school.

In addition, the absence of any fundamental change in the contents of Gaokao and the Gaokao-based school evaluation spurred the nationwide frenzy of schools ranking competitions and strongly hindered any attempts at quality-oriented education, as Yao explains below.

There remains a considerable gap between the Gaokao and the New Curriculum Standards. The New curriculum standards cover several dimensions of student development as persons, but the Gaokao just covers the knowledge and skills dimensions. We focus on the Gaokao standards because students’ Gaokao results mean everything.

The Gaokao results determine the level of support from the educational management to schools, which in turn determine schools’ resources (teachers and educational facilities) and students’ learning outcomes. Yao’s description of the competition-driven education pervading in China is given below.

The more education reforms, the more students and teachers suffer. The predominant problem is the huge population and limited educational resources that have led to great regional disparity among different schools. Advanced facilities, high quality teachers and highly-caliber students are concentrated in the key schools, which is the source of fierce competition and unfair education. In order to be admitted to key schools, children begin to prepare for public examinations when they are in the kindergarten.

Thus, it would seem that a series of irrational and demoralising Gaokao-driven practices have been modelling the school culture. As Yao’s experiences suggest, working hard for students’ good exam performance and conformity to school administrators’ instructions remain the two caveats in teachers’ professional life. With the ethos that Gaokao results depend on the investment in time and sweat (shijian jia hanshu), the school schedule is crammed with classes, assignments and tests as incentives, leaving teachers, students and administrators with very little time for entertainment and relaxation. Added to this, many of the teacher training programmes were concerned with new trends of Gaokao and preparation guidelines.

Gaokao not only means a heavy work schedule, but also a lot of anxiety and stress. Yao explained how teachers and students are ranked after each
Each teacher is accountable for their students’ results. Low-performing teachers and students feel stigmatised, and high-performing ones feel more pressured to maintain and excel the achieved standards. This practice was in turn a result of the pressure the school principals were under to fulfil the targets set by the different hierarchies above the school level. Thus, ignoring the Gaokao would be impossible. As Yao remarks:

Exam results is the sole indicator of a teacher’s and a student’s quality. We have exams every month, followed by students’ and teachers’ rankings, showing top 5, top 10, top 20, top 30, average marks. The results are announced at staff meetings, and put up on the wall outside the study affairs director’s office. The results determine our bonuses. This practice exerts great pressure on each student and teacher because they all want to do well.

Therefore, Yao spends the whole year of Senior 3 on Gaokao preparation, leaving no time for instructional reform. Fostering students’ competence is commonly regarded by school teachers as unrealistic because ‘cultivating competence is a long process. Exams are imminent and allow little time for cultivation’. Yao felt that the reliance on cramming and exercise tactics resulted from a need to achieve instant results, particularly since staff performance assessment is based on students’ test results and teachers’ biannual evaluation. Despite her desire to follow the aims of the new curriculum, she reports below how she has very little choice but to stick to the prevailing exam-oriented methods.

The mastery of a language shouldn’t be quantified by superficial scores, but this is the case in our country. We learn English to pass the exam instead of mastering and using it. What’s the best way to help students get high scores in exams? Intensive paper exercises and knowledge bombarding. So, even reform-oriented teachers have no choice but to use the seemingly effective way—traditional transmission, because it can guarantee “squeezing” more knowledge into students’ brain in limited time.

As she describes, in the centralised school environment, ‘the principal has the trump card to deal with teachers, who live for their face!’ That means he knows that the common fear of loss in the ranking competitions will drive teachers to choose to conform to whatever demands come from the school and beyond. A number of Yao’s colleagues who were initially enthusiastic about teaching towards curriculum goals were laid off or gave up their effort because of their dissatisfaction with the school climate. Yao expresses her powerlessness and helplessness about this lack of autonomy in the first few years of her career.
Teachers are constrained by their schools’ educational philosophies and goals. My school’s only goal is to fulfill the university admission rate, that’s an absolute goal for teachers and students. Our teaching is totally determined by my school’s educational philosophy and goals. (University) Admission rate is our absolute goal, so our teaching revolves around how to enable our students to improve their scores in the shortest time. High scores mean high teacher competence. This is the rule of the game unless you have good personal relationship with the headmaster or have important connections.

Over time, Yao gradually became aware that she had to compromise to ‘survive’. She acquiesced despite her strong aversion to this new employment policy along with her colleagues. She explains that,

We are the lowest-ranked. How can we question the system? How can we change the system from the bottom level? Our voice will fall into oblivion. Nobody can afford to lose their job. My school is over-staffed now because of the dramatic decrease of student numbers (resulting from the one child policy). Teachers are under control and live under great pressure, bewildered. That is where the fundamental problem lies.

2.2.2 Stage 2: Reaching a Compromise—Perceiving Gaokao as a Critical Opportunity for Rural Students

After years of futile resistance to the demands and requirements of the exams, Yao gradually perceived her role as positive. She was a teacher who could help rural students gain access to better life chances through their exam results and so more likely to be on an equal footing with their urban counterparts. She had come to terms with the reality that it was possible to have a ‘positive’ attitude towards some intrinsically good elements of the exam-oriented education. Yao saw that an exam approach to education could develop students’ foundational knowledge, including reading comprehension, vocabulary and translation, which prepares them well for their future development. The hard work and effort that students invested towards their exams could develop the kind of well-rounded qualities needed for their future development.

We found that high-performing students enjoy apparent advantages, such as solid foundation knowledge, attentiveness and concentration, persistence and patience, high learning motivation and clear goals. All these features are extremely beneficial to their future academic pursuits. Many of them stand a high chance of becoming high-achieving talents in scientific research.
In addition, Gaokao-based education could provide an equal opportunity for the talented but less privileged rural students, who have been able to enter good schools such as Yao’s, to potentially have access to a bright future through their academic endeavours. As Yao said,

Chinese parents are the most responsible parents for their children’s education. Many of my students don’t come from affluent family. Most parents’ money, time and energy are spent on their children’s education because education is the determinant of children’s and family’s future. Rural students can enter big cities and the world through their Gaokao success.

It became clear that over time, Yao started to empathise with the pressure her school was under and to better understand the super-human working style required of teachers and students, the endless examinations, and the streaming of teachers and students into different levels. She expresses this concern below.

As top 1 school in our district, my school determines the Gaokao outcomes of our district. We are under the scrutiny of the people, the education bureau, and the district management. Our school headmaster is under the greatest pressure. He has to prove to his superiors his achievements and his ability.

She also came to see her role as a ‘holy mission’, as she exemplifies below, to enable her aspiring students from humble origins to be admitted to a prestigious university.

Student’s only hope is entering a university because they don’t have a good family background to support them. My ‘holy mission’ is to help them to be admitted to universities. This is a sense of mission, professional ethics, a sense of achievement. If my students failed in the Gaokao, their prospects might be jeopardised as well as my own reputation (although it is not a serious concern to me). Everyone is struggling for the goal and if I didn’t take my responsibility, I would be a culprit. Every coin has two sides, why not look on the bright side?

She decided to try to make her teaching as Gaokao effective as possible through using three critical strategies: (1) comprehensively summarising the knowledge system in the textbooks based on the syllabus and Gaokao guidelines provided by the provincial education commission, (2) collecting the common problems of previous students in English tests and (3) checking and ensuring each student’s mastery of every likely test point in each unit against the system. To enhance students’ learning, she compiled a set of supplemen-
tary learning materials for her students. Her class had a relaxed and lively atmosphere, but was generally knowledge focused, and she had little time for the development of skills, learning strategies or cultural awareness and competence, as stipulated in the new curriculum. To save time, she mainly highlighted test points and left the practice to students after class. She explains,

We have only one class every day, so we can only focus on what is to be tested, i.e. vocabulary, reading, writing, and grammar in our teaching, practice and assignment. We have no time for oral practice and assignment. Six subjects all have a lot of homework.

Her test-oriented tactic was rewarded with her students’ outstanding exam performance. However, she did not feel a sense of achievement because of the ever-increasing requirements to fulfil the annual targets set by the district governments and education bureau. These annual targets meant that all her students were expected to be admitted to high-ranking universities and one or two students to the two top universities (Tsinghua and Beijing Universities). She felt her life to be ‘as bitter as a cup of black coffee’, denied a chance of having a spiritually and emotionally relaxed professional and personal life, and the freedom to express her opinions about school policies. As ‘a slave of the exams’, she was burdened with anxiety and burnout, which she described as ‘professional monotonous inertia’. Her stress is evident in the following email message.

I feel very tired. On coming back home, I can’t wait to flop onto the bed, not wanting to do anything or saying anything. This is my life and I’ve been accustomed to it and accepted it unconditionally. Life is more about repetition than surprise and challenge lies behind the repetition, which I think is the essence of life. (2 September 2012, 23:05)

She found herself in an ever-present dilemma because of the unresolved conflict between her preferred teaching and her compromised practice. As she explains below, she felt that the practice of making ‘exam machines’ was going increasingly further away from the initial purpose of education, depriving both students and teachers of their happiness and dignity.

Striving for exam results has spelled enormous pressure on me and students because you can’t guarantee good results all the time. This assessment mechanism is really unfair to students, and to teachers. You can’t think too much about it because it will make you depressed. Good exam results not necessarily truly reflect students’ real competence, but we can do nothing about it.
Yao felt like a failure because of the sharp contrast between her students’ test results and competence. ‘After so many years’ hard work, few students can speak English, even though most of them can get high scores in all kinds of English exams’. She acknowledged that teachers were apparently responsible for this situation because of their general low English-speaking proficiency and pedagogical inadequacy. At the same time, she emphasised that the exam-oriented education system was the root of the problem, and teachers were victims of the system. This view can be seen in her words below.

Today’s English teachers are the victims of traditional education. When they realise the serious problem and want to make some change, they find they are restricted by their own limited ability and competence, they don’t have confidence in themselves and are afraid of making mistakes. To save face, they would rather choose a secure way. They copy their own teacher’s traditional grammar translation way. They still focus on the transmission of knowledge of language instead of the development of language skills. So generation after generation, our English teachers teach English without speaking good English. How ridiculous!

With the emphasis on traditional, exam-oriented teaching approaches, she felt depressed about the dramatic decline in her own professional standards. She felt handicapped by her lack of English way of thinking and limited listening proficiency, which she considered as requisites in implementing communicative English teaching. She tried to improve her English, but was unable to persist owing to her heavy workload and the stress of ensuring her students’ successful academic performance.

Being a teacher is the hardest thing in the world, especially in a country where the education system has great conflict with your principles. If I don’t obey, I’ll ruin my students’ future; but if I obey, I’ll put too much pressure on my students and deprive them of their interest and pleasure in studies. It’s a dilemma and the irreconcilable contradiction makes us very painful.

Yao’s words above highlight the emotional dilemma she faced and how in private her emotions experienced frequent oscillation. However, in the classroom, she always appeared cheerful because she enjoyed being with her students and supporting them, and she felt obliged to appear positive in front of them.

Yao’s professional life carried on with these mixed experiences and feelings. She felt that changing teachers’ beliefs alone would not suffice in
helping to implement the new curriculum goals, and the key step was to transform the contents of the Gaokao exam and the assessment practices. She believed that only such a policy change would bring about a fundamental change of teachers’ attitude towards teaching and their professional development, and ultimately the overall quality of school education in China. She was confident that in a genuine reform environment she, along with other teachers, would actively upgrade her teaching and learning as she had always hoped for.

I’m sure teachers will adapt if the Gaokao-based assessment of schools, teachers and students is abolished. Learning quality-oriented teaching methods may take a few years, but after that period teachers will develop quickly.

3 The Educational Landscape Mirrored Through Yao’s Curriculum Reform Experience

Yao’s curriculum reform experience is not a heartening scenario. Similar to the situations documented elsewhere in both China and beyond (e.g. Yan 2015; Tan 2013; Elliott 2014; Hardman and A-Rahman 2014; Song 2015), while there have been considerable signs of whole-hearted receptiveness to quality-oriented education, there have also been insurmountable hurdles in the process of fully implementing it in teaching. Yao’s case shows how the obstacles do not seem to stem directly from the teacher, but from the environment in which she is working where the Gaokao ethos pervades. Three propositions have surfaced from Yao’s personal experience of curriculum reform: ‘teaching to the test’ ought to be a teacher’s main responsibility; ‘teaching to the test’ is an undermining experience; and most importantly of all, ‘teaching to the test’ is a manifestation of a utilitarian philosophy and epistemology that permeates across the education system.

3.1 ‘Teaching to the Test’ Ought to Be a Teacher’s Main Responsibility

Yao underwent a change of attitude towards the Gaokao-driven teaching, which represents an individual teacher’s compromise to the cultural norms and expectations, i.e. the pervading inescapable pressure of Gaokao-based evaluation of schools, teachers and students. Her characteristics (kindness,
conscientiousness and docility) and professional diligence led to her changed perception of Gaokao as a fair opportunity for her students to access higher education.

‘Teaching to the test’ is an externally imposed obligation and a norm over which teachers have little choice to help students achieve positive outcomes in Gaokao. As Bandura (1993: 31) points out

behaviour is regulated by social sanctions. [...] The interpersonal influences operating within one’s immediate social network claim a stronger regulatory function than do general normative sanctions, which are more distal and applied more sporadically.

Yao’s compromised perception embodies school teachers’ confined professionalism, which has been documented elsewhere in China, including more developed cosmopolitans like Hong Kong and Shanghai (Lai and Lo 2007). Her compromise results from the highly centralised nature of the Chinese education system where teachers generally adhere to common curriculum standards and use formally required textbooks (Fan et al. 2004) and follow a knowledge transmission approach to learning and teaching (Ye 2004).

It is noticeable that Yao possesses many features of inspiring teachers defined by educational researchers (e.g. Erwin 2010; Bowman 2007; Lamb and Wedell 2015), such as being good-natured, having a passion for her subject and loving her students. Her public image shows her enthusiasm, dedication and commitment to supporting and developing her students. She has clear goals for her students and builds positive relationships with them through socio-emotional learning and approaches. She maintains a positive attitude towards her work despite being unable to carry out more meaningful and creative teaching.

However, her teaching does not count as inspiring, the characteristic feature of which challenges an assessment-driven policy context (Hayes 2006). Her work is still limited to the small circle of exam preparation routines, a more direct route than inquiry-based learning to achieve desired exam results although she tries to infuse student-centred elements within her capacity in her teaching. Her choice of conformity is a compromise to the centralised system where the work ethic is underpinned by collectivism, large power distance, strong uncertainty avoidance and masculinity (Hofstede 1991). Her lack of opportunity and space and time to use innovative pedagogies has gradually impaired her pedagogical competence. Her lived experiences are consistent with the picture painted previously in different contexts over the last ten years (e.g. Qi 2005; Li 2012; Wang 2011;
Lamb and Wedell 2015; Thompson and Harbaugh 2013; Lee et al. 2011; Riazi and Razavipour 2011), pointing to the prevalence of kiasuism (fear of loss) in schools under the pressure of the gruelling, ultra-competitive Gaokao and an absence of collective efficacy to realise new curriculum goals. Yao’s experiences also reflect similar pressures and a lack of efficacy that have been reported regarding teachers working in contexts outside China (Song 2015; Kirkgoz 2008; Orafi and Borg 2009).

3.2 Teaching to the Test as an Undermining Experience

Yao is representative of many frontline Kiasu school teachers in China who succumb to the overwhelming pressure from working with a marginalised status between two conflicting worlds of educational policy ideals and school reality. Considering the local sociocultural environment where governments across the region use examinations as gatekeepers of access to schooling and as a means of quality control (Hill 2010), her compromised teaching can to a great extent be seen as ‘culturally appropriate’ pedagogical choices for motivating her students in the short-term (because their future long-term aspirations are far beyond her capacity).

Echoing Chinese teachers’ professional state previously depicted elsewhere (Zhao and Poulson 2006; Zhang and Liu 2014; Lo et al. 2013), the current exam-centric education and assessment regime posed as an oppressive force to Yao’s academic and social lives and largely reduced her enjoyment of English teaching and learning. The incongruence between her professional outlook, which is intimately linked to student academic achievement, and the dictates of state reform measures caused enduring anxiety. Despite feeling happy about the school’s recognition of her students’ Gaokao success, Yao suffers ongoing physical and emotional stress caused by several contradictions, for example, between her visceral aspirations and work values and her compromises; between her perceived ever declining professional competence (English proficiency, pedagogical conservatism) and lack of intrinsic working incentive and teaching satisfaction; and between the desire for more time and freedom and the enormous pressure of her teaching load. The limited opportunity for her to express her feelings has severely undermined her sense of efficacy. She refrained from disclosing her feelings to her colleagues for the fear of causing disharmony with colleagues, however, her ‘surface acting strategies’ (Yin and Lee 2012) of suppressing her emotions could not help her achieve ‘emotional harmony’ and ‘psychological well-being’ (Rafaeli and Sutton 1987). Her neg-
ative emotions were aggravated because of little time to enjoy her personal life and fulfil her family responsibilities as a wife and a mother. Similar accounts of vulnerability and emotional disharmony have been reported in other studies of curriculum reform (Gao 2008; Lee and Yin 2011), yet as Yao’s case highlights, there still seems to be a widespread lack of acknowledgement by planners that the curriculum change process is inherently emotional; ‘It’s as if teachers think and act; but never really feel’ (Hargreaves 2005: 279).

3.3 ‘Teaching to the Test’ Is a Utilitarianism-Driven Practice

The conflicts and forces operating in Yao’s navigation of the dilemmas she faces between implementing the new curriculum and sticking to the existing examination-oriented teaching practices do not suggest a need to abolish the Gaokao. Instead, she considers Gaokao as having the potential to be a relatively fair assessment tool which can benefit children in less resourced regions. As she suggested, ‘Scores are not a sin. They are an essential tool to evaluate students’ performance. The problem is that we use it in a wrong way’. Yao’s case suggests that the present Gaokao-based school competition has resulted in an increasingly stratified education system and equity issues for rural schools, as previously documented (Postiglione 2006; Zhao 2007; Zhao et al. 2008; Liu and Dunne 2009), specifically marginalised status of rural schools and its adverse consequences, such as students’ social and cultural capital, teachers’ financial status and limited access to professional development opportunities and most importantly the equal opportunity to access higher education for a better life. Meanwhile, it also suggests that to fulfil Gaokao’s envisaged functions of ‘selecting talents and promoting pedagogical change’ (Fan and Jin 2013), there is an urgency to address the lack of alignment between the government’s curriculum goals and the English Gaokao contents, as Cheng (2008) noted. This would seem to be true for not only Yao’s situation, but also in many other teaching and learning contexts (Wedell 2009; Orafi and Borg 2009; Chen and Brown 2013). This suggests a need to develop teacher trainers’ professional standards and to train test developers.

Yao’s case confirms that the experiences, perceptions and emotions of curriculum reform are the results of a dialectical relationship between the individuals and their professional and wider environment (Edmond and Hayler 2013). To enhance teachers’ sense of agency and efficacy in the curriculum reform climate, undeniably there is a need for individual teachers
to make meaning of their pedagogical reform experiences through critically examining the mismatch between their ideals and reality. But more importantly, resonant with Schweisfurth’s (2013) argument, sustained and coherent support (e.g. through genuine encouragement of more autonomy and the provision of on-the-job time to engage in systematic personalised job-embedded professional development) may have the potential of helping rural teachers rethink their practice and adapt their behaviours accordingly to be more accomplished and skilled educators for students in need of quality learning experience. Yao’s story tells us that for teachers like Yao, professional growth, sense of efficacy and psychological well-being could be enhanced if assessment reforms were to be widely carried out to genuinely take account of new curriculum goals.

References


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