

## Chapter 2

### Entering a Culture of Teaching: Teacher Induction in Shanghai

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#### 1. Starting Up:

##### Induction through the Eyes of Teacher Li Mei

Li Mei is an energetic, cheerful woman who feels that teaching “is the hardest job under the sun, but the happiest”. [2] In her second year of teaching lower secondary mathematics, she teaches thirteen periods a week (the average load for most lower secondary teachers in Shanghai): six each to two different sixth-grade classes and one to an elective ‘activity class’ (*huodong ke*) that is geared at strengthening and deepening pupils’ interest in mathematics and helping them develop ‘divergent’ ways of thinking that stretch beyond the textbook. Her load is like that of most teachers in her school.

In addition to her instructional work in mathematics, Teacher Li [3] devotes much energy to her work as a *banzhuren* (‘class director’). In that role, she manages the study and extra-curricular lives of the forty-eight pupils in one of the sixth-grade classes she teaches for mathematics: her duties in this role are to help nurture what she terms the ‘all-round development’ of each pupil and the class as a collective. Formally, she monitors morning exercises, mid-morning eye exercises, lunch hours and study halls, as well as organizing weekly class meetings. Informally, she attends to the personal and academic needs of her charges.

Teacher Li’s days start early, as she comes to school by 7:00, a half-hour before her pupils arrive for their morning review work. If she is not teaching a class, she spends most of the day in her office, which she shares with a number of other teachers, correcting pupil assignments and meeting with individual pupils. As a *banzhuren*, she also spends time following up on issues related to individuals in her class, consulting with the pupils’ teachers of other subjects, helping pupils organize activities and monitoring the maintenance of their classroom, and doing of their work.

At 12:45, there are physical exercises; afterwards, there is a break – pupils and teachers can rest and take a nap (something commonly undertaken as a brief after-lunch activity in offices and schools around the country). During this rest period, as a *banzhuren* Teacher Li may be found in her class's room, although in her effort to help develop leadership skills and self-management in the pupils she sometimes relies on the pupil leaders to supervise free time, opting to stay in her office, rather than the classroom.

In the office, she blends mathematics teaching work and dealing with her concerns for pupils' personal, social and academic problems, as pupils pop into the office with “small issues” – questions, concerns or triumphs to share.

I never plan my lessons in the office; I plan on Saturday and Sunday at home. In the office, I have to deal with pupils' problems. They come to my office and report all kinds of things that require me to deal with them immediately.

Teacher Li does not leave school until 6:00. In fact, she never really leaves school, since she lives in an apartment on campus. But she prefers to leave her weekday nights free of schoolwork. Watching TV and doing other things give her a chance to “re-energize” for the next day. Apart from lesson preparation, she does no other schoolwork on Saturdays and Sundays.

Teacher Li's busy days blending mathematics-focused and *banzhuren* work have their parallels in her weekly routines. On Mondays, during the school day, she takes part in weekly meetings of all the *banzhuren*. The group discusses the past week's activities of the various grades and the school as a whole, announces activities and assigns work for the coming week. Tuesdays include weekly meetings of both the ‘lesson preparation group’ (*beikezu*) and the ‘teaching research group’ (*jiaoyanzu*). Both of these groups involve other mathematics teachers in the school.

The lesson preparation group meeting starts at 1:30 and varies in length, depending on what the group needs to accomplish; all three of the sixth-grade mathematics teachers (and occasionally a fourth, who is a part-time instructor) attend. This year, Ms. Li chairs the lesson preparation group. Their meetings provide a time to discuss “where we've reached in our teaching so far, plan lessons together, share our teaching experiences and how pupils have learned, discuss how to assess pupils and analyze exam results”. Teacher Li finds this group especially important for it gives her, as a beginning teacher, a chance to ask older teachers how to teach.

Her teaching research group involves all the mathematics teachers in the school, regardless of the grade level they teach. She sees those meetings as occasions to focus on “bigger issues of teaching” – like new reforms in instruction or assessment. These meetings also offer Teacher Li the

opportunity to attend activities outside of her school, for she sometimes observes teachers' classes at other schools or attends district professional development events.

For Teacher Li, a graduate of a teacher education program at one of the local universities (Shanghai Teachers' University), teaching requires a combination of knowledge and skill for which pre-service education provided valuable preparation, but which ultimately has to be learned on the job. As a mathematics department graduate, she feels she had a solid preparation in the content she teaches, but views this university-acquired knowledge as largely theoretical.

Entering teaching, moving from "my student role to a teacher role", involved some areas that were "unfamiliar". She needed help, for example, in learning how to "teach a class" and "prepare a lesson". Her student teaching practicum gave her some opportunity to learn about these teacher tasks, but once she began work as a full-time teacher, she realized that she also needed to understand pupils and to develop skill in managing and communicating with them.

While she had studied psychology as part of her university preparation, she now feels a grounded understanding of pupils is not something one can learn well "in a short time", even though it is a "crucial part of teaching". Despite her brief foray into teaching as part of her practicum, it was not until she had her own classes that she "really understood" much of what was being talked about in her undergraduate courses: for example, her role as a schoolteacher in helping pupils both acquire knowledge and become better educated people.

The university laid an important foundation for our subject-matter knowledge, but to be a good teacher, you need to learn on the job. The knowledge learned in university is relatively theoretical. I can say that I mastered my student-teaching life in school well, but really being together with pupils and facing pupils can only be learned when doing my own real work.

Now all my energy is on pupils. I was a student before, but now – as the teacher – my energy is on pupils. Now I am a teacher facing my pupils. I did student teaching practice before. It was a short period of training [one month], during which I learned how I was to write a lesson plan, teach a lesson, but learned nothing at that time about how to manage pupils. When we went to a secondary school to do student teaching, we taught classes but never connected with the pupils and did not know about their happiness, anger, sorrow and joy. Only after I formally entered my teaching position did I start to know about pupils and I can say that I spend most of my days with my pupils.



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