

Chapter 2

It Is Not a Bad Idea for Me to Be a Language Teacher!

Abstract In this chapter, we report on an inquiry exploring experiences of ten elite mainland Chinese student teachers of English as to understand why they came to Hong Kong for the teacher education programme. The study revealed that these students were largely attracted to teaching in Hong Kong because of its extrinsic benefits such as professional stability, the prestige associated with the English language teaching profession, and the opportunities to acquire valued skills transferable to other professions including English competence. Facing challenges as non-local students, they were also uncertain of becoming teachers in the new context. This raises questions as to how these talented non-local teachers can be retained in Hong Kong's schools.

Keywords Motivation • Mainland Chinese student teachers • Retention

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we reported on an inquiry¹ into understanding mainland Chinese student teachers' motivation for choosing a teacher education programme in Hong Kong. Since the late 1970s an unprecedented number of students from the Chinese mainland have gone abroad to pursue English medium higher education, often in search of opportunities to improve their linguistic competence and advance socially (Gu and Schweisfurth 2006; Li and Bray 2007; Tan and Simpson 2008). It is only in recent years that an increasing number of mainland Chinese students have come to Hong Kong for tertiary studies in the medium of English (Li and Bray 2007; Gao 2008a). According to the University Grants Council ('UGC'), 4,638 mainland Chinese undergraduates were enrolled in UGC-funded tertiary institutions, making up 82.9 % of its non-local undergraduate population in the academic year 2010/2011.

¹ A different version of the chapter was published as follows: Gao and Trent (2009).

Mainland Chinese students have become a significant group of non-local students at the Hong Kong Institute of Education ('the Institute'), one of the leading teacher education institutions. The majority of these have joined the Department of English. In 2007–2008, mainland Chinese students (73 of them) made up over 57 % of the student intake in the department. As a rule, only mainland Chinese applicants who are qualified for first-tier mainland Chinese universities could submit applications to tertiary institutions funded by the University Grant Council (UGC, Hong Kong), including the Institute.

The influx of these students to Hong Kong's teacher education programmes while being a welcome phenomenon has also created uncertainty as to the future of teacher supply in the Hong Kong school system. It is noteworthy that such enthusiasm for teacher training programmes among mainland Chinese applicants contradicts previous research findings on Chinese students' unwillingness to become teachers (Gordon 2000; Lai et al. 2005; Su et al. 2001). Heavy financial costs related to teacher education programmes do not seem to have discouraged these students from applying for the teacher education programmes at the Institute. Most of these students had to pay 15,000 USD for tuition and minimal living costs each year while an undergraduate teacher education programme usually lasts 1 year longer than other undergraduate degree programmes in other universities. Moreover, these mainland Chinese students also face challenges as non-local students in many other educational contexts, including learning, succeeding and surviving within both English-medium tertiary institutions as well as having to give satisfactory teacher practicum performances in Hong Kong schools. As most of the mainland Chinese students speak Putonghua and only a small number speak Cantonese, they inevitably face with numerous linguistic challenges in their academic and career pursuits. Therefore, it has become imperative to understand why these students chose to be teachers in Hong Kong, what the nature of their motivations are and how committed they were to the teaching profession.

2.2 To Teach or Not to Teach

Motivation affects individuals' choice to become teachers, drives them to achieve their academic and professional goals and retains them in the teaching profession despite adverse experience and conditions (Sinclair 2008). Individual student teachers are attracted to the teaching profession for various reasons. Among different theorizations of student teachers' motivation to become teachers, Kyriacou and Koberi (1998) put forward three types of reasons for individuals to choose to become English language teachers:

1. Altruistic reasons refer to individuals' perceptions of teaching as a socially important job and the desire to help society and children improve through teaching.

2. Intrinsic reasons are the ways in which the job itself attracts individuals to teach, including their interest in using their knowledge of a particular subject.
3. Extrinsic reasons are related to the attractions external to the teaching, including pay and holidays (also see Kyriacou and Coulthard 2000; Lai et al. 2005; Manuel and Hughes 2006).

Teaching is found in research to be an unattractive profession since it is usually considered a profession with ‘less job security, low pay and prestige, subordinate status, limited career opportunities’ (Sinclair 2008, p. 79). Research has also established a similar picture of Chinese attitudes towards the teaching profession although it has long been considered highly respectable and teachers enjoy high social status in traditional Chinese cultural discourses (Cleverley 1991; Fwu and Wang 2002; Schoenhals 1993). In many contexts, studies identified Chinese students’ unwillingness to become school teachers (Gordon 2000; Lai et al. 2005; Su et al. 2001). For instance, in the United States, Gordon’s (2000) study on Asian minority students, largely of Chinese ethnic origin, revealed that they did not wish to become teachers even though they attributed their academic success to their teachers’ efforts. Lai et al. (2005) found that high school students in Hong Kong ranked ‘teaching’ as one of the ‘most wanted’ and ‘most respected’ occupations. However, only students with low public examination scores and from families with low monthly household incomes were more interested in becoming teachers than those with high public examination scores and from families with high monthly household incomes. On the Chinese mainland, Su et al. (2001) discovered that many of the participants in their research disliked the teaching profession and that they enrolled in the teacher education programmes because of low university entrance exam scores and lack of financial support. The findings in Su et al. (2001) indicate that the student teachers’ life experience strongly mediates their attitudes towards the profession. These participants, who lived with their parents (teachers) in cramped residences allocated by schools, developed remarkably negative attitudes towards the teaching profession as they came to believe that teaching and teachers were not respected. These findings create a puzzle as to why so many mainland Chinese applicants were motivated to take part in teacher training programmes in Hong Kong, this directing attention to the processes in the wider social and educational context on the Chinese mainland.

2.3 The Educational Context on the Chinese Mainland

To understand mainland Chinese students’ decision to come to Hong Kong for tertiary studies, it is necessary to appreciate what cultural assumptions and beliefs they have about education. Education occupies a central position in the Chinese cultural tradition and has remained a top priority among the concerns felt by most Chinese, despite the dramatic social, cultural and political shifts in China over the centuries (Elman 2000; Lee 2000; Thøgersen 2002). Cultural discourses, especially writings by Confucius and on Confucianism, emphasize learning for one’s own self

or moral perfection and the implications of such individual perfection in social transformation (Elman 2000; Lee 2000). In contrast with these cultural ideals, in the past the public adopted a pragmatic approach to education and consistently expected to acquire academic and literacy skills as well as achieve upward social mobility and personal development through education (Thøgersen 2002). In particular, it was essential for people to achieve social mobility, gain financial returns or maintain their high social status in communities through educational efforts (Schulte 2003). In other words, education is widely considered by the public an investment in gaining highly valued cultural and social capital (Bai 2006).

As China is one of the most densely populated countries in the world, academic competition on the Chinese mainland has been particularly intense in the past 10 years, largely due to the rapid expansion of tertiary education and the commercialization of education. The expansion in the tertiary educational sector has created new tensions as an increasing number of tertiary graduates remain unemployed (Bai 2006; Postiglione 2005). In order to succeed in such a competitive educational context, many Chinese started attaching great importance to the learning of foreign languages, especially English, and began to pursue academic studies abroad, mostly in English medium universities, as their courses are considered of higher value (Gu and Schweisfurth 2006; Li and Bray 2007). Since the late 1970s, the English language has become one of the most important means to reconnect China to the world and is promoted as a resource for economic prosperity in the face of globalization and the rise of the knowledge economy. Well-resourced families send their children to private schools or employ private tutors so that they can get an early start in the race to learn English. Better education and English competence are widely conceived by these emerging Chinese middle-class families as essential to securing a better future for their child. As a result, China has witnessed a massive outflow of Chinese students to overseas institutions, in particular, to Anglophone countries where education is delivered through the medium of English (Li and Bray 2007). It is in the context of this ongoing outflow of students from the Chinese mainland in search of better academic credentials and English competence that Hong Kong has become a favoured destination.

2.4 The Inquiry

The study reported in this chapter aimed to understand why these mainland Chinese students chose to be teachers in Hong Kong, what the nature of their motivations are and how committed they were to the teaching profession. In order to address these questions, the inquiry involved ten first-year mainland Chinese undergraduates in the Department of English (see Table 2.1), taking part in a Bachelor of Education (English Language) programme. As can be seen from the Table, they largely represent the wide mainland Chinese student population at the Institute. Most of them do not speak Cantonese as their first language.

Though we were interested in finding out why they came to Hong Kong for teacher training, we also took the view that individuals' motivation is dynamic as

Table 2.1 The participants

No.	Name	Gender	Native languages
1	Hui	Female	Shanghai Dialect, Putonghua
2	Jess	Female	Putonghua, Cantonese
3	Jiashan	Female	Putonghua
4	Lin	Female	Putonghua
5	Meng	Female	Putonghua
6	Star	Female	Putonghua
7	Winter	Female	Cantonese, Putonghua
8	Xi	Female	Putonghua
9	Qian ^a	Male	Cantonese, Putonghua
10	Tao	Male	Hangzhou dialect, Putonghua

^aMeans that the participant was interviewed in English

it is mediated by social contexts and their contextual experiences (Gao 2008a; Su et al. 2001). For this reason, we paid attention to their life experiences in the inquiry. We adopted a biographical interview approach in the study as life history interviews or the biographical method, where learners' retrospective accounts of their experiences are collected and analyzed, help capture the participants' voices and enhance our understanding of their life realities (Johnson and Golombek 2002; Goodson and Sikes 2001). In the interviews, the participants were encouraged to recount their life experiences whenever possible while a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix 2.1) was used in the process.

In the data analysis, a 'paradigmatic approach' (Erickson 2004; Smeyers and Verhesschen 2001) was adopted when interpreting the narratives produced by the participants. We normally went through all the interview transcripts to have a global understanding of what actually happened to the participants. Then, guided by the interpretative focus, we constantly questioned and compared the relevant data to generate categories. Some of the categories were informed by existing theories. For instance, Kyriacou and Kobori's (1998) classification of motivations helped in the analysis of data relevant to the participants' perceptions of the teaching profession. As an example, Star gave the following answer when she was asked about why she wanted to become an English teacher in Hong Kong:

Extract 1

As for being an English teacher, I think that it is a quite stable job. (Star)

In the light of Kyriacou and Kobori's (1998) motivation classification, this extract suggests that she had extrinsic reasons underlying her choice of the teacher education programme. The participants tend to produce statements that are subject to multiple interpretations. For instance, Hui described the process of her changing attitudes towards the teaching profession in Extract 2 as a response to our question concerning the reasons why she decided to apply for the teacher education programme:

Extract 2

My father thought that teaching is a nice job for girls. Teaching is a stable job. Quite relaxing. [...] I myself do not love being a teacher but I do not dislike being a teacher. I can accept it

as my profession. It is not a relaxing job at all. I think that one needs to accumulate a lot of teaching experience though it will not be a very challenging job. If one has enough experience, one will find it easier to do this job. And also, in my previous schools, a teacher's attitude towards students was really important in respect of these students' growth and development. So I think that teaching is a really important job. (Hui)

In the interview extract above, Hui referred to both extrinsic ('a nice job for girls') and altruistic ('a really important job') reasons for being a teacher. In addition, the extract shows that Hui's family and teacher significantly influenced her perceptions about the profession. Moreover, the extract is also indicative of her ambiguous attitudes towards becoming a teacher as she expressed her concern about the demanding nature of the job. To overcome such complexity in the interpretation process, we relied on our first-hand knowledge about prospective mainland Chinese applicants, which we gained from participating in promotion tours on the Chinese mainland and dealing with queries from interested parents and potential applicants. Fine-grained findings also emerged from preliminary ones in a reiterative analysis of the data under each category (Patton 1990).

2.5 'I Don't Like the Teaching Profession' but 'Teaching English Is Not a Bad Job!'

The analysis of the data revealed that the mainland Chinese students' enthusiasm for taking part in the English language teacher education programme was related to their perceptions of the teaching profession (English Language Teaching) and Hong Kong as the educational context in relation to their self perceptions. Their perceptions of the teaching profession and Hong Kong helped us understand what attracted these participants to join this particular teacher education programme. They were also indicative of their commitment to the teaching profession.

2.5.1 Perceptions of the Teaching Profession

The data indicate that the participants had mixed perceptions of the teaching profession in general while they appeared to have been highly attracted by the prospect of becoming English teachers.

2.5.1.1 Positive Attractions of the Profession

The data analysis revealed that the participants' reasons for joining the teacher education programme were largely related to their perceptions of the teaching profession as mediated by their prior experiences. Extract 1 represents a widespread conception of the teaching profession among the participants, indicating that they

were attracted to the profession by its extrinsic incentives. At least four participants also referred to the relational aspect of the profession, like Jiashan in Extract 3. Jiashan witnessed harmonious collegial culture among teachers and students in her previous school and was deeply impressed by their readiness to help each other in teaching. In contrast to the 'fierce competition' in other workplaces such as company offices, the teaching profession almost served as a safe haven for her and thus became a 'happy' profession:

Extract 3

Teaching must be a happy profession. It will not be full of complexities like in other professions. [...] Teachers in my previous schools have a very harmonious relationship. They like to help each other and prepare lessons together. They also discuss problems together. [...] I think that it is nice to be a teacher in such schools. There is fierce competition in other professions, I know. (Jiashan)

Other participants like Meng point out the therapeutic function of teaching. She believed that teaching could help her 'keep a young heart' since it allows her to be in contact with children:

Extract 4

Teaching is a nice job. Very stable. I can keep a young heart to be with children or students in school. This is an active attitude towards life. (Meng)

Some of the female participants also mentioned benefits associated with teaching such as 'vacations' and possibly for this reason, three of them believed that teaching was very much a girl's job. As revealed in their accounts, the participants' family and friends were particularly influential in helping them internalize the discourses between teaching and gender and shaping their attitudes towards the teaching profession. Like Hui in Extract 2, Jess began to change her perception of the teaching profession on the Chinese mainland after she recognized the benefits of being a teacher with her parents' persuasion:

Extract 5

My parents said to me that teaching was not a bad job for girls. You can have two vacations. The job is stable. Many people around me wanted to become teachers. They talked to me about it so gradually they changed my initial perceptions. (Jess)

In contrast, two male participants emphasized the nature of the teaching profession as the most important attraction for their decision to join the teacher education programme. Qian was attracted to teaching because of its autonomous nature, a perception constantly fostered by his father, who was a university lecturer before becoming a businessman:

Extract 6

Well, my father [...] told me that it is much better to be a teacher than to be a businessman. [...] being a teacher you can do what you like. He likes to do some research, and, and communicate with students. So she, he thinks it is a good job to be a teacher. (Qian)

In other words, Qian's father had succeeded in making his unfulfilled desire to be a teacher, a regret caused by his switching to be a businessman, to be Qian's dream career. As a result, Qian believed that he would be 'free' from various constraints as a teacher. Apart from the influences of their family and friends, three participants

recalled how important teachers had been in their past experience and concluded that teaching was ‘a noble job’:

Extract 7

I could remember what teachers have said throughout my life. They have been really important to me in different stages of my life. Being a teacher helps students grow. (Star)

The perception of teaching as a noble profession had certainly functioned as an altruistic incentive for the participants to apply for the teacher education programme (Elman 2000; Kyriacou and Kobori 1998).

2.5.1.2 Negative Aspects of the Profession

While the participants reported both extrinsic and altruistic motives in becoming teachers, their perceptions of the teaching profession were also found to have been overshadowed by negative professional images in the interview data. Although Meng thought that teachers are ‘highly respected’, other participants noted in the interviews that the profession had a low status on the Chinese mainland (also see Su et al. 2001):

Extract 8

People talk about respecting teachers. But you know, it is a materialistic society. I do not think that teaching has a high social status. (Tao)

The reason why Tao considered teaching as having a low status was that teachers received low salaries. In a ‘materialistic society’, teachers’ low salaries meant for him that they were not respected at all. Moreover, teaching is also a very time-consuming job compared with other professions:

Extract 9

I found that teachers in my previous schools worked really hard. They had to be with us all day long. They had a lot to do. Those who work in companies have free time. But they did not have any. [...] Therefore, I do not like the teaching profession on the whole [...] It also has a low social status. (Lin)

As suggested in the extract, Lin’s observation of teachers working in her previous schools confirmed her belief that the teaching profession has a low status, resulting in her dislike for it. Another indicator of low professional status is related to low recruitment criteria and the government’s incentives for school graduates to join the teacher education programmes:

Extract 10

Teaching has a low status in the society. [...] I often read in the newspaper, politicians on the Chinese mainland are calling people to go to teacher education universities without paying any tuition fee. [...] then I started feeling that those who do not have a good family or whose families are poor go to study in teacher education universities. (Jess)

In Jess’s opinion, this had made the profession unsuitable for high-achieving students. Low social status and material returns mean that hardly any of the sociocultural values (see Elman 2000; Lee 2000) attached to education such as social promotion and financial returns could be realized by pursuing a career in teaching.

The participants' school experiences, like that of Lin in Extract 9, further made them feel that the teaching profession was an unattractive career option:

Extract 11

I know a lot of parents sometimes complain about teachers. I do not know whether this is due to the increasing pressure in the society or the fact that their children do not do well in studies. There are a lot of complaints. [...] I have some friends. We were good friends. They did not work hard. We all studied at key middle schools, provincial key middle schools. Then they could not catch up with others in their studies. Their grades fell. Their parents complained about the teachers. My parents, who were their good friends, told me that they had a big argument with the teacher in the parents' meeting. [...] The status of teachers is very low now on the Chinese mainland. Although my previous school is a key school, there was a teacher who, for an unknown reason, was assaulted. Terrible. A student hit that teacher. [...] When I heard the news, I just could not believe it. A student hit a teacher? Students should place teachers above their parents. (Winter)

As noted by Winter, the much valued 'harmonious' professional relationships had become complicated because of cultural shifts and intense educational competition (Gao 2008b). As a result, she was deeply troubled by her school experiences, in which she saw the status of teachers gradually undermined by demanding parents and disrespectful students. Extract 11 is an elaboration of her feelings of ambiguity towards the teaching profession.

2.5.1.3 Unique Attractions of the English Language Teaching Profession

In contrast to their ambivalent attitudes towards teaching in general, seven participants found it particularly attractive to become English language teachers. They reported intrinsic reasons behind their choice to be English teachers in interviews. Winter wanted to be an English teacher because she would be able to use English with her future students in teaching even though she was aware of the undermined status of teaching as a profession:

Extract 12

It is not a bad idea for me to be a language teacher although I have not taught so far. Just imagine. I can have access to English every day. I like English very much. If I can use English to teach students and socialize with them in English, that will be nice. Well, I do not know whether I can speak good English. (Winter)

Teaching English was also 'more fun' for Meng than teaching other subjects. In addition, two participants including Lin also noted the status of English as an academic subject in schools on the Chinese mainland to justify her decision to join the English Language Education programme:

Extract 13

Teaching English is not a bad job. First of all, she can speak English. Then, on the Chinese mainland, English is one of three main subjects. English teachers are important in schools. (Lin)

The high status of English as a school subject as the participants perceived it may be related to an unprecedented public enthusiasm for learning English on the Chinese mainland. Since English is a socially important language on the Chinese mainland

and in Hong Kong, at least four participants mentioned that being an English teacher had wider career spaces open to them in contrast to other subject teachers:

Extract 14

English has wider applications. If you are a physics or mathematics teacher, it will be difficult for you to change your job in the future. As an English teacher, you can find an easy entry to different professions. You can be an English teacher, but you can also be a translator. It is easier for you to change your career. (Jiashan)

As suggested by Jiashan, being proficient in English was important because it gave them career options other than being teachers, including working as translators. Ironically, these participants appeared to have been attracted to English language teaching because their English competence might offer them an easy exit to the career when needed. The easy exit is important in these participants' perception as they, like many others in Chinese cultural contexts, are likely discouraged to join the teaching profession by the prospect that teaching may be a 'dead end' career. Therefore, it can be argued that the participants' interest in becoming English teachers was closely related to benefits external to the teaching profession.

2.5.2 *Perceptions of Hong Kong*

The participants' enthusiasm for taking part in the teacher education programme in Hong Kong was found in the inquiry to have been related to their positive impressions of Hong Kong. In interviews, they also expressed uncertainties as to whether they could go on to stay as qualified teachers in Hong Kong.

2.5.2.1 *Attractions of Hong Kong*

As suggested by the findings in the above sections, the participants displayed ambiguous attitudes towards the teaching profession while they also found it attractive to become English teachers. Further analysis of the data revealed that three aspects of Hong Kong were also particularly appealing to the participants when they were making decisions about undertaking tertiary studies at the Institute.

First, all of them regarded Hong Kong as 'a better place for learning English'. Meng's comments are representative of all the participants' perception that Hong Kong has rich resources for them to learn English:

Extract 15

It is a better choice to study English in Hong Kong. If I studied in one of the foreign language universities in Beijing, I might have only one or two classes taught by foreign teachers. I also had to take courses such as mathematics, politics. These are useless courses for a student specializing in English. [...] The conditions are surely better. We all want to learn in an environment with good conditions. I think that it is nice to be here. (Meng)

As the participants highly value English competence, it is not surprising that they desired a resourceful context for learning English. Two participants were even

disappointed for a short time after arrival because they felt that they were given insufficient support in their pursuit of English competence.

Second, the participants were impressed by the commitment of both the society and Institute to teacher education as they became aware of the heavy investments that were put into teacher education in Hong Kong:

Extract 16

I think in universities, in mainland, some of the universities in mainland, they don't care about you when you enter university. For example, if you don't come to a lecture, nobody will blame you. And you can still pass the exam. I think it's too relaxed for me to study in the mainland university. [...] Hum, I think, students here will work very hard. It is much, much difficult for me to get a high mark than in mainland, because you know here we should get credits, and the, we have the record the GPA. But in mainland, there is not this kind of things. (Qian)

Extract 17

On the Chinese mainland, the society does not place a lot of emphasis on the importance of the teaching profession. Only highly qualified students can enter this Institute for strict education before being qualified as teachers. On the mainland, the entry level to teacher training institutes is low. And one can easily graduate and become a teacher. This is not good for the teaching profession. In schools, teachers may enjoy some benefits and discounts but their salaries are low. (Star)

As mentioned earlier, these participants all went through a rigorous selection process, whereby only a few highly qualified mainland Chinese applicants could receive offers to study in Hong Kong. In contrast, on the Chinese mainland, the government encourages applicants to take up teacher education courses by giving incentives such as free tuition. It was probably easier for school applicants to get admitted to teacher education programmes, creating the impression of teaching as a low-status profession in some of the participants' perceptions. In Hong Kong, teacher education programmes were well-resourced and the whole training process seems to be much rigorous than that in mainland Chinese universities. All these perceptions contribute to the feeling among the participants that the importance of the teaching profession is emphasized in Hong Kong. It is also important to note that school teachers in Hong Kong get much higher salaries than those on the Chinese mainland, confirming the participants' perception that the profession is valued.

Another important attraction of Hong Kong is that graduates have better employment prospects as the Institute claims that it has a near 100 % graduate employment rate in their promotion materials. This was an important attraction as there has been increasing unemployment among mainland Chinese university graduates in recent years (Bai 2006; Postiglione 2005). Without employment, graduates can hardly pursue their objectives in education, such as social mobility, financial returns, or a respectable social status:

Extract 18

Living and study conditions are better than those on the Chinese mainland. [...] Graduate employment rate is much higher too. If you do not go to a good university on the Chinese mainland, [...] except for taking postgraduate studies, it is really difficult to find a job. You have to take exams for postgraduate studies or be a public servant. (Lin)

To sum up, Hong Kong attracted these mainland Chinese students as a place where they can have better education, opportunities to enhance their English competence, and ample career opportunities. As a result, the participants felt that they could realize the values of education that Chinese traditionally attach to it (Elman 2000; Lee 2000; Thøgersen 2002) in Hong Kong, and which were increasingly difficult for them to pursue on the Chinese mainland (Bai 2006; Postiglione 2005).

2.5.2.2 Uncertainties as Non-local Students

In Hong Kong, the 100 % graduate employment rate did create a strong incentive for the participants to join the teacher education programme. However, they were also aware of the challenges facing them in their career advances upon graduation:

Extract 19

Students are difficult to teach in Hong Kong. [...] I saw a TV drama series about a school in Hong Kong. I also learnt from other senior students [...] They sometimes talk about classroom incidents.[...] Hong Kong students do not listen to teachers as mainland Chinese students do. [...] these were local teachers. Therefore, I am thinking, as a mainland student teacher, when I go for the teaching practicum, when I find myself in a similar situation, I do not know what to do ... you know, I do not speak Cantonese that well. I am a little bit worried. (Xi)

Extract 20

I grew up on the Chinese mainland and do not know the system here. Or parents' expectations of children and teachers. I do not know what Hong Kong students are thinking about. (Hui)

Half of the participants acknowledged that they were unfamiliar with the local educational system, school curriculum and students' learning needs in Hong Kong, which would seriously undermine their career ambition. They were also concerned about the linguistic gap between themselves and their future students and wondered whether they would be able to teach them, given that Cantonese was not their first language.

The participants were also worried about whether the 100 % graduate employment rate could continue in Hong Kong as the numbers of mainland Chinese students in the Institute continued to rise. Macro-contextual changes, such as the decreasing demand for teachers in some sectors due to demographic decline, might have left some of the participants feeling uncertain about being teachers in Hong Kong:

Extract 21

Now more and more mainland Chinese students come here. There will be fewer and fewer schools for us to choose from. (Star)

As a result, many participants also prepared for alternative careers upon graduation, indicating fluctuations in their commitment level towards the teaching profession. Though graduation was still some years ahead at the time of the interviews, half of the participants were already considering taking further education upon graduation

or continuing education for jobs at the university. These considerations helped them deal with contingency situations in which they were unable to achieve what they set out to achieve when coming to Hong Kong as high-achieving students from the Chinese mainland:

Extract 22

I may continue studies after my graduation. [...] If I have better academic qualifications, I could easily find a job. (Jiashan)

Moreover, some participants were empowered by their experience in the new context and had already set even higher career goals, which might eventually attract them away from school teaching itself. In fact, at least three participants mentioned in the interviews that university teachers had higher social status and thus teaching in universities might be a more attractive career. These findings confirmed that extrinsic attractions were important when considering a teaching career. Success and failure in their pursuit of these extrinsic objectives may mediate their motivations to teach and commitment to the teaching profession in the future, rendering tortuous their future developmental path as student teachers.

2.6 Discussion

In this chapter, we have so far documented ambiguous attitudes towards the teaching profession among the study participants. In the inquiry, we have identified that they were largely attracted to teaching because of its extrinsic benefits but at the same time they were also discouraged by the negative professional images such as low social status on the Chinese mainland. Many of them did not think that being teachers helped them fulfil their pursuit of traditional objectives of education including material returns and social advancement (Su et al. 2001). However, the participants were motivated to become English teachers in Hong Kong, a profession seen as more prestigious and having valued skills transferable to other professions. The participants also perceived Hong Kong as a better place for learning English and as a context that values the teaching profession. Consequently, they felt that they were more likely to realize the traditional values of education by participating in the teacher education programme in Hong Kong. However, these participants were also conscious of the difficulties for non-local graduates like them to become teachers in the new context. For this reason, they had already begun to set further education goals and prepare for alternative careers. Given the numbers of these mainland Chinese students in the teacher education programme, their fluctuating commitment to the teaching profession creates uncertainty for the supply of qualified teachers in the local educational system, an issue that needs to be addressed by stakeholders in the educational system (Cruickshank 2004; Manuel and Hughes 2006).

Research suggests that two of the most important factors that can assist in the difficult process of becoming a teacher are a positive sense of professional

community and school administrators' support (Scherff 2008). In this inquiry, participants' commitment to teaching was undermined not only by the status and conditions of teaching; they were also concerned with the likelihood of successfully becoming members of the teaching profession in the new context. Therefore, it is important for schools in Hong Kong play a crucial role in promoting a positive sense of professional community amongst these teachers. In schools, strengthening the participants' commitment to teaching and their sense of professional community could begin with official recognition and acknowledgement of the strengths that the participants, as non-local teachers, see themselves bringing to the Hong Kong educational environment. One example is the participants' perception of their Putonghua competence. When asked about what made them particularly employable as non-local graduates, four participants mentioned that their proficiency in Putonghua enabled them to play a unique role in Hong Kong's schools:

Extract 23

Gao: But compared with those local students, what kind of strength do you think you have, say, for a job, in trying to get opportunities?

Qian: I think Putonghua is the first one.

Gao: Why?

Qian: Because our teacher told us in some schools in Hong Kong, the schools will ask mainland teachers to teach Putonghua, both English and Putonghua are taught in a primary or secondary school. And if you can speak Putonghua very well, they will let you teach both Putonghua and English, I think it is the strength. (Qian)

As Putonghua is being promoted in Hong Kong's schools not only as a subject but also the medium of instruction for the Chinese language in primary schools (Davison et al. 2007), Hong Kong schools do need a large number of speakers who are proficient in Putonghua. If these Putonghua-proficient teachers also learn to speak Cantonese well, they may serve as multilingual role models for their students. Consequently, the participants' perceived strength of Putonghua competence could be formally recognized as a valuable resource to make schools sites helping students achieve multilingual competence in Cantonese, English and Putonghua, as advanced by the government (Davison et al. 2007; Evans 2000; Lai 2001).

In addition, it is important to ensure that the voices of these teachers are heard in order to strengthen their sense of belonging in the school communities (Scherff 2008). This could begin with consultation in which school authorities solicit and respond to the views of mainland Chinese teachers, who will enter school with their own goals and values. The consultation processes allow these mainland Chinese teachers to utilize their unique experiences and understanding of educational contexts beyond Hong Kong in mediating the policies and practices of local schools. These mainland Chinese teachers also need knowledge of local school practices and to understand the micro politics of these schools (Ball 1987). For this reason, schools may establish induction and mentoring programmes that provide information to these teachers and allow them to explore their concerns in a supportive environment (Gold 1996; Hargreaves and Fullan 2000). In doing so, they can be helped to overcome their anxiety resulting from a strong desire to see guaranteed returns on their educational investment.

2.7 Conclusion

Hong Kong, like many other contexts, will find it strategically important to attract and retain a large number of talented non-local students in the teacher education programmes, which were often turned down by their own high-achieving students. The mainland Chinese student teachers in the inquiry were driven to Hong Kong because of the increasingly competitive educational context on the Chinese mainland (Bai 2006; Postiglione 2005), which made social advancement difficult. They were also attracted to Hong Kong because of better education opportunities and their perceptions of teachers as valued professionals. However, while these ambitious mainland Chinese students may experience high quality education and have positive images of being English teachers in Hong Kong, they most likely find their 'rosy' imagination to be destroyed by the reality of teaching, in particular, as non-local student teachers (see Chap. 3). Teaching in Hong Kong, as in many other contexts, is a demanding job (Lai et al. 2005; Morris 2004). Language teachers' professional practices are often subject to critical scrutiny by the public (see Chap. 5). Concerns have also been raised as to whether the promotion of Putonghua in Hong Kong's schools is politically motivated or not (see Chap. 10). Therefore, these students' path to teaching is not straightforward as they bring with them their own expectations of the teaching profession and educational investment, which may not be appreciated in the new context. Chapter 3 will look into the process of non-local student teachers' adaptation and development as committed and competent teachers in local schools to see they can be well supported in their professional growth.

Appendix 2.1: Interview Schedule

Can you talk about your experiences before you joined the programme? Like who you are and what you did.

Can you talk about how and why you decided to join the programme? Any particular person(s) or life event(s) that might have influenced your decision?

What are your perceptions of teachers and the teaching profession? What are your perceptions of English language teachers and the English language teaching profession? How did you come to have such perceptions? How does society view teachers? What do you think gives rise to these perceptions?

What are your expectations from taking this programme? What do you want to achieve by taking this programme?

What skills/experience/knowledge are needed to be an effective ELT? What strengths do you think you have in becoming the kind of teachers that you expect yourself to become? How do you become convinced that these strengths are your strengths?

What kind of support do you think that you may need in the programme?

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