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**Gender, Culture and Career:
Two Junior High School Women Teachers' Conceptualization**

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ABSTRACT

This study used a qualitative approach to explore two junior high school women teachers' conceptualization of their teaching careers. Subjective career experiences were the foci for investigation. However, contextual factors were also analyzed, providing understanding of how individual conceptions were shaped within the context. The results suggested that traditional cultural values and societal expectations of gender role influenced teachers' entry into teaching. Older generation's share of child-raising responsibility was conducive to the continuity of teachers' career. Career path was not planned in advance. Devoted to working, having mother-like love and tolerance, experiencing stress and struggle, and being busy between school and home were portraits of their teaching lives.

INTRODUCTION

Teachers' career has been a topic investigated by researchers for decades. Traditionally, the definition of career focuses more on the structural aspect, emphasizing an individual climbing up the career ladder according to one's merits. Following this definition, it is not surprising that Lortie (1975) described teaching as "careerless." Besides, sociologists proposed that women were less intrinsically committed to work than men (Dreeben, 1970; Simpson & Simpson, 1969). However,

should we be critical of the traditional male model used as a norm to explain women's experiences? Feminist works challenge the malestream perspective, and influence how researchers reconceptualize teachers' career. Biklen (1983, 1995) found the elementary women teachers she observed and interviewed did not view "being an administrator" as a career goal because it compromised the commitment to children. And Acker (1992, 1995a) argued that most of the existing models of teachers career did not do justice to the fragmented, accidental quality of career described by women teachers in her study of England primary school. These findings suggested that the career concept took on a different meaning for women teachers. Career does not necessarily mean climbing a ladder to an administrator position and does not necessarily possess the characteristics of continuity. Although new scholarship on women provides us alternative model, influenced by postmodernism, the search for the concept of women teachers becomes dangerously oversimplified. There is an increasing recognition that women are not all the same with regard to their class, ethnicity, race, age, marriage status, and sexuality, which has led to the problem concerning the building of theoretical edifices on what has become shifting sand: the concept of "woman" itself (Alcoff, 1988). However, studies now we are exposed to are mostly from America, England, or some other countries in the western world, which may obscure the cultural connotation of teaching in other societies. For example, in the cultural contexts of Confucianism, teaching is highly valued. It contradicts the fact found in most western countries, which may be manifested in Biklen's (1983) study, in which women teachers expressed their resentment toward the low social reputation for teachers. Besides, with different family structure and ethics, most women teachers in Taiwan would benefit from older generation in sharing responsibility of taking care of young children. Therefore, the movement out of teaching, then reentry caused by the family schedule is not so often found in Taiwanese women teachers.

So, in this paper, I would like to explore women teachers' careers in junior high schools using in-depth interview and Taiwan was used as a cultural context for

investigation. Specifically, several questions were focused: How did women, as teachers in junior high schools, conceptualize their careers? Was teaching occupation valued by them? How did cultural beliefs and school context influence their career and teaching lives? How did their work intersect with home?

RESEARCH ON TEACHERS' CAREERS

Research into teaching and teachers' career has a long history in sociology and in education. Ball and Goodson (1985) have analyzed the shifts of foci from the 1960s to the 1970s. In the 1960s teachers were shadowy figures on the educational landscape mainly explored through large-scale surveys or statistical analyses of the characteristics of teachers and their position in society. Teachers were represented in aggregate through statistics or were viewed as individuals mechanically responding to the powerful expectations of their role set. 'Blaming the pupils' was used to explain differences in school performances (Ball & Goodson, 1985).

At the end of 1960s, the 'black box' of the school was broken. Case-study researchers began to investigate what were going on in the school (Lacey, 1970; Hargreaves, 1967). 'Blaming the teacher' instead of 'blaming the pupils' became a new focus. Teachers were implicated not only responsible for the difference in pupil achievements, but also in the maintenance and reproduction of gender stereotypes (Delamont, 1980).

In the late 1970s, the focus shifted to the constraints on teachers' work. Some studies emphasized the societal and economic determinants of education and explained how constraints limited the practices of teachers' work. Teachers became victims under this kind of approach. In the 1970s there was also a revival of the interactionist theoretical perspective and it continued in the 1980s. In such studies, the focus was put on the individual construction of reality, on meaning, understanding and experiences.

In the 1970s and 80s the interactionist perspective was used extensively in

research of teachers and teachers' careers (Ball & Goodson, 1985; Nias, 1984; Sikes, Measor & Woods, 1985; Woods, 1980). These perspectives shifted the focus of research on teachers to the immediate practical problems of being a teacher and coping day-to-day in schools and classrooms (Evetts, 1990). Ball and Goodson (1985) have argued that in the 1980s there were fruitful exchanges between interactionist approaches and researchers emphasizing the wider societal, economic and cultural constraints on teachers. These exchanges have resulted in teachers' experiences increasingly being placed in the wider political, social and economic contexts within which they operate and which influence their work and careers.

In addition, feminist work on women and education published in Britain in the late 1970s and early 1980s gave a prominent space to women teachers and their careers. In America, studies on women as educational employees lagged behind studies on students. Some research appeared in the early 1980s focused on female administrators (Acker, 1995a). In the late 1980s and 1990s, new trend in scholarship emerged. Studies (e.g., Acker, 1989, 1992, 1995b; Biklen, 1983, 1995; Casey, 1993; Evetts, 1989, 1990; Shakeshaft, 1989; Weiler, 1988) applying gender analysis to teachers' work call attention to the obvious and subtle ways in which cultural beliefs about women and men influence the nature of teachers' work and the perceptions others hold of it. There are three trends in recent work, which includes the emphasis on accounts of individual experiences, a search for alternative career model for women, and the attention paid to the links between the school and home lives of teachers (Acker, 1995a).

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE AND METHODS

Theoretical Perspective

In the studies, career may be analyzed objectively or subjectively. Hughes (1937), as a symbol interactionist, employed career subjectively. He proposed that

"Subjectively, a career is the moving perspective in which the person sees his life as a whole and interprets the meaning of his various attributes, actions, and the things which happen to him" (Hughes, 1937, p. 137). From this perspective, "career" emphasizes how the actor interprets the world. A career is an individual experience. It examines how the actor sees problems and possibilities; how the actor copes with and negotiate constraints and makes use of opportunities; what influences, key events, turning points, decisions and so on are involved. The subjective career is the theoretical perspective utilized in this study. Hence, women teachers are not objects researchers perceive, instead, they are subjects who conceptualize their experiences. In addition, contextual factors, including traditional cultural values and the school setting, were analyzed to see how they influence teachers' lives.

Methods

Qualitative research approach was used in this study since it offers space for the possibility to emerge new explanatory framework. In order to have a more thorough exploration, I decided to conduct a study of two cases. For increasing the diversity of cases, several criteria were used to recruit participants, such as the administrative post, school size, subject taught. Besides, the willingness to participate in this study is another and the most significant factor for deciding subjects.

As such, Shu and Li, two junior high school teachers, became participants in my study. Shu, in her mid forties, taught living technology, a non-preparatory exam subject. She also acted as a dean of school academic affairs¹, a post like the assistant principal in America. Li, in her late thirties, taught Chinese literature, an exam-preparatory subject. She had no administrative post. Both of them were married and had children.

Since Shu and Li were my old acquaintances for years, it saved me time to

¹ There is a standard structure of administration designed for schools in Taiwan. Under the principal, there are six directors in charge of academic affairs, student affairs, counseling, general affairs, personnel and accounting respectively.

achieve rapport with them. And because of that, they had no scruple to tell me what they felt and experienced. Having a lot of chances chatting with them, I knew their stories of school and family lives well. In addition to the informal conversations, at least three times of in-depth interview were given to each of them. Each interview lasted for one-and-half to two hours. The first interview was focused on their entry into teaching. What made them be a teacher? In the second interview, we talked about teaching lives. And the third interview emphasized the school culture and the reflections they had on their careers. Mishler (1986) argued that interview is not a mechanic way of asking and answering questions. Instead, it is a kind of interactive process from which the interview and the interviewee construct new meaning. So, I did not ask myself to keep “neutral” and “objective.” Sometimes I shared what I thought with the interviewees, especially on the gender issues. What I did was meant to sharpen their senses to reflect on what they have experienced.

THE SCHOOLS

In order to provide situated discourse of the two teachers’ conception in this study, describing the places Sue and Li worked becomes necessary.

The site Shu served was a city school with middle size, having nine classes each grade. Chen Junior High School (pseudonym), catering children from 7th to 8th grades, had an honorable history. However, influenced by demographic changes in numbers of pupils and competition among schools, Chen declined in the past decade. Shu, went with her principal, to the school three years ago, had ambition reviving Chen’s reputation. When I visited her, some remarkable results appeared. They were permitted by the City Bureau of Education to cater two more classes for the coming year. When reflecting on the past of Chen School, the deterioration is not without reasons. The culture was of inertia. When the new principal came, it took a lot of efforts for the administrative team to rectify. After the staff’s hard working, and it happened that the most troublesome teachers retired, the school went into another

stage of development. A number of innovations had been implemented.

In contrast to the Chen School, Ming Junior High School (pseudonym) Li served was a large city school with about twenty-six classes per grade. Ming School was quite new with less than ten years. Because of the first principal, the school had very high reputation attracting pupils from other school districts. Good teachers were recruited from different schools. So the faculty, led by the visionary principal, created a very good record for students' achievement. However, when the second principal came, the school ethos changed and the school reputation lowered down because of the passive principalship. Li observed that the faculty did not sense much the pressures of education reforms imposed by the government. New innovations seldom implemented in the school. The most pressing challenge was stilling how to help students enter into prestigious high schools. Working in such a school setting, Li had a heavy teaching load. It was partly because the subject Li taught was a significant one for the entrance exam of high school. Besides, she was a homeroom teacher, a role expected to take the main responsibility for students' performance in the class.

CAREER PATH

Entry into Teaching

Immersed in Confucianism, the society owes teachers high social expectation. Heaven, Land, Emperor, Parents and Teachers are juxtaposed as five categories respected. Parents usually authorize teachers to take part of the responsibilities educating children, which is reflected in a saying that "Once a person is your teacher, he will be your father in your entire life." Although the language subsumes gender bias, it reflects respect for teachers as well as teachers' responsibility. The reputation of teachers may be further confirmed by a longitudinal survey conducted by Lin (1992). It was found that secondary teachers enjoyed their social reputation the same as doctors and lawyers did. The cultural value for teachers along with expectation of gender roles, teaching becomes a popular choice among girls. Statistics reveals the

reality. In Taiwan, there were 66.1% female teachers in elementary schools and 62.5% in junior high schools during the 1998 academic year (Ministry of Education, 1999).

When asked why being a teacher, Shu pointed out parents' expectation was one of the causes. Actually, "teaching is good for girls" is a popular concept in parents. It is a deep-rooted value commonly shared by the society. Shu also expressed the same idea:

Being a teacher, you have winter and summer vacations, and you have more flexible time to match children's schedule...If you want to play a double-role parent, teaching is a pretty good choice.

The occupational decision is often involved more than one simple reason. Family economy was another influential factor for Sue. Tracing back to the 1970s, people in Taiwan were not so affluent as now. Although Shu was grown up in a middle-class family, economy was seriously considered. At that time, the free tuition of normal universities, institutions training students for high schools, attracted many excellent students. Shu became one of them. After graduating from a normal university, she had kept her teaching job for approximately twenty years.

Li had wanted to be a teacher since she was a child. "I wanted to be a teacher" was so obvious emerging several times when I interviewed her. From the narratives in which she admired her teachers, we may know that teachers' status was also a factor influencing Li's entrance into teaching, although it was not explicitly expressed

It is probably my natural-born aptitude. I admire being a teacher when I was little. When I was asked to write down what I am going to be, I always said to be a teacher. It seemed that I kept pursuing this goal in my school years. Although my family's economical condition is not good and my parents are illiterate, I just like this road.... There was a kind of self-initiated force inside me...

Although Li liked the road of being a teacher, she did not go to a normal university. Instead, she went to a prestigious public university. She told me that she's

influenced by her high school teacher. She dreamed for the freedom her teacher described, deciding to go to the same college her teacher did. However, this created her a more curved way to be a teacher. Since before 1994, teacher education program was not open to all the colleges. Li, without teacher qualification, went to a supplementary school for the first year after acquiring her bachelor's degree. She trained herself teaching skills there, which contributed a great deal to her application for a job of probationary teacher. After three years of working and at same time preparing for the entrance exam of teacher education program, she became a student again. Days had been so busy. Being a teacher in the semesters, she was a student of teacher program in the summer. These days lasted for two years. She finally finished all the required credits and got an offer being a formal teacher.

Career Plan

Lyons (1981) proposed teachers are rational planners for their careers. So, the career-oriented teachers are single-minded purposefully pursuing career goals. But this set of promotional behaviors does not seem to have been matched in the practices of the women in Grant's study (Grant, 1989). In a number of studies on women teachers' career, it was found that career was unplanned in advance. Home and family circumstances frequently made it impossible for most women to take such a self-conscious approach to their career progress.

In my study, Shu and Li consistently expressed that they were devoted to teaching in their first decade of teaching life. They had no intentions being an administrator. Shu said that among her twenty-year teaching career, the first fifteen years were just teaching without any administrative post.

In the fifteen years, the colleagues I got along were mostly teachers of living technology. In the eyes of my colleagues, I am that kind of person who has his/her own idea. I got my opinions for everything. My opinions are not selfish and not for myself. Colleagues will buy my ideas...

It was after Shu transferring to another school that she started her administrative work. When meeting the new principal the first time, Shu proposed her planning of living technology classrooms, which impressed the principal. And her subsequent satisfactory performance paved her road to the journey of administration. She got a post of assistant director in the pastoral section under the office of student affairs.

A feature found in women teachers' career is the role of "gatekeeper," which is a phrase used to describe people with the power to control the promotional system. Evetts (1987) revealed that the advice and encouragement of 'gatekeeper' was an important factor in the career achievements of the women primary headteachers in her survey. Sue, in this study, got the principal's recognition, began her administrative posts as an assistant director and a director for three years. After that, encouraged by her colleagues and principal, she went to the qualification examination for school deans. She had been an academic dean for three years.

Li, like the majority of women teachers, did not view being an administrator as a career goal. What occupied her mind was how to be a good teacher. But after a long period of over-exhaustion, her body could not afford too many lectures in the classroom. She wanted to give herself a try doing administration. So, unexpected physical condition changed Li's career path.

Although there were unexpected elements in the careers of Sue and Li, no interruption occurred, which was inconsistent with the results found in western women (e.g., Acker, 1992, 1995a; Biklen, 1983, 1995; Evetts, 1990; Grant, 1989). Family tie may offer part of the explanations. "Zen" as a core of Chinese ethics, people believe that caring others needs to start from whom were the most intimate to you. Therefore, a strong affectionate connection maintains between parents and children even when children are grown-ups and get married. Sue and Li benefit from this cultural practice, they both had their mother or mother-in-law acting as a backup sharing some part of the children's nurturing, which made Shu and Li keep their teaching career uninterrupted. But ironically, the nurturing responsibility always falls on the shoulders of females.

A PORTRAIT OF TEACHING LIVES

Working Hard

No matter in my study, or the studies of Acker (1995a), Biklen (1983, 1995) and Evetts (1990), women teachers were found whole-heartedly doing their jobs.

Shu played an arduous role in school. For assisting her principal improve school, she often worked till night. The office was lit in the silent and dark campus. Clearer mind at night enabled Sue to concentrate on making plans for implementation, writing proposals for funding application, and searching materials for City Bureau of Education, etc. Although Sue only had few years being an administrator, she always did her utmost thinking future development of the school.

When we have in-service training, I will grasp every opportunity to attend....When I went to the training, I was very attentive and used my brain to think. The training could be said as a 'brain revolution' for me! Every time, there are always new concepts occurring to me, so I'll write notes when I'm back. Then I'll discuss with my partners. After discussions, some concrete actions will be shaped. Every school has its own feature. What are those our school can do? What are those can not be done? What kind of ways we may use? If they were inapplicable, we'll give them up. So, the feature of our school will come out.

As earlier studies indicate that women start their journey of administration is because they want to accomplish something, not because that is part of their planned career. Sue, like those women, was very committed to her work.

Having more than ten-year teaching experiences, Li had her unique way for classroom management. She was such a kind of person that spoke vigorously once stepping onto the platform. Although handling a big class, she always tried her best to perform in order to catch children's attention. Li mentioned that she had 60 students in one class before, while the number decreased to 48, then to 36, according to the

national policy moving toward small-size class. Big class increases difficulty and complexity for management. Li was exhausted but students' feedback was a source for her strength. The meaning of teaching was to have students with a sense of achievement, but not constrained to academy. She said:

When I see students have a sense of achievement, I think I've made my life meaningful. The sense of achievement is not limited to academy. I hope that my students know how to be a human being...So, my sense of achievement is that I may feel that my students develop mentally and physically. Academic achievement comes the second. I think that the caring for people, the affection between classmates, between students and teachers. It's a kind of warm feeling. When the student let me have that kind of feeling, I am satisfied.

Caring

In Acker's study, she suggested that teachers showed evidence of dedication beyond the call of duty and teachers identified with their classes. There were regular references to 'your children' and 'my children', meaning the children in a particular teacher's class (Acker, 1995b). Li used similar words. She said "I hope to give students a feeling of home...I will naturally treat students as my own children." Many women teachers, especially having children, are likely to treat students like mothers with more tolerant attitudes.

Li, retrospectively the past years, she observed changes in herself. She was more patient than before. After her child went to junior high school, she had more understandings about adolescents, which made her not so severe as before.

I was very rigid and severe at the beginning. I love them, so I easily blame them. But now, I am milder and more patient....When I had child, I realized what the child means to the parent. The feeling was so strong. I think it influenced me a lot. It changed me. It let me have more patience, and more caring. It seemed to me that I knew better about how to guide my students.

The class just graduated, led by Li, was just like a family. Strong cohesion

existed among classmates and there was no discrimination. Cooperation might be seen often in the classroom.

Stress and Struggle

Teachers' lack of professional autonomy is an issue discussed in the school improvement area. Constrained by the Joint Entrance Examination, teachers needed to follow the Curriculum Standard and use textbooks as the basis for teaching. Teachers had limited autonomy in deciding what needed to be taught. Within such a context, teachers felt great pressures from peers and parents. Since Li, taught Chinese Literature, which was a significant subject in the entrance exam and acted as a homeroom teacher, she cared students' record of grades in her earlier teaching lives. Experiences told her being responsible for herself. She released herself from peer competition. However, parental expectation still made her step into another cycle of exhaustion. She recalled:

Since my class was in the 9th grade. They were going to attend the entrance exam. Parents expected me to ask all the students to stay in school studying at night. And I had to monitor them every night. You know, that puts tremendous pressure on me since I have children, I have family to take care of. How is it possible for me to stay school every night? In other classes, they had parents taking turns to do the job. Unlike my class, parents were unable to do it. But, finally I took the job. I went to school monitoring students every night for months. It had been really tough days for me!

Since the main job for Shu is administration, the stress for Sue was quite different from that for Li. Going to a school where most faculty were used to the status quo, it really brought hard time for Shu when she actively wanted to implement innovations. Furthermore, few teachers who were always against administrators worsened the situation. The opposition faction sometimes implicated challenges to a comparatively young and female administrator. Looking at the positive side was the philosophy Shu learned from frustrations. She told herself to be attentive to those

teachers who were willing to cooperate. So, she started organizing a core team as a base for improvement. It worked well. However, the identity of a female caused other troubles for Shu. Her frequent contacts with principal triggered dissemination of rumors. At last, Shu's ability and hard working stopped the evil mouths.

Busy between Work and Home

Studies indicated that school influences home life (Acker, 1992; Spencer, 1986). Shu and Li also reported the similar situation they were in. Motherhood went along with their career development. Being an administrator, Shu kept her life very busy. In addition to the day school, she was also in charged with the adult education program at night So, the day and night jobs made her squeeze time to do home errands and to take care of children. Li, although had no administrative position, being a homeroom teacher, had lots of duties for her class. She made phone calls at home often for parents contact. And she took paperwork home, especially Chinese composition.

When women walk into the public sphere, they do not walk out of the family. The intersection of school and home describes the stirring life of women teachers.

CONCLUSIONS

The stories presented before us are two women teachers devoted to work. Sue with active personality, was busy in implementing school innovation. There was no clear distinction between work and home for her. The school started changing under her instructional leadership. Li, faced with great pressure from entrance exam, insisted to create a healthy learning environment for students. Her hard working earned her lots of positive feedback from students. Although Shu and Li projected positive images of women teachers, patriarchal ideology negatively influences their career development. When choosing a career in teaching because of its compatibility with marriage and motherhood, it could be seen as a constraint as well as a choice. When traditional domestic role and motherhood fasten a close tie with women, women

teachers always need to work out coping strategies.

This paper portrays two women teachers' career, which offers us an understanding concerning the cultural and gender construction of teaching lives for women. And it opens another avenue for investigating women teachers in different cultural worlds.

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