HOW DOES A TEACHER'S TRANSFORMATION OCCUR?

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Introduction (by Chen Xiangming):

In mid-December 2003, as a consultant expert for the Gansu Basic Education Project's teacher training, I organized and participated in a summary conference reviewing three years of teacher training work. At the meeting, a teacher from Lanzhou Secondary Normal School shared a heartfelt account of her own transformation, vividly illustrating the gradual change a teacher undergoes during an educational reform.

The subsequent discussion among participants about the factors that triggered her change prompted me to reflect further: What internal motivation and external conditions are needed for teachers to change their beliefs and behaviours? How should these two forces work together to create synergy for teacher transformation? What is the relationship between individual teacher change and their environment (even the national education context)? How does an externally initiated education reform become implemented in each teacher's specific actions? And how can changes in individual teacher behavior, in turn, influence and shape the design, implementation, and promotion of the reform?

Below is Teacher Zeng Tao's self-narrative and my brief commentary. The purpose of presenting this case is to introduce a form of teacher professional development in a vivid and concrete way, to explore the factors influencing teacher change and their interrelationships, and to examine the dialectical relationship of mutual restriction and promotion between these factors and teacher change.

Self-Narrative (by Zeng Tao):

I am an ordinary teacher at a secondary normal school with over ten years of teaching experience. In July 2001, I began to encounter participatory teaching, and it has been more than two years since then. During this process, both my internal thinking and external behaviour have undergone significant changes. This transformation can be divided into three stages:

1. Rejection—Complaint Stage

In July 2001, I participated in the Sino-British project's teacher training for the first time, which was also my first exposure to participatory teaching. Initially, I found this approach novel and quite different from my previous teaching methods, and the learning felt relaxed and enjoyable. However, as the training progressed, the novelty wore off and was replaced by boredom. I felt that the "activity—discussion—activity—discussion" format was not very meaningful.

In August, I became a trainer myself, using participatory methods to train teachers from other normal schools. My role shifted from participant to trainer. At this point, I completely rejected participatory teaching. The main reason was that this method was very different from my previous teaching style. Over ten years of teaching had ingrained a fixed mindset and teaching habits. I was used to planning lessons, choosing methods, and designing models from the teacher's perspective, and to lecturing extensively in class. Now, being asked to change my

habits and start anew was psychologically difficult to accept.

Additionally, I hadn't truly experienced or understood the philosophy of participatory teaching during the training, only grasping its external form. As a result, when organizing activities, I merely imitated my own trainers superficially, lacking genuine connection between myself, the activities, and the participants. I noticed that many participants seemed to be discussing, but their discussions were unrelated to the lesson content. I was aware of this but felt powerless. I found it hard to integrate into the classroom and communicate effectively with participants. Every class felt tedious and slow.

At this stage, I was extremely resistant to participatory teaching. I often complained to a college classmate who was a member of the project team and a strong advocate of participatory teaching. She initially responded with silence, but eventually said, "How much do you really know about participatory teaching? Have you ever taken the time to understand and study it? Why are so many experts and teachers researching it? Don't be quick to deny what you don't understand." Although I didn't agree with her at the time, her words did make me think.

2. Acceptance—Dependence Stage

The principal of my school was also a member of the project team and a strong proponent of participatory teaching. He frequently introduced participatory teaching at school meetings, shared his experiences, and required teachers to try it in their classes. He believed this method aligned with the current curriculum reform in China; normal schools are the main institutions for pre-service teacher training and should meet the needs of primary and secondary education reform. If normal school teachers don't change their educational concepts and teaching behaviours, they will struggle to survive in the competitive environment.

Under the school's advocacy, some teachers began to act. Participatory teaching appeared in open classes and graduation demonstration lessons. Under this pressure, I felt I had to change. I started to reflect on what my classmate and principal had said and slowly tried using this method in my own teaching.

However, although I accepted participatory teaching in theory, my understanding was still superficial, lacking real experience. When I actually used it, I simply copied activity designs from textbooks, which felt like prosthetics that didn't work well for me. I couldn't use them flexibly and often felt powerless and incompetent, even doubting my own abilities.

After one class, I called my classmate and said, "I feel so stupid, like I don't have the ability to use participatory teaching." She asked why I felt that way, listened to my experience, and said, "You're a living person, why always copy others? You can integrate your own ideas into the textbook content and adapt it to your teaching reality. Your sense of failure means you're aware of your shortcomings and starting to improve." She encouraged me to be patient, persistent, and reflective, and offered advice for my doubts. Gradually, I started to find my footing.

3. Integration—Innovation Stage

When one's mindset changes, wisdom sparks. In July 2003, I participated as a trainer in the project's teacher training for the third time. I was now enthusiastic about participatory teaching, reflecting on my previous work and trying to design my own activities. Initially, I

focused on making activities fun and engaging, neglecting their fundamental purpose. After a lively class, I wondered, "Did I achieve the teaching goals? Was the activity design reasonable? What did the participants actually learn?"

With these questions, I called my classmate again. She listened to my activity design and process, helped me analyze the reasons for my doubts, and suggested I record my feelings after each class as valuable resources for improvement. With her help, I paid more attention to the connections between myself, the participants, the activities, and the teaching goals. Over time, my understanding and experience deepened. I began to think from multiple perspectives when designing activities and to listen more during the process. I felt I had entered a new teaching realm, and the old "routine" mindset was replaced by a passion for creativity and innovation. My sense of success and confidence returned.

In November 2003, I taught the "Children's Learning Strategies" course for three women's classes in the project. I rearranged some content and activity designs based on my and the students' actual situations and the teaching goals. Each class, through interaction, we explored each other's potential. I tried to record my feelings and insights from the students, using them as a basis for improvement. At this point, I truly felt integrated into participatory teaching. Although my classes still had shortcomings, I now enjoyed using this method. It allowed me to experience the beauty of creativity in teaching and the joy of teacher growth, enabling both myself and my students to grow and progress together.

Commentary (by Chen Xiangming):

A teacher's transformation is a long and difficult process, not something that happens overnight. Teacher Zeng's change took three years, going through three stages: rejection—complaint, acceptance—dependence, integration—innovation. Initially, she found participatory teaching very different and difficult, leading to resistance. When there is mental resistance, it's easy to blame external factors rather than oneself. Later, although she accepted the concept, she hadn't truly grasped its essence and merely copied the form, resulting in a strong sense of powerlessness. Through repeated attempts and reflection, she finally understood the purpose and meaning of participation, dared to innovate, and experienced the joy of creation and teacher growth. At this point, she had reached a state of professional development where she could flexibly adjust her beliefs and behaviours beyond textbook authority and external forms.

So, how did Teacher Zeng's transformation occur? Clearly, it required not only her own qualities and efforts but also peer support, a favourable professional development environment, and positive interaction between the environment and the teacher.

First, regarding Teacher Zeng's own qualities, she is ambitious, thoughtful, quick to react, creative, and reflective. Although she complained at first, this showed she was thinking and had her own views, not passively accepting. When she depended too much on textbooks and trainers, she could sense her discomfort and tried to overcome it. She designed her own activities, adjusted them to learners' needs, and regularly wrote reflective notes.

Her transformation was also aided by peer support. Her college classmate, a project team member and advocate of participatory methods, listened patiently to her complaints, provided understanding and support, and offered technical guidance. Having a safe space to express dissatisfaction and incompetence gave Teacher Zeng room to explore the reasons for her

resistance and unfamiliarity. This peer acted as a mirror, helping her see herself more clearly.

Besides personal reflection and peer support, the school's overall reform environment played a role. The principal, a key project member, had unique insights and linked new ideas to the school's development, persuading and mobilizing teachers. Under strong advocacy, many teachers took action, creating a reform atmosphere that pressured Teacher Zeng to change.

Pressure came not only from colleagues and leaders but also from national education reform trends—curriculum reform required teachers to focus on student needs and participation, and normal school reform threatened the survival of teachers. Teacher Zeng hinted that without reform, survival would be difficult, referring to institutional restructuring and market competition. If teachers don't adapt, they risk being eliminated—an external motivation for change.

On a more abstract level, teacher change is also influenced by academic authority. When her classmate reminded her that many experts and scholars study participatory teaching, the implication was clear: experts are trustworthy, and their knowledge and positions are authoritative. Our society values professional authority, and the project's experts came from renowned domestic and international institutions. Teachers' discomfort and scepticism toward unfamiliar methods were partially alleviated by academic authority.

Although expert authority is not unquestionable, reform does need professional guidance. Reform rarely happens automatically within schools, especially when rigid structures and routines exist. An externally initiated reform, if well-designed and supported, can impact school reform and teacher development, shaking up existing mindsets and interacting with internal reform desires and potential. If external reform doesn't integrate with internal motivation and conditions, it's hard to implement effectively. The Sino-British project emphasized participation and provided necessary institutional and material support, giving teachers ample opportunity to understand their needs and potential for change.

Teacher Zeng's transformation was influenced by various factors (personal and external), but it's not a dualistic process. As an active "actor," she is part of the educational "reality." When reform arrives, the obstacles she faces are also institutional sedimentation from long-standing teaching norms. Teachers' habitual "transmission" methods are not just personal behaviors but reproduce norms and construct their own "reality." Resistance to unfamiliar methods is not just personal; it's rooted in the security provided by routine. Reform shakes this security, causing anxiety and doubt, which can reinforce old norms and hinder reform. When teachers reconstruct educational reality, they are also constrained by existing norms—forming a dynamic interaction between individual and institution, micro and macro, structure and agency, subjective and objective.

Because of this interaction, teachers' responses to reform are complexly influenced by institutional factors and can also promote reform. Individual changes can aggregate into group behaviour, providing reflective monitoring for reform design and implementation. For example, when many teachers resisted participatory teaching, the project organized workshops to analyse mindset changes; when teachers used participatory methods mechanically, the project arranged video analysis; when teachers designed activities more freely, the project held experience-sharing sessions. Teacher Zeng's case was used as a discussion material because her transformation made project leaders realize that individual agency can effectively drive the project's overall operation.

From this analysis, teacher professional development depends on the positive interaction between personal motivation, interests, beliefs, and macro-level systems, social environment, and historical accumulation. At the same time, teacher development is not just passively controlled by external conditions. Teachers' reflection on their own consciousness and behaviour is itself a positive response to the environment, participating in the active reconstruction of institutional reform. Therefore, analysing teacher change requires understanding both their "discursive consciousness" (what they can articulate and perceive personally) and their "practical consciousness" (what is manifested in their actions and intertwined with educational systems, historical development, and socio-economic context). These factors provide generative meaning for individual change and broad temporal and historical perspectives for teacher development research.