# Teachers' Identity Tensions and Related Coping Strategies: Interaction With the Career Stages and Socio-Political Context

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## Abstract

When external requirements conflict with teachers' personal beliefs and values, the resulting internal struggles can lead to identity tensions. Contributing to discussion on teachers' identity development in a challenging context, this study investigated teacher identity tensions and related coping strategies in Hong Kong. We conducted 21 semi-structured interviews with qualified teachers and then performed a deductive thematic analysis of the data. We categorised the identity tensions as positioned on the micro or macro level, and distinguished the coping strategies as emotion-focused or problem-focused behaviours. The identity tensions and related coping strategies seemed to be associated with teachers' career stages. We further found identity tensions to be related to the school's sociocultural environment and to the specific political and societal forces in the region. The study demonstrated the need for continuous and differentiated support catering for teachers' needs, and highlighted the specific social-political influences on professional identity development.

## Keywords

Career stages, coping strategies, Hong Kong, professional identity tensions, socio-political context, teacher professional development

## Introduction

Teachers' professional lives are characterised by continuous educational and societal changes. Despite training opportunities, including practices to facilitate transformations and innovations, teachers face multiple challenges in their work within schools and from society. When teachers' personal beliefs and values conflict with the demands of their profession or with external changes, internal struggles may lead to identity tensions (Beijaard et al., 2004). Discrepancies between personal and professional elements can further have negative effects on teachers' learning, job satisfaction, career endeavours, and may lead to resignation from the profession (e.g. Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Previous studies have pointed out the professional identity tensions of beginning teachers (Pillen et al., 2013) and different identity issues of experienced teachers (van der Want et al., 2018). To facilitate continuous teachers' professional development, identity tensions should be investigated in relation to the different stages in professional life and to the context, which comprises the school community (at the micro level), along with the societal expectations and top-down educational policies (at the macro level).

This interview study aimed to investigate the identity tensions and the coping strategies of teachers at different career stages in the Hong Kong context. The context serves as a significant case for investigating micro- and macro-level teacher identity tensions, bearing in mind that the region is eager to maintain a competitive edge and to nurture talents for future development.[1] The study was designed to contribute to a holistic and dynamic understanding of teacher-identity tensions at different sites within professional life, and to assist policymakers, administrators, and researchers in reflecting on appropriate support as professionals like teachers progress on their career path beyond initial professional training.

## Literature review

### *Teacher identity development at different career stages, identity tensions, and the related coping strategies*

Teacher identity encompasses the traditional professional assets of teachers in the school context, including teaching values and beliefs, subject knowledge, and other related competencies (e.g. Beijaard et al., 2004; Vähäsantanen et al., 2017). At the same time, personal variations in its motivational and affective aspects, such as efficacy and emotions, are significant components in its construction and preservation (Kelchtermans, 2009).

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[1] "Nurturing Talents" has been the main theme of Chief Executive's Policy Address since 2017, except in 2019, when the Anti-extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement broke out.

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Teacher identity is not regarded as an inborn phenomenon; nor is it a static entity residing within the individual and separated from the environment. Rather, it is developed through a somewhat fluid, fluctuating, and subjective process (e.g. Akkerman & Meijer, 2011), and it is continuously negotiated with other actors and contextual factors within one's career trajectory.

As teacher identity is an ongoing developmental process of the professional self in relation to the different domains within school and society, it is important to analyse identity on different professional life phases of teachers' trajectory if one is to provide continuous differentiated support according to needs. There has been considerable research on the phases of teacher professional development (e.g. Huberman, 1993), and the career stages covered by the studies differ in number and definitions (e.g. Day, 2012; Graham et al., 2020). Regarding the operational definition of career stage in the present study, 0-7 and 8-15 years of experience are categorised as early and middle professional life phases respectively (Day, 2012). The early career life phase is further distinguished into the beginning stage (0-3 years) and the transitional stage (4-7 years), while 8 or more years is considered as the experienced stage. The rationale for such distinction is based on the wide acknowledgement of the first three years as the early career survival and discovery stage (e.g. Huberman, 1993), and also on the more stabilised career decisions in beginning teachers after the initial 3 years (Graham et al., 2020).

Identity tensions can emerge in the identity negotiation process, when teaching beliefs, values, or ideals in the personal dimension conflict with the requirements or expectations from the workplace, along with the sociocultural policy in school and society respectively (Beijaard et al., 2004; Day, 2012). Within the classroom, teaching is "emotional work" that requires whole-person involvement. Teachers must invest their authentic selves in understanding and caring for students' learning and growth (Day, 2018). At the school community and organisational level, teachers must engage in micropolitical negotiations with their colleagues related to actions, strategies, and practices, and do so within the conditions of their work environment (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002). Concerning the broader social and political dimensions, forces emerging from societal discourse and educational policies interact with both teachers' internal psychic disposition, and their immediate school context (Zembylas & Chubuck, 2018). According to the study of Pillen and colleagues (2013), beginning teachers in the Netherlands experienced various identity tensions with the change of role into a fully responsible teacher. These involved (desired or actual) support for students, along with conflicting teaching and learning conceptions with colleagues and mentors. All these could negatively impact the beginning teachers' professional development and well-being, with some of the issues from an early stage persisting throughout the individual's career (van der Want et al., 2018).

When teachers face identity tensions, they must therefore acquire appropriate coping strategies. The most common coping strategy used by beginning teachers is to speak with

significant others, while some search for solutions when feeling incompetent, or else they simply accept the status of novices (Pillen et al., 2013). It appears that experienced teachers, too, may be unwilling to talk about these tensions, and that they merely put up with the situations (van der Want al., 2018). A study on English as a foreign language teachers (Raharjo & Iswandri, 2019) distinguished the strategies for dealing with teacher tensions according to whether the coping behaviours were emotion-focused or problem-focused. When external conditions are deemed unchangeable, one is more likely to adopt emotion-focused strategies, such as avoidance or distancing. In contrast, problem-focused coping behaviours are related to one's agency enactment in the situated context, with the possibility of actions to solve the tensions using the resources available.

# Theoretical framework

## *Teacher identity tension in different contextual domains*
Multiple factors in the external environment influence the development of the personal and contextual elements in teacher identity, and the balance between them (Beijaard et al., 2004; Ye & Zhao, 2019). A micro- and macro-level contextual framework can seek to capture the complexities of teacher identity tensions in the different domains within the context. The framework applied here was planned to identify the tensions emerging between, on the *micro level*, teachers' performance of their identity roles in classroom interactions, collegial relationships, and the school culture (Kayi-Aydar, 2015); and on the *macro level*, forces from the broader social and political dimensions, including societal discourse and political agendas (Zembylas & Chubuck, 2018). Further explanation of the various factors operating at the micro and macro levels in the teacher-situated context is presented below.

### Micro level: Professional and social dimensions in the classroom and in the immediate work conditions
The micro level involves teachers' immediate working conditions engaging the professional and social dimensions. Teachers' everyday work consists of classroom interactions, cooperation with colleagues and school leaders, and communication with parents or with other professionals. As regards the classroom context and student relationships, teachers often encounter conflicts between the amount of support they desire to give students and the actual support they can give. This causes them to start to maintain an emotional distance and to adjust expectations of students' academic performance from an early stage in their career (Pillen et al., 2013; van der Wal et al., 2019). In addition, today's school environment requires constant collegial collaboration and active involvement in the teaching community. There are pressures to enhance teaching quality and implement changes, and various conflicts may arise among colleagues over teaching conceptions or the ways in which various tasks should be handled (Schaap et al., 2019). At the school management level, conflicting expectations between school leaders and teachers, changing priorities in instructional practices or administration policies, and a performance-driven

school culture can lead to clashes with teachers' internal beliefs and values. Outside the immediate teaching environment, teachers are increasingly engaged in communication bound up with factors such as home—school collaboration and enhanced technology. In line with this, van der Want and colleagues (2018) also found teacher-parent interactions to be a prominent identity tension issue for experienced teachers in the Netherlands.

<u>Macro level: Societal and political dimensions of the specific region</u>
The macro level encompasses the forces of authority, laws, rules, and traditions, plus the principles, rights, and responsibilities related to the teacher's position. It comprises factors in the societal and political dimension, including the implicit expectations, norms, and values assigned to teachers' roles. It also includes education policies and further, the institutional rules and regulations of the society in question. The societal image of teachers varies across cultures and regions, as does also their status. For instance, teachers are executors of state education policy in China (Ye & Zhao, 2019), while Finnish society has traditionally held the professional status of teachers in high regard (Sahlberg, 2014). In recent years, the demands of the "neoliberal cascade" (Connell, 2013) and of the "Fourth Industrial Revolution" in respect to technological know-how have induced the authorities to impose many educational changes and policies. These have been found to lead to overwhelming but meaningless workloads for teachers, with possibilities for harm to school morale (Davies & Davies, 2013). Moreover, when ideologically-oriented regimes or authoritarian contexts possess the power to penetrate through to frontline actors, a "politics of use" perspective can impel teachers to become larger political agents of central missions, and may override institutional and organisational structures (Schulte, 2018).

# Research questions

To identify teacher identity tensions and related coping strategies, this study was guided by the following research questions:

(1) What are the identity tensions perceived by qualified teachers at different career stages in the social-political context of Hong Kong?

(2) What kinds of strategies do teachers at different career stages adopt to cope with these identity tensions?

# Methods

## *The research context: Teachers' working conditions in Hong Kong*
The study participants were qualified teachers in Hong Kong who worked at the primary or secondary level and taught various subjects. Hong Kong was a former British colony until its sovereignty was handed over to China in 1997. A series of education reforms were launched in the early 1990s, covering the political transition period. These were also seen as a response to globalisation, and they emphasised excellence, competition, and accountability.

The centralised-decentralisation approach in education governance positioned the government as the centre of reforms and changes, while schools were designated with managerial power to be the agent of policy implementation (Ng & Chan, 2008). The management and staff structure within schools were hierarchical. Teachers are ranked according to qualifications and years of experience, while the decision-making power often rests with the upper management and principals (Ko et al., 2016). In addition to increasing institutional demands leading to extremely long working hours, the changing political and societal sphere in Hong Kong has also influenced teachers' work (Tsang, 2018). Civic society has itself become a stronger force affecting educational issues, as demonstrated in the 2012 protesting the introduction of "Moral and National Education"[2].

## *Participants*

In total, 21 teachers representing different schools, subjects and teaching experiences agreed to participate in semi-structured interviews for this study. The teachers were invited via email using the researchers' personal and professional contacts. Before the study began, we verbally informed the teachers about their rights as research participants and obtained their written consent. The teachers were working in different privately or publicly funded schools in Hong Kong. Table 1 illustrates the work profile of the participants. Pseudonyms are used to ensure privacy. The average age was 32 years. The gender ratio of the participants closely reflected that of teachers in Hong Kong, where female teachers comprise 76% and 56% in the primary and secondary education respectively (The World Bank, 2022). They also taught different subjects and were involved in various administrative duties.

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[2] As part of the nation-building assemblage after 1997, the Education Bureau announced the introduction of "Moral and National Education" (MNE) as a compulsory subject in 2010. Yet, the issue remained controversial. This resulted in numerous public protests and 24 civic groups opposing the subject, which led to the subject's withdrawal in 2012.

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**Table 1**. Background profiles of participants

|   | Participants | Gender | Years of Experience | Career Stage | School Level | Employment Term | Subject(s) Taught |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Dortha | F | 9 | Experienced | Secondary | Regular | English |
| 2 | Gordon | M | 4 | Transitional | Secondary | Regular | Mathematics |
| 3 | Peony | F | 1 | Beginning | Primary | Temporary | English & French |
| 4 | Felix | M | 7 | Transitional | Secondary | Regular | Mathematics |
| 5 | Camelia | F | 10 | Experienced | Primary and Secondary | Regular | Mathematics, Integrated Science & English |
| 6 | Louis | M | 8 | Experienced | Secondary | Regular | Liberal Studies |
| 7 | Howard | M | 8 | Experienced | Secondary | Temporary | English |
| 8 | Xavier | M | 3 | Beginning | Secondary | Temporary | Mathematics |
| 9 | Nicholas | M | 7 | Transitional | Primary | Regular | Mathematics & English |
| 10 | Beatrice | F | 8 | Experienced | Secondary | Regular | English |
| 11 | Sophia | F | 9 | Experienced | Secondary | Regular | English Literature & English |
| 12 | Queenie | F | 5 | Transitional | Secondary | Temporary | Mathematics |
| 13 | Rosie | F | 15 | Experienced | Secondary | Regular | Biology, Integrated Science & Liberal Studies |
| 14 | Ian | M | 3 | Beginning | Secondary | Temporary | Liberal Studies |
| 15 | Opal | F | 7 | Transitional | Secondary | Temporary | Chinese |
| 16 | Elsa | F | 0 | Beginning | Secondary | Regular | Visual Arts |
| 17 | Violet | F | 11 | Experienced | Secondary | Regular | Chinese |
| 18 | Lisa | F | 7 | Transitional | Secondary | Regular | Chinese |
| 19 | Karl | M | 6 | Transitional | Secondary | Regular | Economics |
| 20 | Mathew | M | 7 | Transitional | Secondary | Regular | Mathematics |
| 21 | Terrance | M | 11 | Experienced | Secondary | Regular | English |

## *Interviews*

We collected the semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) to understand the current tensions encountered by the teacher participants and their respective coping strategies. The interviews were conducted in Cantonese by the first author in the summer of 2018, and held in venues where the participants felt comfortable and safe to express thoughts and feelings regarding their work situation. The interviews lasted 51 minutes on average. The following were discussed: (i) participants' professional values and beliefs, (ii) their perceptions of how family, social circles, and society comprehend their profession, (iii) their work situation, especially the struggles and obstacles encountered, (iv) their relationships with management, colleagues, students, and any interpersonal conflicts in the

workplace, (v) their professional prospects. In addition, the teachers were asked if they found any belief or value discrepancies in issues related to (ii), (iii), or (iv). When disagreements, conflicts, struggles, or tensions were mentioned, the researcher followed up by asking if the interviewee had devised any coping strategies to help deal with the situation.

## Analysis

We used thematic analysis to analyse the identity tensions and the coping strategies from the interview data translated from Cantonese to English (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and utilised ATLAS.ti for analysis.

The initial coding of the data started with adopting the teachers' identity issues in previous research on beginning and experienced teachers in other cultural contexts (Pillen et al., 2013; van der Want et al., 2018), e.g. *time for teaching* vs. *time for other tasks*. Apart from using the codes in previous studies, new codes, which are mostly related to the macro level in the societal and political dimensions, e.g., *feeling more inferior to other professionals*, are generated from the current data. Then, the coded data were re-read according to each interviewee's context and discussed within the research group. Subsequently, the codes were refined for better categorisation. For the first research question, the codes related to identity tensions were reviewed and grouped within six domains at the micro and macro levels, such as student relationships and government policy.

For the second question, the codes were categorised under two main themes: emotion-focused and problem-focused coping strategies. All the codes were read again. At this point, some quotations associated with those codes were removed, as they merely illustrated conflicts occurring in the workplace without triggering any internal struggles or negative emotions in the interviewees. Next, all the subthemes under the main themes were discussed and modified by all researchers in the group to ensure comprehensiveness in covering the tensions and strategies described.

We then counted the number of teachers who mentioned a theme pertaining to either of the research questions. In this way we gained a picture of the themes in their totality, and their relative prominence within the data. Moreover, the thematic analysis gave a rich overview of the phenomena under investigation across the entire group of teachers. To illustrate those phenomena from the viewpoint of different career stages, we pick out extracts that had been noted during the thematic analysis (See Table 2 and 3). Additionally, we used narrative method (Riessman, 2008) to provide more details on how the identity tensions in different domains impact on the professional life phases. Three teachers, who encountered the largest number of identity tensions in the respective career stage group, were selected to further illustrate the phenomena.

# Findings

Concerning the first research question, an overview of the identity tensions encountered can be found in Table 2. The tensions correspond to identity tensions experienced in (i) student relationships, (ii) the collegial community, (iii) the school organisation, and (iv) parent relationships (at the micro level), and further to tensions involving (v) society and (vi) government policy (at the macro level). Each theme pertaining to each level is elucidated by an example, and the number of teachers mentioning that tension is noted.

The analysis of teacher identity tensions in relation to the career stages showed that most teachers (14/21), regardless of career stage, identified with tensions related to the hierarchical structure, and experienced as a restraining expression from the bottom up (tension iii). By contrast, only a few teachers (4/21) across all the stages indicated tensions associated with parents (tension vi).

The number and domains of the tensions encountered varied between different career stages. Identity tensions were reported most among beginning teachers and least among experienced teachers. Over half of the beginning teachers in the present study encountered identity tensions in nearly all the themes, at both the micro and macro levels, except for those related to parents and social status. In contrast, many teachers at the transitional stage reported identity tensions associated with having an inferior professional status (tension vii). Nearly all the identity tensions at the beginning stage lingered on into the transitional stage; however, out of all the stages, the transitional group showed the fewest tensions related to the collegial community (tension ii). Regarding the experienced teachers, two identity tensions were demonstrated by most teachers in this category. These were related to the hierarchical structure (tension iii) and the collegial community (tension iv), with the former persisting throughout all stages, whereas the latter was an issue among beginning and experienced teachers but not so among those in the transitional stage.

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**Table 2.** Findings on teacher identity tension

| Domains within the Context | Domains | Tensions and Examples | S1^ | S2^ | S3^ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Number of teachers** | | | 4 | 8 | 9 |
| Micro Level (Classroom & Immediate Work Conditions) — Social and Organizational Dimensions | Student relationships | i. Wanting to support students' intellectual and moral growth vs. feeling frustrated by students' attitudes and low motivation (7/21) | ** | ** | * |
| | | *"If the students are being very unreasonable, they won't listen to me. It is very exhausting."* (Xavier, beginning stage, mathematics) | | | |
| | Collegial relationships | ii. Having teaching methods and working styles that conflict with those of colleagues (11/21) | ** | * | ** |
| | | *"Working in the subject group is a mental battle. [I have to] know when to dodge, not to fall into traps or to be framed by somebody."* (Beatrice; experienced stage, English language) | | | |
| | School and organisation | iii. Wanting to express ideas and opinions vs. feeling restrained under the hierarchical school structure (14/21) | ** | ** | ** |
| | | *"Those with low seniority, [and who tell] in fact, a 'poor man's tale' cannot be heard."* (Mathew; transitional stage, liberal studies) | | | |
| | | iv. Feeling exhausted by nonteaching duties and meaningless tasks (11/21) | ** | ** | * |
| | | *"[The management] used a lot of government resources and manpower on school promotion, but not directly on our students with special education needs."* (Peony, beginning stage, English and French language) | | | |
| | | v. Wanting career development vs. feeling negatively towards the prospects (8/21) | ** | ** | * |
| | | *"I didn't stay in the school and prepare for my lessons, even if I want to witness the students' growth. Because I needed to leave school and send job application."* (Howard; experienced stage, English language) | | | |
| | Parent relationships | vi. Wanting to be education partners with parents vs. feeling the need to give way to parents' demands (4/21) | * | * | * |
| | | *"When parents want to protect certain rights for their children, they would despise teachers, and they don't believe in the [teaching] profession."* (Opal; transitional stage, Chinese language) | | | |
| Macro Level (Societal Expectation and Top-down Policies) — Societal and Political Dimensions | Society | vii. Being a professional with specified expertise in education vs. feeling that teaching is inferior to other professions (11/21) | * | ** | * |
| | | *"Other professionals, such as doctors and lawyers, may think teaching is a very ordinary job."* (Lisa; transitional stage, Chinese language) | | | |
| | | viii. Being expected to uphold extremely high moral standards and be accountable for social problems (8/21) | ** | * | * |
| | | *"You don't get away from teachers' moral obligations after work for 24 hours, 7 days a week."* (Elsa; beginning stage, visual arts) | | | |
| | Government policy | ix. The imposition to carry out top-down policies and changes vs. wanting to have a voice in educational matters (11/21) | ** | ** | * |
| | | *"[The government] wants to push different policies into schools. They only give some money as support, and that's it. There is little information transmitted from the bottom up."* (Karl; transitional stage, economics) | | | |

*^S1= Beginning Stage, S2= Transitional Stage, S3= Experienced Stage*
*\* Less than half of the interviewees encountered the tension*
*\*\*Half or over half of the interviewees encountered the tension*

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The teachers mentioned multiple ways to handle the identity tensions. The coping strategies were classified as either emotion-focused or problem-focused behaviours for the tensions and tension-causing experiences. Table 3 lists the strategies mentioned by the participants. Most teachers (11/21) were willing to tolerate the situation to avoid further conflict, and no other strategy was prominently mentioned over the different career stages.

Within the different stages, half of the beginning teachers mentioned *all* the emotion- and problem-focused behaviours in seeking to cope with the tension, while most of the experienced teachers coped by means of various strategies, including, for the most part, *tolerating the situation*, or *actively communicating about the problem*. However, less than half of teachers at the transitional stage indicated that they had adopted the coping strategies appropriate for each category.

**Table 3.** Findings on coping strategies

| Emotion-Focused Behaviour | Example | S1^ | S2^ | S3^ |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| i. Tolerating the situation (11/21) | *"There's nothing you can do about it (meaningless tasks), just do it… or try my best to act in concert with it."* (Violet; experienced stage; Chinese language) | ** | * | ** |
| ii. Having and giving emotional support among close colleagues, or sharing with family and friends (4/21) | *"My family often listen to me talking [the issues in school], and they understand that teaching is hard work.*" (Queenie; transitional stage, mathematics) | ** | * | * |
| **Problem-Focused Behaviour** | **Example** | | | |
| iii. Communicating and negotiating actively (8/21) | *"I would try to accommodate or to explain to those colleagues who have different opinions, and try to make them understand."* (Camelia; experienced stage, mathematics, integrated science and English language*)* | ** | * | ** |
| iv. Reflecting on the self and the situation (6/21) | *"I was not a 'straight A' student, I understand the students struggle with their studying. It probably doesn't work by forcing them [to study]."* (Dortha; experienced stage, English language*)* | ** | * | * |
| v. Finding spaces for one's individual voices and aspirations (6/21) | *"I would first fulfil the basic requirement and find some space to do something I want to do."* (Gordon; transitional stage, mathematics*)* | ** | * | * |

^S1= Beginning Stage, S2= Transitional Stage, S3= Experienced Stage
 * *Less than half of the interviewees encountered the tension*
 **Half or over half of the interviewees encountered the tension*

# Extended examples of teacher identity tensions and coping strategies at different career stages

To provide a close-up on how the identity tensions and different coping strategies play out in different domains on the teaching trajectory, three teachers were selected to illustrate the phenomena at the beginning, transitional, and experienced stages. These selected cases involved the largest number of identity tensions out of all the cases from the same career stage.

### *Ian (beginning teacher): An identity tension survival story*

Ian was a beginning teacher in his mid-20s with three years of experience in three different schools. He started as a teaching assistant, then received a teaching position in the second school, and was now employed as an assistant again. Ian's core professional beliefs were based on the pedagogical aspect of assisting student growth.

Like other beginning teachers, Ian encountered identity tensions in most domains at the micro and macro level. Within the teaching context, Ian enjoyed working with students, but he described his experiences as "shallow" and "inadequate" to stimulate students with low motivation in classrooms (tension i). Furthermore, he had to chase after the examination-oriented progress like other colleagues (tension ii), and suppressed his professional inspirations. Also, Ian observed in different schools that teachers worked in isolation most of the time. He described school as a hierarchical organisation requiring teachers' obedience (tension iii). His opinion counted merely as a "poor man's tale" in which the upper level would not be interested. Despite being a qualified teacher, Ian had to change to a different school annually, and such instability worried him and his family. He felt passive and helpless regarding his career development, and he experienced an opaque and unfair employment mechanism based on favouritism (tension v). He was not even certain he would continue teaching in the face of the unstable situation. He might need to opt for a substitute position to accumulate more teaching experiences. At the macro level, although Ian felt teachers were respected in general, society depersonalised the profession and expected them to be role models around the clock. He described Hong Kong society as "conservative"—a location where teachers could not lay down their professional roles during their spare time, because they could easily be judged by the public (tension viii). Ian also found that government education policies and new initiatives did not necessarily make teaching and learning meaningful. He criticised the examination evaluation frameworks were being very inflexible, which was in contradiction to his professional training and beliefs in the open-ended nature of the subject (tension ix).

As regards coping with the difficult career path, Ian's friends contributed significantly to his willingness to persevere as a beginning teacher (strategy ii). His friends listened to his struggles and encouraged him not to give up his career goal.

Ian's story illustrated how a beginning teacher survived the identity tensions in the school environment—tensions that stemmed from complex tasks and requirements for fully responsible teachers. As he saw it, personal professional beliefs and values, and knowledge from initial professional training, were challenged and restricted by school reality—including students' motivation, school expectations on academic performance, and the organisational hierarchical culture. Furthermore, the temporary contracts and non-transparent employment mechanism negatively affected his well-being and professional aspirations. His

main support in enduring the tensions came from the encouragement given by his personal social circle.

### *Felix (transitional stage teacher): An identity tension story illustrating efficacy at risk*

Felix was the vice-chairperson in his subject group, and he belonged to the discipline and guidance committee. He was in his late 20s, had taught for five years, and was a permanent staff member. His professional beliefs centred on his subject matter, and his didactic methods focused on improving students' academic grades. He liked interacting with and providing guidance for students.

Like other teachers in the transitional stage, Felix's tensions were mostly related to the organisational culture at the micro level, and societal educational expectation at the macro level. Felix had a mixed relationship with his colleagues. He had positive relationships with his teammates in the subject department, but he felt negative and restricted when working with colleagues in the discipline team who acted with hierarchical attitudes, did not listen to junior teachers, and expected them to merely follow the seniors (tension iii). The other organisational identity tension involved heavy non-teaching duties (tension iv). The exhausting teachers' work nowadays made Felix feel like an "administrative staff person" who could not perform his teaching role, not to mention his professional beliefs and values.

On the macro level, Felix believed that society did not recognise teaching as a professional job (tension vii). In the current education system and the problems facing the society, he felt what teachers could contribute was "very limited", and he personally could not see himself doing the things he wanted to do.

In dealing with the tensions, Felix chose to remain silent (strategy i) most of the time. He preferred to avoid conflicts and merely fulfilled orders, as he could not influence or change anything in the current situation.

Although Felix demonstrated higher confidence in didactic and pedagogical matters, had greater collaboration with colleagues, and even assisted the subject group, he perceived himself merely as a "passive follower" at the school. Being a more experienced staff member, he was expected to have more administrative tasks, tackle difficult student cases, and experience higher pressure from management to produce academic results from students. Felix's identity tension story was accompanied by reduced efficacy. Like Ian, who was at the beginning stage, Felix also described teaching as a challenging profession with an unstable environment. In fact, he asked himself if he would be competent for future demands, as he could be "washed out" in the waves of education changes and top-down policies.

### *Sophia (experienced stage teacher): An identity tension story involving unrecognised effort*

Sophia had been teaching for over eight years, and she was a subject leader with a master's qualification. Her competencies lay in didactic and pedagogical aspects focused on students' understanding and the learning process.

Similar to other teachers at the experienced stage, the tension-infused domains involved collegial relationships and the organisation's hierarchical structure. As a subject leader, Sophia had to coordinate tasks and ensure the teaching quality of her teammates. Nevertheless, her teaching and working methods could conflict with those of her colleagues (tension ii), and she found her role in supervising and interfering with her colleagues' work to be difficult and even "heart-breaking" when the work did not meet her minimal expectation. Also, Sophia's experiences and duties led her to communicate more closely with the seniors and the principal. Although she understood more than others about management decisions, she recognised that she did not have any influence on them (tension iii). As a teacher holding multiple responsibilities and a heavy workload, she felt powerless in terms of requesting promotion within the structure. She was very disappointed when she was not promoted within the organisation. On the societal level, she felt that the teaching profession was not well recognised and highly trusted by society; this was because no autonomous and strong trade union or professional association existed to represent the profession (tension vii).

As a coping strategy, for most issues she tried to communicate with and suggest ideas to the seniors and the principal (strategy iii). Sophia also took active initiatives in trying to provide emotional support to her colleagues' teaching (strategy ii).

In reflecting on her current situation, Sophia preferred to maintain her core beliefs in quality teaching and learning. Despite the identity tensions in her role as subject leader, Sophia demonstrated her coping skills via active communication. Moreover, her experience led her to recognise that the politics in the school restricted her promotion. She therefore diverted more of her focus from her professional to her personal life.

## Discussion

### *Consideration of differentiated support for identity development at different career stages*

Findings showed that teachers at different career stages vary in the number and domains of identity tensions. Teachers at the beginning stage encountered identity tensions in most domains, and many tensions persisted to the transitional stage. Yet, experienced teachers noted the least tensions, except those related to the collegial relationship. Thus, the present study calls for differentiated support for identity development at different career stages.

As in earlier research (e.g., Pillen et al., 2013; Ponnock et al., 2018), teachers at the beginning stage, who were relatively lacking in practical experiences, had to struggle with challenges including but not limited to changing roles and expectations from student-teacher to full-time teacher, relationship with students and colleagues (Pillen et al., 2013). All these aspects could negatively affect a person's professional identity, career development, and psyche. In line with previous studies (e.g., Sarastuen, 2020), appropriate support, including mentoring and induction practices, is needed to facilitate beginning teachers so that they can recontextualise their knowledge from professional training to school reality, engage in steep learning in teaching, discover potentials, and realise their aspirations in the profession.

As regards teachers in the transitional stage, the study revealed (as with beginning teachers) the persistence of identity tensions related to students, non-teaching tasks, and career prospects. These teachers required continuous support to further polish their professional skills, despite of fewer identity tensions associated with colleagues after the induction phase. Transitional teachers are given more administrative tasks and responsibilities than their beginning counterparts; hence, at this career stage, heavy workloads and excess accountability for students' academic performance could potentially affect well-being, lessen job satisfaction, and make work seem meaningfulness (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). The conflict between work and private life can persist from early to mid and late careers (van der Want et al., 2018). Another interesting point is that many of the transitional teachers in the present study showed identity tensions regarding their status and voice in society—a factor which was not obvious in the other stages. Ponnock and colleagues (2018) found that teachers who survived the beginning stage may have greater motivation and a heightened sense of self-efficacy. To take advantage of this, and to sustain transitional teacher development into the mid-career phase, school leaders should open channels for teachers to contribute opinions for organisational development, facilitating as far as possible negotiation for agency with the larger forces influencing educational policies in the immediate school environment (Zembylas & Chubuck, 2018).

Teachers at the experienced level demonstrated the fewest identity tensions relative to the other teaching stages. As in the Dutch context (van der Want et al., 2018), the identity tensions related to pedagogical expertise and to student relations diminished when the experienced stage was achieved. Most of these teachers were assigned more duties and responsibilities at the school, and they became more sophisticated in optimising their resources, prioritising the time spent on tasks (Philipp & Kunter, 2013), and negotiating their workload with the management. However, most of the experienced teachers showed identity tensions relating to collegial collaboration. Being trusted with leading positions, they had to manage new roles and negotiated their identity with other colleagues and the environment. Apart from having expectations for the teaching community, management needs to pay more attention to teachers' career aspirations, particularly the experienced

ones. The absence of promotion and leadership opportunities could lead teachers to disappointment and shift their life focus from professional to personal matters as demonstrated in Sophia's case. Thus, communication skills and leadership development may be crucial in sustaining the commitment and engagement of teachers over the longer term.

When coping with identity tensions, strategies like tolerating situations, speaking to significant others, and communicating problems were mentioned, as has been found in previous studies (Pillen et al., 2013; van der Want et al., 2018). It appears that putting up with the situation is the most prevalent coping strategy, regardless of the career stage or the geographical context. Depending on personal and workplace affordances, some teachers in our study were able to communicate their tensions, reflect on themselves, and find spaces to implement their pedagogical ideas. However, the study revealed that most teachers tolerated the tensions without active orientation or special activities, seeking merely to avoid further conflicts. Their perception was that top-down decisions could not be influenced under the existing hierarchical management culture. It would be interesting to discover whether such toleration of difficult circumstances is a universal coping strategy for teachers, or whether it is only prevalent in certain sociocultural contexts, also including epochs and generational experiences.

### *Specific sociocultural and political forces within the schools and society of Hong Kong*

In addition to underlining the teacher identity tensions within the prevalent school environment, the present study also demonstrated how specific identity tensions are related to the societal-political situation in Hong Kong. First, the findings showed that the major identity tension for teachers at all career stages was the hierarchical structure that restrained expression from the bottom up. The hierarchical school structure made teachers feel restricted in communicating ideas and problems. Discouraged by predetermined decisions and by the neglectful attitude of management, teachers responded with inaction, silence, and acceptance of their powerlessness within the profession (Tsang, 2018). For example, Ian and Felix described their professional identity as one of "being obedient", involving a position of being "a passive follower". To facilitate teachers' development and encourage collegial collaboration, school leaders and policymakers should encourage more effective and evenly distributed leadership (Tian et al., 2016). This would further involve greater recognition of teachers' voices and the granting of resources to facilitate the enactment of professional agency.

Secondly, under the centralised-decentralisation system, the locus of control in educational policies is currently in the hands of the government rather than a professionalised teaching force. Top-down educational changes and initiatives are often imposed on schools, and bottom-up channels are limited or non-existent, with no means for teachers and schools to voice concerns and criticism. In the absence of recognition of teachers' professional agency

or of interactive communication in the formation and evaluation of the region's educational issues, teachers cannot interpret the meaningfulness of new policies or work towards genuine pedagogical changes. The identity tensions in this domain are likely to be intensified in the region, due to stricter political control after the 2019-2020 protests. With the disbanding of the largest pro-democracy teachers' union in 2021, individual and collective professionals' voices became vulnerable and even muted, owing to a fear of prosecution based on the newly enforced national security law in 2020.

Thirdly, regarding societal cultural aspects, teachers' identity tensions are rooted in the region's high expectations regarding teachers' performance and moral standards. Academic achievement is heavily enshrined in regional values, to the extent that low-achieving students and weak university acceptance rates remain a source of pressure for teachers. As teachers are viewed as role models for subsequent generations, the beginning teachers in our study were particularly uncomfortable and depersonalised, because of the extremely high moral expectations imposed. However, the high expectations were not accompanied by high status or respect for the profession. The perception of an inferior status among transitional teachers, regardless of their specialised educational skills, is in line with the study of Morris (2004), who noted the extent to which teachers were treated as semi-professionals and criticised by persons outside the field.

Fourthly, in contrast with other cultural contexts (van der Want et al., 2018), identity tensions associated with parents were not equally prevalent across all the career stages in the Hong Kong context. One explanation could be that Hong Kong is a Confucius-heritage society, with teachings emphasizing the notions of respecting teachers and obeying seniors to maintain societal order and relational harmony. Moreover, beginning teachers were not usually assigned major classroom teacher roles; hence, relationships with parents were mainly handled by more experienced staff to strengthen parents' trust in the school.

## Limitations

The study has several limitations. Firstly, the data in the present study was based on 21 teachers who voluntarily shared their feelings and thoughts regarding their own career experience. Due to personality and character differences, not all the teachers experienced the tensions most typical of a given teaching level. Secondly, the interviews were conducted face-to-face at the end of the 2018 academic year; hence, this study could only explore the internal tensions presented at the indicated time point and might now be superseded by other positive or negative factors.

This study indicates the need for further exploration of qualified teachers' identity tensions in terms of career stage, the school climate, teaching positions, and the socio-cultural and regional context. It is worthwhile to explore the identity tensions experienced by teachers in different regional environments and enhance the understanding of the challenges and support of the development of positive teacher identity related to the school organisational

structure and the specific political socio-cultural contexts. Furthermore, a longitudinal study, along with other research methods such as observation or learning diaries, would delve deeper into the topic, contributing to a better understanding of changes in identity tensions, with possibilities also to design better support for teachers.

## Implications and conclusion

The present findings demonstrate that teacher identity tensions are not limited to the early stage of the teaching career, and do not emerge only in response to educational reforms. Many of the struggles and tensions mentioned have existed for over a decade. On the macro level, policymakers should pay more attention to teachers' voices and research recommendations, and address teachers' needs at the forefront of educational policy. Within schools, supportive leadership and a collegial collaborative culture need to be cultivated, as these would prompt teachers to become active agents in improving the school. The study itself contains a framework that offers teachers, researchers, and policymakers a way to identify the locus of tensions in teachers, with implications for strategies that will support teachers at different professional life phases and promote their well-being in the relevant contexts.

The current working conditions for teachers in Hong Kong are characterised by high or even harsh societal expectations regarding teachers' abilities and personal lives. As Hong Kong has been undergoing dramatic societal and political changes, further research should address the vulnerabilities that currently exist in the professionalism of teachers in the region.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Article history

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