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Mentoring as the Third Space: A Narrative Inquiry on Pre-Service Teachers at a Chinese Comprehensive University

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Employing narrative inquiry, this study explores how pre-service teachers at a Chinese comprehensive university have been transformed by structured mentoring as a "third space." The research details two narratives under the theoretical framework of the third space. "The Sense of Mission Under the Laugh" highlights the transformation of personal experiences and educational beliefs during mentoring for pre-service teachers' career development. "The Wild Pedagogy" presents how the dichotomy of learning theory and teaching practice is accommodated by hybridity in the third space. Mentoring can become the third space when it includes self-reflecting, hybridizing, and transforming personal and professional experiences and beliefs.

Introduction

Teacher education programs in China are predominantly offered at normal universities, which are higher educational institutions that specialize in training K-12 teachers. In addition, some comprehensive universities provide teacher education pathways for students who are interested in a teaching career. Traditionally, however, education-related programs at comprehensive universities focus on

training educational researchers. While the Chinese government has recently issued guidelines to encourage and facilitate teacher education programs at comprehensive universities, these programs do not engage teacher education projects but instead orient the program participants toward academic research (Kang, 2016). Due to the lack of professional teacher education courses, mentoring plays a crucial role for student teachers in negotiating their teacher education journeys at these institutions.

As teacher educators at a Chinese comprehensive university, we (the authors) are pleased to see students devote themselves to the teaching profession. However, mentoring opportunities available for these students to fill the gap between professional learning and teaching practice are rare. As a result, as narrative inquirers, we are concerned with the experiences of teacher education students. We are interested in the following questions:

- Can structured mentoring make a difference with respect to pre-service teachers' on-campus learning and practice in the schools?
- How do these pre-service teachers view mentoring in the teaching profession?
- What modes of mentoring are acceptable to pre-service teachers and their mentors of elite universities?

These questions led us to a one-and-a-half-year study in which we employed the theoretical framework of mentoring as the third space—along with the first space as the objectively existing space and the second space as people's imaginary space on the cognitive level—and the methodology of narrative inquiry. We discuss the transformative journey for students who are interested in becoming teachers but not yet majoring in education as well as their reflections on mentoring within teacher education at a comprehensive university in China. Specifically, our inquiries are distilled into three research questions:

1. What do pre-service teachers at a comprehensive university view about teaching as a profession?
2. How have these students' experiences been hybridized, accommodated, and transformed through mentoring as a third space?
3. What does narrative inquiry under the theoretical framework of the third space bring to mentoring in teacher education?

Literature Review

Bhabha (2004) and Soja (1996), propose the third space as an interdisciplinary theoretical framework for criticizing the traditional dichotomy between epistemology and mainstream power. Soja (1996) argues that people's cognition of the dimension of living space has been constrained by the traditional dichotomy framework. In this framework, two cognition models, the first space and the second space, are generated. The first space refers to the objectively existing or actual space in people's experience, such as a building, a group of people, or a profession. The second space is one's imaginary space on the cognitive level—for example, what functions people think a school should have as an educational institution, or what they think the job of teachers should be (Whitchurch, 2008; Wang, 2007). Therefore, the second space has an influential and controlling effect on the first space, in that people's understanding of the physical space is profoundly impacted by their sense of its essence, form, and function (Bhabha, 2004; Zeichner, 2010).

To transcend this dualistic interpretation of the first space as "real" and the second space as "imaginary," the concept of the third space was introduced. In the third space, people can transform their fixed understanding and recognize space as a changing, different, and complex embodiment (Bhabha, 2004; Cuenca et al., 2011). Tang (2016) articulates that "third" in the third space concept refers to breaking the model of dualistic thinking and should be understood as otherization, which means the third space includes both the real space and the imaginary space, thereby creating a triple-dialectic thinking. Bhabha (2004) further explains the third space from the perspective of social culture and puts forward that its essence lies in its redefinition of a cognitive model as reflection, transformation, and hybridity.

Educational research studies have discussed how the third space can be positioned or harnessed to construct classroom community. Additional research has explored how higher education institutions serve not merely as teaching institutions, but also as third spaces to re-examine the relationship between higher education institutions and personal development. Representative studies such as Zeichner's (2010) address how higher education institutions as teaching institutions and academic institutions influence pre-service teachers' development. Cuenca et al. (2011) also incorporates the third space into student teaching seminars to establish a new pattern of student

teaching experiences. In addition, Gorndetsky and Barak's (2008) and Saudelli's (2012) research discusses how international teachers negotiate the discrepancy between higher education institutions' cultures and their own cultures. Other studies discuss how the third space helps individuals develop meaningful activities based on teachers' or students' main characteristics and actual needs. For example, Abraham (2021) found that the third space can be used as theory and pedagogy for rethinking transnational teacher education by highlighting the power of language and literacy ideologies and pedagogical practices. Gutiérrez (2008) employs Vygotsky's concept of the "zone of proximal development" to explore how the third space can function as an educational space that promotes individuals' development. Williams et al. (2018) addressed how the curriculum of teacher education promotes pre-service teachers' professional careers through structured practice, improvement of teaching strategies, and establishment of professional relations through the third space.

Employing the third space as a theoretical framework to view mentoring's role in teacher education has academic origins and practical significance. Because mentoring can be viewed as situated functionally between classroom learning and student teaching, the question of how to identify its role in translating and mediating student teachers' conflicts suggests the possibility of creating a third space (McDonough, 2014). Studies have found that students describe mentoring as a transformative experience because mentors have smoothed their paths through support, communication, and feedback, guiding students toward their aspirational goals (Hall & Liva, 2021; Kuyini et al., 2022). Other authors emphasize how different modes of mentoring, for example, online mentoring, participatory activities, or peer instruction, can affect pre-service teachers' perception of their transformation within the third space (Kuyini et al., 2022; Tinoco-Giraldo et al., 2020). In addition, Chan (2020) points out that mentoring can be highly problematic due to the inherent power roles in mentor-mentee relationships.

Within the context of Chinese higher education, teacher education at comprehensive universities has natural attributes of the first space and second space from the perspective of the third space theory. The first space is the physical space, which in this study is located at an elite comprehensive university. The second space is how individuals understand mentoring in teacher education at a comprehensive university. The main characteristics of this space include elitism, the pursuit of academic achievement, an emphasis on theoretical knowledge rather than practical knowledge, and attention to major social issues related

to teacher education (Kang, 2013; Yang, 2019). Therefore, mentoring in teacher education in this context becomes a third space for pre-service teachers at the institution where the study took place.

Methodology

Narrative inquiry as a research methodology seeks to understand individuals' lived experiences and to examine their personal stories within the dimensions of time, personal and social perspectives, and place. Moreover, narrative inquirers present their interpretations through narrative constructions (Barone, 2007; Chan, 2020). In this study, we constructed narratives of the as the focus of mentoring lessons, which we called *Exploring Teaching as a Career*, under a theoretical framework of the third space, which is intrinsically related to narrative inquiry. Bhabha (2004) argues that the third space is created through language or discourse. For example when people challenge countercultural authority, incorporating personal experiences that are different from those of the mainstream culture, they are creating the third space. As such, Bhabha's interpretation provides a critical basis for using narrative inquiry to understand people's experiences. Narrative inquiry reflects the process of constructing individual experiences in time, place, and social relations, which corresponds to three narrative dimensions of timeliness, spatiality, and cultural relations (Clandinin & Connelly, 2002). Therefore, the method of narrative inquiry selected for this study can also effectively address the research questions. One of the few mentoring lessons offered by the Graduate School of Education, *Exploring Teaching as a Career* aims at enabling students who would like to know more about or have an interest in a teaching career to gain a comprehensive understanding of the professional knowledge, required qualities, and career development of the teaching profession.

Participants

During the 2018-19 academic year we designed a series of structured mentoring classes for undergraduate and graduate students at Y University. The structured mentoring lessons involved topics such as educational philosophy, pedagogical skills, and educational research methods. According to Salleh et al. (2020), four delivery modes of mentoring (discussions, reflections, reading materials, and feedback on lesson observations) are effective for improving students' self-un-

derstanding. Therefore, activities embedded in the mentoring lessons included classroom discussions, group work, research presentations, and watching teaching documentaries.

In this study, two students and one researcher, second author Wang, were the narrative study participants. Wang, who recently received his Ph.D. in education and entered academia, served as a part-time mentor. While Wang had limited mentoring experience, his academic background allowed him to organize mentoring lessons in transformative ways. The narratives presented here are constructed to illustrate how mentoring became the third space through reflection, transformation, and hybridity, and how the participants came to understand the teaching profession. The demographics of the two students and Wang are shown in Table 1. All names used in this article are anonymized.

Data Collection and Analysis

In addition to lectures, discussions, watching educational videos, and other conventional teaching methods during mentoring, students were required to write a series of reflections and to conduct educational research. These mentoring modes were used as a means of data collection (see Table 2), and the students' written texts were analyzed to form narrative constructions.

Based on analysis of the data above, we made outlines and conducted two 40-minute one-on-one interviews with each participant. Because Wang was also a participant in the research, he carried out self-reflective writing and took notes during the study. These materials were used to form narrative constructions within three-dimensional narrative spaces from the perspective of third space theory.

Narrative Constructions

We employed Barone's (2007) notion of narrative construction to analyze and present the study data. Narrative construction emphasizes the composition of small stories or vignettes into complete and bounded narratives. Following this rationale, we developed two narrative constructions: *The Sense of Mission Under the Laugh* and *The Wild Pedagogy*. The first construction discusses how Li Yan was embarrassed by informal in-class challenges but strengthened his sense of mission in teaching via the mentoring classes. The second construction illustrates how Ji Dongdong re-envisioned his pedagogical skills by incorporating personal experiences, which was made possible by the mentoring-induced breaking of the traditional theory-practice dichotomy.

Table 1
Study Participant Demographics

<i>Name</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Major</i>	<i>Understanding of Teaching Profession Before Registering for the Lessons</i>
Li Yan	Male	Senior in Physics	Yan would like to be a teacher committed to rural education.
Ji Dongdong	Male	Freshman in Basic Medicine	Dongdong thinks he has created his own pedagogy. He has interest but is uncertain about becoming a teacher.
Wang	Male	Assistant Professor in Education	Wang has never organized structured mentoring lessons, but he has developed the idea that the class should include students' lived experiences.

The Sense of Mission Under the Laugh

When Li Yan chose "Sex Education Issues" as the theme for his mentoring report, other students in the class could not help smiling. They wondered why a top physics student had picked a topic that was somewhat indecent in Chinese culture. Upon hearing his classmates' laughter, Li Yan said placidly to me, "They [his students] also smiled like this at that time."

Li Yan joined the volunteer teaching program at Y University in his junior year and was sent to a primary school in a small mountain village in the province of Guizhou, which was four days drive by car. The school had three classes and two local teachers, so Li Yan had to serve as an *all-round* teacher, meaning that he taught Chinese, math, PE,

Table 2
Data Sources and Their Use in Mentoring

<i>Data Sources</i>	<i>Descriptions</i>	<i>Use in Mentoring</i>
Educational autobiography	The autobiography consists of three parts: a summary of your own educational experience; a detailed special event in your educational experience; and an answer to the question "Why do I/don't I want to be a teacher?"	Mentoring assignment; class discussion
Personal education philosophy thesis	Reflecting on your own educational experience and the lesson topics, write a paper based on the following questions: What is the function of school in today's society? How can teachers help students learn better? What is the best teaching method? What kind of teaching environment should teachers create?	Mentoring assignment; group discussion
Educational research proposal	Choose an educational issue that you are concerned about or interested in, research it with a research methodology discussed in class, and write and present a research proposal.	Mentoring assignment; class presentation; peer review

and took the children to learn singing and dancing. One day, Yan was teaching fifth graders the word "bathroom." As the students listened attentively, someone in the corner murmured, "sanitary pad." In the Chinese language, "bathroom" as a compound word literally means "sanitary room," having the same syntax as "sanitary pad."

Spoken in a small voice, the word was like red paint dripping into a bowl of clear water, rippling around the classroom. "Mr. Li, what is

a sanitary pad?" a little girl raised her hand and seriously asked. Li Yan's face suddenly turned red, and he could only smile awkwardly. The local teaching assistants sitting in the back row began to chuckle. Several little boys in the class also covered their mouths, peering at each other and snickering. Li Yan was struck by the question, but having no idea how to explain the word, he waved his hand and asked the girl to sit down. "A sanitary pad is what you will use when you grow up," he said. Then Yan turned the book to the next page in a panic. Finally, the bell rang and released him from his duty. However, Li Yan still felt lost on the way back to his office. After all, who would have thought that a famous university's favored son could be stumped by a primary student from a small mountain village?

It is uncertain whether it was the spirit of inquiry or the feeling of embarrassment that drove Li Yan to treat the child's question so seriously. But after arriving at his office, he searched the key words "sex education" and "teaching methods" on the Internet to find out how to answer. The inquiry hovered in his mind until he returned to school after the summer break, when he knocked on the door of an education professor's office to seek advice. Hearing Li Yan's question, the professor smiled and patiently told him how the issue of sex education had encountered intense resistance during its implementation in primary and secondary schools in China. The professor further analyzed the reasons behind the phenomenon from various angles. He turned on his computer and shared his research with the enthusiastic pre-service teacher. Li Yan was so inspired that he thought of transferring his major to education. After stepping out of the School of Education building, however, he had a vague feeling that he had missed something during that conversation. "How should this problem be taught?" Li Yan asked himself again.

This question was also the one Li Yan sought to answer during the mentoring class. When instructor Wang introduced the two class activities, an educational autobiography and a personal education philosophy thesis, at the first lesson, Li Yan raised an objection: How could these activities provide a solution to the practical problems he had encountered in his teaching? This question struck Wang, who had not considered the rationale for these assignments. He viewed the mentoring class as an exploratory process rather than a discussion of critical issues in the teaching profession. Moreover, Wang had underestimated that Chinese students would be so critical. Faced with Li Yan's question, Wang arrived at a reasonable explanation that students' and teachers' perspectives on education and teaching could be different based on what they had experienced as students.

Li Yan's question caused Wang to reconsider the objectives of his mentoring efforts. What exactly did he want these pre-service teachers to experience in this mentoring class? Was it enough for students to be guided through issues in the teaching profession, or was it more pragmatic for them to reflect on their own beliefs? These questions persuaded Wang to review his mentoring goals, and Li Yan's submitted educational autobiography assignment helped Wang to answer them.

"My problem is not how to teach sex education, but why I am so determined to be a teacher in rural areas," Li Yan wrote in his educational autobiography. In the essay, he recalled how he had been admitted to Y University from a small town and had volunteered to teach in a small village every year. He wanted to "go back" to his origins and inherit his father's legacy as secondary school teacher in a small village. These unadorned ideas would be channeled into his definition of "sense of mission" in his later educational philosophy class thesis. In his reflection, Li Yan traced the academic terms *humanism* and *progressive education* back to their original fertile soil, becoming the subscripts of his own sense of mission: He was from the countryside and was admitted to a top university in China with a spirit of speaking up for the underrepresented and social justice; as such, he had a mission to repay his birthplace as an educator.

Li Yan's self-reflection also prompted Wang to adjust the mentoring class's design and arrangement. He had not considered that the educational autobiography assignment could enable students to retrace their own sense of an educational mission. Therefore, Wang revised his mentoring plan, inviting Li Yan to share his autobiography and organize the discussion. Surprisingly, all of the students agreed to frame the discussion around the seemingly obscure phrase "sense of mission."

Li Yan's sense of mission aligns with Kang's (2016) concept of teacher education culture, which articulates that in addition to resource and material allocation in teacher education, personal beliefs and values (spiritual culture) should also be reflected. The reason Li Yan's spiritual culture is defined as a "sense of mission" is that as a physics student from the countryside attending an elite comprehensive university, becoming a teacher is a powerful avenue for him to practice his cultural legacy. In Li Yan's praxis, educational reality as represented by sex education emerged. While sex education is not taboo in China—Chinese educational institutions had been promoting it for years—having it represent Li Yan's sense of mission was "laughed at" in the first and second spaces because it does not conform to the

positioning of comprehensive universities as emphasizing educational research. Therefore, for Li Yan mentoring becomes a meditation room for reflecting on personal experience and educational beliefs instead of teacher education, and the third space begins to emerge. In this space, education theories, research methods, and pedagogical knowledge become the mediums that facilitate the transformation. This transformation allows the personal experience of pre-service teachers to become the curriculum, challenging the consistency and solidification of the first and second spaces (Abraham, 2021). It echoes Behari-Leak and Roux's (2018) argument that the third space creates new power, practice, and discourse structures that are inconsistent with people's overall view and expectation of a university education.

Finally, Li Yan had developed a solid idea and a reasonable method to explore a solution. He decided to put aside teaching methods and pedagogies and to conduct a qualitative analysis on why he had chosen to teach in that small village. The self-reflection, which was the mentoring content Wang added after reading Li's writings and negotiating with him, became a meaningful tool for his own explorations.

The Wild Pedagogy

When Ji Dongdong planned to intern as a part-time teacher for a high school during the summer break, he was confident in his ability to pass the interview and be hired. His optimism was quite valid, as he was an honorary graduate of this provincial key high school, had the title of "Y University student," and had two years of student teaching experience. In a word, Ji Dongdong's alma mater should have had no reason to reject his job application.

But the school did reject Ji Dongdong due to his 20-minute mathematics trial lecture. A teacher politely asked Ji Dongdong about his ideas on instructional design. Ji Dongdong enthusiastically described how he had developed his pedagogy by observing students' problem-solving processes and interacting with them to understand any learning difficulties. As soon as he finished speaking, Ji Dongdong's former math teacher, who was also the director of the school's mathematics teachers, appeared to be disappointed. "But how you were teaching was a wild pedagogy," he said. "I mean, that there's no theory or evidence supporting your pedagogy even though we all talk about innovative teaching methods." This feedback shocked Ji Dongdong, who had never thought that his was a wild pedagogy. "What does the word *wild* mean?" he asked himself. "Is it because I did not major in a

teacher education program?" These questions haunted Ji Dongdong, but he realized that he had no proper terminology to describe his pedagogy.

When Ji Dongdong came to the mentoring class, then, it was with a grievance and a determination to justify his pedagogy. Like Li Yan, Ji Dongdong had paid attention to the instructional design and pedagogy that seemed to be applicable and pragmatic for learning. Different from Li Yan, however, he was eager to find educational theories to prove that his pedagogy was supported by evidence. Ji Dongdong's learning goals encouraged Wang to make a second adjustment to the class's mentoring design.

"Can I present my pedagogy for the midterm report, Dr. Wang?" Ji Dongdong asked Wang in response to the mentoring class requirement for students to identify an educational issue and present their research. Seeing Wang as an educational expert, Ji Dongdong assumed that the presentation would be an opportunity to test whether his pedagogy was reasonable and meaningful. As such, he carefully controlled his language and manner in the presentation, trying to avoid verbal phrases and excessive hand movements. His description of his pedagogy included educational terms such as *scaffolding instruction*, *flipped classrooms*, and the like, and he emphasized the educational theories behind them.

As a mentor, Wang was pleased that students had presented teaching skills with academic awareness, but he recognized that in Ji Dongdong's presentation, "I" or "himself" was missing. He had introduced the appropriate teaching theories to support his pedagogy, but his original thinking that combined personal reflection and practice was no longer present. In response, Wang recommended that Ji Dongdong explore educational action research and share his action research proposal as his final report. Ji Dongdong listened attentively and took detailed notes, as if he had grasped the compass for his journey. However, he failed to master the essence of using the compass. For the 15-minute final presentation, he prepared more than 50 slides to share his personal reflection and the literature review supporting it. When he tried to highlight these two aspects within a designated time, he spoke too fast for other students to follow. The situation embarrassed Wang as well, because he wanted his students to embrace their individual experiences and identify critical issues, but he also needed to complete the scheduled lesson.

Wang realized that in this situation, a third space had formed due to the manifestation of the concept of *ambivalence* (Bhabha, 2004). As

a student, Ji Dongdong's ambivalence was a result of his endeavor to prove the rationality of his pedagogy through the traditional model of linking theoretical knowledge with teaching practice without shackling his practical knowledge and experience with this approach. Wang's ambivalence as a mentor was reflected in whether to organize mentoring according to his original plan or to design mentoring based on the actual learning needs of students. It was from this state of ambivalence that the third space gradually formed in the class for both teacher and students.

Bhabha (2004) argues that to respond to ambivalence, hybridity, accommodation, and transformation need to be employed to create a third space. The reason Ji Dongdong's pedagogy was defined as "wild" by his professor was that it was being judged by the traditional theory-practice dichotomy, that is, teachers should build solid theoretical knowledge in the classroom before engaging in teaching practice. This model is the typical sequence for most teacher education programs in China, particularly at comprehensive universities. This view of teacher education has shaped professional opinion and resulted in a lack of emphasis on educational practice and application in teacher education programs.

In the third space of mentoring that emerged in the class, this traditional dichotomy was deconstructed by hybridizing theoretical knowledge and individual experiences, and students' learning became a process of self-verification and self-discovery—that is, a process of accommodation. Therefore, Ji Dongdong's approach evolved from displaying rigid principles in his midterm report to inquiring about a specific and distinct action research proposal in the final assignment. During this process, knowledge and practice no longer developed linearly but grew from informing each other. As discussed by Zeichner (2010), for teacher education, the third space does not counterpose academic theory and teaching practice, but instead enables them to coexist to discover and establish a new perspective.

Discussion

This narrative inquiry constructs two stories on mentoring in teacher education at a Chinese comprehensive university from the perspective of the third space. *The Sense of Mission Under the Laugh* affirms the transformational role of personal experiences and educational beliefs in career development in the third space. *The Wild Pedagogy* reflects how the third space can liberate the theoretical learning-teaching

practice dichotomy through mentoring, allowing both to coexist. These two narrative constructions illustrate pre-service teachers' different understandings of the teaching profession at a Chinese comprehensive university. They represent the teaching profession as an avenue to realize one's individual vision and as a pathway to verify self-worth.

These two narratives further illustrate that mentoring can become a third space when the mentor designs lessons for mentees to reflect on their beliefs, accommodations, and personal experiences as well as their teaching. In this space, students' individual experiences and educational beliefs become the curriculum, and the theoretical learning-teaching practice is used to help students explore individual challenges.

The practice of teaching is one of the main research themes in teacher education globally, through extracurricular activities related to teachers' career development such as mentoring and student teaching (Dunst et al., 2019). The assessment of teacher education's impact focuses on students' academic performance and the quality of their teaching in the early post-employment period. In China, whether at a comprehensive university or a normal university, the mentoring setting and practical activities in teacher education follow a rationale of theory followed by practice. Teacher education at Chinese comprehensive universities has long been regarded as focused only on academic research while lacking a teaching practicum (Kang, 2016; Lu, 2019).

In this study, the emergence of mentoring as the third space introduces the idea of treating students' individual experience and personal educational beliefs as part of the instructional process, thereby emphasizing the hybridity of individual knowledge and experience as well as the transformative nature of adaptable mentoring. For pre-service teachers at a comprehensive university, it is often their own experiences and personal will that motivate their career choice. Mentoring as the third space emphasizes individual reflection and the transformation of that reflection into an educational philosophy. This study, therefore, upends the theoretical learning-teaching practice dichotomy and makes the process of students exploring individual challenges the curriculum. Mentoring as the third space does not abandon the first and second spaces, but instead selectively and strategically reconstructs them as a new hybrid approach (Abraham, 2021; Cuenca et al., 2011). We therefore propose that learning theory and practical teaching be integrated and employed to assist students in reflecting on and addressing practical problems derived from personal experiences.

These narratives can provide enlightenment for mentoring students

in other disciplines. Specifically, we suggest that mentors develop an understanding of what discipline-specific mentoring entails and design suitable activities that provide spaces for transformational learning. In this study, the mentor-teacher Wang's professional background in teacher education made him aware of how to capitalize on the mentees' reflections on their educational beliefs through activities such as writing an educational autobiography. Additionally, self-reflection enables mentors to engage in the process of identifying issues, tensions, and accommodations during mentoring. For example, Wang conducted a narrative inquiry and included himself as a participant, reflecting on his mentoring experience in an academic manner. For mentors, employing an educational research method to share experiences and reflections can lead to the development of new initiatives and possibilities that can be shared with peers.

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