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PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY OF TEACHERS IN CHINESE VOCATIONAL COLLEGES

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Abstract

Education is the driving force and foundation of human social development. The development of a country cannot be separated from education, and the foundation of high-quality education is teachers. If the professional identity of teachers is not high, high-quality education will lack the most basic guaranteed conditions. In the current stage of social development in China, the economy is highly developed, and the culture is increasingly prosperous, but behind any harmony, there are new challenges. With the differentiation of social classes and the widening gap between the rich and the poor, multicultural conflicts and multi-value games have become new social problems. This contradiction has also extended to the field of higher education. The most prominent manifestation is that many teachers in higher vocational colleges are reluctant to reveal their teacher identities to the outside world. They are more willing to develop their second social identity. They show serious job burnout in teaching activities, and the turnover rate of teachers in some places is high. This paper outlines the introduction about professional identity of teachers, analyzes and studies the importance, the factors and related about professional identity of teachers. Enhancing teachers' professional pride and sense of belonging and improving teachers' professional identity are not only conducive to the stability of the teaching staff, but also can stimulate teachers' internal motivation and promote the high-quality and sustainable development of China's higher vocational education.

Keywords: Professional Identity, China teachers, Chinese Vocational Colleges

Introduction of professional identity of teachers in China

The term "professional identity" refers to an aspect of your overall identity that is formed as you absorb, interpret, and apply the values, behaviors, norms, beliefs, and skills of your professional community. This community can include anyone relevant to your profession, such as coworkers or those in the same or complementary industries. Your home culture, family, and age group also shape your professional identity. Each group has unique social and cultural expectations related to your profession, which shape how you talk and feel about your professional life. For some people, society has shaped their professional identity to be separate from other aspects of their identity. Over the past few decades, that line has blurred and then disappeared with the pandemic. For many of us, professional identity formation is a key part of our personal identity development, profoundly influencing how we see ourselves and our role in the world. Like other aspects of our identities, career identity development occurs when we begin to feel part of certain groups. As children, we hear and absorb messages about different careers from family and close friends. We then learn more about other careers as we attend school and join communities of shared interests. We begin to form impressions of certain careers based on what we observe about status and norms, which begin to motivate and influence our decisions. As we enter the world of work, we absorb and internalize the values,

norms, and expectations of our organizations and careers. We change our behaviors and change our language to reflect others. For example, we may switch between our “work” and “non-work” identities to adapt to different situations, and much of this happens unconsciously. (Wilson, V. 2024)

The Chinese teacher educator context is very different from many countries, particularly considering that the majority of teacher educators in China do not have previous teaching experience (Kastner et al. 2019). Many Chinese teacher educators started their career working with PSTs as ‘college teachers’ and did not experience a shift of identity from school teacher to teacher educator (Wang, 2017). To improve the quality of teacher education in China, higher education-based teacher educators were encouraged to work in schools and outstanding school teachers were encouraged to teach in the higher education institutions (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2018). The Chinese Ministry of Education, National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, and State Commission Office for Public Sector Reform (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2018) stated that it is essential to establish a group (community) of teacher educators in higher education to promote their sense of belonging. Significantly, Chinese teacher educators need a community to construct and develop their identity, however, they are at the stage of ‘fighting alone’ (for example, reading a book and reflection) and did not have a sense to build a community or professional learning community (Ma and Hu, 2018).

Traditionally, the role of teachers in China has been heavily influenced by Confucian philosophy, which emphasizes respect for authority, the importance of education, and the teacher’s role as a moral guide and knowledge bearer. This historical view has shaped societal expectations of teachers as ultimate authority figures in the classroom, tasked with not only imparting knowledge but also instilling moral values in their students.

In short, the professional identity of teachers is a question that teachers raise to the fundamental question of “who am I”. Under the influence of many factors, the professional identity of Chinese teachers is very unstable and often in an unfinished state. Some teachers wrongly judge teachers’ professional identity from utilitarian perspectives such as money and reputation, which leads to the crisis of teachers’ professional identity.

The Importance of professional identity of teachers

1. It has a profound impact on teachers’ career development and education.

Who we are is a pre-emptive problem for people to carry out social activities. Only when we appear in the subconscious mind or make clear who we are through thinking can we know the meaning of our participation in social production and life, and then make behavioral choices. The importance of professional identity of teachers lies in its profound influence on teachers’ career development and education quality. The sense of identity encourages teachers to consciously devote themselves to the cause of education and show a firm sense of responsibility and mission in teaching, so as to guide students’ learning and growth more effectively. At the same time, identity can help teachers establish professional beliefs and values, enhance their loyalty to education, and enhance their social status and influence. In addition, the promotion of teacher identity can also promote education innovation and change, promote the healthy development of the education system, and ultimately benefit students and society.

2. Teacher educators need to have a strong sense of his/her own professional identity.

Teacher educators are crucial in supporting and facilitating the initial education of new teachers and continuing professional development of experienced teachers (European Commission, 2013). Teacher educators undertake various roles and responsibilities in relation

to the different types of work they engage in, for example, teaching, school placement supervision and research (Yuan and Yang, 2020). Yuan (2020) suggested that identity struggle and conflicts are part of their professional experiences when they enter teacher education in higher education, and they need to constantly experience, explain and navigate identity conflicts through reflections and practice. Research in a Chinese context found that teacher educators encounter difficulties in identifying as a teacher educator (Cui, 2018; Qiu, 2015; Zheng, 2015). This trend is common in a number of countries, as those who teach teachers might not identify as teacher educators (European Commission Citation 2013, 8). Similarly, Furlong and O'Brien (2019) found that teacher educators often described themselves as teachers, educators, researchers and facilitators. It is therefore prudent to explore how university teachers involved in teacher education understand their professional identity and what factors influence their professional identity as teacher educators, given that teacher educators need to have a strong sense of his/her own professional identity in order to enable pre-service teachers (PSTs) to have a strong understanding of self as professional. (Furlong and O'Brien, 2019)

What factors are related to professional identity of teachers?

1. Factors Influencing Teacher Professional Identity

Suarez found out that (Suarez, 2022) the educational system and school context added to several factors of the structures and support systems for teachers shape teacher professional identity, including:

- 1.1 the previous experiences of the teachers
- 1.2 their professional relationships and collaboration among colleagues
- 1.3 their initial teacher education
- 1.4 the support they receive from their supervisors or mentors
- 1.5 the personal and collective reflections they have on their practice and beliefs
- 1.6 Psychological Processes Influencing Teacher Identity

The role of the direct work environment was experienced as either strengthening or constraining, depending on whether or not teaching was valued in the department. We found five psychological processes that were involved in the development and maintenance of a teacher identity: a sense of appreciation, a sense of connectedness, a sense of competence, a sense of commitment, and imagining a future career trajectory. (Van Lankveld, T. et.al. 2017)

2. The Impact of Work Environment on Teacher Identity

The direct work environment has a strong impact on teacher identity. It can either compensate for the negative effects of the wider context of higher education or maintain them. Finding a professional community of like-minded colleagues is not easy for university teachers. At universities, departments are usually discipline based, which means that often research prevails. Teachers may therefore be more likely to find like-minded colleagues in other departments. (Van Lankveld, T. et.al. 2017)

3. The Influence of Individual Needs and Contextual Factors

Identity is guided by the needs of the subject. Teachers' professional identity is closely related to many factors, such as career development prospect, salary income, teacher-student interaction experience, school management evaluation, social reputation and so on. Of course, people's needs are diverse, which means that identities are also diverse. But under the specific time and space scene, people will certainly have their own most important needs, so they will also have their own first identity. (Meng Yiming, 2024)

Knowing the factors that shape teachers' professional identity enables educators, administrators, and policymakers to create a more effective, supportive, and satisfying educational environment for both teachers and students.

Related research on professional identity of teachers

1. The Impact of Professional Identity and Autonomy on English Language Teachers' Success. Derakhshan, A. et.al. (2020) studied about the investigating the effects of English language teachers' professional identity and autonomy in their success and found that because of the importance of instructor success in the adequacy of instruction and learning, this study aimed to explain the impact of two factors, namely language teachers' professional identity and autonomy, with respect to their success. To this end, 190 Iranian EFL teachers, including university lecturers and language institute teachers, participated in this study. As for data collection, the Teacher Autonomy Questionnaire (TAQ), the Teacher Professional Identity Scale (TPIS), and the Characteristics of Successful Language Teachers Questionnaire (CSLTQ) were distributed among the respondents. Using Cronbach's alpha estimates and correlational analyses, the reliability of the questionnaires and the associations among the TAQ, TPIS, and CSLTQ were examined, respectively. The results of Pearson correlations revealed that there were significant positive correlations among all three teacher factors. These findings were also confirmed by Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) results; teacher success was predicted positively and significantly by both professional identity and autonomy. Outcomes of this research suggest that teachers' professional identity and autonomy are highly beneficial to their success. This study also outlined the elements of teachers' professional identity that could be more useful for their success. In the end, relevant pedagogical implications are discussed.

2. Shaping Professional Identity in Student-Teachers: Insights from Team-Teaching Science through Project-Based Learning. Dina Tsybulsky et.al. (2019) studied about the the development of student-teachers' professional identity while team-teaching science classes using a project-based learning approach: A multi-level analysis and found that the research study deals with the development of professional identity of 17 student-teachers during their pedagogical practicum while team-teaching science classes using a project-based learning (PBL) approach. Data were collected from in-depth interviews as well as reflective reports and analyzed by means of multilevel analysis. Findings indicate that the student-teachers' professional identity was shaped by meaningful experiences in two dimensions: overcoming challenges while leading PBL and involvement in fruitful and supportive cooperation with their peers. The student-teachers progressed from group-focused to self-focused professional identity, indicating professional growth, empowerment, and substantial gains in self-confidence.

3. Longitudinal Insights into Novice Teachers' Professional Identities: Challenges and Successes in the Early Years. Joy Myers et.al. (2022) studied about Examining Novice Teachers' Professional Identities and found that the purpose of this longitudinal study was to follow three teachers from their university teacher preparation programs into their first 3 consecutive years of teaching to better understand their teacher's professional identities. One of the reasons they were invited to this study was because they were strong candidates in their student teaching. The findings reveal that all teachers continued in the profession despite the obstacles they faced during their first 3 years of teaching. While they were all persistent, each persevered in a different way, depending on their beliefs, context, and relationships with their peers and administrators. Understanding their experiences and the ways they found success has implications for teacher education and induction as well as research on teacher development.

4. Addressing Professional Identity Alienation among University Teachers: Analysis and Countermeasures. Yuyun (2024) studies about university teachers' professional identity alienation and countermeasures. and found that this paper first expounds the generation and alienation of professional identity of college teachers, then analyzes the consequences of professional identity alienation of college teachers, and finally discusses the countermeasures

of professional identity alienation of college teachers, including clarifying the boundary of power, ensuring the unity of power and responsibility; Strengthen the care for teachers to form a dynamic working environment; Promote multi-subject governance in colleges and universities, and protect teachers' right to participate in school governance and management.

5. Exploring and Measuring Teachers' Identity in Private Universities: Development of a Recognition Scale. Li Wei et.al. (2024) studied about structural dimension exploration and measurement scale development of teachers' identity in private universities and found that the identity recognition of private college teachers is seriously blurred, and reconstructing their identity and enhancing their level of identity recognition has become an urgent matter. However, the lack of measurement tools for the identity recognition of private college teachers poses a significant obstacle to research and management practices in related fields. Therefore, the study employed grounded theory analysis to conduct an in-depth exploration on the construct of private college teachers' identity recognition. On this basis, a measurement tool was developed and validated for private college teachers' identity recognition, including three dimensions: occupational identity, professional identity, and institutional identity, with 28 items. The research results not only provide a measurement tool for relevant empirical studies, but also help private colleges accurately understand and assess the current status of teachers' identity recognition, providing a theoretical basis for further enhancing teacher identity recognition.

Conclusion

All in all, the identity of Chinese teachers is still in an unfinished stage. Coupled with the diversified value impact brought by China's rapid economic and social development, the professional identity of Chinese teachers is facing great challenges. In particular, compared with comprehensive universities, China's higher vocational colleges have natural disadvantage genes, such as uneven national resource investment, school management needs to be improved, poor teacher-student interaction experience, very high work intensity, and low social reputation. Accordingly, the vocational identity of teachers in vocational colleges is not high, the work is lack of passion, easy job burnout, and the turnover rate of teachers in some local vocational colleges is high. These phenomena are not conducive to the high-quality and sustainable development of higher vocational education, and seriously restrict personnel training and the rational allocation of labor resources. In the future, if the Chinese government wants to vigorously develop vocational education and deal with the employment crisis caused by the imbalance of professional structure and the practical problems of insufficient vocational and technical personnel, it will have to formulate systematic vocational identity cultivation programs for teachers in higher vocational colleges. To meet the challenges ahead. Therefore, it is of great practical significance to strengthen the research on professional identity of teachers in higher vocational colleges and explore and construct the cultivation model of professional identity.

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