

A Survey on Pre-Service Teachers' Professional Identity of Primary Education Major in Private Universities - A Case Study of H University

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Abstract

This study explores the current status of pre-service teachers' professional identity from three dimensions—professional value identification, professional status identification, and professional emotion identification—and from the perspective of grade-based development. The findings reveal that pre-service teachers generally hold a positive and relatively high level of professional identity, yet they hold low expectations for career prospects and a strong intention to switch professions. Additionally, professional identity presents a gradual, ladder-like improvement with grade progression, and practical teaching experience is identified as a key influencing factor. Based on these results, this study proposes constructing a phased and differentiated training system, aiming to address issues such as anxiety about career prospects and strong turnover intentions, thereby promoting the comprehensive development of pre-service teachers' professional identity.

Keywords

Pre-Service Teacher, Primary Education, Teacher Professional Identity

1. Introduction

With the in-depth advancement of the “Education Power” strategy and the full implementation of the “Double Reduction” policy, China's primary education sector is undergoing profound reforms and transformations. Against this backdrop, the role positioning, professional requirements, and competency standards of primary school teachers have been endowed with new implications. As a core determinant influencing the stability of the teaching workforce and the quality of

education and teaching, their professional identity has garnered growing attention from the educational circle. As a vital reserve force for future educators, the professional identity of students majoring in primary education not only serves as an internal driving force for their personal career choices and development, but also constitutes a key indicator for assessing the quality of teacher education and safeguarding the sustainable development of basic education.

Regarding the connotation of teacher professional identity, teacher professional identity consists of four sub-identities: centrality, which refers to the importance, significance, and interconnectedness of the teaching profession to teachers' self-concept; valence, which refers to its value and attractiveness; solidarity, which refers to the readiness to share a common fate with colleagues; and self-presentation, which refers to the willingness to be recognized by others as a professional teacher (Hofman & Kremer, 1981). The second viewpoint argues that the professional identity of pre-service teachers comprises four dimensions: teaching commitment, career orientation, task orientation, and self-efficacy (Lamote & Engels, 2010). The third viewpoint argues that teacher professional identity comprises six components: professional cognition, which mean teachers' understanding of their profession's nature, functions, and significance; professional emotion, which mean whether teachers like their profession and whether their emotional experiences in professional activities are positive or negative; professional will, which mean teachers' level of resolve toward their current teaching profession and work environment, which contrast with their inclination to transfer jobs or leave the teaching field; professional skills, which mean teachers' perceived proficiency in disciplinary, teaching, and educational knowledge capabilities; professional expectation which mean teachers' hopes of achieving success in professional activities and becoming excellent teachers, and professional values which mean the goals teachers seek through their profession, such as money, status, honor, or self-actualization (Wei, 2008).

According to these views, this study argues that Teacher Professional Identity is an integrated construct of teachers' cognition, emotions, and attitudes toward their professional role. Different scholars divide it into multi-dimensional structures, reflecting teachers' understanding of the profession, emotional connection, will tendency, and value pursuit. As a sub-dimension of teacher professional identity, Teacher Value Identity refers to teachers' cognition and acceptance of the goals and significance carried by their profession. It includes both the social values of the profession itself and the personal goals pursued through the profession. Belonging to the emotional dimension of teacher professional identity, Teacher Emotional Identity refers to the emotional experiences and tendencies formed by teachers in professional activities, including the degree of affection for the profession and emotional states in professional activities. Teacher Status Identity refers to teachers' cognition and acceptance of the position of their profession in the social structure, involving both the subjective perception of the social status of the profession and the pursuit of the "status" goal in professional values. It is the embodiment of professional identity at the level of social positioning.

The findings of this research are expected to provide practical guidance for private universities in Guangdong Province to optimize talent training programs, adjust curriculum settings, and strengthen vocational guidance for primary education majors. It will also help students gain a clear understanding of their current professional identity and resolve career-related confusions. Meanwhile, this study aims to provide insights for enhancing the professional identity of pre-service primary school teachers nationwide and consolidating the talent foundation for basic education.

2. Study Design

The content of this study focuses on the current status of pre-service teachers' professional identity among students majoring in Primary Education at University H. This study took first-year to fourth-year students majoring in Primary Education at University H in Guangdong Province in China as the research objects.

In terms of research methods, this study adopts a questionnaire survey and interview method.

The design of the questionnaire and interviews drew on content from *Scale of Professional Identity for Primary and Secondary School Teachers* (Wei, 2008), as well as the papers *Finnish Pre-service Teachers' Identity Development After a Year of Initial Teacher Education: Adding, Transforming, and Defending* (Varis et al., 2023) and *The Construction of Teachers' Professional Identity: An Analysis of Subjective Learning Experiences* (Chavez Rojas et al., 2023) and *Impact of early career teachers' professional identity tensions* (van der Wal et al., 2019). The questionnaire is appropriately revised and adjusted in close combination with the research content, so as to design questionnaire items closely related to the study. The rating scale adopted in the questionnaire is a 5-point Likert scale, with the scoring criteria defined as follows: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree.

Through a sampling survey, 200 questionnaires were distributed to the participants via Wenjuanxing (a professional online survey platform in China). After screening by the researcher and excluding invalid responses, 162 valid questionnaires were finally recovered. The data collection of the questionnaire adopts a 5-point Likert scale, and SPSS software is used for data analysis. The research results are analyzed to draw the final conclusions.

In addition to the questionnaire survey, this study selected eight pre-service teaching interns (from first to fourth years) majoring in the same major for face-to-face or telephone interviews. The selection was based on the interviewees' willingness and individual circumstances. Semi-structured and open-ended questions closely related to the research topic were designed in advance as the interview outline. During the interviews, detailed records were kept. Finally, the interview content was transcribed, analyzed, and refined to extract the core insights.

3. Descriptive Analysis of the Current Status of Pre-Service Teachers' Professional Identity in H University

This research used SPSS data analysis software and adopted descriptive statistics

to analyze the basic information of the respondents. In the survey sample of primary education majors at H University in **Table 1**, there was a significant gender difference: female students accounted for 62.96%, while male students accounted for 37.04%.

Table 1. Gender distribution of the survey sample among primary education majors at H university.

Gender	Proportion (%)
Female	62.96
Male	37.04

This phenomenon is related to social perceptions of gender roles in primary education, where women are generally considered more suitable for primary teaching work, making the higher proportion of female students in the sample reasonable.

In terms of grade distribution in **Table 2**, senior students (fourth-year) accounted for 35.19%, sophomores (second-year) and juniors (third-year) accounted for 24.69% and 24.07% respectively, with freshmen (first-year) accounting for the lowest proportion (16.05%).

Table 2. Grade distribution of the survey sample among primary education majors at H university.

Grade	Proportion (%)
Freshmen (First-year)	16.05
Sophomores (Second-year)	24.69
Juniors (Third-year)	24.07
Seniors (Fourth-year)	35.19
Total	100.00

This distribution suggests that as grades advance, students receive more comprehensive teacher education—especially senior students who are about to enter the workplace, whose professional identity as pre-service teachers may be relatively stronger.

Age distribution showed a high concentration: 93.83% of students were in the college-age group of 19 - 25 years old, reflecting that the student group of this major is mainly young people.

Regarding internship experience, 56.17% of students had no internship experience, while 43.83% had participated in internships. This difference indicates that internship experience has an important impact on pre-service teachers' professional identity—students with internship experience can gain a more intuitive understanding of the teaching profession, while those without internships mostly rely on classroom learning for professional cognition, resulting in a relatively limited perspective.

In terms of the overall performance of professional value identity, the average score of students majoring in primary education at H University was 3.40, with a standard deviation of 0.729 and a median of 3.57. This data indicates that students generally hold a positive attitude towards the value of the teaching profession, recognizing its core significance and social value. However, it is noteworthy that students still have certain doubts regarding the perception of career development prospects and the willingness to change careers, which have become potential factors affecting the deepening of their professional identity.

4. Analysis of the Current Status of Pre-Service Teachers' Professional Identity in H University

4.1. Analysis of the Professional Value Identity Dimension

Overall, pre-service teachers at H University have a high recognition of the value of the teaching profession, but harbor significant concerns about their career prospects. Firstly, they demonstrate strong recognition of professional value, believing that primary school teachers are respected (mean score: 3.49) and can fully exert their abilities (mean score: 3.48). Their enthusiasm for professional skill learning (mean score: 3.44) and initiative in extracurricular reading (mean score: 3.41) are well-developed, reflecting their emphasis on professional development. However, pre-service teachers have low expectations for career development prospects (mean score: 3.07) and a high willingness to change careers (mean score: 3.51), indicating a low level of long-term commitment to the teaching profession. In terms of self-efficacy, their confidence in teaching ability is only 3.38, with some students holding skeptical attitudes. The overall average score is 3.40 (standard deviation: 0.729), showing that although pre-service teachers recognize the professional value and attach importance to professional development, their professional loyalty and self-efficacy are relatively weak.

4.2. Analysis of the Professional Status Identity Dimension

In terms of the recognition of teachers' professional status, pre-service teachers generally believe that primary school teachers' work is crucial to students' growth and development (mean score: 3.50), and they have a strong awareness of consciously abiding by teachers' professional norms in future work (mean score: 3.70). This reflects students' high attention to the role of the teaching profession and professional ethics. In addition, when hearing remarks praising the primary school teaching profession, students will show a sense of pride (mean score: 3.35), indicating positive emotions towards the profession. Secondly, pre-service teachers' recognition of the social status of primary school teachers is only at an above-average level (mean score: 3.29), and some pre-service teachers believe that the social status is not high, reflecting the differences in social recognition of the primary school teaching profession. At the same time, in terms of career choice, pre-service teachers show a certain degree of uncertainty. Some may consider changing careers when facing other job opportunities (mean score: 3.28), indicating that

their willingness to engage in primary school teaching for a long time is relatively low.

4.3. Analysis of the Professional Emotional Identity Dimension

First of all, most pre-service teachers recognize the working environment and conditions of primary school teachers (mean score: 3.432), holding certain expectations and a positive attitude towards the professional environment. They also show a positive attitude towards teamwork (mean score: 3.47) and are willing to collaborate with colleagues to complete tasks in future teaching work, reflecting good professional collaboration awareness and team spirit. Secondly, pre-service teachers' enthusiasm for actively participating in teacher profession-related learning and training needs to be improved (mean score: 3.27), and their initiative in enhancing their professional literacy is not strong enough. Most pre-service teachers feel proud of becoming primary school teachers (mean score: 3.37), but some still lack a strong sense of pride in the profession. This indicates that there are differences in professional identity among the pre-service teacher group, and it is necessary to further strengthen the value promotion and guidance of the primary school teaching profession.

4.4. Analysis of Interview Results on Pre-Service Teachers' Professional Identity in Universities

To further address the limitations of the survey results, the researcher conducted interviews with eight pre-service teachers majoring in teacher education at H University, covering freshmen to seniors. Based on the sorted interview findings, six representative students (1 freshman, 2 sophomores, 1 junior, and 2 seniors) were selected for in-depth analysis. The interview content mainly focused on students' professional value identity, status identity, and emotional identity towards the teaching profession, as well as the impact of internship experience on their professional identity.

From the perspective of the grade-based development trajectory, pre-service teachers' professional identity presents a law of "gradual improvement with distinct phased characteristics": Freshmen are in the germination stage of professional cognition. Due to the lack of systematic professional learning and practical experience, their professional identity is relatively low and their cognition is vague, which confirms the characteristic of low identity scores among lower-grade students in the questionnaire survey. Sophomores enter the period of career exploration and confusion, where the deepening of professional cognition coexists with doubts about self-adaptation. Their professional identity is at a medium level, echoing the identity status of this grade group in the quantitative data. Juniors step into the mature stage of professional cognition. Relying on comprehensive professional course learning and initial practical accumulation, their career plans gradually become clear and their identity improves significantly, highlighting the positive driving effect of knowledge accumulation and practical experience. Sen-

iors achieve an all-round sublimation of professional identity through in-depth educational internships. Immersive teaching practice not only strengthens their professional emotions and confidence, but also alleviates anxiety about career prospects. This perfectly confirms the result that seniors have the highest identity scores in the questionnaire survey, and further verifies the core empowering role of internship experience in professional identity.

Overall, through the in-depth analysis of qualitative research, the interview results clearly present the formation logic and key influencing factors of professional identity among students of different grades. They not only mutually corroborate the quantitative research results, but also enrich the concrete understanding of students' professional psychological states, providing a more three-dimensional and accurate practical basis for the formulation of targeted cultivation strategies in the follow-up.

5. Conclusion

Overall, students majoring in primary education at H University have established a solid foundation for professional identity, with generally high levels of value identity, status identity, and emotional identity. However, students majoring in primary education at the university face several challenges: low expectations for career prospects, strong willingness to change careers, insufficient enthusiasm for actively participating in profession-related training, weak professional pride among some students, room for improvement in self-efficacy, and individual differences in emotional identity. It is still necessary to enhance their enthusiasm for participating in teacher training, focus on professional value identity as the core, and strengthen the guidance of professional status cognition and the cultivation of professional emotions.

Meanwhile, in line with the law of grade-related development, a phased and differentiated training system should be constructed to alleviate occupational anxiety and enhance career stability, thereby addressing pre-service teachers' career concerns. For first-year and second-year college students who are in the initial stage of their academic journey, their understanding of the primary school teaching profession corresponding to the Primary Education program remains vague. It is imperative to establish a systematic and comprehensive career guidance system. By regularly organizing high-quality lectures on teachers' professional cognition and inviting scholars with rich practical experience in the field of education, in-depth analysis should be conducted from multiple dimensions—including the historical evolution, current status, future development trends, and professional competency requirements of the primary school teaching profession. This will enable lower-grade students to form a relatively clear understanding of the primary school teaching profession.

For junior college students (third-year undergraduates), emphasis should be placed on the significant impact of educational observation and teaching internships on their pre-service teachers' professional identity. University H should pro-

vide differentiated practical guidance tailored to the employment characteristics and needs of students majoring in Primary Education. For instance, based on students' strengths, subject inclinations, and career aspirations, the university should strengthen communication and cooperation with primary schools across Guangdong Province, enabling students to select internship positions that align with their individual needs. This will allow them to step onto the podium and apply their professional skills in practical teaching scenarios to. As for final-year graduates, they are in a critical transition period from university campus to primary school teaching careers. Practical activities such as offline interview workshops and resume writing guidance can be organized to help students enhance their job-hunting skills and overall competitiveness. Additionally, the university should build a bridge between graduates and employers, thereby creating more employment opportunities for students.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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