

A Study on the Changes of Student Teachers' Professional Identity Before and after the Internships

Xiaodong Zhu^{*}, Liwen Wang

School of Foreign Languages, Gannan Normal University, Jiangxi, 341000, China

^{*}Corresponding Author

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Abstract: In china, student teachers are the reserve army of rural teachers. Their professional identity not only affects their professional development but also affects the quality of rural education. In recent years, the state council and the ministry of education have introduced a series of policies to improve the student teachers' professional identity and promote the professional development of rural teachers. Besides, some studies have revealed that internships have positive and negative impact on the student teachers' professional identity. Thus, this study focuses on the changes in student teachers' professional identity before and after the internships and analyzes the reasons for the changes. This study mainly used questionnaires and interviews to investigate the 56 student teachers of english majors in a normal university. Data from the questionnaires and interviews indicates that: (1) before the internships, student teachers' professional identity was generally on the upper-middle level. Student teachers have a higher level of professional values but a lower level of confidence in language proficiency. (2) student teachers have improved their perceptions of professional identity after the internships. (3) there is no significant difference in student teachers' professional identity in terms of gender, placement school area, and internship phase. (4) student teachers' professional identity is affected by three factors: individual, placement school and normal university. Among them, the factor of placement school has the most significant effect.

1. Introduction

Teacher professional identity is the psychological basis and inherent dynamism of teacher professional development. Wang (2015) points out the professional identity can positively predict teachers' work engagement, colleagues cooperation, coping with educational changes, job satisfaction, and negatively predict teachers' turnover intention and job burnout. The development of teachers' professional identity begins with the teacher preparation program, especially the teaching practice program. Since student teachers are the reserve army of rural teachers in China. Their professional identity not only affects their professional development but also affects the quality of rural education. Therefore, in recent years, the State Council and the Ministry of Education have introduced a series of policies to promote the professional development of rural teachers and improve the student teachers' professional identity.

On the one hand, "*Rural Teacher Support Program (2015-2020)*" issued by the Ministry of Education in 2015 to expand the supplementary channels for rural teachers and improve the quality of rural teachers, On the other hand, in February 2018, the Ministry of Education issued the "*Teacher Education Revitalization Action Program (2018-2022)*", which proposed that "we must focus on cultivating teachers' professional identity and social responsibility. It can be seen that based on such policy objectives, it is particularly important to strengthen the cultivation of student teachers' professional identity. In addition, the existing studies have revealed that internships have positive and negative impact on the student teachers' professional identity (Horvath et al. 2018; Gao, 2019; Chen & Li, 2016; Deng, 2012; Zhang, 2015). Therefore, within the context of national policies, to further understand the changes in student teachers' professional identity before and after internships, and analyze the reasons for the changes will enrich and develop the theory of teachers'

professional identity and the professional development theory. Practically, it has reference significance for promoting the student teachers' professional identity, the growth of student teachers. It also provides some inspirations for teacher educators and mentor teachers. Moreover, it can promote the implementation of the rural teacher support program.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Student Teachers' Professional Identity

Researchers of professional identity have used the concept of professional identity differently (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). However, it is generally believed that teachers' professional identity is a complex and dynamically constructional process that involves the interaction between a person and the social context. As noted in the literature, the development of teachers' professional identity begins with the teacher preparation program, a particular focus is placed on student teachers' professional identity (Schepens et al. 2009; Hong, 2010; Lamote & Engels, 2010; Timostsuk & Ugaste, 2010; Wang, 2015; Zhang et al. 2018; Gao, 2019). Beijaard et al. (2004) address that teachers' professional identity contains "sub-identity". Thus, different scholars construct student teachers' professional identity in different dimensions (Schepens et al. 2009; Wang et al. 2010; Lamote & Engles, 2010; Hong, 2010). Several studies have evidenced the status of student teachers' professional identity in China is relatively high (Zheng, 2012; Chen 2014; Hu & Huang, 2016; Hu & Jiang, 2019). Furthermore, student teachers' professional identity is affected by internal and external factors. Izadinia (2013) summarized the influencing factors from four aspects: reflective activities, learning communities, context and prior experiences. Chiese scholars mainly analyze the influencing factors of student teachers' professional identity from four aspects: individual students, families, school and society (Hu & Huang, 2016; Hu & Jiang, 2019; He, 2017). In addition, the sense of self-efficacy of student teachers can positively predict professional identity (Xie, Yan & He, 2019; Yu, Wang & Zhu, 2018). Lastly, fewer studies focus on the changes in the student teachers' professional identity and their influencing factors during educational internships (Chen & Li, 2016; Gao, 2019; Zhang, Clarke & John, 2018). These studies have revealed that internships have positive and negative impact on the student teachers' professional identity. The influencing factors of student teachers' professional identity during internships include personal factors, school-related factors and social factors.

2.2 Theoretical Basis

2.2.1 Wenger's Identity Formation Theory

Identities are formed amid the 'tension between our investment in the various forms of belonging and our ability to negotiate the meanings that matter in those contexts' (Wenger, 1998, p.188). Therefore, in Wenger's view, identity formation is a dual process of identification and negotiation of meanings. Identification can occur via three modes: engagement, imagination, and alignment (Wenger, 1998). The process of identity formation also includes negotiation of meanings, or practices, which determines the extent to which we are able to contribute to and shape the practices that we invest in (Wenger, 1998). Practices in a community do not always occur harmoniously; rather, conflicts present throughout (Wenger, 2010). Wenger's theory of identity formation can provide an appropriate framework for exploring teacher identity development and changes with a focus on the teaching internships. It allows researchers to explore preservice teachers' complex interactions and interpretations of their lived experiences, which contribute to their professional identity formation and development.

2.2.2 Activity Theory

Activity theory originates in Kant, Hegel, Marx, Engels, Vygotsky, Leontev, and Lulia. Later on, Engelstom (2001) visualizes the activity theory and divides it into three generations. The third generation of activity theory was established by Engelstom in 2001 in overcoming the lack of sensitivity to cultural diversity in the second-generation activity theory. It develops conceptual tools

for understanding dialogue, multiple perspectives and voices, and networks of interacting activity systems (Engeström, 2001). The third-generation model includes at least two activity systems with a potentially shared object (See Figure 1).

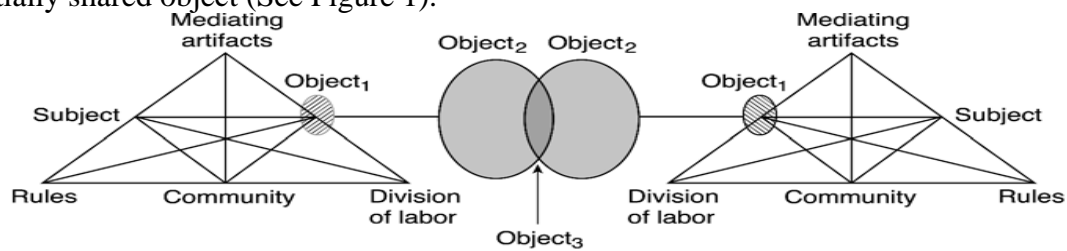


Fig.1 Two Interacting Activity Systems as Minimal Model for the Third Generation of Activity Theory (Engeström, 2001)

Student teachers see themselves as students in the system of university settings but teachers in the system of placement schools. In the present study the subjects are the student teachers whose activity is influenced by the two systems. Object describes the orientation of the activity, derived from motivation to achieve an outcome. Student teachers' motives can be described as performing the teaching task. The shared object can be the student teachers' professional development. The mediating artifacts are the teacher education programs and the supervision and support of the mentor teachers. Learning to teach is a human activity influenced by the involved activity systems. The studies on the evolution of student teachers' professional identities in teaching practicum can be drawn upon the activity theory (Dang, 2013; Fang & Zhang, 2016). Thus, this study draws on the activity theory to analyze the influencing factors of student teachers' professional identity within the internship context.

2.3 Research Questions

- (1) What is the status of student teachers' professional identity before the internships?
- (2) Whether the student teachers' professional identity has changed after the internships, and if so, what has changed?
- (3) Whether there is a significant difference in student teachers' professional identity in terms of gender, placement school area, and internship phase?
- (4) What are the main reasons for the changes in student teachers' professional identity?

2.4 Research Participants and Instruments

In this study we report on 56 student teachers from a normal university who participated in a semester of internships. In addition, among these 56 participants, this study randomly selected 4 student teachers as interviewees. These participants have systematically studied pedagogy, educational psychology, and teaching methodology theories before the internships, but they lack practical teaching experience.

Questionnaires and interviews are conducted in this study. The two questionnaires in this study were designed based on the Foreign Language Teacher Identity Questionnaire compiled by Xun et al. (2014). The first questionnaire includes basic information, 29 questions designed based on four dimensions and a short answer question. Student teachers will have perceived organizational support until they participate in educational internships. Therefore, the pre-internships questionnaire contains only seven dimensions, and the questions about the perceived organizational support have been deleted. The second questionnaire includes basic information, 34 questions designed based on four dimensions. Besides, a multiple-choice question, two single choice questions and three short answer questions are also included. The semi-structured interviews were used to investigate changes in the student teachers' professional identity and the reasons for the changes. The interview outline is designed based on the four dimensions of the questionnaire.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 The Status of Student Teachers' Professional Identity Before the Internships

As shown in Figure 2, the mean of student teachers' professional identity before the internships is 3.967, which is higher than the critical value of 3. Among the four dimensions, student teachers have the highest level of career identity ($M=4.273$) and the lowest level of personal identity ($M=3.830$). The results indicate that the general level of student teachers' professional identity before the internship is high, which is consistent with the results of previous studies (Chen, 2014; Liu, 2015; Zhang, 2019; Chen & Hu, 2019). This may be related to Chinese teacher status and parents' expectations. According to the Global Teacher Status Index 2018, among the 35 surveyed countries Chinese teachers' status is ranked first (Dolton et al. 2018). This Index shows that over 50% of parents in China, India, Ghana, and Malaysia would encourage younger generations to become teachers, while less than 8% do so in Israel and Russia. The same results can also found in this research. About 35% of student teachers choose the education major according to the parents' expectations. Logically, parents who encourage their children to become teachers also show a higher level of belief that pupils respect their teachers.

Figure 3 shows that student teachers possess the highest level of professional values and the lowest level of language proficiency. Regarding professional values, student teachers also recognize that teachers play an important role in student and social development. Chen (2014) found that the professional values of English teachers and were significantly positively related to teachers' professional identity. That is, the stronger the professional values, the stronger their professional identity. In terms of language proficiency, the data indicates that they are not very satisfied with their language proficiency, which may be related to the learning experience. Through the questionnaires and interviews, a common phenomenon amongst participants was that they were deeply affected by the test-oriented education in the basic education stage. In addition, There were some negative comments about the teacher education curriculum in normal universities. One interviewee argued that the teacher education curriculum mainly focuses on theoretical courses, practical courses are fewer. Thus, student teachers lack opportunities to practice the language.

3.2 Analysis of Changes in Student Teachers' Professional Identity after the Internships

In reference to Figure 2, the mean of student teachers' professional identity after internships is 3.988. Compared with the result of before internships, the level of student teachers' professional identity has increased. That is, student teachers improve their perceptions of professional identity after the internships. The results of this study are consistent with previous studies (Gao, 2019; Chen, 2014; Liu, 2015; Zhang, 2019; Chen, Hu, 2019). Whether the changes are significant and whether it has statistical significance need to be further tested.

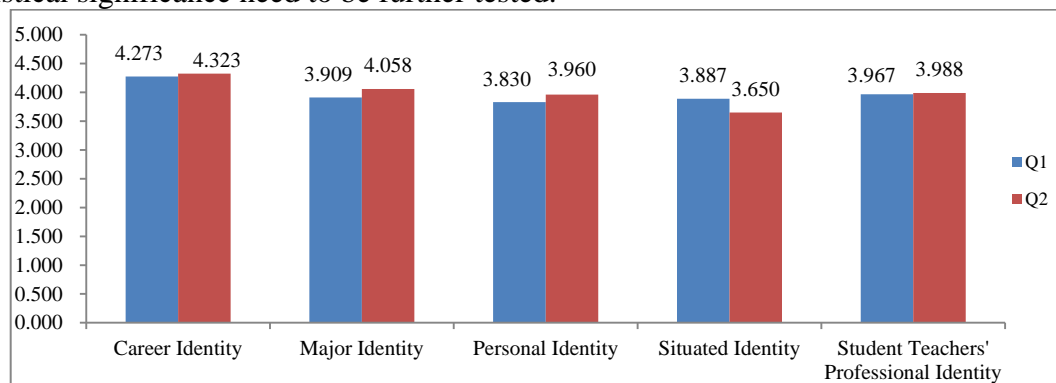


Fig.2 The Mean of Four Dimensions in Two Questionnaires

In reference to Figure 2 and Figure 3, except for professional values, the levels of the other six dimensions have increased, but the increase is not significant. The findings are similar to those of Chen and Hu (2019). The reasons why the perceptions of professional values decreased may be related to those student teachers who choose the education major at will.

The reasons why the perceptions of professional values decreased may be related to those student teachers who choose the education major at will. Therefore, in the context of the college entrance examination and enrollment reform in China, the education system should further promote career planning education in senior high school. In light of English teaching beliefs, before the internship, student teachers believed that English learning was not only a process of construction but also a process of communication. English learning should pay attention to the culture of English-speaking countries. After internships, student teachers have strengthened their original teaching beliefs, which is in line with constructivist learning theory and the idea of communicative teaching. The result corroborates Dong's (2018) claim that pre-service English teacher beliefs are constructivist-oriented.

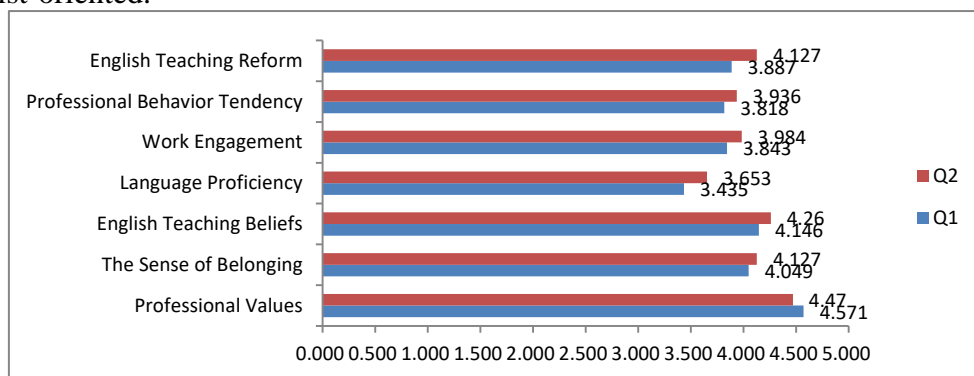


Fig.3 The Mean of Seven Dimensions in Two Questionnaires

The mean of language proficiency indicates that student teachers still lack sufficient confidence in their English competence after internships. In 2018, the Ministry of Education promulgated *National English Curriculum Standard for Senior High School (2017 version)*, which proposed to cultivate students' key competencies. The cultivation of students' key competencies mainly depends on school education. English teachers' key competencies is an important prerequisite and a reliable guarantee for achieving students' key competencies. Therefore, based on the background of key competencies, normal universities should strengthen the training of teachers' key competencies, foster virtue through education, and make key competencies take root in education and teaching.

After the internships, the mean of situated identity ($M = 3.650$) was the lowest among the four dimensions. Overall, the perceived organizational support for student teachers was at a medium level. This finding is consistent with that of Zhao (2017) who also found that the current status of the teachers' perceived organizational support is moderate in rural primary and middle schools. This study reveals that student teachers will encounter "reality shock" during the internships. The "reality shock" is mainly reflected in the school environment, student-teacher relationships and application of theories. During the internships, if student teachers do not receive the care and help from the placement school organization, then the "reality shock" encountered by student teachers has the risk of causing the professional identity crisis. In addition, Zou and Yin (2017) found that novice teachers' perceived organizational support can directly predict their work engagement. This indicates that the higher the perceived organizational support for novice teachers, the greater the commitment to teaching. Therefore, normal universities and local primary and middle school practice teaching bases should strengthen cooperation, actively guide student teachers to adapt to the real teaching situation, and help student teachers perform their teaching tasks successfully.

To sum up, student teachers' professional identity has changed after the internships. The overall level of student teachers' professional identity showed a steady upward trend. From the four first-level dimensions, except for the decrease in situated identity, the other three dimensions all increased, but the increase was not significant. From the seven secondary dimensions, except for the decline in professional values, the remaining six dimensions have increased.

3.3 Analysis of Differences in Student Teachers' Professional Identity after the Internships

In order to verify whether there is a gender difference in student teachers' professional identity

before and after the internships, this study uses gender as the qualitative variable and the four dimensions as the quantitative variables to do the independent sample T-test. The results indicate that male teachers and female teachers had differences in overall level and four dimensions both before and after the internships, but there was no significant difference ($P > 0.05$). These results are consistent with the existing research results (Gao, 2019; Liu, 2015, Chen & Hu, 2019). After internships, surprisingly, the professional identity of male teachers ($M=4.017$) is slightly higher than of female teachers ($M=3.984$). As we can see from the interview results, it was found that female teachers are more difficult to adapt to the local school environment than male teachers in the rural countryside. In addition, it should be noted that due to the current gender imbalance in normal universities, only 5 (9%) male teachers are selected in the sample, which may affect these results to some extent. Next, an ANOVA was conducted to verify whether there is a significant difference in the professional identity after internships in terms of the placement school area and internship phase. The results of the ANOVA indicated that there is no significant difference among the four dimensions in terms of the placement school area and teaching phases ($P > 0.05$). The results accord with Liu's (2015) study.

3.4 The Reasons for Changes Student Teachers' Professional Identity after the Internships

Drawing upon Activity Theory and Wenger's identity formation theory, the author analyzed the open questions of the questionnaire and interview records. The influencing factors can be summarized into the following three aspects: personal factors, placement school factors and social factors. Personal factors include student teachers' perception of the profession, the sense of belonging, and their confidence in professional competence. As far as placement school factors are concerned, they mainly include students, mentor teachers, the environment of the placement school, salary, and parents of students. The social factors mainly include teacher status and teaching pressure.

4. Conclusion

This study sheds light on the changes in student teachers' professional identity during their teaching practicum, which has made it practical to draw conclusions from the results and discussion in the previous section.

First, Before the internships, student teachers' professional identity is generally at the upper-middle level. Student teachers have a higher level of professional values but a lower level of language proficiency. Second, student teachers' professional identity has improved after the internships. From the four first-level dimensions, except for the decrease in situated identity, the other three dimensions all increased, but the increase was not significant. From the seven secondary dimensions, except for the decline in professional values, the remaining six dimensions have increased. Furthermore, there is no significant difference in the student teachers' professional identity in terms of gender, placement school area, and teaching phase. Fourth, The student teachers' professional identity is affected by personal factors, school factors and social environmental factors. Among them, the school factor has the most significant effect, and the individual factor takes the second place. In school factors, significant others play an important role, such as students and mentor teachers. Based on these conclusions, we suggest developing student teachers' professional identity from the three perspectives: student teachers, placement schools and normal universities. Limitations of the study are linked to the small number of research participants. Future research can continue to investigate the changes in the professional identity of student teachers or novice teachers with a comprehensive choice of research participants.

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