



YONG TEACHER'S PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY ENHANCEMENT IN PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN SHANDONG PROVINCE

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Abstract

The objectives of this research were: (1) To explore the components of young teachers' professional identity in private universities in Shandong Province. (2) To propose guidelines to improve the enhancement of young teachers' professional identity in private universities in Shandong Province. This research was a mixed method using a combination of quantitative and qualitative research. Population was 2439 teachers, who in 6 private universities in Shandong Province under the age of 40. The sample size was determined by Krejcie and Morgan's table (1970), with a total of 335 samples. Key informants for in-depth interview total 9 key informants were selected by the purpose sampling method. Focus group discussion, guided by 12 experts holding important positions in 6 private universities. Data were collected with a five-point rating scale, and statistical software was used to conduct descriptive statistics, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and structural equation modeling (SEM). **The research results showed that** young teachers' professional identity in Shandong Province consists of 5 components: Perceived Organizational Support (POS), Career Development

Potential (CDP), Teaching Autonomy (TAY), Pay Equity (PEY), and Sense of Achievement in Work (SAW). These factors have been found to significantly and positively influence overall professional identity. Among these factors, Perceived Organizational Support not only directly influences professional identity but also indirectly affects it through mediating variables such as Pay Equity and Sense of Achievement. Career Development Potential and Teaching Autonomy also exhibited both mediating and moderating roles within the model. Based on the five key dimensions, these strategies provide both theoretical insights and practical recommendations for university administrators aiming to strengthen young teachers' professional commitment and enthusiasm for education.

Keywords: Professional identity; Young teachers; Private universities; Structural Equation modeling (SEM)

Introduction

The rise and fall of a nation are intricately tied to its education system. Education determines the future and destiny of a country and its people, serving as the solid foundation for national revitalization and social progress. With the continuous advancement of science and technology, the creation and application of knowledge have elevated human resources to the status of a critical strategic asset. These resources play a vital role in driving economic and social development and significantly influence a nation's competitiveness on the global stage. In the past decade, universities in China have expanded their enrollment of new students while simultaneously attracting a significant number of outstanding young talents to join the academic workforce. According to data from the Ministry of Education, as of the end of 2022, there were 1.9778 million full-time teachers in the higher education sector nationwide, with young teacher accounting for two-thirds of the total (Ministry of Education, 2023). This highly qualified teaching workforce has established a solid foundation for promoting the high-quality development of higher education. The State Council, in the “Overall Plan on Coordinating the Construction of World-class Universities and First-class Academic Departments”, has made “building a first-class faculty” the primary task of the “double first-class” construction, in particular, it is emphasized that “we should focus on young and middle-aged teachers and innovation teams, optimize the institutional environment for the growth and development of young

and middle-aged teachers, and realize the sustainable development capability of the talent team” (State Council, 2015). In recent years, China's higher education has witnessed rapid development. According to the official higher education statistical data released by the Ministry of Education, as of 2023, there have been 3,074 institutions of higher education in China, and the number of full-time teachers in universities has reached 2.0749 million. Meanwhile, the number of students enrolled in higher education has increased to approximately 47.6319 million. Among them, the number of private and universities has grown to 789, accounting for 25.67% of the total number of universities across the country. The number of full-time teachers in private universities has reached 401,428, accounting for 19.3% of the total number of full-time teachers in universities nationwide. Moreover, the number of students enrolled in private universities has increased to approximately 9.9438 million, accounting for 20.8% of the total number of students in higher education across the country (Ministry of Education, 2023). As shown in the table 1-1:

Table 1-1: Comparison diagram between national universities and private universities.

Comparison Items	National Universities	Private Universities
Number of Institutions	3,074	789
Number of Full-time Teachers	2,074,900	401428
Number of Enrolled Students	47,631,900	9,943,800

In the current socio-economic context, the core task of connotative development in private universities lies in building outstanding professional teacher teams. Teacher development remains central to institutional progress, as teaching quality, teacher research capacity, academic activities, and institutional brand recognition are all closely tied to the quality of the teaching staff. Against the backdrop of high-quality development, teachers represent the primary academic resource of higher education institutions and form the foundation for their existence and growth. Private universities must align with evolving policy trends, continuously innovate in talent cultivation, and leverage policy support to achieve high-quality development in private education. Young teachers are the

driving force behind the sustainable and healthy development of private universities. Their professional identity is a form of self-recognition regarding their occupational role. Enhancing this identity is crucial for strengthening the institution's brand image and improving educational quality. Therefore, addressing how to enhance the professional identity of young teachers in private universities is a pressing issue. As a form of self-conception of one's professional role, professional identity plays a crucial role in teaching motivation and institutional development (Beijaard et al., 2004; Li, 2018).

The significance of this study includes both theoretical and practical aspects. In terms of theoretical significance, this research can enhance and expand theoretical research on teachers' professional identity. A review of relevant literature reveals that research on teachers' professional identity has predominantly focused on primary and secondary school teachers, with some attention to teacher. However, studies specifically addressing the professional identity of young teachers in private universities remain relatively scarce. Given the rapid development and ongoing challenges faced by private universities, there is an urgent need for theoretical frameworks that cater to the unique characteristics of teacher development in these institutions. This study adopts a perspective that centers on the genuine internal needs of young teachers in private universities. It analyzes the underlying causes of the challenges they face and proposes actionable recommendations. By doing so, it aims to contribute to the enhancement and enrichment of theoretical research on teachers' professional identity. At the same time, this research can introduce new perspectives to the study of professional identity. This research focuses on young teachers in private universities as its primary subjects. By employing ERG theory (Existence, Relatedness, Growth Theory) put forward by Clayton Alderfer of Yale University in the United States, the study investigates their professional identity and identifies influencing factors. It examines these factors through the lenses of existence needs, relatedness needs, and growth needs, offering targeted recommendations. This approach not only enriches ERG theory but also broadens the scope of research in teacher education, providing fresh insights into the study of professional identity in the context of private higher education.

This research, grounded in theoretical logic, explores pathways to strengthen the professional identity of young teachers in private universities. It aims to foster their sense of belonging and recognition of their institutions, assisting them in achieving the goal of independent self-development. And, this research can guide the development of high-quality teacher teams in private universities to improve educational standards. As private higher education in China matures, research on the professional identity of young teacher members can provide valuable guidance for teacher development in private universities. By analyzing the current state of young teachers' professional identity and identifying existing issues, this research facilitates timely adaptation and adjustment by teachers. This process contributes to the formation of a more stable teaching workforce, enhances the branding and educational quality of private universities, and ultimately helps establish a favorable reputation for private higher education institutions.

Research Objectives

- 1.To explore the components of the professional identity of young teachers in private universities in Shandong Province.
- 2.To propose guidelines for enhancing the professional identity of young teachers in private universities in Shandong Province.

Literature Reviews

Different scholars understand and interpret the conceptual definition of teacher professional identity from their respective research perspectives. Mawhinney and Xu (1997) hold that teacher professional identity is the degree to which teachers evaluate their own investment in work according to certain external standards, that is, how teachers assess their own identity roles. Samuel and Stephens (2000) put forward the concept of perception. They believe that teacher professional identity is the process in which teachers understand and accept a series of disputes and contradictions encountered in their career based on their existing work experience. Steeley and Sherry L (2005) propose that teacher professional identity is related to teachers' self-evaluation, concepts and images.

Teacher professional identity is the self-belief of teachers about their work and their own roles, belonging to "self-understanding". Gholamreza and Delaram (2013) consider that teacher professional identity is a process of seeking answers to questions such as "Who am I?", "How do I view the value of the teaching profession?" and "Why did I choose this group?". Hong (2010) developed a six-dimensional theory to explain the structure of teacher professional identity, offering a detailed conceptualization that includes emotional orientation, knowledge and belief systems, professional commitment, perceived efficacy, micropolitical awareness, and value alignment. This framework captures both the personal and institutional dimensions of identity formation, emphasizing that teachers' internal landscapes are shaped by emotional investment and moral conviction as much as by organizational expectations. The inclusion of emotion as a foundational element in identity theory reflects the reality that teaching is deeply affective labor, where personal feelings and professional responsibilities are tightly intertwined. Knowledge and beliefs serve as cognitive anchors that inform pedagogical choices, while professional commitment reflects the depth of engagement and long-term orientation toward the vocation. Efficacy, understood as the belief in one's capacity to make a meaningful impact, functions as a motivational driver, reinforcing persistence and innovation in practice. Micropolitical sensitivity enables teachers to navigate institutional hierarchies, policy shifts, and power dynamics, which are often invisible yet profoundly influential. Finally, the values dimension speaks to the ethical frameworks and normative ideals that guide professional conduct and shape how teachers define success.

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Cai Chenmei and Liu Gang (2010) put forward in the field research that teacher professional identity is the process in which teachers confirm and obtain happiness and self-esteem in their professional lives, and the core of self-identity is professional identity. Zhao Hongyu, Qi Tingting (2011) believe that the government should effectively improve the salary system for young people in private colleges and universities. Pay attention to the post training mechanism of young teachers; Strengthen the improvement of policies and system optimization, and focus on cultivating teachers' intrinsic motivation to teach, so as to enhance teachers' professional recognition. Yang Bing (2010) believed that during the professional development of young teachers, there are problems such as a lack of professional knowledge, heavy workloads, and low participation in scientific research. Therefore, domestic scholars have provided a good foundation for the theory of teacher professional identity with corresponding incentive theories such as the Hierarchy of Needs Theory and the Two-Factor Theory. The research on professional identity from the perspective of ERG theory in China is still insufficient. Only three pieces of literature were found through searching the CNKI database. One is research on the professional identity of private kindergarten teachers from the perspective of ERG theory, and the other two use ERG theory as a research path for enhancing professional identity degree. For example, Song Wei and Meng Qingguo (2018) adopted ERG theory in their research on the professional identity of private kindergarten teachers. This article

starts from the theory and provides a new research perspective for analyzing the factors affecting teacher professional identity.

Research Methodology

This study focuses on the professional identity of young teachers in private universities in Shandong Province. Qualitative research; Conduct in-depth interviews and exchanges with 8 key informants, using a three-dimensional sampling method for screening. All of the key informants are young teachers their age is both under 40. Give them plenty of time to reply. In determining the sample size, the researcher adopted a stratified random sampling technique and referred to the Krejcie and Morgan sample size table. From a total population of 2,439 individuals—including professors, lecturers, and teaching assistants—a sample of 335 participants was selected. This sampling design ensured adequate representation of each subgroup, thereby enhancing the reliability and generalizability of the findings while maintaining a manageable sample size. The researcher conducted a content analysis of the data obtained from the focus group discussion. At the end of each topic, key ideas shared by the participants were recorded, and detailed notes were taken to ensure a comprehensive account of each discussion session.

Results

An explore the components of the professional identity of young teachers in private universities in Shandong Province: This study, through a rigorous questionnaire design process and comprehensive data analysis, deeply explores the structural components and validity of young teachers' professional identity in private universities in Shandong Province. Based on an extensive literature review, the measurement dimensions were preliminarily constructed and refined through expert evaluations and Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) testing, resulting in an optimized questionnaire consisting of 57 items. A formal survey was conducted with 335 valid samples, yielding a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.914, which indicates exceptionally high internal consistency. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value reached 0.972, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant, confirming the suitability of the data for factor analysis. The

results of the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) showed a good model fit, with $\chi^2/df = 1.274$, and fit indices such as GFI, CFI, and IFI all exceeding 0.9. Both RMSEA and RMR were controlled at 0.026, indicating a robust model structure. Among the latent constructs—Perceived Organizational Support (POS), Career Development Potential (CDP), Teaching Autonomy (TAY), Pay Equity (PEY), and Sense of Achievement in Work (SAW)—the standardized factor loadings of most items exceeded 0.7. Composite Reliability (CR) values were mostly above 0.6, and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for most constructs were greater than 0.5, demonstrating strong convergent validity. The discriminant validity tests met the Fornell-Larcker criteria, with the square root of each dimension's AVE being greater than its correlations with other variables, indicating clear structural boundaries and no significant overlaps among factors. The correlation matrix further confirmed statistically significant positive relationships among variables, especially within the same dimension, reflecting strong construct validity of the scale.

The propose guidelines for enhancing the professional identity of young teachers in private universities in Shandong Province: To gain an in-depth understanding of the current situation and core challenges faced by young teachers in the process of constructing their professional identity in private universities across Shandong, the research team conducted focus group discussions. A total of nine participants were selected for the discussion, including young teachers from various private universities, academic administrators (such as department heads and academic deans), and higher education experts with long-term engagement in the field.

Establishing a systematic organizational support mechanism to strengthen young teachers' sense of belonging and recognition: Enhancing perceived organizational support involves more than providing sufficient resources; it requires emotional care, institutional responsiveness, and structural consideration. By ensuring access to essential teaching resources, responding to practical needs, offering emotional understanding, and assisting in resolving work-related challenges, institutions foster a trusting and supportive atmosphere. As university structures become increasingly complex, it is vital to respect

individual roles, value teacher feedback, promote participation in institutional decision-making, and implement reward systems that enhance collective cohesion. Incorporating a positive institutional vision and organizing regular psychological support activities further contributes to building a more humane, inclusive academic environment that reinforces professional identity.

Developing multidimensional career development pathways to stimulate young teachers' growth motivation and confidence: Strengthening career development potential requires a multi-tiered institutional framework focusing on promotion systems, professional development mechanisms, and personalized growth trajectories. Clear pathways for advancement, job rotation programs, one-on-one career mentoring, and external academic exchange opportunities contribute to expanding teachers' competencies and professional outlook. Career evaluation and feedback mechanisms help align individual efforts with organizational objectives while assigning challenging tasks encourages goal orientation and personal growth. Supporting both vertical promotion and lateral mobility allows teachers to explore diversified roles, and enhances their long-term competitiveness in the academic field, backed by a strategic and responsive institutional foundation.

Expanding teaching autonomy to foster innovation and educational enthusiasm in a supportive academic environment: Enhancing teaching autonomy plays a vital role in cultivating professional identity among young educators. Providing the freedom to determine course content, set instructional goals, select materials, and adopt pedagogical strategies enables teachers to exercise professional judgment and innovation. In the context of increasingly regulated academic environments, reducing unnecessary administrative intervention and respecting individual teaching styles fosters academic freedom. Encouraging educators to adjust their methods based on student needs and explore topics aligned with their research interests strengthens their agency. Recognizing and rewarding course innovation as part of performance assessments further motivates educators to engage in high-quality, meaningful teaching practices.

Advancing pay equity by constructing a rational, transparent, and performance-linked compensation system: A fair and performance-driven salary structure is fundamental to enhancing organizational commitment and professional identity among young teachers. Ensuring alignment between responsibilities, work intensity, and remuneration supports institutional harmony and employee motivation. Clear and transparent salary adjustment processes, equal pay for equal work, and the elimination of gender-based wage gaps are necessary to promote trust and accountability. Providing industry benchmarks, linking pay increases to years of service, and offering additional bonuses for outstanding staff contribute to incentive-based recognition. Furthermore, balancing internal salary structures during external recruitment and conducting regular compensation satisfaction surveys help maintain fairness and long-term workforce stability.

Reinforcing achievement mechanisms through multi-dimensional feedback to enhance young teachers' sense of professional value: Cultivating a strong sense of achievement depends not only on institutional recognition but also on teachers' ability to meet self-defined goals and experience growth through daily work. Public acknowledgment of achievements, praise from peers and leaders, and tangible results from problem-solving contribute to professional confidence and motivation. Encouraging teachers to engage in purposeful and challenging tasks allows them to gain influence within the institution and see their outputs adopted by others. Positive and timely feedback from leadership reinforces these experiences, helping to establish a lasting emotional connection between teachers and their institutions while promoting deeper professional identity development.

The study conducted an in-depth exploration into the multifaceted nature of professional identity among young faculty members in private universities across Shandong Province, utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods to construct a comprehensive and empirically grounded framework. Through literature analysis, key informant interviews, and a large-scale questionnaire survey, five core dimensions were identified—perceived organizational support, career development potential, teaching autonomy, pay equity, and sense of

achievement in work. Each dimension was rigorously validated using confirmatory factor analysis, which demonstrated the model's sound structural integrity and internal consistency. Notably, the measurement tool achieved a Cronbach's alpha of 0.914, a KMO value of 0.972, and fit indices exceeding the recommended thresholds, confirming the robustness and reliability of the research model. The interviews and focus group discussions reinforced the quantitative findings, emphasizing that the formation of professional identity is closely tied to factors such as institutional responsiveness, growth opportunities, freedom in teaching practice, fair compensation, and meaningful recognition. Participants consistently pointed to the importance of a supportive and participatory organizational culture that values emotional and intellectual contributions while providing structural mechanisms for advancement and autonomy. Building on the empirical results, the study proposed five targeted guidelines aligned with each dimension of professional identity enhancement. These guidelines include establishing responsive support systems that prioritize emotional care and inclusive communication, developing clear and multidimensional promotion pathways, expanding academic freedom to stimulate innovation and autonomy, constructing equitable and transparent compensation structures, and reinforcing teachers' sense of value through multi-channel feedback and recognition. The integration of these strategies offers not only practical solutions for current institutional challenges but also a theoretical foundation for future research and policy development in higher education.

Discussions

Theoretical literature reinforces these observations. Chen Jie (2013) and Sun Baoying (2020) assert that organizational support is not merely a managerial tool but a form of psychological empowerment that serves as a foundational mechanism for professional identity formation. Ma Cuiping (2024) further argues that only when teachers feel emotionally understood and institutionally supported can they truly integrate their personal and professional roles, leading to a stable and enduring sense of identity. Grattarola (2019) highlights that institution should establish two-way communication channels, emotional support initiatives, and recognition systems to cultivate a positive and growth-oriented academic culture. Certain items received relatively lower scores, such as “communicates positive

development visions” (POS11, $M=3.57$, $SD=0.869$) and “organizes regular psychological support activities” (POS10, $M=3.45$, $SD=0.877$). These results suggest a lack of resonance among teachers regarding the institution’s strategic narratives and an underdeveloped system for emotional care. This discrepancy implies that while practical support may be in place, emotional and cultural alignment remains insufficient, potentially leading to a mismatch between functional support and affective recognition. These findings suggest that the professional identity of young teachers is significantly shaped by their perceptions and experiences of organizational support. To fully activate their professional motivation and foster long-term commitment, institutions must develop human-centered support systems that integrate structural security, value recognition, and psychological empowerment in a synergistic manner. Interview data reinforce these findings. Eight out of nine participants confirmed that their institutions offered promotion pathways, training opportunities, and research support mechanisms such as “one-on-one career counseling” (CDP6), which they found valuable for career guidance and capacity building. Many emphasized that “clarity of institutional policies, fairness in evaluation mechanisms, and transparency in promotion criteria” are crucial to the sustainability of their professional identity. A professor from a university’s art department noted, “The recent implementation of job rotation mechanisms and academic lecture programs has allowed me to grow in teaching, research, and administration, significantly boosting my professional confidence.” Supporting literature provides additional insight. Srdan (2013) and Kevin Mak (2019), through their respective studies on career structure and performance feedback, conclude that the formation of professional identity is heavily influenced by the visibility of growth pathways and the rhythm of professional development. Xiang Shiqiang (2023) emphasizes that transparency in career progression, the challenge level of assigned tasks, and the extent of institutional support is critical to transforming mere “job adaptation” into deep “role identity.” Despite the generally favorable scores, certain indicators such as “job rotation to improve comprehensive ability” (CDP5, $M=3.54$, $SD=0.976$) and “availability of horizontal mobility channels” (CDP11, $M=3.87$, $SD=1.044$) scored comparatively lower. This suggests that private universities still face challenges in implementing diversified career paths and flexible mobility options. Some young teachers may experience uncertainty due to a reliance on

linear promotion systems or perceive a lack of breadth and adaptability in their development options. To address this, institutions should strengthen the elasticity of career planning systems and enrich the development ecosystem through mechanisms such as incentive-based training, constructive feedback, rotational assignments, and capability empowerment programs. This will not only bolster professional growth trajectories but also enhance teachers' internalized role identity and long-term commitment. These findings illustrate that young teachers' professional identity is profoundly influenced by their trust in institutional development systems and their access to career-building opportunities. A multidimensional and tiered framework for career development is essential for facilitating personal advancement while reinforcing teachers' engagement with their professional roles. In-depth interviews with nine key informants reveal that over 80% of respondents affirm their considerable freedom in designing lesson plans, selecting materials, and managing course pacing. Most believe that this “de-administratized, academically respectful” management style stimulates their educational enthusiasm and academic creativity. One teacher with administrative experience remarked, “I’m able to tailor my teaching rhythm according to students’ abilities and semester progress, and this level of trust motivates me to invest more energy into optimizing my courses.”

Interviews revealed dissatisfaction among some young faculty members regarding discrepancies such as “equal work, unequal pay.” Many cited concerns about subjectivity and opacity in salary allocation, particularly in the absence of clear performance benchmarks and promotion standards, which undermine trust and organizational commitment. Some teachers also noted that, despite heavy teaching loads, they did not receive commensurate recognition or bonuses, fostering a psychological dissonance wherein “working harder does not necessarily yield greater rewards.” These concerns are validated in the literature. Wang Tao (2022) and Liu Peng (2023) emphasize that pay equity is not solely about absolute income but depends on whether institutional structures are rational, evaluation processes are transparent, and outcomes are predictable. Yang Yan (2020) warns that significant disparities between the compensation of internal faculty and external hires can severely damage existing staff’s confidence and sense of belonging. Ni Jing (2017), focusing on performance-based incentives,

advocates for a meritocratic bonus system that aligns rewards with actual contributions and counters egalitarianism in distribution.

New Knowledges

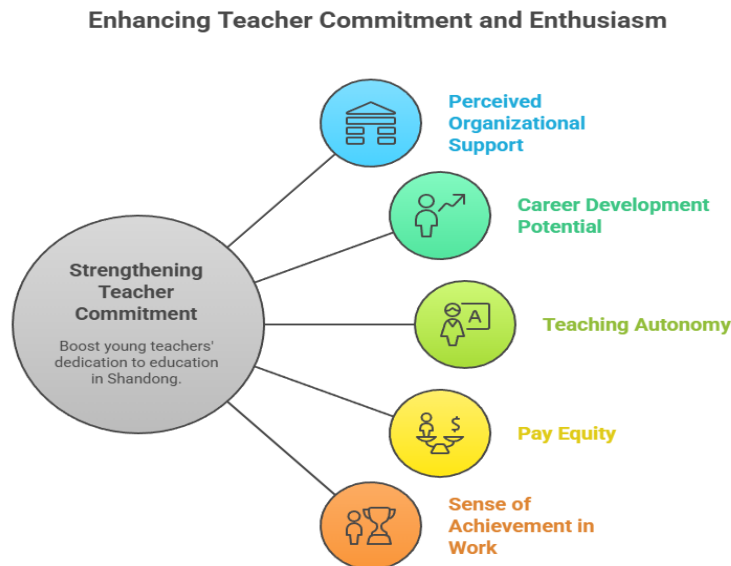


Figure 1: Young teachers' professional commitment and enthusiasm for education.

Conclusions

This document explores the multifaceted components that shape the professional identity of young teachers in Shandong Province. It identifies five key dimensions: Perceived Organizational Support (POS), Career Development Potential (CDP), Teaching Autonomy (TAY), Pay Equity (PEY), and Sense of Achievement in Work (SAW). The findings indicate that these factors significantly and positively influence the overall professional identity of educators. Furthermore, it highlights the intricate relationships among these components, offering valuable insights for university administrators seeking to enhance the professional commitment and enthusiasm of young teachers.

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