A Survey on the Professional Identity of English Teachers in Private Colleges of Hubei Province

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Abstract. In this research, a survey was conducted to analyze the status quo of the professional identity of English teachers in private colleges of Hubei. A mixed method of questionnaires and in-depth interview was designed to collect pertinent information. The researchers ascertained the four dimensions of teacher professional identity (TPI), and undertook a qualitative analysis of the data collected in the survey and then analyzed the influence of variables, such as gender, teaching length, academic degree and professional title upon TPI. It was found that teaching length was the major influencing factor. The findings of this research will serve as a theoretical guidance for drawing up the motivating mechanism to promote the professional identity of English teachers in private colleges of Hubei.

Introduction

Teachers’ education originated in the United States in the late 1960s, and prospered in Europe in 1980s. It has become a popular research topic worldwide today.

Studies on teacher professional development (TPD) at home and abroad confirmed that, without teachers’ active participation, any education reform was unlikely to succeed. In the past, however, the policy making of TPD emphasized what teachers should do to promote students’ development and social advances rather than to meet their own needs, which caused the inadequate progress of TPD.

As the teachers in private colleges in Hubei are generally young, they have to develop in professional knowledge and teaching skills particularly.

From the perspective of how teachers’ inner factors affect their professional identity, this research took private college English teachers in Hubei as subjects to investigate teachers’ own intrinsic demands and understandings of professional development, analyze the internal cause of TPD inefficiency, and accordingly construct the motivating mechanism.

1. Research Design

1.1 Research questions

In this research, the concept of “teacher professional development (TPD)” refers to activities that help to boost a person’s formal experience, pedagogical skills, subject-matter knowledge, teaching expertise, individual satisfaction and other characteristics as a teacher.

TPD should be teacher-oriented, which means teachers have to be active in this process. A strong sense of professional identity has positive significance to the development of teachers’ professional skills.

1.2 Objectives of the research

This research is to answer the following questions: 1) What is the status quo of professional identity of English teachers in private colleges of Hubei; 2) What are the factors that influence the sense of professional identity of English teachers? 3) Is there significant difference between these factors in influencing the dimensions of TPI?
The results of this research are to provide theoretical guidance for drawing up the motivating mechanism to promote the professional identity of English teachers in private colleges of Hubei.

1.3 Dimensions of the research

To achieve these objectives, the researchers must determine the structure of TPI, as well as its influencing factors.

Scholars often have different focuses when they define TPI. There are two main perspectives: one focuses on the internal psychological process or psychological components of teachers; the other focuses on the external aspects of teachers’ sense of professional identity.

This research picks the English teachers in private colleges of Hubei as subjects. This group has a more consistent tendency in professional identity. Therefore, with regards to the research results of previous studies, the researchers ascertained the following four dimensions of TPI:

1) Professional identity in emotion. It is about teachers’ sense of belonging and pride in the profession which reflects teachers’ positive feelings and experience of their relationship with their own profession.

2) Professional identity in environment. It refers to teachers’ perception, understanding or evaluation of their work environment and social status. It includes three levels—macro environment, medium environment and micro environment.

3) Professional identity in development. It refers to teachers’ understanding and evaluation of improving teaching ability and research ability, as well as self-motivated desire, inclination or investment to promote the development of teaching and research ability.

4) Professional identity in devotion. It refers to the willingness, inclination and degree of teachers’ active participation in teaching practice. It shows whether teachers are willing to invest in work and how to behave at work.

TPI is the unity of being a “man” and a “teacher”. It is influenced by both macro factors such as social values and individual factors such as cognition, attitude and personal values. The variables identified in this research were objective factors, including gender, age, teaching length, academic degree, professional title, teaching field, salary etc.

1.4 Research design

Questionnaires. Based on current theories of TPD and investigating model of professional identity, the researchers designed a questionnaire and distributed it among 130 English teachers from 15 private colleges in Hubei. 120 questionnaires were valid and analyzed. Table 1 is the detailed information of the subjects.

Table 1. Information of the Subjects.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Teaching Field</th>
<th>Professional Title</th>
<th>Academic Degree</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>College English</td>
<td>English Major</td>
<td>Associate Professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The questionnaire included questions and statements centered on the four dimensions of TPI discussed above. It was designed according to Likert Scale, with strongly disagree accounting for 1 score, disagree 2 scores, unclear 3 scores, agree 4 scores and strongly agree 5 scores. The questionnaires were delivered by emails and the data were computed by SPSS.

Interview. Among the 120 subjects, 15 teachers were picked up to conduct the in-depth interview. Table 2 provides the detailed information of the interviewees. Major questions included were: 1) How to be a qualified college English teacher? 2) Troubles college English teachers have in doing research work. 3) How to promote teaching competence under the new situation of this era? 4) Roles college English teachers are playing and ways to adapt to the changes in their roles.
Table 2. Information of the Interviewees.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Teaching Field</th>
<th>Professional Title</th>
<th>Academic Degree</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>English College</td>
<td>Associate Professor</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>≤30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>English Major</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>30-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the data collected in the questionnaires and interview, the researchers summarized the status quo of English teachers’ professional identity and found out the existing problems and the reasons behind.

2. Results and Discussion

2.1 Status quo of the professional identity of English teachers in Hubei private colleges

Table 3 presents the results of the survey. It reflected that the overall level of the professional identity was unsatisfactory. Assuming the four dimensions weigh the same, the mean would be 3.66 (M=3.66), lower than 4, which shows there is a broad space for development in the professional identity of English teachers in Hubei private colleges and this may explain the high turnover of these teachers.

Table 3. Results of the Questionnaires.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional Identity in Emotion</th>
<th>Professional Identity in Environment</th>
<th>Professional Identity in Development</th>
<th>Professional Identity in Devotion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean 3.27</td>
<td>Mean 3.21</td>
<td>Mean 3.72</td>
<td>Mean 4.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std. Deviation 0.63</td>
<td>Std. Deviation 0.71</td>
<td>Std. Deviation 0.89</td>
<td>Std. Deviation 0.41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Teachers’ sense of professional identity with the environment was at a relatively low level. On the one hand, private colleges first came into being only 20 years ago and their social value is not fully recognized by the general public. Compared with teachers from public universities, English teachers in private colleges are in a disadvantageous position in policy support, salary, teaching and research conditions and development opportunities. On the other hand, most subjects of this research were college English teachers, whose sense of belonging was proved to be lower than that of teachers teaching English majors due to the fact that college English is a public course rather than a professional course. In a word, that teachers’ satisfaction with the environment is low will have a negative impact on the professional identity level, and will in due course interfere with teachers’ professional development.

Teachers’ professional identity in emotion is not high either. As the private colleges are civilian-sponsored enterprises, private college teachers are more like employees than educators. Besides, private college students’ English level is low, which is prone to cause troubles and frustration in teaching activities. Pressure from schools, families and research work also makes the teachers lose confidence in teaching, and thus easier to quit.

The mean of professional identity in development is still less than 4. English teachers are engaged in both education and academic researches. The professional development of teachers involves the improvement of both teaching competence and research ability. But private colleges emphasize teaching and neglect research work. Although the majority of teachers are young and energetic and willing to improve themselves, they lack financial support and guidance. This results in the dilemma that the teachers progress slowly in research ability and professional title.

Professional identity in devotion is the highest in the four dimensions. Although English teachers in private colleges have a low degree of satisfaction with the environment and their development, most of them are still willing to devote, showing their professional ethics. This result reflects that private college English teachers have a relatively high enthusiasm and initiative for their work, and a good development potential.
2.2 Teaching length and TPI

Among private college English teachers, females account for the vast majority. Most of them have a master’s degree and only a small part have senior titles. Therefore, variables such as gender, academic degree and professional title did not generate considerable difference in TPI and thus will not be discussed. The following part will be focused on the effect of teaching length on TPI.

Private college English teachers are basically under the age of 40. Most of them have a teaching length of less than 15 years. Therefore, the teachers investigated will be put into 3 groups according to their teaching length: less than 4 years, 5-10 years and more than 11 years.

Table 4. TPI of Teachers with Different Teaching Length.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional Identity</th>
<th>Emotion</th>
<th>Environment</th>
<th>Development</th>
<th>Devotion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>≤ 4 years</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>4.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-10 years</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>4.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥ 11 years</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>4.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Novice teachers with less than 4-year teaching experience are faced with pressure from students and themselves. Rich experience and students’ recognition takes time. These teachers are basically assistant lecturer. Although they lack teaching experience, their professional identity is the highest according to the data obtained from this research. With the growth of teaching length, TPI will show a downward trend. Relevant studies also showed that novice teachers had a high work enthusiasm and were willing to accept new ideas, while experienced teachers often showed a downward trend with TPI due to energy burnout.

TPI in devotion has the highest mean among the four dimensions but the lowest standard deviation. And among groups of teachers with different teaching length, TPI in devotion has the smallest divergence, which confirms the above conclusion that the majority of teachers in private colleges have high work enthusiasm and ethics. With the growth of teaching length, more and more teachers make progress in professional title, and therefore show a downward trend in satisfaction with their work environment.

Conclusion

This research found that English teachers in private colleges in Hubei showed a falling sense of professional identity in devotion, development, emotion and environment. In terms of variables, the influence of teaching length was most obvious—TPI gradually decreased with the increasing of teaching length.

It is suggested that due attention must be paid to improving teachers’ work environment in order to improve their TPI level. At the same time, private colleges should balance teaching and research work, create good conditions for teachers to improve their research ability and draw up a positive motivating mechanism. In terms of work burnout and the negative influence of teaching length, private colleges and teachers should seek to strengthen work initiative and form the habit of lifelong learning. Private colleges should give teachers proper and timely assistance and training based on the characteristics of teachers in different stages of development, to explore and maximize teachers’ potentials, and in the long run, promote the level of English teaching in China.

Acknowledgement

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References


