

Factors Affecting Rural Novice English Teachers' Identity

Ruijun Yang^{1,2}, Mazura Mastura Muhammad¹, Liya Yang²

¹Faculty of Languages and Communications, Sultan Idris Education University, Tanjong

Malim, Malaysia, ²Faculty of Foreign Language, Heze University, Heze, China

Email: yangruijunhz@163.com

To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i8/22518>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i8/22518

Published Date: 20 August 2024

Abstract

This study discusses the identity of novice rural English teachers based on socio-cultural and learning communities theories. The questionnaire is used to investigate the identity of novice English teachers in seven provinces in the western development plan of China. The novice teachers are categorized into three groups according to their growth backgrounds, and finally six teachers are selected to be interviewed. The teaching year of the new generation rural novice English teachers is from zero to six years. After the completion of the data collection, the study adopts the Nvivo 12 to analyze the interview data. Through the analysis, the identity level of the new generation rural novice English teachers, the negative and positive factors affecting their identity are analyzed and exposed. Finally, a path to enhance their identity level is proposed.

Keywords: Identity, Factors, Solutions.

Introduction

At present, the problem of rural teacher attrition is still serious, and the quality of rural education still needs to be improved. This study begins with the teacher's identity problem and explores the factors affecting the identity of rural novice English teachers. The study helps to understand the sense of professional commitment of rural teachers and the causes for the loss of rural teachers. In addition, understanding the factors affecting rural teachers' identity can help the relevant departments to understand the concerns of rural teachers, thus helping to solve their urgent concerns. In this way, the living and working environment of rural teachers can be effectively improved.

The object of this study is rural novice English teachers. The interview outlines used in this study are Xunyang's high school English teacher identity interview outline and Qi Mingjun's college English novice teacher identity interview outline. According to the different growth backgrounds of novice teachers, six teachers are selected as subjects for this interview. They are all rural novice English teachers. They were born in the 90's and their working years are

within 0-6 years and not more than six years. The six teachers selected for this study are categorized into three main groups based on their growth backgrounds; the first category was born in rural areas and grew up in rural areas. The second category was born in the rural area grew up in the city but had a close relationship with rural life. The third category was born and raised in the city. These three types of novice teachers cover almost all of the rural novice teachers' growth background.

Identity is closely related to the "I" in psychology, which is the process of self-recognition. It is the process of self-recognition, and Gee (2000), argues that identity is related to the environment, and that identity changes with the environment. Wenger (1998), states that our understanding of identity influences our behavior. Therefore, identity is related to behavior and the construction of identity includes how I perceive others, how I am perceived by others in mutual cooperation, and how I understand myself (Johnson, 2003).

Teacher identity refers to how teachers view themselves as teachers. This perspective emphasizes teachers' ideals and values (Mayer, 1999). Teacher identity is constantly evolving. Teachers develop their identity of self through their teaching practice activities. Identity refers to an individual's perception and understanding of the self and the individual's relationship with others in general (Mingjun 2019). There is a wealth of research on identity. Akkerman and Meijer (2011), concluded that teachers' perceptions of self-identity are complex, continuous and unconnected, and individual and social, after studying teachers' identity from the perspective of dialogue. Xiaoying (2017), found that there was a significant correlation between teacher identity and teacher attrition have a causal relationship after studying preschool teachers' identity. Some researchers focus on the factors affecting teachers' identity. They studied teachers' identity in terms of environment, teaching reform, and professional competence. Some scholars focus on the influence of external factors on teacher identity (Varghese et al., 2005). For example, teachers' professional development environment also affects teachers' identity (Wang, 2011). There are some studies on teacher identity from post-structuralism. They believe that teacher identity is related to teachers' emotional factors. Teachers' beliefs and values have a direct impact on teachers' practice of commitment (Daya, Elliot & Kingtona, 2005). Most of the current research on identity uses case study. Oruc (2013), developed a detailed description of the identity process of novice teachers. Xu (2010), used a narrative method to explore the factors affecting the identity construction of novice teachers. Currently, the research on teacher identity in China mainly focuses on secondary schools and universities, and there are fewer studies on rural novice English teachers. Due to the limitations of economic conditions and the number of students, the current schools established in the countryside are mainly elementary school. Therefore, the novice rural teachers in this study are teachers in rural primary schools.

Methodology

This study examines the identity of novice rural English teachers based on sociocultural theory and learning community theory. Sociocultural theory was first proposed by Vygotsky in 1987. It emphasizes the influence of the environment on the development of human cognition and heart. Sociocultural theory discusses the course of development of the human mind. It argues that the human mind is constantly developing and changing under the influence of environment and education. During social activities, the individual's cognition and intelligence continue to improve (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). In terms of individual development, the higher

psychological development of human beings originates from the society and continues to evolve through interactions with the people around them. Learning community theory refers to a group of individuals share common concerns and interests, and they achieve professional development through exchanges (Wenger, 2011). The characteristics of teacher learning community is cooperation and interaction (Westheimer, 1999). Learning community refers to teachers in the community continuously improve their teaching skills by learning from each other and cooperating with each other (Lee, 2020). In the study, learning community of teachers refers to teachers in the learning community continuously improve their professional skills and it also includes the interpersonal relationships formed by teachers and the open learning environment formed by its members. In short, individuals form their perceptions of identity under the influence of the community's environment.

Subjects

The respondents of the survey are rural novice English teachers within six years. Combined with the age of entry and years of education, this group of novice teachers was born between 1990-1999, with an age structure between 21-35 years old, and most of them have a bachelor's degree. The subjects of this study were novice English teachers teaching in rural elementary school. Due to the economic level of the villages, there are only elementary school in villages.

Instrument

The interview outline for high school English teachers by Xunyang and the interview outline for novice college English teachers by Qi Mingjun are used in this study. The interview outline focuses on the three dimensions of self-perception, the influence of the social environment on teachers, and the influence of the work environment on teachers. Since this study is about novice English teachers and questions about novice teachers are missing in Xunyang's interview outline, the interview outline of this study incorporates some questions about novice teachers from Qi Mingjun's interview outline.

Data Analysis

Based on the grounded theory, the interview data is analysed. The grounded theory Grounded theory is a common method used in qualitative research, in which phenomena are analyzed and organized to produce results through inductive methods. The coding process of grounded theory is usually divided into three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Firstly, open coding is an analytical work by scrutinizing the phenomena in order to name and classify them. That is, it is the process of analyzing and reviewing the data and conceptualizing them inductively and comparatively. It aims to identify conceptual categories from the data, name the categories to determine their attributes and dimensions, and then name and categorize the phenomenon. The second step is axial coding. It is a complex process of deduction and induction, linking approximate codes together by means of constant comparison. Its main task is to select and construct the content of the main categories and to link the main conceptual categories with the secondary ones in order to reorganize the data. The third step is selective coding. Selective coding refers to the systematic analysis of all the conceptual attributes found after the selection of a "core attribute". The analysis constantly focused on those related to the core attributes of the code number. The core category must repeatedly prove to be overarching in comparisons with other categories, encompassing the greatest number of findings within a broader theoretical context.

The data analysis software in the study is Nvivo12. The analysis process mainly consists of open coding, spindle coding and selective coding. The factors affecting teacher identity is identified through the three steps. Open coding means that the researcher needs to meticulously decompose, compare and name the collected textual materials, break up the interview textual materials according to certain coding principles, extract the statements related to the research topic from them, name them in appropriate words to form concepts, and then classify and summarize the extracted concepts with new categories to determine the categories. Therefore, the steps of open coding usually contain three parts: First, conceptualization. The researcher needs to extract the information in the original interview text first break it into independent sentences, then extract the elements related to the research question from the sentences, name the elements in plain language, and form concepts. Second, concept categorization. The researcher needs to optimize and classify the concepts formed in the first step, merge the concepts with the same meaning, delete the irrelevant concepts, and then cluster the concepts reflecting the same genus to form the concept clusters. Third, the researcher needs to abstract the concept clusters produced in the second step to name the concepts and form the categories. In this study, open coding is completed by objectively labeling and coding the collected interview texts through Nvivo 12. The open coding yields a total of 324 initial concepts and 781 nodes. Then, spindle coding. It is a higher level of classification, comparison and generalization of the results of open coding to extract main categories. The researcher has to carefully analyze and compare the concepts and categories extracted from open coding, analyze the logical relationships behind the categories, extract features and dimensions, and form the main categories. A total of 324 initial concepts and 35 initial categories were obtained from the open coding in this study, on the basis of which the researcher used the principal axis coding logic to carry out a higher level of abstraction, resulting in a total of ten main categories. Finally, Selective coding. it is the process of summarizing the relationships of the main categories using more abstract dimensions, with the aim of uncovering the core categories of the study and constructing a complete story line that provides an in-depth explanation of the research question. Through the three levels of coding, factors affecting the identity of novice English teachers are identified: socio-environment factors; occupational environment factors; and professional growth factors.

Results

Factors Affecting the Identity Level

a. Socio-environment Factors

Through coding, it is found that the influence of social environment on novice rural English teachers mainly includes three aspects: social evaluation, social bias and social status. First of all, social evaluation is mainly manifested in the evaluation of teachers' image and teaching ability in social activities. In social activities, people often discriminate and prejudice against the teachers' group because of individual teachers' inappropriate. This is related to the long-standing publicity of the image of teachers in Chinese society. The image of the teacher has been deeply rooted in people's minds, leading to high expectations of teachers. These high expectations have led to accusations and attacks on the teaching profession in the event of negative news. Due to the stereotyped image of rural teachers, the society holds prejudice against the teaching ability of rural teachers. They generally believe that rural teachers are less capable of teaching.

Secondly, social bias. Social bias is mainly manifested in job evaluation bias and behavioral cognitive bias. In social activities, teachers are regarded as a high-income and low-paying profession. Teachers' hard work is not seen, and the society generally holds prejudice against teachers. Behavioral cognitive bias refers to the excessively high standard of behavior demanded by the society for teachers, and this bias seriously affects the normal life of teachers. Many teachers hide their status as teachers in their daily lives, believing that their status as teachers is a burden to them and has a negative impact on their normal lives. The following is the example of the interview.

Thirdly, social status. Most of the teachers interviewed consider their social status to be low. The current society has a hostile and questioning attitude towards teachers. Teachers interviewed believe that they are often disrespected in their work in the villages, and they believe that teachers are a vulnerable group in society, and when they are treated unfairly, they cannot fight back and have to suffer in silence. Rural teachers believe that teachers are much less respected today than teachers are in the past.

b. Occupational Environment Factors

Occupational Environment refers to work environment in the school. It includes the content of teachers' work, intensity assessment requirements, working time arrangements, work autonomy, interpersonal relationships in the workplace, student status, training and development opportunities (Cazes, Hijzen & Martin, 2015). Through analysis, it is found that organizational environmental factors includes five perspectives: organizational situations; professional values; interpersonal relationships; professional emotions; and work environment.

Firstly, organizational situations. Owing to the low economic level of the villages, the living and working environment in most village schools is not good. Most rural teachers eat at school, and most schools provide teachers with a more modest dining environment. Due to the development of China's cities, most of the teachers interviewed live in cities, while rural primary schools are generally located in more remote areas. As a result, the teachers interviewed consider the location of the school to be an inconvenience in their daily lives, and the teachers interviewed have a tendency to leave their jobs. The teaching equipment of rural schools is in Teaching equipment in rural elementary school is relatively outdated and slow to be updated, which seriously affects the quality of teaching of rural teachers. Parental cooperation is closely related to teaching effectiveness. Most of the rural students are left-behind children whose parents go to work in the city and they live with their grandparents and other old people. Elderly people are unable to take up the task of cooperating with teachers in education. In addition, the cultural level of rural parents is generally low, and they tend to be hostile to teachers, so conflicts between teachers and parents are more common. Rural students are less cooperative with their teachers due to the limitations of their home environment. The cognitive level of rural students is also lower.

Secondly, professional values. The teachers interviewed strictly adhere to the Professional Code of Ethics and express strong professional beliefs. Novice teachers have a strong commitment to teaching, care for their students, and want to make a difference in the lives of rural students through their influence.

Thirdly, interpersonal relationship. It includes teacher-student relationships, parent-teacher relationships, coworker relationships, and superior-subordinate relationships. The interviewed teachers and students maintain a more harmonious relationship. Teachers are conscientious and responsible, and students are grateful and concerned about their teachers. The relationship between parents and teachers is more complicated. Some parents and teachers have a good relationship, while most have a tense relationship with teachers, with conflicts occurring from time to time. The superior-subordinate relationships of rural teachers are more complicated. Some school leaders defend the interests of teachers in parent-teacher conflicts, while others ignore the feelings of teachers and adopt a negative attitude, which greatly dampens teachers' enthusiasm for work.

Fourthly, coworker relationships. Most of the teachers interviewed believe that they have better relationships with their coworkers, and some believe that coworker relationships are closely related to the competence of school leaders. Rural teachers believe that they receive care and concern from their colleagues at work and experience a sense of well-being in a group. Some teachers think that their coworker relationships are not harmonious due to improper guidance from leaders.

Fifthly, superior and subordinate relationships. The teachers interviewed generally consider their relationships with their superior and subordinate relationship to be more harmonious. Some teachers express their dissatisfaction with this relationship. Sixthly, professional emotions. Most of the teachers interviewed feel they lack a sense of belonging and well-being in rural elementary school. Novice teachers perceive some career anxiety at the beginning of their careers.

Seventhly, work environment. Interviews reveal that most teachers consider their workload normal. Their non-teaching workload is heavier. These non-teaching tasks seriously affect the teachers' normal workload. Teachers are more satisfied with their current salary level and believe that they do not have welfare. In terms of title promotions, teachers think they are under more pressure.

c. Professional Growth Factors

Through codings, it is found that professional growth factors consist of internal and external factors. Firstly, Internal factors. It includes personal initiative and self-growth awareness. Most of the interviewed teachers have the initiative to learn, and will take the initiative to ask for advice from experienced teachers or actively discuss the confusion in teaching with colleagues in their daily work. In terms of self-growth, most teachers hope to improve their professionalism and teaching ability through learning. Secondly, external factors. It includes entry support, teaching training, teaching and research activities and teaching reform training. Most of the teachers interviewed express the view that they do not have entry support from the school at the beginning of their career, and therefore they have a strong sense of anxiety about being a newcomer. Most of the schools provide teachers with various learning and exchange opportunities, and conduct some teaching training regularly. Due to the limitation of the conditions, most of the schools do not have teaching and research activities, and the teachers are unable to seek help from their peers in a prompt way. Most teachers believe that the current teaching reform training does not meet the actual situation of rural elementary school. Many new teaching methods are difficult to implement.

Identity Level*a. Identity Level in Social Environment*

Low social evaluation, severe social prejudice and declining social status have a negative impact on teachers' identity. Most of the teachers have been treated unfairly in their social activities, and they lack a sense of honor and pride as teachers, believing that the teaching profession has a low social status and is discriminated against by the society. Therefore, the social environment has a negative impact on teachers' identity level.

b. Identity Level in Occupational Environment

Since the objective conditions in rural schools are generally poor, this is bound to cause dissatisfaction among teachers. In addition, the remoteness of rural elementary school triggers a tendency for teachers to leave. Outdated teaching equipment affects the effectiveness of teaching. The poor cooperation between parents and students and the low cognitive level of students in rural elementary school all affect the teaching effect, and the teachers' sense of achievement is low. In short, the organizational situation has a negative impact on the level of teachers' identity. Rural teachers strictly abide by the professional code of ethics for teachers and have strong professional beliefs. Therefore, strong professional values had a positive impact on teachers' identity. The teacher-student relationship of novice teachers is harmonious, teacher-parent relationship is tense and there are conflicts from time to time. Colleague relationship of the interviewed teachers is in a better state. Some teachers expressed dissatisfaction with superior-subordinate relationship. In conclusion, harmonious relationship positively affects the level of identity and vice versa.

c. Identity Level in Professional Growth

The teachers interviewed have a personal initiative to learn and improve their professional competence. The initiative to learn and think definitely has a positive impact on teacher identity level. Therefore, internal factors have a positive effect on the identity level. Most of the interviewed teachers have strong self-growth awareness, they have their own learning direction, understand their own weaknesses and strive to improve their teaching ability and professionalism. These have a negative effect on the identity level. Most of the schools provide various kinds of teaching training to the teachers, which help the novice teachers to improve their teaching skills quickly. This has a positive impact on teachers' identity. Most schools do not have the teaching and research activities due to the constraints of rural teaching conditions, and novice English teachers cannot get help when they encounter problems. This is bound to have a negative impact on teachers' identity level. Most of the teachers think that teaching reform is not in line with the reality of teaching of rural primary school. Therefore teaching reform has a negative impact on teachers' identity level.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the factor analysis of identity level, this study gives solutions to enhance the identity level of teachers.

a. Strengthening Publicity for Teachers

The society increases the publicity for teachers' work, so that the public can have a correct perception of teachers. For example, by increasing the number of open days in schools, parents can learn about the work of teachers, understand the hard work of teachers, and

reduce social prejudice against teachers. Open days can also improve communication between teachers and parents, thus reducing conflicts between the two.

b. Increasing Financial Support

At present, the hardware facilities of rural elementary school are generally poor, and the dining and accommodation environment of rural teachers is relatively simple. Increasing financial support in this area will improve the social conditions of teachers. Secondly, the teaching equipments in rural elementary school are backward, the state should provide special funds to speed up the updating of backward equipments, so as to ensure the realization of teaching effect.

c. Implementing Development Support Policies

Implementing entry support for novice teachers: Entry support is an important period for novice teachers to build up their sense of belonging and satisfaction. In view of the current situation of rural elementary school, establish a network learning and mutual support system to make teaching and research activities practicable. Formulate teaching reform programs in line with the reality of teaching in rural areas. Teaching reform training is an important way for rural teachers to improve their teaching level and accept new teaching ideas. Practical and feasible teaching reform programs are conducive to improving the teaching ability of rural teachers and their teaching effect, thus enhancing their sense of professional achievement.

References

- Akkerman, S. F., Meijer, P.C. (2011). A dialogical approach to conceptualizing teacher identity, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 27, 308-319.
- Beauchamp, C., & Thomas, L. (2009). Understanding teacher identity: An overview of issues in the literature and implications for teacher education. *Cambridge journal of education*, 2, 175-189.
- Beijaard, D., Meijer, P. C., Verloop, N. (2004). Reconsidering research on teachers' professional identity. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 20(2), 107–128.
- Cui, Z. J. (2018). The Dilemma and Way Out of Teacher Educator Identity, *Contemporary Education and Culture*, 3, 89-95.
- Farrell, S. C. (2012). Novice-service language teacher development: bridging the gap between preservice and in-service education and development. *TESOL Quarterly*, (46), 435-449.
- Gee, J. P. (2001). Identity as an analytic lens for research in education. *Review of Research in Education*, 25, 99–125.
- Qi, M. J., & Wang, X. M. (2017). The professional identity of novice college English teachers from the perspective of learning community: connotation, model and path. *Foreign Language World*, 6, 47-49.
- Zhu, X. Y. (2017). Research on the Relationship Between Preschool Teachers' Identity and Job Burnout. *Journal of Nanchang Normal University*, 6, 139-140.
- Johnston, B. (2003). Values in English language teaching. Malawah: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Karatas, P. & Karaman, A. C. (2013). Challenges faced by novice language teachers: support, identity and pedagogy in the initial years of teaching. *Educational Research Association*, 4, 10-23.
- Katz, L. G. Development stages of preschool teachers. *Elementary School Journal*, 1972, 73(1), 50-54.

- Lantolf, J. P. & Thorne, S. L. *Sociocultural Theory and the Genesis of Second Language Development* [M]. Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Li, S. Y. (2020). Analysis of the effect of school organizational culture and professional learning communities on teacher efficacy. *Integration of Education*, 206-217.
- Qi, M. J. (2019). *A study of professional identity of novice university English teachers in local general undergraduate colleges in China*. Shanghai International Studies University.
- Varghese, M., Morgan, B., Johnston, B., & Johnson, K. A. (2005). Theorizing language teacher identity: Three perspectives and beyond. *Journal of language, Identity, and Education*, 4(1), 21-44.
- Wang, Y. M. (2011). Teacher identity: crisis, causes and demands. *Education Guide: First Half of the Month*, (3), 4.
- Wenger, E. (1999). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. London, UK: Cambridge university press.