

# An Investigation of Professional Identity of Elementary Education Major Students in Normal Schools Based on Identity Theory

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**Abstract:** In the field of education, the professional identity of primary education students is of great significance to their future education practice and education quality improvement. Based on the identity theory, this study conducted an in-depth investigation of the professional identity of primary education students by using questionnaires, interviews and other methods. Through the analysis of data, explore the factors that affect their professional identity. Combined with the theoretical model of self-identity, the paper analyzes the causes and specific phenomena of four kinds of identity states of normal university students' professional identity. This study provides the theoretical basis and practical reference for improving the vocational identity of normal college students, which is helpful in promoting the sustainable development of primary education.

**Keywords:** Normal university students; Professional identity; Identity theory

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## 1. Question raising and research background

Teacher professional identity refers to the process of teachers' continuous development and growth in the field of education, and then gradually determining and confirming their role and the degree of identification of their specific profession<sup>[1]</sup>. For normal university students, it is a compulsory course from the status of prospective teachers to formal teachers, and it is also the inner driving force for normal university students to achieve self-growth and development. Normal university students' attitudes towards the teaching profession are related to their learning effect in school, the adequacy of pre-service preparation, and their future professional behavior<sup>[2]</sup>.

First of all, having a high teacher professional identity can greatly promote the cultivation and improvement of normal university students' professional skills. If normal students have a high degree of professional identity, it will be converted into internal motivation, prompting them to be more focused and emotionally involved

in learning professional skills <sup>[3]</sup>. Secondly, the higher professional identity of teachers can help normal students enhance their sense of occupation and responsibility. The sense of responsibility of teachers comes from the firm belief in the profession of teachers, the concept of education, and the deep understanding of the responsibility of education <sup>[4]</sup>. In addition, a higher professional identity of teachers can help normal students overcome difficulties and fear of difficulties, and thus achieve a long career. Teachers with a good and positive professional attitude can immerse themselves in the inner fun and happiness of education work, experience the sense of achievement and satisfaction brought by occupation, and obtain an inexhaustible source of stimulation for a happy mood <sup>[5]</sup>. In addition, the high professional identity of teachers can create a positive educational atmosphere, attract more people to join the cause of education, promote the prosperity of the cause of education, and provide a talent guarantee for social progress. Therefore, for normal university students, improving a teacher's professional identity is one of the important tasks in their prospective teacher stage.

However, the empirical investigation of the professional identity of primary education students found that their overall degree of professional identity is not high. The main reasons are the low salary of teachers, the lack of teaching practice activities and the lack of timeliness of vocational belief cultivation <sup>[6]</sup>. Lack of professional identity will affect normal university students' learning enthusiasm and future career planning and even make it difficult for them to adapt and persist after entering the workplace. Therefore, training colleges and universities should improve the curriculum system of normal education and formulate effective talent training programs <sup>[7]</sup>. At the same time, normal university students themselves should also take the initiative to enhance their professional identity, make full use of the practical activities organized by colleges and universities, and feel and reflect on the practice <sup>[8]</sup>. The purpose of this paper is to investigate and analyze the current situation of professional identity of teachers of normal college students in primary education, and put forward some suggestions on how to cultivate their professional identity.

## 2. Research methods

Questionnaires and interview methods were used in this study. The questionnaire method aims to comprehensively collect data information on professional identity and related factors of normal university students. The questionnaire design covers multi-dimensional content, including basic data (such as gender and place of origin of students), various dimensions of professional identity (professional will and expectation, professional value, professional effectiveness, professional identity), and the classification of events affecting professional identity (teacher behavior, teaching experience, learning process, family environment), etc. to explore the status of professional identity of normal university students and its influencing factors from multiple perspectives.

Normal university students from the college of primary education of Capital Normal University were sampled as the research objects, and 114 valid questionnaires were collected. The samples were representative and reliable, and could reflect the overall characteristics of normal university students in terms of vocational identity to some extent.

The questionnaire and interview outline were carefully designed in this study. The contents of the questionnaire covered multiple dimensions of professional identity, and the current situation was directly reflected through quantitative poetry. In addition, 9 normal university students were interviewed to understand their cognition, emotions, and values of the teaching profession, as well as the factors affecting professional identity, to provide strategic suggestions for improving professional identity and provide references for making

educational policies. The interview outline focuses on obtaining open and in-depth insights and understanding the psychological changes, challenges, and coping strategies of normal university students in the process of forming professional identity through face-to-face communication.

### 3. Summary and analysis of the research results

#### 3.1. Basic data analysis

The number of female students (142) in the sample was significantly more than that of male students (35), accounting for 80.2% and 19.8% of the total number respectively (**Table 1**). Urban students (146) accounted for 82.5%, while rural students (31) accounted for 17.5%. Such distribution differences of gender and student origin may affect the subsequent analysis of occupational identity, and attention should be paid to the differences among different groups.

**Table 1.** Summary of participants' information

Group	Basic materials	Number of people	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	35	19.8%
	Female	142	80.2%
Place of origin	Rural area	31	17.5%
	City	146	82.5%

#### 3.2. Occupational identity dimension analysis

Although the mean and standard deviation caused by gender were different in the dimensions of occupational intention and expectation, occupational will, occupational value, occupational efficacy, and occupational identity, the *t*-test results of independent samples showed that the *t*-values did not reach significant levels ( $P > 0.05$ ). This indicates that in the samples of this study, gender has no significant impact on the dimensions of professional identity of normal university students, that is, there is no significant difference between male and female students in the overall level and each specific dimension of professional identity (**Table 2**).

**Table 2.** Data table of differences caused by gender factors

	Male (M ± SD)	Female (M ± SD)	t
Career aspirations and expectations	1.21 ± 0.39	1.20 ± 0.54	0.128
Occupational will	2.53 ± 0.78	2.70 ± 0.74	-1.217
Professional values	1.74 ± 0.63	1.77 ± 0.67	-0.277
Professional effectiveness	1.52 ± 0.49	1.62 ± 0.64	-0.930
Professional identity	1.75 ± 0.45	1.83 ± 0.52	-0.784

As for the difference in students' place of origin, the *t* value of urban students ( $M = 1.23 \pm 0.55$ ) and rural students ( $M = 1.08 \pm 0.21$ ) was 2.570 ( $P < 0.05$ ), which reached a significant difference (**Table 3**). This indicates that the vocational intention and expectation of urban normal students are significantly higher than that of rural normal students, which may be due to the abundant educational resources in urban areas and more access to

education-related information, etc., leading to their higher expectations of teaching careers. However, the *t*-value of vocational will, professional value, professional efficacy, and professional identity did not reach a significant level ( $P>0.05$ ), indicating that the places of student origin had no significant influence on these dimensions, that is, urban and rural normal college students had similar levels of professional identity in these aspects.

**Table 3.** Data table of the differences caused by the factors of student origin

	Town (M ± SD)	Rural (M ± SD)	t
Career aspirations and expectations	1.23 ± 0.55	1.08 ± 0.21	2.570
Occupational will	2.68 ± 0.78	2.60 ± 0.75	0.561
Professional values	1.78 ± 0.68	1.70 ± 0.57	0.681
Professional effectiveness	1.61 ± 0.63	1.59 ± 0.51	0.216
Professional identity	1.83 ± 0.52	1.74 ± 0.41	0.837

The values of occupational willingness and expectation, occupational will, occupational value, occupational efficacy, and occupational identity are all in the range of 1.00 to 5.00 (the range of occupational identity is 1.00 to 4.67). The standard deviation corresponding to the mean values of each dimension shows that normal college students have obvious individual differences in these aspects. These data provide the key basic data and group characteristics reference for further exploring the relevant factors of the professional identity of normal college students.

**Table 4.** Data summary table

	Minimum	Maximum	M ± SD
Career wishes and expectations	1.00	5.00	1.20 ± 0.51
Occupational will	1.00	5.00	2.67 ± 0.75
Professional values	1.00	5.00	1.76 ± 0.70
Professional effectiveness	1.00	5.00	1.61 ± 0.61
Professional identity	1.00	4.67	1.81 ± 0.51

### 3.3. Analysis of events affecting occupational identity

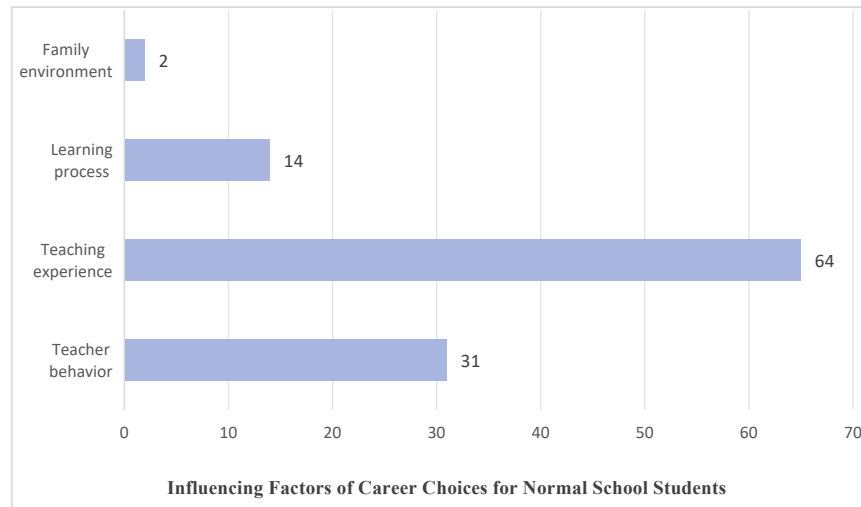
The career identity of normal university students is affected by many factors, which can be divided into positive and negative factors (**Figure 1**).

The positive factors significantly encourage normal university students to form a positive professional identity. Teachers' solid professional skills, serious and responsible attitudes, and other behaviors set up professional models for students, and stimulate their yearning and identification of the teaching profession. In the teaching experience, the positive feedback of students and the teaching harvest of normal university students have enhanced the identity of normal university students in the teaching profession. Course learning consolidates professional identity, and extracurricular learning and self-cognition factors, such as learning about excellent teachers, also provide support for a positive professional identity. The family environment in which teachers are parents of normal university students also promotes the formation of professional identity.

The negative influencing factors bring challenges to the professional identity of teachers and students. Although the scores of the designed questionnaire are small, they reflect potential problems that may affect



the professional identity of normal college students, such as self-doubt caused by students not listening to the lecture in teaching experience, change of career idea caused by curriculum pressure in the learning process, and uncertain self-cognition of whether to engage in the profession of teachers, etc. (Table 5). In the process of education and teaching, attention and guidance should be paid.



**Figure 1.** Influencing factors of career choices for normal school students

**Table 5.** Classification of events affecting the professional identity of normal university students (the numbers in the table below are 114 questionnaires)

Attitudes towards becoming a teacher	Influencing factors		Specific content summary
Positive (111)	Teacher behavior (31)	Qualities a teacher has	Solid professional skills, serious and responsible, with a sense of responsibility and mission, role model, love, and patience.
		The guiding role of teachers	Study life, conduct cultivation, psychological and emotional guidance.
	Teaching experience (64)	Feedback from students	The sense of achievement and happiness that come from feeling students' needs and helping students to solve difficulties and make progress; Positive feedback from students in the classroom and recognition after class.
		Harvest methods and inspirations	Learn how to prepare and design lessons to attract students' attention and improve classroom efficiency; Have a deep understanding of the important role of teachers, clear goals for future efforts, and firm faith in becoming a teacher.
	Learning process (14)	Course study	Learn professional knowledge and educational theories to deepen the understanding of education.
		Extracurricular life/self-knowledge	Learn about good teachers online and offline; Learning about students to motivate them towards their goals; And a conviction to become a teacher from an early age.
Negative (3)	Family Environment (2)		Parents are teachers and are deeply influenced by their parents' educational ideas and methods.
	Teaching experience (1)		Students do not listen to the lecture and have self-doubt, reflect on the quality of the class and the teaching design, and question their suitability to become teachers.
	Learning Process (2)	Course study	Through education courses, I think that teaching is too stressful, and then I change my mind about becoming a teacher.
		Self-knowledge	I haven't decided yet if I want to go into teaching.

## 4. Theoretical basis

As for the research on the status quo of professional identity of normal college students and its influencing factors, this study takes the “theoretical model of self-identity state” proposed by American psychologist James E. Marcia as the basic framework, which is also an important basis for analyzing professional identity of normal college students<sup>[9]</sup>.

Freud, the founder of the psychoanalytic school, first proposed the concept of identification, that is, individuals subconsciously imitate and internalize, and then make them psychologically consistent with others or groups. On this basis, Erikson further developed and proposed the theory of “self-identification.” Based on Erikson’s “self-identity” theory, Marcia proposed the “self-identity state theory model.” This model aims to describe the different states that adolescents experience in the process of exploring self-identity. Marcia proposed that self-identity contains two dimensions, namely “exploration” and “commitment.” Based on these two dimensions, Marcia further proposed four kinds of identity of individuals, namely, identity achievement, identity moratorium, identity foreclosure, and identity diffusion.

This study starts from the two core dimensions of the “theoretical model of self-identity.” “Exploration” refers to the process in which normal university students actively seek solutions to teachers’ career development problems, and then form a professional identity, covering the exploration of professional knowledge and skills, professional role quality, and self-cognition. “Commitment” is reflected in the belief that normal university students firmly devote themselves to the cause of education, and are willing to invest time and energy in it, such as actively participating in professional learning, full of enthusiasm and confidence in the cause of education, and making clear their own career planning.

Based on these two dimensions, the normal university students participating in the study can be divided into four categories. The normal university students in the status of identity acquisition show the characteristics of high exploration and high commitment, and they make a firm commitment after career exploration. In the state of identity delay, the students have a high exploration degree but lack commitment. The students with early closure of identity have made commitments without full exploration, showing low exploration and high investment. However, in the state of identity diffusion, the students lack exploration and make no investment, showing a state of low exploration and low investment. Therefore, the “self-identity state theoretical model” is of great significance in dividing the career identity stage of normal college students, analyzing the characteristics of the stage, and summarizing the influencing factors and mechanisms.

## 5. The specific interpretation of the identity state

### 5.1. Identity achievement

In Marcia’s self-identity theory, identity achievement represents a state of high exploration and high commitment. Normal university students have conducted an in-depth exploration of the teaching profession and made a firm commitment to devote themselves to their education career.

Such normal students usually have gone through the process of career exploration. They pay attention to the teaching profession at the beginning of their enrollment, actively participate in educational practice activities, clarify their career interests and goals, and closely link the teaching profession with their own development. They choose the normal major because of their love and understanding of education. They can match their own interests and advantages with the teaching profession, and have high enthusiasm in learning and practice, to continuously improve their professional quality and teaching ability.

At the stage of identity achievement, normal university students can flexibly use knowledge and constantly innovate teaching methods in practice, have clear plans and expectations for career development, and actively seek development opportunities. In the face of challenges and changes in the education industry, they can maintain a positive attitude, be good at reflection and summary, constantly adjust their teaching concepts and strategies, and often achieve better results and long-term development on the career path of teachers.

This state has a positive impact on the formation of normal university students' professional identity, which helps to establish firm professional belief and commitment, promote their in-depth exploration of the connotation and requirements of the teacher profession, improve professional quality and teaching ability, form a positive self-professional identity, and lay a solid foundation for career development.

## **5.2. Identity moratorium**

Identity moratorium is a state of high exploration and low commitment, which means that normal university students have launched a certain exploration of the teaching profession, but have not formed a firm career will and expectation, and their professional identity is relatively low.

The concrete manifestation is the wait-and-see attitude towards the teaching profession, the choice of primary education major partly due to the score limitation, the lack of love for the teaching profession, and the confused career direction. This kind of choice based on scores rather than interest makes them hesitate in the face of the teaching profession. Studies have also shown that students who choose to major in teacher education because of external factors rather than their own interests are more likely to have a wait-and-see attitude toward teaching <sup>[10]</sup>. At the same time, according to the survey, normal university students in the identity moratorium state are significantly lower than students in other states in enthusiasm for participating in educational practice <sup>[11]</sup>. Their resistance to practical activities makes it difficult for them to deepen their understanding and identification of the teaching profession in practice. In addition, such students generally lack a clear career plan. It is found in the interview that although some normal students choose to major in teacher education, they only have vague ideas about their future career planning, and their specific plans are not clear. Some studies have pointed out that the vagueness of career planning will affect the degree of normal students' investment in teaching careers and reduce their professional identity <sup>[12]</sup>.

In conclusion, the reasons leading to the status of identity moratorium of normal university students include individual, family, school, and society. At the individual level, when the fit between themselves and the profession is not clear, it is difficult for them to fully devote themselves to the exploration of the teaching profession, and thus it is difficult to form a firm career commitment <sup>[13]</sup>. In terms of family factors, parents' and children's differences in understanding and expectations of the teaching profession, as well as parents' over-protection, lead to children's lack of independent exploration and decision-making ability. Studies have shown that normal university students with a high degree of family support have a higher degree of professional identity and exploration enthusiasm <sup>[14]</sup>. There are some deficiencies in school education, such as the curriculum of some normal colleges, which is highly theoretical and out of touch with practice, the teaching methods of teachers are single, and the guidance of students' career interests and identity is lacking <sup>[15]</sup>. Society's negative evaluation of the teaching profession, such as high work pressure and unsatisfactory salary, also reduces the enthusiasm of normal university students to explore and produces a fear of difficulties <sup>[16]</sup>.

It can be seen that normal university students in the identity moratorium state lack motivation and goals in learning and practice, and are easy to be disturbed by the outside world. On the other hand, teachers with

low professional identity are more likely to suffer from job burnout, and their involvement and enthusiasm in teaching work are also lower <sup>[17]</sup>. However, they are still actively exploring, with active thinking and an open mind to different educational concepts and teaching methods, and the accumulated experience and knowledge will help them better understand and adapt to the teaching profession in the future <sup>[18]</sup>.

This is a common state in the formation of normal university students' professional identity, and teachers and educational institutions should give more guidance and support.

### **5.3. Identity foreclosure**

Identity foreclosure means that an individual makes a commitment to a certain profession without full exploration. For normal university students, this state is embodied in making a commitment to the teaching profession without full exploration.

The status of identity foreclosure of normal university students is often the result of the joint action of society, family, and individual. In the country, society gives high status to primary and secondary school teachers, and some normal college students will be affected by the characteristics of teachers' work such as social status, and then choose to engage in the teaching profession. In addition, social and cultural stereotypes and traditional concepts of the teaching profession also lead to the early closure of the identity of normal college students to a certain extent. For example, society may regard teaching as the ideal career for women, so some female normal students choose the teaching profession under the influence of others to fully explore the practical suitability of the teaching profession with themselves <sup>[19]</sup>. Based on these social factors, some parents and family members of normal college students expect teachers to be engaged in the profession because of the stability and security of the profession, but normal college students accept this concept without full consideration, putting themselves in a state of identity foreclosure.

The concrete manifestation is that their understanding of the teaching profession only stays on the surface, they rarely participate in career exploration activities, and they are prone to self-doubt when they get in touch with the work of teachers, and they cannot persist in the teaching profession for a long time. At the same time, although the normal university students in this state choose the teacher major and complete the corresponding learning tasks, they do not carry out corresponding exploration, and they are still uncertain about whether to engage in the teaching profession in the future. In addition, due to the influence of family or society, normal college students in the state of identity foreclosure do not choose the profession completely voluntarily, so their learning motivation and learning commitment are lower than those who have fully explored and made commitments <sup>[20]</sup>.

Identity foreclosure has many effects on the formation of the professional identity of normal university students. The positive effects include that there is a clear career direction in the short term, which is conducive to focusing on early teacher professional learning, and the stability of the early vocational identity is high. However, in this state, normal university students lack the process of self-exploration, the identity of teacher occupation only stays on the surface, and it is difficult to adapt to the diversified development trend of education.

### **5.4. Identity diffusion**

Identity diffusion is a state of low exploration and low commitment. For normal university students, neither fully explore the teaching profession, nor firmly establish the will and expectation to join the profession.

The state of identity diffusion is the result of internal factors and external environment. In terms of personal internal factors, some normal university students have unclear self-cognition, and it is difficult to connect the teaching profession closely with their own development. In the interview, many normal university students said that their choice of teacher education major was due to external factors such as scores and employment stability, but not due to their love for education. In terms of the external environment, the negative evaluation of the teaching profession by society, such as high work pressure, unsatisfactory salary, and difficulty in dealing with conflicts between family and school, reduces the enthusiasm of normal university students to explore<sup>[21]</sup>. At the same time, some schools lack vocational education, vocational planning courses are not targeted, and practical activities are not arranged properly, which cannot effectively guide normal students to have a deep understanding of the teaching profession<sup>[22]</sup>.

In the interview, the feedback of some normal college students reflects the characteristics of identity diffusion. Some normal university students mentioned that the choice of primary education major is mainly due to the score factor, and they did not have much in-depth thinking about the future teaching industry, and their cognition of the teaching profession only stayed on the surface, and they were not clear about the future career plan. In addition, interviews with some normal university students also found that such students lack the willingness to participate in educational practice and practical activities, and do not actively experience the actual work scenes of the teaching profession, which makes it difficult to deepen the understanding and identification of the teaching profession in practice, reflecting the lack of exploration.

This kind of state is not conducive to the development of normal college students. Due to the lack of professional enthusiasm and awareness of active exploration, they lack the motivation to learn professional knowledge. In future employment, they may be prone to frequent career changes due to their low professional identity, which is not conducive to the stability of the teaching team<sup>[23]</sup>.

Promotion measures: Schools and families should provide more vocational enlightenment and guidance to promote normal university students in the state of identity diffusion to form a positive teacher professional identity. Schools can add career planning courses and organize various educational practice activities to make normal students feel the charm of the teaching profession; Families should provide support and encouragement to create a positive atmosphere for career exploration<sup>[24]</sup>.

## 6. Conclusion

This study delves deeply into the current status and influencing factors of professional identity among normal students majoring in primary education analyzes four identity states of professional identity of normal college students in combination with the theoretical model of self-identity, and reveals the specific manifestations and reasons under different states. Without further improving the professional identity of normal college students, future education needs to start from the three aspects of individuals, educational institutions, and society, and take measures to optimize the education curriculum, strengthen career guidance, improve the social environment, and so on to enhance the professional commitment and professional behavior of normal college students. Future research will further explore the differences of vocational identity of normal college students in different education stages and different regions, and how to effectively improve their vocational identity through specific intervention measures.

## Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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