

The Influence of Sense of Place on the Professional Identity of Newly-Recruited Teachers: The Chained Mediation Effect of Career Adaptability and Self-Efficacy

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Abstract: The professional identity of newly-recruited teachers with a specific orientation is a core issue in the construction of grassroots education teacher teams, and it holds crucial significance for both the professional development of new teachers and the improvement of grassroots education quality. A survey conducted among 311 newly-recruited teachers with a specific orientation reveals that there is a positive correlation between their sense of place, teacher professional identity, professional adaptability, and professional self-efficacy. Professional adaptability and professional self-efficacy play a partial mediating role in the process of sense of place influencing the professional identity of newly-recruited teachers with a specific orientation. Furthermore, within the influence of sense of place on the professional identity of newly-recruited teachers with a specific orientation, there exists a complete chain mediation effect between professional adaptability and professional self-efficacy. To enhance the professional identity of newly-recruited teachers with a specific orientation, concerted efforts from multiple parties are required: education management departments and schools should focus on strengthening the sense of place of newly-recruited teachers with a specific orientation, helping them integrate better into their teaching environment; meanwhile, systematic training and other methods should be employed to enhance the professional adaptability of new teachers and provide more professional support to enhance their professional self-efficacy, thereby promoting the formation and consolidation of their professional identity. This study not only clarifies the internal mechanism by which sense of place affects the professional identity of newly-recruited teachers with a specific orientation, but also provides theoretical support and practical guidance for enhancing their professional identity and stability, thereby facilitating their professional development.

Keywords: Sense of place; Newly-recruited teachers; Professional adaptability; Chain mediation

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1. Introduction

The concept of “adhering to the people-centered development of education and accelerating the construction of a high-quality education system” proposed by the General Secretary in the report of the *20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China* profoundly reveals the core position of education in the national development strategy. In the journey of promoting comprehensive progress in education, rural areas are undoubtedly the key and difficult points ^[1,2]. Teacher team building has become the top priority in tackling this problem, and the effective recruitment of teachers is the primary node in strengthening teacher team building ^[3]. In recent years, China has actively explored the mechanisms for recruiting teachers in rural areas ^[4]. Publicly funded targeted training for normal school students, as an important method widely adopted in most provinces, has increasingly demonstrated its unique value ^[5]. Since 2018, the Ministry of Education has successively issued a series of policies aimed at promoting the training of publicly funded normal school students, such as the *Action Plan for the Revitalization of Teacher Education (2018–2022)* ^[6]. These policies are precisely targeted and actively respond to the great strategic deployment of rural revitalization, explicitly requiring that the training of publicly funded normal school students should not only focus on improving educational professional skills but also be brave enough to undertake social responsibilities and the mission of educating people, actively integrate into the tide of rural revitalization, and use the power of education to promote comprehensive rural revitalization.

Over the past five years, through this training model, the country has supplied a significant number of directionally public-funded teacher trainees to rural education ^[7]. They are like seeds of hope sown in the vast field of rural education, carrying new hope for its development ^[8]. However, while rejoicing in the growth in numbers, we also have to deeply consider a series of key issues. These directionally public-funded teacher trainees can be referred to as directional new teachers for the first three years of their careers ^[9]. How well do they perform in terms of regional adaptability? Can they quickly integrate into the local educational environment, cultural atmosphere, and social life, thus achieving a seamless transition from campus to rural education positions? In the vast expanse of rural education, what profound impact will they have on improving the quality of rural education and the overall process of rural revitalization? In the context of the new era, teacher education in China is in a critical period of active transformation and striving to achieve independent problem-solving ^[10]. Can they effectively respond to the major proposition put forward at the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, “comprehensively improving the quality of independent talent cultivation?”

Upon delving into the crucial factor of teachers’ professional identity, it is found that it has a decisive impact on teachers’ teaching practice, career development, and even the advancement of the entire education cause. The degree of teachers’ professional identity is directly related to the quality of teaching effectiveness, the positivity of teaching attitude, and the long-term development of their careers. Developing and maintaining a strong professional identity is an important basis for judging teachers’ professionalism ^[11]. For directionally public-funded normal university students, a high degree of professional identity will motivate them to take root in rural education, overcome difficulties, continuously improve teaching quality, and provide better educational services for rural students ^[12].

2. Research subjects and methods

2.1. Research subjects

Using a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling, questionnaires were distributed to targeted new teachers (within 1–3 years of employment) in Guangdong Province, resulting in a total of 318 data

points. After excluding data with overly quick responses, 311 valid data points were obtained, with a validity rate of 97.80%. Among them, there were 110 male teachers and 201 female teachers. There were 175 teachers with less than 1 year of teaching experience (56.30%), 92 teachers with 1–2 years of teaching experience (29.60%), and 44 teachers with 2–3 years of teaching experience (14.10%). The basic information of the valid participants is shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Basic information of effective subjects

Basic information	Project	Number of people	Percentage
Hometown	City	166	53.40%
	Countryside	145	46.60%
Targeted workplace	City	144	46.70%
	Countryside	167	53.70%
Highest degree	Junior college	47	15.10%
	Undergraduate	231	73.40%
	Master's student	33	10.60%
Teaching experience	Within one year	175	56.30%
	1–2 years	92	29.60%
	2–3 years	44	14.10%

2.2. Research tools

2.2.1. Sense of place scale

The sense of place scale comprises four dimensions (place dependence, place identity, place attachment, and social support), with a total of 19 items. The place attachment section draws on the scale developed by Williams *et al.* ^[13], while the place dependence, place identity, and social support sections draw on the scale developed by Wynveen ^[14]. The questionnaire consists of a total of 8 items across the four dimensions, with D5 being a reverse-scored item. A higher score indicates a stronger sense of place for the individual. In this study, the internal consistency reliability of the overall scale was 0.95, and confirmatory factor analysis indicated good construct validity of the questionnaire ($\chi^2/df = 1.78$, $CFI = 0.97$, $TLI = 0.97$, $RMSEA = 0.050$, $RMR = 0.046$).

2.2.2. Orientation of new teachers' professional identity

Using the “Teacher Professional Identity Scale for Normal Students” developed by Wang *et al.* ^[15], we investigated the professional values, professional efficacy, and professional will of normal students, and appropriately adapted it into three dimensions (professional willingness and expectations, professional will, and professional values), with a total of 12 questions. Questions W2 and W3 are reverse-scored, with higher scores indicating a higher level of orientation towards the new teacher profession identity among the subjects. In this study, the internal consistency coefficient of the total scale was 0.80, and confirmatory factor analysis indicated good construct validity of the questionnaire ($\chi^2/df = 1.82$, $CFI = 0.98$, $TLI = 0.97$, $RMSEA = 0.052$, $RMR = 0.038$).

2.2.3. Occupational adaptability

This study refers to Zhang's “Questionnaire on the Occupational Adaptability of New Teachers in Rural

Primary Schools”^[16] and has been appropriately adapted to form the “Questionnaire on the Occupational Adaptability of New Teachers in Publicly-funded Normal Universities.” It includes five dimensions (occupational adaptation, occupational identity, occupational ability, occupational psychological adaptation, and occupational interpersonal relationship), with a total of 23 questions. PI3, PA2, and PA3 are reverse-scored, with higher scores indicating higher levels of occupational adaptability among participants. In this study, the internal consistency coefficient of the total scale is 0.77, and confirmatory factor analysis indicates good structural validity of the questionnaire ($\chi^2/df = 1.71$, $CFI = 0.95$, $TLI = 0.94$, $RMSEA = 0.048$, $RMR = 0.061$).

2.2.4. Career efficacy

This study refers to the “Rural Primary School New Teachers’ Career Adaptability Questionnaire” developed by Zhang and the “Teacher Professional Identity Scale for Normal Students” developed by Wang *et al.*, with the adaptation of the career efficacy scale. It consists of 3 items, and a high score indicates a high sense of professional efficacy among the subjects. In this study, the internal consistency coefficient of the total scale is 0.79, and confirmatory factor analysis indicates good construct validity of the questionnaire ($GFI > 0.95$, $CFI > 0.95$, $NFI > 0.95$, $RMR < 0.001$).

2.3. Data processing and analysis

This study utilizes SPSS 26.0 and Mplus 7.4 for data processing and analysis. Hayes’ PROCESS model 6 is employed to examine the chain mediation effect of professional adaptability and teacher efficacy on the relationship between sense of place and the professional identity of newly-recruited teachers.

3. Research results

3.1. Testing of common method bias

The Harman’s one-way MANOVA method was used to test for common method bias^[17]. The results of exploratory factor analysis showed that the eigenvalues of the six factors were all greater than 1, and the unrotated first factor explained 45.89% of the variance, which was less than the critical criterion of 50%^[18]. Therefore, the common method bias was not significant.

3.2. Mean, standard deviation, and correlation analysis among variables

The correlation analysis (Table 2) lists the mean, standard deviation, and Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient for each variable. The results indicate that there is a significant positive correlation between all variables.

Table 2. Mean \pm standard deviation and correlation among variables ($n = 311$)

	M \pm SD	1	2	3	4
1. Sense of place	63.79 \pm 17.16	-			
2. Teachers’ professional identity	41.86 \pm 7.60	0.70***	-		
3. Occupational adaptability	72.57 \pm 10.65	0.83***	0.75***	-	
4. Professional efficacy	10.67 \pm 2.90	0.78***	0.80***	0.80***	-

Note: * indicates $P < 0.05$, ** indicates $P < 0.01$, *** indicates $P < 0.001$, the same below.

3.3. The mediating role of professional adaptability and professional self-efficacy between sense of place and professional identity of newly-recruited teachers

To examine the chain mediation effect of professional adaptability and professional self-efficacy on the relationship between sense of place and the professional identity of newly-recruited teachers, Model 6 from the PROCESS program was used for regression analysis^[19]. The results (Table 3 for details) indicated that, after controlling for hometown location and targeted work location, (1) sense of place positively predicted professional adaptability ($\beta = 0.82, P < 0.001$); (2) both sense of place and professional adaptability positively predicted professional self-efficacy ($\beta = 0.38, P < 0.001$; $\beta = 0.50, P < 0.001$); (3) when sense of place, professional adaptability, and professional self-efficacy simultaneously predicted the professional identity of newly-recruited teachers, the direct effect of sense of place on their professional identity was not significant ($\beta = 0.09, P > 0.05$), while both professional adaptability and professional self-efficacy positively predicted their professional identity ($\beta = 0.31, P < 0.001$; $\beta = 0.50, P < 0.001$). This suggests that professional adaptability and professional self-efficacy of newly-recruited teachers play a fully chain mediation role in the influence of sense of place on them (Figure 1).

Table 3. Testing of the chain mediation model of occupational adaptability and occupational self-efficacy

Regression equation		Overall fit index		Significance of regression coefficient	
Outcome variable	Predictor variable	R^2	F	$\beta(SE)$	t
Occupational adaptability	Sense of place	0.68	218.54	0.82(0.02)	24.93***
	Hometown location			0.01(0.76)	0.16
	Targeted workplace			0.01(0.77)	0.15
Career efficacy	Sense of place	0.69	167.75	0.38(0.01)	6.58***
	Career adaptability			0.50(0.02)	8.89***
	Hometown location			-0.003(0.21)	-0.09
	Targeted workplace			-0.07(0.21)	-1.94
Directed professional identity of new teachers	Sense of place	0.71	151.23	0.09(0.03)	1.61
	Occupational adaptability			0.31 (0.04)	5.05***
	Career efficacy			0.50(0.14)	9.16***
	Hometown location			0.02(0.52)	0.44
	Targeted workplace			-0.20(0.53)	-5.89***

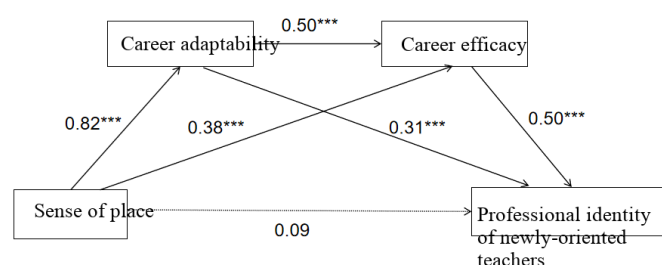


Figure 1. Path coefficient diagram of the model

The bias-corrected percentile bootstrap method (with 5,000 replications) was employed for mediating effect testing. If the 95% confidence interval does not include 0, it indicates that the mediating effect is significant. The results show that: (1) the mediating effect value of professional adaptability between sense of place and professional identity of newly-recruited teachers is 0.11, with a confidence interval of [0.06, 0.17], indicating that professional adaptability has a mediating effect between sense of place and professional identity of newly-recruited teachers; (2) the mediating effect value of professional self-efficacy between sense of place and professional identity of newly-recruited teachers is 0.08, with a confidence interval of [0.05, 0.12], thus indicating that professional self-efficacy has a mediating effect between sense of place and professional identity of newly-recruited teachers; (3) the chained mediating effect value of professional adaptability and professional self-efficacy is 0.09, with a confidence interval of [0.06, 0.13], indicating that both professional adaptability and professional self-efficacy have a chained mediating effect between sense of place and professional identity of newly-recruited teachers. The effect values of the three mediating paths account for 34.04%, 25.33%, and 27.93% of the total effect value, respectively. See **Table 4** for details.

Table 4. Test of the mediating effect of professional adaptability and professional self-efficacy between sense of place and orientation of new teachers' professional identity

Predicted path	Effect	Mediation effect value	Standard error	95% confidence interval		Relative effect size
				Lower limit	Upper limit	
Local sense → Orientation of new teachers' professional identity	Total effect	0.33	0.02	0.29	0.36	100%
Local sense → Orientation of new teachers' professional identity	Total indirect effect	0.29	0.03	0.23	0.34	87.35%
Local sense → Professional adaptability → Orientation of new teachers' professional identity	Indirect effect 1	0.11	0.03	0.06	0.17	34.04%
Local sense → Professional efficacy → Orientation of new teachers' professional identity	Indirect effect 2	0.08	0.02	0.05	0.12	25.33%
Local sense → Professional adaptability → Professional efficacy → Orientation of new teachers' professional identity	Indirect effect 3	0.09	0.02	0.06	0.13	27.93%
Local sense → Orientation of new teachers' professional identity	Direct effect	0.04	0.03	-0.009	0.09	12.65%

4. Discussion of results and suggestions

After conducting in-depth research on newly recruited teachers, it has been found that a sense of place positively impacts their professional identity, with professional adaptability and professional self-efficacy playing crucial roles. A sense of place refers to the emotional connection and psychological belonging formed by newly recruited teachers after interacting with the teaching system, teacher-student community, and community education ecology of their new school. It can reduce the sense of strangeness and anxiety experienced by newly recruited teachers when they first start their jobs, laying a psychological foundation for them to adapt to their professional roles. When newly recruited teachers feel a deep emotional connection with the school environment, they will proactively learn about teaching requirements, the school's cultural

atmosphere, and the educational policy environment. Good professional adaptability, in turn, enhances their professional identity, enabling them to smoothly adapt to their roles while efficiently completing teaching tasks. They gain recognition from students and support from colleagues, gradually experiencing a sense of value and achievement in educational work, thereby deepening their acceptance and identification with the professional role of “teacher.” At the same time, a sense of place can satisfy the basic psychological need for belonging among newly recruited teachers. This psychological satisfaction translates into an intrinsic motivation to face work challenges, enhancing their belief in their teaching abilities. Teachers with high professional self-efficacy are more willing to break through the limitations of traditional teaching models, actively experiment with innovative teaching methods, and demonstrate resilience in the face of teaching challenges. Positive professional behavior improves teaching effectiveness while providing self-affirmation for newly recruited teachers, further strengthening their professional self-efficacy, forming a virtuous cycle of enhanced self-efficacy, positive behavior, and deepened identity. Professional adaptability and professional self-efficacy play a fully mediating role between a sense of place and the professional identity of newly recruited teachers. A strong sense of place can provide newly recruited teachers with psychological support, such as a sense of security, belonging, meaning, and social support, reducing their professional anxiety and stimulating their willingness to explore and engage. This enables them to perceive the instrumental and intrinsic value of the teaching profession. High value perception stimulates their motivation to actively adapt, and the successful teaching experience accumulated during the adaptation process enhances their teaching confidence and improves their professional self-efficacy. Ultimately, high value cognition and firm self-efficacy beliefs jointly internalize into the professional identity of newly recruited teachers. In the training and retention of newly recruited teachers, education management departments should establish a systematic intervention path that includes environmental creation, adaptation support, self-efficacy enhancement, and identity cultivation. By improving the school environment and strengthening community collaboration, they can enhance the sense of place among newly recruited teachers. Relying on pre-service training and on-the-job assistance, they can improve the professional adaptability of newly recruited teachers. By relying on recognition of teaching achievements and professional development support, they can strengthen the professional self-efficacy of newly recruited teachers, thereby achieving deep cultivation of their professional identity and providing guarantees for stabilizing the teaching team in grassroots education, rural education, and other fields.

4.1. Through professional adaptability cultivation, strengthening the professional identity of newly-recruited teachers with a sense of place

A sense of place refers to the emotional connection and psychological belonging formed between new teachers and the teaching system of the school they teach in, the community of teachers and students, and the community education ecology. This connection can reduce the sense of strangeness and anxiety that new teachers may feel when they first join the profession, laying a good psychological foundation for professional adaptation. In accordance with the needs of educational practice, cultivating new teachers’ professional adaptability and enhancing their sense of place have a positive effect on professional identity. This can be achieved from three aspects. First, deepen the integration of local education by organizing new teachers to participate in community education research in their teaching locations, explore the integration points between local culture, industrial resources, and subject teaching, incorporate rural farming culture into labor classes, and urban community development cases into social classes, so that new teachers can feel the value of local education in teaching practice and deepen their emotional connection with the teaching environment. Second, refine teaching

adaptation guidance by drawing on the collaborative education concept of mentor-mentee pairing, arranging for experienced teachers to guide new teachers on core teaching requirements, such as implementing national curriculum standards and classroom management, and helping new teachers quickly grasp teaching methods suitable for local learning conditions. Third, build an adaptation exchange platform, regularly organize new teachers' teaching adaptation sharing sessions, encourage teachers to share experiences and challenges in implementing the "double reduction" policy and developing characteristic courses, and improve adaptation efficiency through peer assistance. Education management departments and schools should focus on the main link of "establishing emotional connections" in the cultivation of targeted new teachers, relying on pre-service campus cultural immersion activities, "mentor-mentee" assistance measures, and other educational means to help new teachers integrate into the educational environment as soon as possible, building a solid bridge for the formation of their professional identity.

4.2. Enhancing professional efficacy and promoting the professional identity of newly-recruited teachers through a sense of place

The value of a sense of place is primarily manifested in meeting the basic psychological need for a sense of belonging among newly-recruited teachers. When new teachers are immersed in a school teaching and research atmosphere that fosters inclusivity and mutual assistance, and in a community cultural environment that respects educational principles, their need for a sense of belonging is satisfied. This, in turn, transforms into an intrinsic motivation to overcome teaching challenges, thereby enhancing their confidence in their teaching abilities. To enhance professional efficacy and promote professional identity, it is necessary to establish a cultivation system centered around three aspects: satisfaction of needs, affirmation of abilities, and behavioral incentives. Schools can collaborate with communities to establish a care mechanism for new teachers, providing regular visits, resource sharing, and other means to make new teachers feel the dual support of the school and the community, thereby strengthening their sense of belonging. Schools can also build a platform for ability demonstration, design teaching practice projects for new teachers based on local educational characteristics, organize new teachers to carry out teaching activities that introduce local intangible cultural heritage into schools, provide special guidance for rural students' learning habits, and so on. This allows new teachers to accumulate successful experiences in practice. Schools should improve the feedback and incentive mechanism, promptly recognize the achievements of new teachers in teaching innovation and student growth based on positive feedback, and enable new teachers to intuitively see the value of their teaching through teaching achievement exhibitions, parent satisfaction recognition, and other means. New teachers with a high sense of professional efficacy are more willing to try new teaching methods such as project-based learning and interdisciplinary integration. They will also proactively seek solutions when facing student learning differences and classroom discipline issues. Through positive teaching behaviors, their sense of efficacy is further enhanced, forming a virtuous cycle of efficacy improvement, positive teaching, and deepened identity, thereby promoting teachers' professional identity.

4.3. Establishing a chain-like cultivation framework for professional adaptation and effectiveness, empowering newly-recruited teachers with a sense of place to enhance their professional identity

Based on the theory of place attachment and the career social cognition-career theory, we can establish a chain-like cultivation framework for professional adaptation-efficacy. This framework can be implemented from three aspects: environmental creation, tiered cultivation, and collaborative support. Firstly, optimizing the local

educational environment. Education management departments can promote schools to create educational and cultural spaces with local characteristics, set up local educational achievement exhibition areas, rural education theme corridors, etc., and collaborate with communities to carry out activities that bring local educational resources into schools, so that new teachers can enhance their sense of place in an immersive environment. Secondly, designing a tiered cultivation plan. During the initial stage of new teachers' employment, focus on professional adaptability cultivation through local learning situation training, basic teaching skills training, and other methods to help new teachers quickly integrate into the educational environment. After entering the adaptation period, the focus shifts to enhancing self-efficacy, adopting personalized professional development planning, special tackling of teaching difficulties, and other methods to stimulate new teachers' teaching confidence. Thirdly, establishing a collaborative support mechanism. According to the educational logic of home-school collaborative education, a three-party linkage system of education management departments, schools, and communities is established. Education management departments coordinate resources and provide policy support and training opportunities for new teachers; schools bear the main responsibility for cultivating and tracking the growth of new teachers in real time; communities cooperate by providing practice venues and feedback channels. Through this framework, new teachers can first achieve professional adaptation with the support of a sense of place, then rely on the achievements obtained during the adaptation process to enhance their self-efficacy, and ultimately internalize high-value cognition and high-efficacy beliefs into professional identity, providing a guarantee for stabilizing the teaching team in grassroots and rural education.

5. Conclusion

This study reveals the mechanism by which place attachment influences the professional identity of newly inducted teachers and explores the chain mediation role of occupational adaptability and professional self-efficacy between place attachment and professional identity. The findings have important practical implications for enhancing the professional identity of newly inducted teachers. Schools should focus on providing emotional support and adaptive training for new teachers, such as organizing community engagement activities and contextualized teaching simulations, to help them integrate into the school environment more quickly, strengthen their occupational adaptability and professional self-efficacy, and thereby enhance their professional identity.

However, this study also has certain limitations: (1) As a cross-sectional study, it cannot reveal the causal relationships among place attachment, occupational adaptability, professional self-efficacy, and the professional identity of newly inducted teachers. Future research could adopt a longitudinal design to further verify the dynamic relationships among these variables; (2) This study mainly relies on self-reported data from new teachers, which may involve common method bias. Future research could incorporate multi-source evaluations (e.g., feedback from school administrators and colleagues) to improve the reliability and validity of the study.

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