Professional Identity Associated with Teacher Career Satisfaction:

A Cross-Sectional Design to Test the Multiple Mediating Roles

of Psychological Empowerment and Work Engagement

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Abstract

Previous research has explored the positive relationship between teacher professional identity and career satisfaction but has not investigated its underlying reasons. Therefore, this study examines the mediating roles of two variables psychological empowerment and work engagement in the relationship between professional identity and career satisfaction. This study surveyed 630 teachers from 17 Chinese universities using the Professional Identity Scale, Psychological Empowerment Scale, Utrecht Work Engagement Scale, and Career Satisfaction Scale. Demographic variables (such as gender, age, teaching experience, professional title, job characteristics, and school level) were controlled as covariates for conservative prediction. Results: (a) Professional identity is positively correlated with career satisfaction; (b) Professional identity is positively correlated with work engagement; (c) Professional identity is positively correlated with psychological empowerment; (d) Work engagement is positively correlated with career satisfaction; (e)Psychological empowerment is positively correlated with career satisfaction; (f)Work engagement mediates the relationship between professional identity and career satisfaction(g)Psychological empowerment mediates the relationship between professional identity and career satisfaction. Based on the research findings above, several recommendations are proposed for the government, universities, and university teachers. The government should formulate and implement education policies beneficial to higher education teachers. These measures should include increasing teachers' salaries, improving teaching conditions, and enhancing teacher training. These policies should address the actual needs of teachers and help effectively enhance their professional identity and career satisfaction. This study demonstrates that there is a positive correlation between professional identity and teacher career satisfaction, professional identity and work engagement, professional identity and psychological empowerment, psychological empowerment and teacher career satisfaction, and work engagement and teacher career satisfaction. More importantly, professional identity can indirectly influence teacher career satisfaction through the mediating effect of psychological empowerment; professional identity can also indirectly affect teacher career satisfaction through the mediating effect of work engagement.

Introduction

Professional identity and career satisfaction are very important to every person in the workplace. Only when we identify ourselves with the work we are engaged in can we devote ourselves to our work, get satisfaction from it, and realize our self-worth in the process. On the contrary, people will be drained of enthusiasm or even hate their work, and they will be even more unable to gain satisfaction from it.

Teachers' professional identity is the result of current meanings about the individual and the profession constructed by teachers through their interaction with the environment, and it is the individual's psychological recognition of the teaching profession (Zhang, N. J.,et.al. (2013). Teachers' professional identity is not only about personal emotions and professional development but also about the stability and progress of the whole education system. It is very important to study teachers' professional identity and career satisfaction.

Research Objectives

To analyze the relationship among professional identity, teacher career satisfaction, work engagement, and psychological empowerment. To examine the mediating effect of work engagement on professional identity and teacher career satisfaction. To identify the mediating effect of psychological empowerment on professional identity and teacher career satisfaction.

Hypotheses of research

H1: There exists a positive and significant relationship between teachers' professional identity and career satisfaction.

H2:There is a positive and important relationship between teachers' professional identity and work engagement.

H3:There is a positive and important relationship between teachers' career satisfaction and work engagement.

H4:There is a positive and important relationship between teachers' professional identity and psychological empowerment.

H5:There is a positive and important relationship between teachers' career satisfaction and psychological empowerment.

H6:Work engagement mediates the relationship between teachers' professional identity and career satisfaction.

H7:Psychological empowerment mediates the relationship between teachers' professional identity and career satisfaction.

Literature Review

Professional identity and career satisfaction

Teacher professional identity refers to teachers' attitudes and commitment to their profession, manifested in their desire to maintain and their degree of liking for their profession. Social Identity Theory (SIT) suggests that individuals desire to establish and maintain a positive self-image. Individuals' identification with their profession can enhance their career satisfaction. Numerous empirical studies have demonstrated the connection between career satisfaction and professional identity. For example, Ávalos, B., & Aylwin, P. (2007) found that teachers' professional identity can reflect their career life and career decisions. Sabanciogullari,S. & Dogan, S (2015) studied the turnover intention of Turkish nurses, and their research found that nurses' professional identity may affect their level of happiness at work. Sun, B., et.al. (2022). conducted an empirical study on Chinese hotel employees and found that professional identity positively influences employees' dedication and satisfaction while negatively affecting turnover intention. Additionally, the research elucidates the mediating mechanisms of employee dedication and job satisfaction in the relationship between professional identity and turnover intention.

Psychological empowerment, teachers' professional identity and career satisfaction

Psychological empowerment is a synthesis of an individual's psychological state and cognition (Spreitzer, G. M. (1995). Previous studies have found that both professional identity and career satisfaction are positively correlated with psychological empowerment (Ye, B., & Zheng, Q. 2017; Thomas, K. W., & Velthouse, B. A. 1990). According to Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET), individuals evaluate themselves and their occupational situations based on their own and others' viewpoints, and individuals with positive psychological empowerment are likely to experience a stronger sense of meaning in their work.

Work engagement, teacher professional identity and career satisfaction

Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT) posits that individuals who maintain an attitude towards their professional identity are more likely to exhibit behavior consistent with that attitude, thus leading to consistency between attitude and behavior. In the organizational behavior literature, work engagement is regarded as a positive, work-related state characterized by high levels of energy (vigor) and full dedication to work (Schaufeli, W. B., & Bakker, A. B. ,2004) Research has demonstrated that individuals with high levels of work engagement experience a greater sense of achievement and identification with their work (Kanungo, R.N.1982). Lv, X., & Bai, X. (2017) investigated the impact of work engagement on the career satisfaction of intellectual property professionals in research institutions.

The study revealed a significant relationship between career satisfaction and work engagement, with work engagement acting as a mediator between professional identity and career satisfaction. Iuliia, Y. I (2018) surveyed Russian employees and found that work engagement moderated the relationship between self-efficacy and career satisfaction, with self-efficacy having a positive effect on career satisfaction among Russian employees. The study also demonstrated that emotional intelligence has a positive impact on self-efficacy and

work engagement and can moderate the relationship between self-efficacy and career satisfaction.
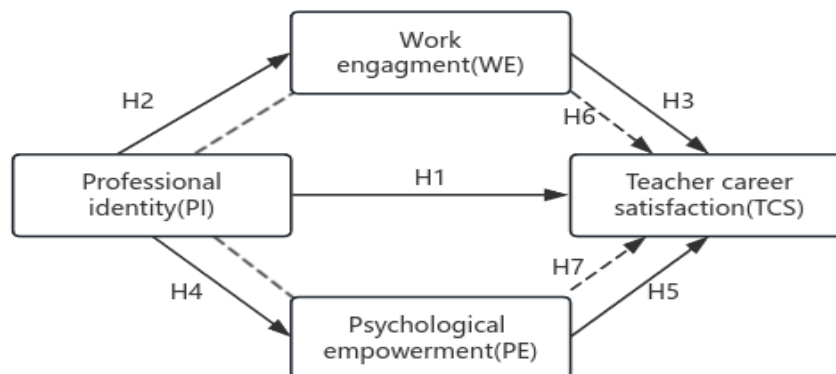
Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 Research framework map

Research Methodology

This study selected 17 universities teachers from Sichuan Province, Chongqing Municipality, Shanxi Province, Guangdong Province, and Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in China as case analysis subjects. These educational institutions include prestigious universities, vocational colleges, and ordinary higher education institutions, distributed in the central, eastern, northern, and southern regions of China. The selection of these samples holds representativeness and typological significance in researching the professional identity and job satisfaction of university teachers in China.

Measurement tools for this study
Teacher Professional Identity

Wei, S. H. (2008) defined the concept and dimensions of teacher professional identity and constructed a dimensional structure of teacher professional identity based on theory. Following a scientific research procedure, a large-scale sample (1942 valid data points covering seven major regions nationwide) was utilized to empirically test and refine the concept and structure of teacher professional identity. Based on this, the characteristics and impact model of teacher professional identity were explored. The "Teacher Professional Identity Scale" developed in this study divides teacher professional identity into four dimensions: professional behavioral tendency, professional belongingness, professional values, and role values, comprising a total of 18 items and adopting a Likert 5-point scoring system. The scale has been proven to be highly reliable and valid in various studies, especially when used with Chinese samples (Ye, B.,et. al. (2020); Li, C. P.,et.al.2006). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this scale in the present study was 0.941.

Career Satisfaction

The Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ) was developed by American psychologists David J. Weiss and Anne M. Smith in the early 1950s. Originally designed to investigate job satisfaction, the questionnaire has undergone multiple revisions and expansions over time and has become one of the classic tools for measuring individual work satisfaction. In this study, the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire-Short Form (MSQ-SF) was utilized, which consists of 20 items and adopts a Likert 5-point scoring system to assess satisfaction across two dimensions: intrinsic and extrinsic. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this scale in the present study was 0.947.

Work Engagement

The most popular self-report survey for gauging work engagement at the moment is the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), formerly known as the Utrecht Work Engagement Questionnaire. The scale is in use worldwide and has been translated into 17 languages, including Chinese, which was done by academics like Gan Yiqun. Over 30,000 employees globally have had their work engagement measured and entered into an international UWES measuring database. The 17-item measure categorizes labor involvement into three dimensions: energy, devotion, and absorption. A seven-point Likert scale is used for scoring. For this scale in the current study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.958.

Psychological Empowerment

Li, C.,et.al. (2006) adapted Spreitzer, G. M. (1995).Psychological Empowerment Scale (PES) for use in China. The entire scale consists of four parts: meaningfulness of work, self-efficacy, autonomy, and impact at work, each comprising three items. The questionnaire consists of a total of 12 items, evaluated using a Likert five-point scale. Therefore, the scale has been shown to have high reliability and validity when measuring Chinese samples. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this scale in the present study was 0.888.

Data collection methods and ethics

Face-to-face or semi-structured interviews, done in person or over the phone, are the primary means of conducting in-depth communication with respondents in qualitative research in order to gain an understanding of their viewpoints, experiences, and feelings. Data are extracted from recordings of the interviews afterward in order to be analyzed and interpreted. Online surveys are used to gather sample data for quantitative research. Faculty and staff at the 17 target universities were given questionnaires for this study via the research website (https://www.wjx.cn).Invalid questionnaires were eliminated during the official questionnaire gathering process using two criteria. Initially, surveys with incomplete responses were discarded. Second, questions that appeared arbitrary or did not accurately represent the respondents' inner views were not included in the selection process. The quantitative study successfully gathered 672 questionnaires, of which 630 were found to be legitimate. This yielded an effective rate of 93.8%, satisfying the minimal sample size requirements for additional empirical data analysis.

This study complied with ethical principles throughout its duration. Throughout the interview and questionnaire survey processes, researchers provided clear explanations of the research content, methods, and objectives to the participants. The authors ensured the security of the provided data and ensured that the data were used solely for research purposes.

Statistical analysis strategy

In this study, we used SPSS 25 and AMOS software for data analysis and processing. The preliminary analysis included descriptive statistics and correlation analysis among the main variables. The preliminary analysis of the measurement model consisting of four variables was conducted using the fixed loadings method and maximum likelihood estimation (ML), and the model was subjected to confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). To investigate the indirect effects of the dependent variable through mediation and the direct effects among variables based on the structural model, we employed the bootstrap resampling method with 5000 iterations and utilized a 95% confidence interval to test the significance of path coefficients.

Research results

1.Demographic Information

This study included a total of 630 valid samples. In terms of gender distribution, there were 243 males, accounting for 38.6%, and 387 females, accounting for 61.4%. The age group was mainly concentrated between 41 and 50 years old, with 306 individuals accounting for 48.6%, followed by the age group between 31 and 40 years old, with 208 individuals accounting for 33%. Regarding family status, 504 individuals were married with children, accounting for 80%. The majority of teachers had teaching experience of 16 to 25 years, accounting for 39.7%, followed by 6 to 15 years of teaching experience, accounting for 32.1%. The highest educational qualification was a master's degree, with 449 individuals accounting for 71.3%. In terms of professional titles, there were 283 lecturers, accounting for 44.9%, and 223 associate professors, accounting for 35.4%. In terms of job characteristics, there were 214 teachers in teaching positions, accounting for 34%, and 192 teachers in teaching and research positions, accounting for 30.5%. The distribution of school levels was relatively even, with key universities accounting for 30.6%, general colleges accounting for 37.9%, and vocational colleges accounting for 31.4%.

2. Confirmatory factor analysis

The confirmatory factor analysis of the model was conducted using the AMOS software with the fixed-load method and maximum likelihood (ML) method. The results are shown in Figure 2, Figure 3, Figure 4, Figure 5, and Table 1.
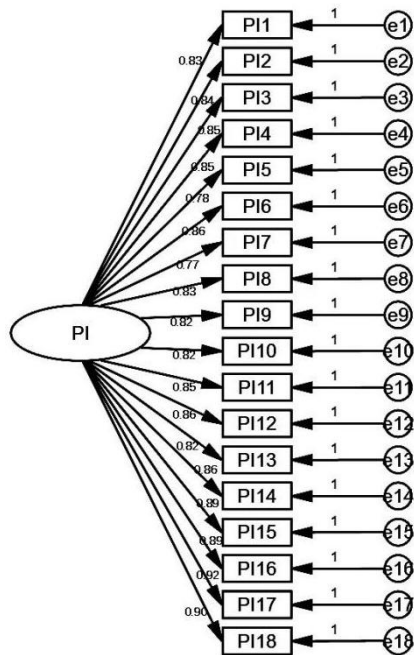
Figure 2 Output of CFA Model of Independent Variables（Professional Identity）
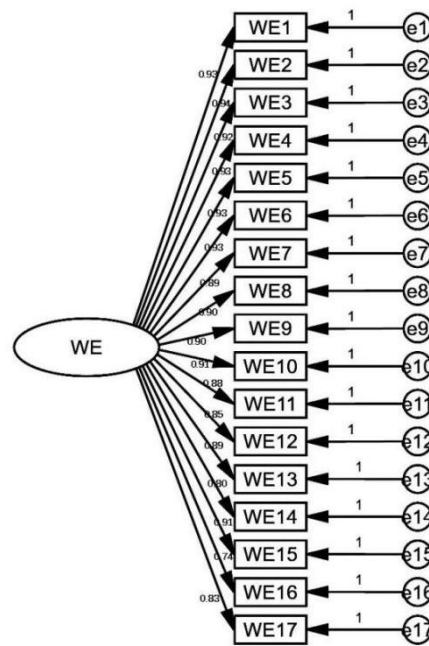

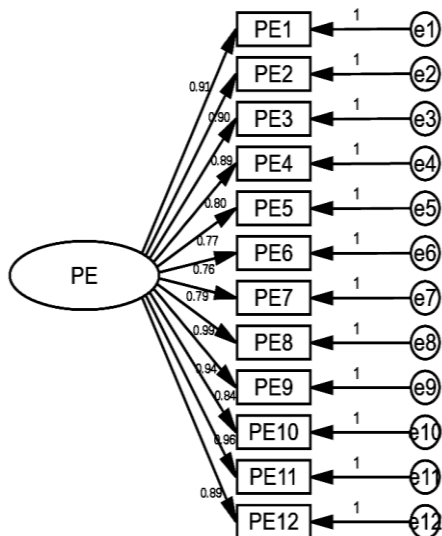**Figure 3** Output of CFA Model of Mediator Variable（Work Engagement）

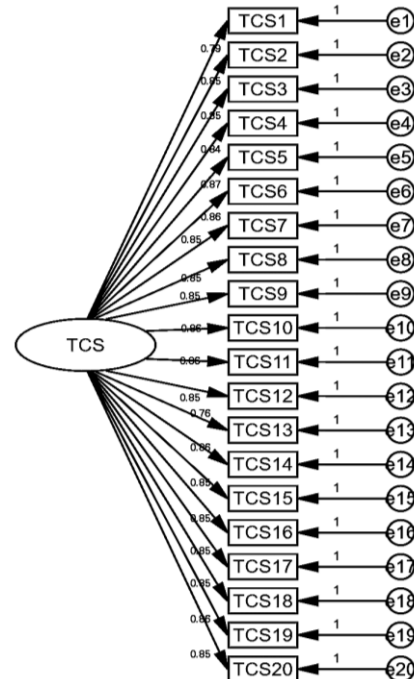**Figure 4** Output of CFA Model of Mediator Variable（Psychological Empowerment）

Figure 5 Output of CFA Model of Implicit Variable（Teacher Career Satisfaction）

Table 1 Model Fit Index Summary Table

	P	CMIN	CMIN/DF	RMSEA	GFI	AGFI	IFI	TLI	CFI
standard value	< 0.05	-	1—3	< 0.08	> 0.9	> 0.9	> 0.9	> 0.9	> 0.9
Professional Identity	**	315.08	2.442	0.048	0.94	0.93	0.98	0.98	0.92
Psychological Empowerment	**	136.98	2.854	0.054	0.97	0.95	0.98	0.98	0.98
Work Engagement	**	327.06	2.894	0.055	0.94	0.92	0.98	0.98	0.98
Career Satisfaction	**	404.76	2.438	0.048	0.93	0.91	0.98	0.98	0.98

Based on the four model fit values, the model fit meets the requirements for further research.

Hypothesis testing methods

Since all measurement models have been validated, we will employ the two-step approach of structural equation modeling (SEM) by Anderson and Gerbing to test the research hypotheses. To examine the indirect effects generated by the dependent variable through the mediating variable as well as the direct effects among variables based on the structural model, we utilized percentile and bias-corrected bootstrapping, extracting 200 bootstrapping samples within a 95% confidence interval. We calculated the lower and upper bounds of the confidence interval to test the significance of the mediation effect.

Model evaluation

The structural model was run using the sample data. The output is shown in Figure 6.
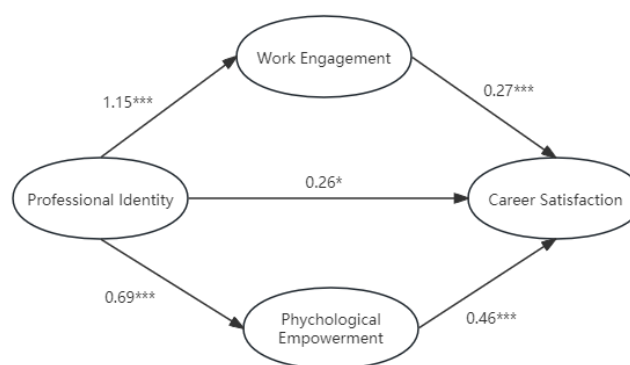
Figure 6 SEM Analysis of Mediating Effect

Table 2 Overall SEM model fit table

Model	P	CMIN	CMIN/DF	RMSEA	GFI	AGFI	IFI	TLI	CFI
-	< 0.05	-	1—3	< 0.08	> 0.9	> 0.9	< 0.08	> 0.9	> 0.9
Default model	***	599.45	2.803	0.051	0.920	0.913	0.97	0.980	0.911

As shown in Table 2, CMIN/DF = 2.803 < 3, RMSEA=0.051<0.08, indicating that the model fits are all excellent.

Bootstrap estimation

We utilized the method of bootstrap resampling with 5000 repetitions and selected both the 95% percentile and bias-corrected confidence intervals to examine the significance of path coefficients. Therefore, we examined the significance of the influence between latent variables through critical ratio (C.R.), upper and lower bound confidence intervals, and two-tailed significance testing.

The bootstrap estimation results are shown in Table 3, where the two-tailed significance values are all less than the 0.05 standard, and the C.R. values are all greater than the 1.96 standard. Therefore, the effects of all paths in the model are significant.

Table 3 Table of output coefficients for the overall SEM model

Trails			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Bootstrapping	
							Lower	Upper
WE	<---	PI	1.150	0.134	8.578	***	0.052	0.186
PE	<---	PI	0.685	0.088	7.754	***	0.148	0.284
TCS	<---	PI	0.263	0.105	2.498	.013	0.038	0.254
TCS	<---	PE	0.457	0.091	5.018	***	0.095	0.141
TCS	<---	WE	0.272	0.056	4.858	***	0.115	0.226

Table 4 Indirect effect

Indirect Path	Estimate	Lower	Upper	P
PI→WE→TCS	0.246	0.138	0.381	0.025
PI→PE→TCS	0.322	0.314	0.734	0.004

Source: Data and information from the research

Figure 7 Work Engagement Mediated Effect Values

Figure 8 Psychological Empowerment Mediated Effect Values

As shown in Table 4,Figure 7 and Figure 8, using a significance level of p < 0.05 as the criterion, there exists a significant mediating effect between PI and TCS. On both paths PI-WE-TCS and PI-PE-TCS, there are mediating effects with values of 0.246 and 0.322 respectively, and the 95% confidence intervals do not include 0. Thus, the mediating effects of the model have been validated.

Discussion

1. Relationship between teachers' professional identity, career satisfaction, psychological empowerment and work engagement

The results of the study proved that there is a significant positive correlation between professional identity and teachers' career satisfaction, supporting hypothesis 1.

This conclusion is consistent with previous research findings. For example, Ye, B., & Zheng, Q. (2017) found that the influence of professional identity on the career satisfaction of rural primary school principals is moderated by professional identity. Furthermore, our research results confirm the Social Identity Theory (SIT), suggesting that one's self-awareness in their profession may enhance their career satisfaction. When teachers identify with their profession, they are more likely to perceive their work as enjoyable and challenging rather than stressful and demanding. Therefore, when teachers have a positive professional identity, educating students will be considered important. Teachers derive positive achievement from their work, providing them with positive and effective psychological resources to perform better (Apostolidou, Z. 2015).

Teachers' professional identity is significantly and positively related to work engagement, supporting Hypothesis 2.

Individuals with a strong sense of professional identity may exhibit more positive attitudes and behaviors in their work (Li, Y.,et.al. 2014; Zhang, H.,et.al. 2022). Indeed, some empirical studies support this theory, indicating that those who have a strong sense of identity in their work demonstrate higher levels of work engagement (Jeanson, S., & Michinov, E.2020; Wang, C.,et.al. 2020). When individuals have a high degree of identification with their profession, they are more likely to invest more energy and emotion into their work. At the same time, high levels of engagement in work can also enhance individuals' identification with their profession, creating a positive feedback loop. Conversely, if individuals lack identification with their profession, they may exhibit lower levels of engagement in their work.

There is a significant positive correlation between work engagement and teachers' career satisfaction, which supports Hypothesis 3.

When individuals invest more effort, time, and emotion into their work, they often find it easier to feel satisfied. Because they put in more effort, they experience a greater sense of accomplishment and pride, thereby enhancing their career satisfaction. Other studies have also demonstrated the positive impact of work engagement on teacher career satisfaction. For example, research by Skaalvik, E. M., & Skaalvik, S. (2017) conducted a quantitative review of work engagement and tested the positive relationship between work engagement and task

performance and contextual performance, providing insights into our understanding of the connection between work engagement and career satisfaction. Studies by Hakanen, J. J.,et.al.. (2006), Christian, M. S.,et.al (2011), Schaufeli, W. B., & Bakker, A. B.. (2004) similarly demonstrated the positive relationship between work engagement and career satisfaction.

Teachers' professional identity is significantly and positively related to psychological empowerment, supporting hypothesis 4.

Individuals' sense of identification and belonging to their profession typically enhances their self-efficacy and autonomy in work, thereby strengthening their sense of psychological empowerment. Simultaneously, psychological empowerment can also promote the formation and consolidation of professional identity. When individuals gain more autonomy, sense of control, and influence in their work, they are more likely to develop a sense of identification with their profession, thereby enhancing their commitment and involvement in that profession. A clear understanding of the "teacher profession" is essential for achieving higher levels of psychological empowerment (Wang, X., & Niu, X., 2023).

Psychological empowerment is significantly and positively related to teachers' career satisfaction, supporting hypothesis 5.

When individuals feel they have more autonomy, influence, ability, and sense of meaning in their work, they often find it easier to feel satisfied and are more willing to make positive contributions to the organization. Individuals with higher levels of psychological empowerment tend to exhibit higher levels of career satisfaction (Türe, A. & Akkoç, I. 2020; Blais, A.-R., et.al., 2020; Zhang, L,et.al.. 2020; Wong, C. A. & Laschinger, H. K. S., 2013).When teachers have a high level of psychological empowerment, they perceive their work as meaningful and worthy of their efforts, thereby increasing their psychological resources and enhancing their job satisfaction. Blais, A.-R et al. (2020) analyzed dimensions of work fatigue among military and civilian personnel. They found a positive correlation between psychological empowerment and military personnel's career satisfaction.

2.The mediating effect of work engagement on professional identity and teachers' career satisfaction

The results of this study confirm that work engagement mediates the relationship between professional identity and career satisfaction, supporting Hypothesis 6. Teachers with high levels of professional identity tend to work hard, leading to higher levels of career satisfaction. This finding is consistent with previous research on the mediating role of work engagement in the relationship between professional identity (especially the dedication component of work engagement) and career satisfaction (Jeanson, S., & Michinov, E.2020; Karanika-Murray et al., 2015). Furthermore, our results validate Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT). High levels of professional identity promote work engagement, and work engagement is a proactive behavior individual adopt to alleviate cognitive dissonance. By increasing work engagement to enhance career satisfaction, individuals maintain and strengthen their identification with their profession. When individuals perceive the meaningfulness of their work, they continue to demonstrate vitality, dedication, and absorption in their work, leading to work involvement (Wu et al., 2012), increased career

well-being, and career satisfaction (Schaufeli, W. B. 2006; Hakanen, J. J.,et.al., 2012). Therefore, when teachers have a strong professional identity, they can fully engage in their work, leading to higher career satisfaction.

3.The mediating effect of psychological empowerment on professional identity and teachers' career satisfaction

The results of this study confirm that psychological empowerment mediates the relationship between professional identity and career satisfaction, supporting Hypothesis 7.

Higher levels of psychological empowerment among teachers indicate greater confidence in their ability to perform well and a stronger belief in the meaningfulness and value of their work (Spreitzer, G. M., 1995; Xu, C., & Xu, X., 2007). Additionally, we can also explain the mediating role of psychological empowerment on professional identity and career satisfaction from the perspective of Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET). When individuals feel they have more autonomy, competence, and meaningfulness in their work, they tend to make more positive cognitive evaluations of their work. They may perceive their work as challenging, meaningful, and capable of generating positive impact. This positive cognitive evaluation further influences individuals' attitudes and behaviors toward their work, including their professional identity and job satisfaction. Shi et al. (2016) found in a study on the relationship between positive psychology and career satisfaction among 2086 Chinese secondary school teachers that positive psychology and psychological adaptability were closely related to career satisfaction among teachers. Positive psychology and psychological adaptability predicted teacher career satisfaction, with psychological adaptability partially mediating the relationship between positive psychology and teacher career satisfaction.

Recommendation

Based on the research findings above, several recommendations are proposed for the government, universities, and university teachers. The government should formulate and implement education policies beneficial to higher education teachers. These measures should include increasing teachers' salaries, improving teaching conditions, and enhancing teacher training. These policies should address the actual needs of teachers and help effectively enhance their professional identity and career satisfaction. Additionally, it is necessary to establish and improve the higher education system and culture, including teaching evaluations, promotion mechanisms, and incentive measures, to encourage teachers' active engagement in their work and strengthen their professional identity. The government should also strengthen the construction and management of university teaching teams, including teacher recruitment, training, evaluation, and incentives, by formulating relevant policies and providing financial support to promote the development of teaching teams. Furthermore, the government can enhance the social status and reputation of teachers through publicity and social recognition, thereby earning teachers respect and recognition from society and thereby enhancing their professional identity. Finally, the government should strengthen communication and cooperation with teachers, listen to their opinions and suggestions, and jointly explore

solutions to educational problems to increase teachers' sense of participation and belonging, thereby enhancing their career satisfaction.

Universities should focus on providing support and resources to teachers, including teaching equipment, space, and materials. They should provide professional development opportunities to help teachers enhance their teaching skills and knowledge. Encouraging teachers to innovate teaching methods and providing opportunities for collaboration to share experiences are also crucial. Empowering teachers with autonomy and decision-making authority can enhance their professional identity. Providing timely recognition and positive feedback to teachers is essential to making them feel valued. Moreover, attention should be paid to teachers' work-life balance by offering flexible work arrangements and support.

Teachers should prioritize student learning and development, continuously explore ways to enhance teaching quality, and actively participate in curriculum design and educational reforms. They should collaborate with colleagues and share experiences and resources to enhance teamwork and professional identity. Additionally, teachers should continuously improve their teaching skills and professional knowledge by participating in training sessions, workshops, and academic conferences to remain competitive. Seeking feedback from students and colleagues, continually refining teaching methods and performance, and focusing on student learning and progress are essential. Providing support and assistance to students and deriving a sense of achievement and satisfaction from their progress is crucial. While maintaining a balance between work and life, teachers should cultivate personal hobbies and interests, maintain good relationships with family and friends, and better cope with work challenges and stress, thus enhancing career satisfaction.

This study demonstrates that there is a positive correlation between professional identity and teacher career satisfaction, professional identity and work engagement, professional identity and psychological empowerment, psychological empowerment and teacher career satisfaction, and work engagement and teacher career satisfaction. More importantly, professional identity can indirectly influence teacher career satisfaction through the mediating effect of psychological empowerment; professional identity can also indirectly affect teacher career satisfaction through the mediating effect of work engagement.

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