



Narrative Inquiry of a Chinese EFL Student Teacher's Professional Identity Development through Practicum

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports a narrative study of a Chinese EFL student teacher's professional identity development before, during, and after the teaching practicum. The data collection includes in-depth interviews, documents, and observations. By providing a rich and detailed description of Li Ping's experiences, this research offers valuable insights into the current landscape of professional identity development among Chinese EFL student teachers. Viewed through the lens of teacher socialization, the findings reveal distinct professional identities assumed by Li Ping at different stages of her journey: an expectant and anxious learner before the practicum, an exhausted and frustrated class manager, an ambivalent observer, an earnest apprentice, a nervous debutant, and a reflective practitioner during the practicum, and a determined prospective teacher after the practicum. The narrative story of Li Ping suggests that she experienced a dynamic professional identity development over time through continuous negotiation, adjustment, and reflection at different stages of the practicum. In addition, this paper proposed applicable suggestions for educational institutions, placement schools, as well as student teachers. By incorporating these insights, future teacher education programs can better equip aspiring educators to navigate the complexities of their professional identity development, ultimately bolstering the effectiveness of EFL teacher preparation in China.

Keywords: Professional Identity, Student Teachers, Teacher Socialization, Practicum.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, research on the professional identity of language teachers has been flourishing (Richards, 2023). Studies have shown that teacher identity plays a crucial role in shaping the way that teachers approach their work (G. Zhu, Rice, Li, & J. Zhu, 2022). In the process of teachers' professional development, teacher education is considered the starting point of teachers' professional growth (Tang, 2019).

The teaching practicum, in particular, is widely regarded as a pivotal phase during which student teachers actively shape and nurture their professional identities (Chen & Liu, 2022). Practicum is a kind of professional curriculum that pre-service English teachers should participate in before they graduate from university, to get experiential knowledge, improve teaching skills, and develop an actual affection towards education. In the process of practicum, student teachers may often ask: Who am I? What kind of teacher do I want to be? What is a good teacher? If they can provide satisfactory answers to these questions, it will help them construct their professional identity, as well as improve their commitment to the profession (Li, 2014). Student teachers' professional identity determines, to some extent, their intention to stay in the profession and whether they want to seek professional development opportunities (Cao, 2020).

There are works of literature on different aspects of teacher education, however, only a limited number of studies examine student teachers' professional identity development in the field of TESOL practicum (Othman & Senom, 2018). Teaching practicum provides student teachers a chance to gain practical experience, but it is also

acknowledged as a stage in which student teachers encounter various challenges and hold unstable professional identities (Henry, 2016). Therefore, exploring the dynamic development of student teachers' professional identity through practicum is of great importance as it can reveal their trajectory of teacher socialization during the transition from students to prospective teachers.

However, there is a lack of chronological study on student teachers' professional identity development concerning the timeline of their role changing at different stages, especially in the context of Chinese EFL teacher education (Zhong & Li, 2020). To fill the gap, this study attempts to explore EFL student teachers' professional development at different stages before, during, and after the practicum. By fully understanding the student teachers' professional identity development, educators are able to adjust the curriculum for teacher education and find positive factors that are conducive to the teaching profession, thus better promoting EFL teacher education in the Chinese setting.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher socialization refers to the process by which individuals are prepared to become teachers and learn the norms, values, and expectations associated with the teaching profession. According to Lacey (2012), teacher socialization involves how individuals acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for successful participation in the teaching profession. This process occurs through formal education and training programs, as well as through informal interactions with other teachers and educational professionals. Teacher training programs often combine coursework with practical experience, such as student teaching or internships in real classroom settings. This hands-on experience allows future teachers to apply what they've learned in a supervised environment, gaining valuable insights into the challenges and rewards of teaching. Through teacher socialization, student teachers develop a sense of professional identity and become socialized into the culture of the teaching profession. This includes understanding the roles and responsibilities of teachers, as well as the expectations for professional conduct, ethics, and performance.

Lacey (2012) found that student teachers experienced three periods in the process of teacher socialization. The first is the honeymoon period when the student teachers are excited about the transition from academic learning at the university to practical experience in the teaching field, and feel novel about everything in the placement school. They are eager to be a good teacher and are optimistic about their future career. The second period is the crisis period when the student teachers find the gaps between their ideals and reality. During this period, the student teachers may feel depressed or frustrated when they feel incompetent to deal with classroom teaching or class management. The third period is learning to get by or fail. After experiencing the reality shock during the crisis period, student teachers start to re-evaluate their ideal teacher identity and the expectations of the profession. They find solutions through communication and discussion with others or try to solve problems by themselves through trial and error. If problems are not resolved, student teachers may leave their teaching positions.

Teacher educators aim to introduce student teachers to particular roles and identities. Meanwhile, students, parents, colleagues, and administrators may try to familiarize student teachers with specific practices and attitudes based on their values, prejudices, and perceived requirements. Student teachers themselves also have their own desires and conceptions of who they are or could be, as educators and members of various communities (Q. Zhang, 2013). For many inexperienced teachers, this intricate process of participating in professional socialization and balancing these identities and practices can be difficult but ultimately beneficial (Duff, 2016). Inexperienced teachers, especially student teachers may grapple with finding a balance between implementing their innovative ideas and adhering to school and district policies and procedures, or they may find it challenging to critically assess their own practice and identify areas for growth. Overcoming these difficulties often requires a combination of teacher training, mentorship, and professional development.

There are works of literature on the student teachers' professional identity construction. Yuan and Mak (2018) investigated the identity construction of two student teachers with a model examining teacher identity in practice, discourse, and activity. Othman and Senom (2018) investigated how student teachers' practicum experience influenced their professional identity formation with respect to pre-service ESL teachers' knowledge, procedural awareness and skills, disposition and identity. Zhu et al. (2022) analyzed the metaphors generated by EFL student teachers before and after the teaching practicum, trying to get a clue about EFL student teachers' professional identity construction. However, research on the socialization process of language teachers' professional identity development is scarce (Sang, 2022).

To fill the gap, this paper tries to explore Chinese EFL student teachers' identity development through the lens of teacher socialization. Understanding how EFL student teachers' professional teacher identity evolves

throughout their training and beyond the practicum within the process of teacher socialization warrants further exploration.

METHODOLOGY

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative research is a type of qualitative approach using or analyzing narrative materials that include oral stories, interviews, biographies, diaries, reports, and others (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). Researchers argue that we can use narrative to achieve our identity and self-concept and understand our existence as a whole by unfolding stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). Creswell and Poth (2016) stated that “narrative stories tell of individual experiences, and they may shed light on the identities of individuals and how they see themselves (p.68)”. The narrative study on teachers' professional identity has become a research trend.

In recent decades, an increasing number of researchers have adopted narrative inquiry, driven by a shift in teacher education from a “knowledge transfer model” to an “interpretive, socially negotiated and continuously reconstructed model” of teacher learning (L. Zhang, 2016). The traditional “knowledge transfer model” associated with a one-way flow of information from teachers to students is giving way to a more socially interpretive model. The “interpretive, socially negotiated and continuously reconstructed model” represents a modern and student-centered approach to education that emphasizes learning is an active, dynamic, and interactive process. Narratives are recognized as an effective channel for teachers to better understand their professional identity and thereby continually develop, adjust, and improve their teaching practices. There has been a growth in narrative studies of foreign/second language teachers' professional identity (Liu & Li, 2023). However, those existing narratives are mostly about in-service teachers, and narratives about pre-service EFL teachers are not sufficient (Li & Xu, 2022). This study presents the stories of a Chinese EFL student teacher, following a chronological way to make an in-depth analysis of her changing identities in different stages before, during, and after the practicum.

Context of Teaching Practicum in this Study

For most student teachers, teaching practicum offers them the first chance to take the role of a teacher. In the process of learning to be teachers, student teachers' external behaviour and inner cognition have changed. In this study, a group of 20 EFL student teachers from S University (pseudonym) participated in a teaching practicum at a senior high school (anonymous as Xinhua High School) located in a small county in Southeastern China. The group of student teachers stayed at the placement school for 12 weeks, where they observed their mentors' English classes, learned to conduct lessons, and managed the students. The goal of the teaching practicum is to assist student teachers in gaining familiarity with the teaching process, comprehending the intricacies of teaching responsibilities, and preparing for their future teaching careers.

Participant

According to Creswell and Poth (2016), collecting the stories or life experiences of a single individual or a small number of individuals is most suitable in narrative research. The individual narrative allows researchers to deeply explore the student teacher's experiences, providing rich and detailed insights into the changing contextual situation.

This study investigates one student teacher's professional identity with purposeful sampling (Chen, 2001). Before commencing the study, all necessary ethical clearances were secured from the Universiti Malaya Research Ethics Committee, ensuring to protect the participant's rights and well-being. The participant was fully informed of the research and signed the consent form.

The experiences of Li Ping (pseudonym) at different stages of practicum are reported. Through her experience, Li Ping not only showcases her own professional growth as a student teacher but also provides a comprehensive reflection of Chinese EFL student teachers in similar situations.

Li Ping was born into a financially disadvantaged family in central China. Despite their limited resources, her parents made relentless efforts to provide her with a good education. Li Ping completed her primary and secondary education in the local town. Following the National College Entrance Examination, she secured admission to S University (pseudonym), a comprehensive university, where she pursued a major in English. Li Ping cherished her educational opportunities and dedicated herself to diligent studies at the university. Her passion for English drove her ambition to become an English teacher. In her seventh semester, she actively participated in the teaching practicum at Xinhua High School alongside her classmates. In this practical teaching experience, she was assigned to co-teach a Grade One (Year 10 in the UK) class with a fellow student. Under the guidance of experienced mentors and supervisors, Li Ping acquired valuable knowledge of teaching methods and

classroom management.

Data Collection and Analysis

In this research, data collection includes in-depth interviews, observations, and documents. Four interviews were conducted with Li Ping, spanning the period before, during, and after her practicum. These interviews primarily focused on capturing Li Ping's perceptions and the changes she experienced in relation to her professional identity. Apart from in-depth interviews, observation is also an important source of data. By observation, the researchers saw the occurrence, development, and changes in Li Ping's teaching behaviours. Documents include practicum plans, student teacher's journals, teaching plans, teaching reports, field notes, class observation notes, class schedules, and any other related materials the researchers can get. Li Ping offered 10 journals that documented her reflections, feelings, and ideas. These journals proved to be invaluable resources for comprehending her professional identity and exploring the development thereof. To increase the credibility of the study, the data collection was completed when data saturation was reached. A triangulation test (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) was applied to ensure the trustworthiness.

Thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008) was employed as the data analysis approach in this study. The researchers initiated the analysis process by immersing themselves in the qualitative data, which encompassed transcripts of four in-depth interviews, student teacher's journals, teaching plans, field notes, and class observation notes, aiming to develop a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of the student teacher. Then the researchers proceeded by assigning descriptive codes to meaningful segments of the data, facilitating the identification and organization of key themes. Through a careful examination of the coded data, potential themes that transcended the entire data set were identified. These themes were subsequently reviewed and refined to ensure coherence, distinctiveness, and faithful representation of the data. The researchers then synthesized the findings into a narrative report, incorporating the identified themes and substantiating them with illustrative quotes or examples from the data. To avoid the researchers' bias, the transcripts were sent back to the participant to validate the accuracy and completeness of the findings, allowing her to confirm or correct the interpretations.

RESULTS

Before the Practicum: An Expectant and Anxious Learner

Li Ping set up the goal as an English teacher when she was young. As a student from the rural countryside, she didn't learn English until she was twelve (Grade Six of primary school). Though Li Ping started to learn English late, she showed great enthusiasm for English learning. She studied very hard and gradually became one of the top students in her class. Being selected as the English class representative made her feel more confident in English. Her interest in English continued throughout junior high school and senior high school, which had a great impact on her choice of major. She wrote in her journal:

"I love English, and I wanted to learn English at the university... I wanted to be an English teacher since junior high school. My dream of being an English teacher has never changed." (Journal 1)

She successfully enrolled as a student teacher in the English department of a comprehensive university. In the first two years of university education, she completed compulsory basic courses including English intensive reading, linguistics, literature, and grammar, and has taken general pedagogy and general psychology courses. According to the curriculum arrangement, Li Ping entered the pre-service English teacher education module in the third year, learning courses on English teaching methods and skills (the sixth semester) and English teaching practicum (the seventh semester). At the beginning of the seventh semester, Li Ping joined the group practicum, hoping that the practicum would provide her with a chance to experience real teaching and apply the theories into practice.

Li Ping defined herself as a learner who was eager to learn to teach. On the one hand, she was expecting the teaching practicum, on the other hand, she felt a little anxious. She said in an interview:

"I am not confident about my English proficiency, I wonder whether I can teach the students well. And I don't know if I can get along well with the teachers and students at the placement school." (Interview 1)

With this kind of interwoven feeling of expectation and anxiety, Li Ping started her journey of teaching practicum.

During the Practicum

During the weeks spent at the placement school, Li Ping underwent a significant journey of identity development that unfolded in several stages.

Stage 1: Being an Exhausted and Frustrated Class Manager

Li Ping's responsibilities at the placement school extended beyond English teaching and encompassed class management as well. These two tasks were intertwined and influenced each other. From the moment Li Ping entered the classroom, she assumed the role of an assistant to the class teacher who was tasked with supervising the students from morning until night. Li Ping's daily routine was quite busy as she described in her journal:

"I have to get up at about 6:00 a.m., for the students start their morning exercise at 6:30 a.m., I need to show up at the playground before that time. During class time, I usually observe my mentor's or other English teachers' classes. After dinner time (17:50-18:30), they have several hours of self-study time. I come to the classroom and be with the students until they go back to the dormitories at 22:00. Students can barely have time to relax, neither nor I." (Journal 2).

Li Ping complained the working hours were too long (from 6:30 a.m. to 10:00 p.m.). "Since I sleep less than 7 hours a day, I always feel sleepy in the daytime. I can hardly have time to learn, let alone think about teaching." (Interview 2)

Apart from the long working schedule, dealing with the students also made Li Ping tired. Li Ping wanted to be friends with the students when she stepped into the classroom for the first time, but things didn't happen as she expected. The students displayed a sense of indifference towards the student teachers in the first week. An incident brought Li Ping to the edge of collapse, she recorded:

"One night, our class was very noisy at self-study time, some students kept talking and they didn't care whether I was there or not. I got angry and I slapped the blackboard, saying 'Be quiet'. Then I heard a student say, 'Why should an intern teacher control us?' I felt so frustrated and couldn't help dropping tears after hearing this." (Journal 2)

Li Ping never thought it would be so hard to manage a class. Feeling physically exhausted and mentally frustrated, she even started to doubt her choice. Her enthusiasm for teaching was diminished by the unexpected reality.

Stage 2: Being an Ambivalent Observer

After two weeks of adjustment, Li Ping got used to the work routine, and she spared some time to rest by taking turns with her partner. Meanwhile, the relationship between the student teachers and the high school students has eased as they got to know each other better. Li Ping started to pay more attention to English class observation. She eagerly hoped to integrate the theoretical knowledge she had learned in the class into actual teaching.

Li Ping held the belief that in foreign language teaching, students should be at the centre of classroom learning, while teachers serve as instructors. Her ideal English class involved active student participation, a thorough understanding of the teaching content, and positive feedback. However, she gradually realized that the reality she encountered was far more complex than she had anticipated. A significant gap existed between the actual English class and her envisioned ideal class. Based on Li Ping's observations, she noted that the students lacked enthusiasm and were not actively engaged during class. The predominant learning method seemed to involve passive listening to the teacher's explanations and note-taking. She perceived the students as behaving like "robots," passively absorbing the information presented by the teacher.

Li Ping also found that the students were poor at listening and speaking. They could not understand English native speakers' regular conversations and their oral English was poor since oral English was overlooked in high schools. Li Ping noticed that most students lacked fluency in speaking English, struggling even with basic sentence structures. Li Ping stated:

"I think the ultimate goal of learning English is to communicate in English with other people from all over the world. But the way we teach is far from the goal. They pay too much attention to grammar and writing exercises." (Interview 2)

Ping discovered a dislocation between ideal and reality. Her ideal teaching philosophy was "student-centred", but her mentor's teaching method was "teacher-centred". In addition, her ideal teaching goal was to improve students' communication abilities, but the reality was that they learned English to get a better score. After discovering the dislocation, Li Ping felt lost and confused. Her feeling is not unique. In the field of education, many studies have shown that the actual situation of the classroom is largely inconsistent with the expectations of student teachers (Pokhrel, 2020). Therefore, student teachers have to navigate the challenges and discrepancies they encounter in real teaching contexts.

Stage 3: Being an Earnest Apprentice

After a month of class observation, Li Ping accumulated valuable practical knowledge, which prompted her to begin preparing for her teaching. The first task at hand was to create a teaching plan. Li Ping had learned about the essential components of a well-designed teaching plan. However, when faced with the challenge of writing a teaching plan in an actual teaching context, she felt unsure and overwhelmed. Seeking guidance from her mentor and fellow student teachers, Li Ping gradually overcame her doubts and proceeded to craft her teaching plan. The entire process proved to be both physically and mentally demanding, yet Li Ping remained consistently positive throughout. She firmly believed that writing a successful teaching plan served as the initial milestone towards becoming a competent teacher. Additionally, she recognized the immense learning opportunities embedded within the teaching preparation process. In her journal, she reflected:

“As a student teacher without prior teaching experience, I consider class preparation to be the most crucial step. Only when thoroughly prepared can I confidently deliver my lessons. Through the process of writing the teaching plan, I have become more acquainted with the intricacies of the teaching process. Lesson preparation can not only improve the quality of teaching but also enhance my self-confidence.” (Journal 4)

As Li Ping progressed in completing her lesson plans step by step, she experienced a notable enhancement in her pedagogical knowledge. This growth in knowledge, in turn, played a significant role in shaping her positive professional identity. Through the process of preparing lessons, Li Ping gained a deeper understanding of effective teaching strategies, instructional techniques, and the dynamics of classroom management. This newfound knowledge and competence contributed to her developing sense of professional identity, instilling a greater sense of confidence and a strong foundation upon which she could build her teaching career.

Stage 4: Being a Nervous Debutant

Li Ping approached her first class with utmost seriousness. On the day of her first class, she arrived ten minutes early to prepare the classroom. Following her meticulously crafted teaching plan, Li Ping commenced the lesson by conducting a review, followed by introducing the new lesson. However, as the lesson advanced to the next task, Li Ping noticed a shift in the student's engagement. She assigned the students the task of combining two sentences into a nonrestrictive attributive clause. Despite providing more time for the task, the majority of the students struggled to keep up, and the class gradually became silent. Li Ping resorted to displaying the answers on the slides and asked the students to copy them down. Although Li Ping managed to complete the class, she couldn't shake off a feeling of dissatisfaction with how it unfolded. She expressed her feelings to her mentor and supervisors:

“I was so nervous to stand on the platform. I focused on how to complete my lesson in time, neglecting the interaction with students. When they couldn't finish the task, I just gave them the answer without explanation. My first class was like a disaster.” (Field notes 2)

Li Ping expressed her “student-centred” teaching philosophy, however, when the researcher went to the placement schools and observed one of Li Ping's English classes, it was found that her teaching behaviour still tended to be teacher-centred. In Li Ping's grammar class, when assigning the grammar task, she didn't fully investigate the students' English proficiency and overestimated their ability. The teaching process was mainly based on the teacher's plan, the interaction between the students and the teacher is limited. Obviously, at the present stage, Li Ping's “student-centred” teaching concept is still at the stage of “public knowledge”, and has not been transformed into “personal knowledge”, or has not been truly internalized. Therefore, her teaching philosophy has not truly integrated into her teaching practices.

Stage 5: Being a Reflective Practitioner

Dewey (1933) defined reflective thought as “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends.” Reflection is a special form of thinking to solve problems in an active and deliberate cognitive process.

By the final week of her practicum, Li Ping had conducted ten English lessons. As she gradually acclimated to the teaching role, her performance in the classroom improved steadily with each passing day. This noticeable progress can be attributed to Li Ping's unwavering commitment to continuous reflection. Throughout her practicum experience, she consistently engaged in reflective practices, critically analyzing her teaching methods, classroom dynamics, and student responses. In the process from lesson preparation to classroom teaching to after-class reflection, Li Ping constantly improved. She reflected on her teaching problems and figured out solutions:

“In my first class, when facing students' inability to grasp the knowledge, I did not make adjustments in time. Learning grammar is relatively boring, I should incorporate some interesting or life-related things to improve students' interest. The last task is not suitable for the students, and it is difficult for most students. My solution was terrible by just giving them the answers. I should tell the students some keywords to guide the students to

find the answers.” (Journal 5)

She also noticed that her attention on students was not enough:

“Upon watching the recorded video of my class, I found a tendency to primarily focus on the students with better grades and some active students. However, teaching is not just for these advanced students. Students with poor performance should also get the teacher's attention.” (Journal 7)

Li Ping demonstrated notable growth in her teaching abilities through continuous practice and reflection. While there may still exist a slight misalignment between her teaching beliefs and teaching practices, Li Ping's teaching competence and reflective skills have significantly improved throughout the process. She got more familiar with the teaching process and learned to adjust her teaching strategies according to students' aptitudes.

After the Practicum: A Determined Prospective Teacher

After the practicum, Li Ping had the opportunity to reflect on her experience and contemplate her future career as an English teacher. Through her immersive practicum, she gained a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in the profession. She now recognized the multifaceted nature of the role of an English teacher, encompassing various responsibilities such as lesson preparation, providing after-class tutoring, and participating in peer teaching assessments. Li Ping realized that being an effective English teacher required assuming greater responsibilities and investing considerable time and energy into professional tasks. This newfound understanding prompted her to approach her future career with a heightened sense of commitment and dedication.

Meanwhile, she found that teaching and learning were closely interwoven. In the process of teaching, she recognized that teachers are not solely providers of knowledge but also perpetual learners themselves. Li Ping's experience was in line with Xu's (2014) research that student teachers continually acquire new insights, whether it is about the subject matter itself, innovative teaching techniques, or the ever-evolving needs of the students. Simultaneously, students are not mere recipients of knowledge but active participants who inspire teachers' ideas and methods. She expressed in an interview:

“By answering the student's question, I not only helped the students understand the grammar, but also deepened my own understanding and knowledge.” (Interview 4)

What's more, Li Ping had a better understanding of the relationship between students and teachers. At the beginning of the practicum, Li Ping found that it was difficult to get along with the high school students, which brought a lot of pressure on her. However, Li Ping gradually developed a close bond with the students. She found herself growing fond of them:

“For me, I think the biggest gain is growing up with them, I can see many advantages and disadvantages from them, and then I can also learn a lot from them. As a teacher, I think teaching is a process in which both teachers and students benefit each other.” (Journal 8)

This realization emphasized the importance of building meaningful relationships with students, as it not only enhances the teaching and learning experience but also fosters a sense of care, support, and mutual respect within the classroom. It can be seen that through teaching practicum, Li Ping has enhanced her confidence as a teacher, and her understanding of her identity as a teacher has gradually become clearer. The achievements and progress of students have become her greatest happiness.

To sum up, Li Ping experienced dynamic professional identity development in the process of teacher socialization. These identities at different stages are illustrated in **Figure 1**.

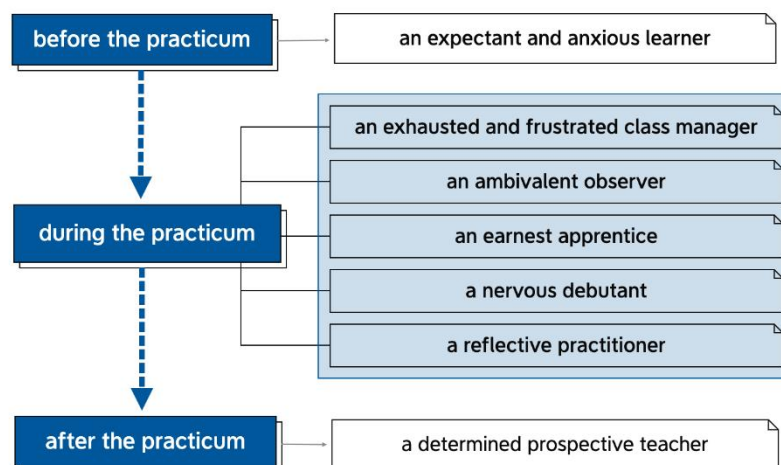


Figure 1. Li Ping's professional identities at different stages

Before the practicum, she was an expectant and anxious learner who was eager to learn to teach English but was also nervous about the new environment. During the practicum, she established five different identities: an exhausted and frustrated class manager, an ambivalent observer, an earnest apprentice, a nervous debutant, and a reflective practitioner. With the transition of different identities during the practicum, Li Ping gradually adapted to the new teaching environment and prepared herself for a teaching career. These identities were instrumental in her growth as an educator and in achieving a deeper understanding of the teaching process. After the practicum, she enriched her practical knowledge and gained confidence, which made her a determined prospective teacher. The process of teacher socialization encompasses how Li Ping becomes socialized into the teaching profession and develops her professional identity as a student teacher at the placement school. It involves acquiring the knowledge, skills, values, and beliefs that are associated with being a teacher and integrating them into her professional practice. Through continuous learning, reflection, and negotiation with the teaching context, Li Ping's perception of teacher identity gradually becomes clear and eventually solidifies her determination to pursue a teaching career.

DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that Li Ping experienced different professional identities at different stages before, during, and after the practicum. The whole process is a dynamic professional identity development via continuous learning, reflection, and self-growth. There were frustrations and confusion, but she persevered with her original aspiration. Her perceptions of English teaching, students, and self-cognition developed simultaneously. Her teacher knowledge has been effectively supplemented and accumulated, and her teaching ability has also been improved in the process.

The difficulties and challenges encountered during the practicum played a crucial role in the socialization process of student teachers. On one hand, the practicum exposed Li Ping to various forms of control in terms of teacher-student relationships and teaching routines. This organizational socialization influenced her perception and adaptation to the teaching environment. On the other hand, instead of being deterred by these challenges, Li Ping demonstrated resilience and determination. She actively sought help from mentors, supervisors, and peer student teachers, effectively stimulating her motivation and reinforcing her commitment to her chosen career path. The practicum experience not only shaped her professional identity but also served as a driving force for her continued growth and development as an EFL teacher.

The researchers also found that Li Ping's teacher socialization didn't align with Lacey's (2012) three periods of teacher socialization: the honeymoon period, the crisis period, and learning to get by or fail. The first stage of Li Ping's professional socialization during the practicum is not a honeymoon period, but a quick adaptive period. She had to adapt herself to the new teaching environment without a break, the extraordinarily busy routine and unexpected student-teacher relationship made her frustrated and exhausted. The honeymoon period actually occurred in the latter half of the practicum when she got used to the school routine and got familiar with the students. It was found in this study that the periods of Li Ping's teacher socialization are as follows: the quick adaptive period, learning to teach, the crisis, the practising period, the honeymoon period, and the reflection and

consolidation. Lacey's framework of teacher socialization provides valuable insight into understanding student teachers' professional identity development, however, it simplifies the complex process of teacher socialization and does not adequately address the influence of cultural and contextual factors on teacher socialization. The examination of Li Ping's teacher socialization stages offers a new conception of student teachers' professional identity development and complements Lacey's framework within the context of Chinese EFL teaching practicum.

Although teaching practicum is only a preparatory stage in the professional development of English pre-service teachers, it plays an indispensable role in the process of their growth into real teachers. It is challenging and involves tensions and compromise which makes it a stage when identity is least stable (Henry, 2016). Practical and reflexive teaching experience offers pre-service teachers a valuable "hands-on" chance with which they develop the initial repertoire of teaching and competence (Trent, 2013) and obtain a sense of professional teacher identity. Some challenges have had a significant impact on Li Ping's adaptation, such as a lack of classroom management skills, a disconnect between her teaching philosophy and the real teaching environment, and difficulties in managing diverse student needs. Through surmounting difficulties, reflecting on her classroom teaching, and collaborating with both peer student teachers and mentors, Li Ping seized these challenges as stepping stones to enhance her teaching abilities and evolve into a more proficient educator.

To enhance the professional identity of EFL student teachers through practicum, the researchers proposed the following three suggestions for EFL student-teacher education:

(1) The curriculum setting for EFL student teachers in the university should be optimized. Teacher education is the starting point of the growth of EFL student teachers, the courses related to English teaching generally include pedagogy, psychology, and English subject pedagogy, but many Chinese universities have a contradiction between "academic tendency" and "teacher education tendency", and in most cases, academic courses receive more attention than teacher education courses. The courses about language knowledge are still regarded as the top priority in the curriculum, correspondingly, the courses on language teaching are seriously underestimated (Li & Wang, 2021). As Li Ping reported during the practicum, the lack of practical knowledge and skills among student teachers is a common concern in the field of teacher education. Therefore, it is necessary to optimize the educational course set. The traditional theory-oriented curriculum should be transformed into a practice-oriented one, increasing the proportion of courses related to practical teachings. Only by providing more practical courses can the EFL student teachers gain more knowledge about English teaching.

(2) The cooperation between the universities and placement schools should be strengthened. In Li Ping's case, it was not until the seventh semester that she first stepped into the placement school. According to Pennington and Richards (2016), teaching contexts can have an impact on a teacher's professional identity, "one's identity as a teacher is relative to a particular national or regional and school culture, reflecting the nature of the students, other teachers, and school leadership and administration (p 11)". Therefore, universities should provide opportunities for EFL student teachers to become familiar with the placement school before their practicum. This allows them to prepare for the challenges and difficulties they may face in actual teaching, ultimately reducing the pressure on student teachers upon entering the placement school. It is suggested that student teachers visit the partner placement school during the first or second semester to gain familiarity with the future practicum context. Additionally, the role of mentors at the placement school should be given due importance. Mentors can demonstrate effective teaching practices, provide constructive feedback regularly, share valuable teaching resources, and offer assistance in classroom management. It is recommended that universities and placement schools offer training and rewards to the mentors as they significantly influence the professional identity development and career orientation of student teachers. Regular and frequent communication between university supervisors and high school mentors is also crucial, as they can collaboratively evaluate the performances of student teachers.

(3) The influence of a community of practice on student teachers should be highly valued. Wenger (1998) pointed out that the construction of identity was greatly influenced by the community of practice (CoP), and was a binary process that combined "identification" and "negotiability". In the process of teaching practicum, the community of practice involved the student teachers, mentors, class teachers, and supervisors. By participating in a CoP, student teachers are exposed to diverse interactions and perspectives. This exposure helps them broaden their understanding of teaching and learning, as well as gain new insights into effective teaching practices. Through participation in a CoP, student teachers also develop a sense of belonging and identity in the teaching profession. They begin to see themselves as part of a community of educators working towards a common goal. This sense of community can help student teachers feel more connected to the teaching profession as a whole, which can contribute to their overall job satisfaction and commitment to their chosen career path. It is suggested that student teachers should be provided more opportunities to actively engage in the CoP at different stages of teacher education and teaching practicum, helping them build a stronger connection with the teaching profession

through the CoP.

CONCLUSION

This paper presents a narrative research that examines the entire process of an EFL student teacher's teaching practicum. The study focuses on the development of Li Ping's professional identities before, during, and after the practicum, providing an in-depth analysis of her experiences. The research findings indicate that the student teacher constructed different professional identities at different stages. Because of the disconnection of university teacher education and high school teaching practice, the participant felt the gap between the ideal and the reality and then made the first leap from theory to practice. Her knowledge, particularly practical knowledge, was further refined and accumulated through reflection and hands-on experience. The study's findings shed light on the professional identity development of EFL student teachers through teaching practicum.

However, the limitation of the study should also be acknowledged. The findings of this research are based on the narratives of a single EFL student teacher. While this participant's experience may provide valuable insights for student teachers in similar educational settings, it may not necessarily apply to a broader context. Therefore, further research must be conducted to investigate a variety of practicum contexts with more participants in China in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of Chinese EFL student teachers' professional identity development.

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