

Teacher Professionalisation and School Engagement in Chinese Vocational Colleges and Universities

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to analyse the professionalism and school engagement of educators in vocational colleges and universities in China. The study classified the demographic characteristics of the respondents based on age, gender, professional experience, and specific areas of expertise. The study also assessed the respondents' professional qualities in terms of pedagogical knowledge, dedication to lifelong learning, ethical practices, and collaboration with peers. In addition, the study assessed respondents' perceptions of school engagement in a variety of areas including administrative support, technology resources, professional development, and mentorship programmes. The study used a descriptive research design involving 300 educators from 287 comprehensive higher education institutions and seven majors in Sichuan Province. The results of the study showed that the majority of the participants were between the ages of 26 and 45 years old and expressed mainly positive feedback on the training provided. The data confirmed that educators agreed on many aspects of professional behaviour, particularly in terms of teaching competence, commitment to continuous learning and peer collaboration. It is noteworthy that teachers' perceptions of professionalism were always similar regardless of length of tenure, age or subject of teaching. This consistency suggests that school engagement policies are broadly effective and do not vary across these demographic variables. Given the clear link between teacher professionalism and school engagement, vocational institutions may consider developing programmes to promote both simultaneously. In addressing both simultaneously, vocational institutions can leverage the interaction between teacher professionalism and engagement to build an academic ecosystem that benefits both teaching staff and learners. Finally, based on the research findings and analytical insights, a programme to improve school engagement and teacher professionalism in vocational education in China is proposed.

Keywords: Teacher professionalization; School engagement; Secondary schools.

1. Introduction

The nationwide social debate on the "Secondary 55 stream" has created a huge uproar, highlighting parents' anxieties and students' concerns about their post-vocational school prospects. Historically, vocational education in China has often been considered less prestigious than academic education, which has affected the recruitment and development of highly qualified vocational educators. The need for many teachers to have greater exposure to the latest industry practices and pedagogical innovations makes it challenging for them to provide relevant and engaging learning experiences for their students [1].

In addition, vocational schools often operate in isolation from the industries they serve. This results in a lack of exposure to the real world and a curriculum that does not adequately reflect the fast-changing nature of work; it is not uncommon for students to experience a disconnect between the theoretical knowledge they learn and the practical application of that knowledge, which questions the effectiveness of the existing educational framework [2]. In response to these pressing issues, this study aims to dissect and address the challenges facing vocational education in China by taking a closer look at two key elements: teacher professionalisation and school engagement. The researcher's degree highlights the need for a comprehensive reform and revitalisation of China's vocational education system.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Teacher Professionalism

A number of vocational schools in China have provided

rich material for analysing teachers' professionalism based on in-depth exchanges and co-operation with the "dual system". The "dual system" in Germany has a three-tier structure from beginner to advanced, intricately intertwining academic and practical training, usually in co-operation with colleagues from enterprises. The system's curriculum is business-oriented and emphasises the practical application of skills [3].

In addition to standards and guidelines, ethical practice in education is a deeply rooted moral compass. It encompasses fairness, empathy and integrity and guides interactions and decision-making in educational settings. Valentine et al. (2020) emphasise that ethical practice is increasingly recognised as a cornerstone of the teaching profession, particularly in vocational education where the relationship between education and employment is strongest. Raising students' awareness of ethical issues through directly relevant examples at an early stage of learning can improve their attitudes towards ethical issues throughout the learning process and in the workplace. The ethical responsibility of vocational educators is to teach and influence students, schools and the profession [4].

Conversely, some sceptics, such as Campbell (2019), also caution against the misinterpretation of professionalism with strict, regulated teaching methods. He argues that an overemphasis on homogenised professionalism may stifle teachers' innate creativity and lead to boring and uninspired teaching methods. School engagement in vocational education institutions is crucial as it is intertwined with teacher professionalism.

2.2. School Participation

Research has consistently emphasised the

multidimensional nature of school engagement. Epstein's pioneering work in the early 1990s led to the realisation that school engagement is not a single entity, but is made up of multiple dimensions. These dimensions encompassed everything from home learning to in-school decision-making, suggesting that engagement is a tangible presence that encompasses dimensions both inside and outside of school [5].

Belliet (2020) highlights a fundamental problem in educational research: an over-reliance on quantitative indicators. This reliance is evident in the typical methods used in previous research on how to measure student engagement. While these metrics are essential, they provide only superficial insights. For example, students may be in the classroom but not mentally engaged, which fails to capture the depth and complexity of student engagement, which involves more than in-person participation or getting good grades on a test. Rigorous quantitative research tends to miss this nuance. Traditional research has focused primarily on student attendance and engagement, thereby limiting the scope of engagement. True engagement encompasses emotional, cognitive and behavioural aspects that are not fully captured by these quantitative metrics. This narrow perspective needs to encompass a wider range of aspects, including the nuances of school management or the transformative impact of modern technology.

3. Quantitative Data Analysis

3.1. Professionalism in Terms of Pedagogical Knowledge

According to Yuan et al. (2018), explicit teaching is a trait that cannot be ignored in effective teaching practices. Explicit instruction bridges the gap between complex ideas and abstract theories and student mastery [6]. By simplifying and structuring information, educators can ensure that students understand the intricate details. To further enhance the clarity of instructions, educators can use visual aids and multimedia, analogies and real-life examples; involve students in parsing or summarising instructions to confirm understanding; and regularly check for understanding and encourage questions.

As emphasised by Kılıçkaya (2019), these assessments provide real-time insights into students' understanding and act as an immediate feedback mechanism. Unlike summative assessment, which assesses learning at the end of an instructional phase, formative assessment provides immediate feedback. This enables educators to modify teaching strategies and adapt teaching methods to the needs of students [7].

3.2. Professionalism in Lifelong Learning

This list of indicators emphasises the dynamic and evolving view of teaching and learning expressed by Ravhuhali et al. (2015). Educators continually develop, improve, and reshape their teaching practices in response to emerging research, technology, and feedback." Drawing insights from student feedback is critical. The evolving nature of teaching and learning is emphasised where feedback is a valuable tool. By understanding students' perspectives, educators can bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, ensuring that their approach resonates with the learning needs of their audience. The dynamic nature of using new instructional technologies in the classroom makes teaching stand out in terms of adapting to emerging research and technology, and embracing technology not just to modernise,

but to improve teaching and learning. As Ravhuhali, Kutame and Mutshaeni (2015) emphasise, the dynamic nature of teaching and learning requires adaptability. By integrating contemporary technological tools, educators can provide more prosperous, interactive, and engaging learning experiences to meet the diverse learning styles of the digital age [8].

3.3. Professionalism in Ethical Practice

Combining the insights of Bostic (2014) and Ibrahim (2020) further emphasises the depth and multifaceted nature of these commitments, painting a picture of a teaching and learning community that is rooted in empathy, respect, and continued growth. Recent research has begun to explore how empathy can enable teachers to deal more effectively with diverse student populations. Bostic (2014) deals with student misbehaviour not just as a matter of discipline, but as a way of fostering understanding and empathy. As Bostic (2014) emphasises, the use of empathy in an educational setting can significantly increase the effectiveness of managing a diverse student population. When educators approach misbehaviour with a fair and respectful perspective, they are able to rectify the issue at hand and develop a sense of trust and mutual respect. Such environments enable students to self-reflect, take responsibility and adopt better patterns of behaviour [9].

3.4. Professionalism in Working with Colleagues

Fonseca (2015) confirms this by emphasising educators' engagement, understanding, competence and positive attitude towards feedback strategies. Feedback is a tool for improvement in fast-moving educational environments such as vocational colleges and universities, and an important component in promoting innovation, enhancing curriculum design and adapting teaching techniques. As evidenced by this ranking, constructive feedback is no longer just a suggestion, but a cornerstone of improved teaching and learning, ensuring that educators are always responsive to student needs and instructional progress. Teacher teamwork is evidence of the collective recognition of the important role of teamwork in professional education.

3.5. Summary of Professionalism

While ethical practice is critical, it lagged slightly behind, with an average score of 3.06. This highlights a nuance: while educators understand the importance of ethics, excellent teaching and professional growth can sometimes overwhelm their day-to-day priorities. Lishchinsky's (2019) study explored whether the 2015 The International Standard Classification System for Education (TIMSS) Teachers' Questionnaire (TQ) whether it reflects teachers' general perceptions of their professional ethics. A quantitative analysis of teachers' responses to the TIMSS questionnaire in 45 countries resulted in a four-dimensional structure of the concept of 'ethics in practice': a focus on student learning, interaction with colleagues, respect for rules and teacher professionalism. The findings support the view that teachers' ethical behaviour exhibits both universal and specific national perspectives. The results of the study helped to raise teachers' awareness of their professional ethics and to mature the use of the Teacher Ethics Assessment Questionnaire (TEAQ) [10].

3.6. School Involvement in Professional Development and Training

This part discusses educators' perceptions of the significance and provision of professional development and training as an integral part of participation in vocational schools in China. Opfer et al. (2011) researched and explored three factors that influence teachers' professional development to improve teaching and learning in schools - the individual teacher, the learning activities in which the teacher engages, and the structure and support provided by the school for teacher learning. Based on survey data collected from a national study of teacher professional development in the UK, the impact of the three aspects of teacher professional development to improve teaching and learning outcomes in schools was explored. The analyses show that although there is a general lack of effectiveness and a lack of school-level systems and support for teacher professional development in the UK, the professional development and professional learning support of teachers in high-performing schools exhibits many of the characteristics associated with effective professional learning [11].

3.7. School Participation in Teacher Mentorship Programme

Such mentoring programmes serve as a bridge for transferring knowledge and assimilating institutional policies and teaching practices (Zhang et al., 2017; Alsaleh et al., 2017). Educators are not just passive recipients of mentorship, but also play an active role in this critical capacity building activity. The efficacy of the programme in helping educators gain a comprehensive understanding of school, institutional and national policies comes to the fore. This understanding is critical as it directly impacts classroom practice and promotes institutional synergy. This engagement reflects the reciprocal nature of the programme, whereby both mentors and mentees benefit from each other, creating an environment of shared learning and collaborative professional growth.

Jin et al. (2019) state that the essence of a structured mentoring framework is to ensure a smooth transition into academia for novice educators. Expert educators provide valuable feedback on pedagogy and play a crucial role in developing and sustaining the learning process of these novices. Lack of clarity in the objectives of the programme may result in missed opportunities to maximise the impact of the interaction between mentor and mentee.

3.8. Summary of School Participation

As Cirocki and Farrell (2019) reflect in many of their academic findings, continued investment in professional development is a cornerstone of improving the quality of education. Teachers need to update their knowledge and skills throughout their careers. There are five different approaches to teacher professional development: school-based learning in a collegial or mentoring context, school engagement in planning an academic career, forums or professional pursuits outside the school setting, government education reform programmes, and self-directed learning.

Technology and infrastructure and teacher mentorship programmes tied for second place with a mean score (3.05). This indicates that educators also value modern facilities and a collaborative culture fostered through mentorship. Akram et al. (2022) argued that technology and infrastructure lay the foundation for interactive and immersive learning

experiences, while mentorship programmes strengthen professional camaraderie among educators, which has long-term benefits for the educational ecosystem.

4. Conclusion

The majority of respondents were middle-aged educators, with a balanced gender distribution, long years of experience, and diverse fields of specialisation, reflecting the diversity and richness of experience of vocational education practitioners in China.

The findings show that the respondents generally have a high level of professionalism, which is reflected in their solid knowledge of teaching and learning, commitment to lifelong learning, adherence to the code of ethics, and co-operation with colleagues.

Evaluation results indicated that respondents were highly engaged in their schools, with adequate administrative support, satisfactory technology and infrastructure, professional development and training opportunities, and participation in teacher mentoring programmes.

Testing for differences in responses based on respondents' profiles showed that respondents' perceptions and experiences varied, which could be influenced by factors such as age, years of experience and area of specialisation.

The analyses showed that there is a significant relationship between the level of professionalism of teachers and school participation, indicating that the higher the level of professionalism of educators, the higher the level of participation in school activities and projects.

5. Suggestion

Most In order to improve the educational landscape in China, emphasis should be placed on the development of professional training programmes that integrate traditional and modern pedagogical methods and that are specifically tailored to the realities of vocational education in China.

Education authorities and policymakers should prioritise the strengthening of local and national administrative support systems to improve the overall quality of vocational education in China.

Vocational education programmes should meet the needs of local industries for vocational education while adhering to national standards to ensure consistency of quality and cross-provincial mobility of students.

Initiate in-depth ethnographic studies focusing on school-enterprise partnerships and skills enhancement for teachers and students in vocational education in China. These studies should explore how partnerships and pedagogical approaches affect skills development and employability, providing rich, context-specific insights for policy and curriculum design.

Policymakers are encouraged to utilise the results of this research to strengthen links with industry while maintaining the essence of traditional educational values.

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