



Exploring Career Satisfaction and Profession Identification with Affect and Symbolic Capital

An Exploratory Study Among Young Language Teachers in Border Regions of China

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Abstract. This study employs both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to explore the professional identification and career satisfaction of young teachers in border regions of China. It examines these issues from the perspectives of affect and symbolic capital. The findings suggest that affect and symbolic capital enhance career satisfaction, creating a virtuous cycle that fosters further positive developments in both areas. However, this research found no direct correlation between professional identification and career satisfaction. Based on in-depth interviews, the study reveals a mismatch between young teachers' preconceived expectations of university teaching roles and the actual demands of these positions. This mismatch has led to a distinct phenomenon where there is a cognitive separation between their professional identity as a university teacher and their day-to-day responsibilities, as some of the work goes beyond their definition of a teacher's job scope. Consequently, while young teachers may express satisfaction with their current job due to symbolic capital, there is dissatisfaction with their identity as teachers. This study expands the application of affect theory and symbolic capital to analyze professional identification and career satisfaction, highlighting the complexities of identification among novice university faculty members.

Keywords: affect, symbolic capital, profession identification, career satisfaction, young university teachers

1 Introduction

“Teachers are the foundation and source of education” (Sun et al., 2022, p. 1). This is especially true for higher education in the border regions of China. Over the last years, a large number of young teachers have become full-time faculty in colleges and universities with the increase in undergraduate enrolment in China. Many of them may lack practical teaching and educational experience in higher education, making it challenging for them to establish appropriate professional selves. Along with the growing demands for research, teaching responsibilities, and the intricacies of educational work,

new challenges emerge concerning these novice teachers' profession identification and career fulfillment. This paper examines the issues from two perspectives: affect and symbolic capital.

1.1 Profession Identification

Language teacher identity refers to "a teacher's optimistic attitude and a strong sense of commitment to the profession, reflected in the teacher's desire to maintain their profession and the degree of liking"[1]. This identity involves an individual's perception and affiliation with a specific occupation and their recognition of themselves as integral members of that working community[2]. Individuals' rational cognition and affective experience of the profession are intertwined, gradually creating a deep emotion and sense of belonging to the profession as "a professional identity is an important cognitive mechanism that affects workers' attitudes, affect and behaviors in work settings and beyond"[3]. This accumulation of emotions and sense of belonging ultimately contributed to forming a professional identity[4]. Therefore, becoming a profession and forming its identity is not a static but a "process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from'"[5] but "what we might become how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves"[5], which could be shaped by various factors including "early socialization experiences"[6], "cultural and social events and geographic environment"[7]. In light of prior research, this study narrows its focus to examine teachers' profession identification through three dimensions: a favorable outlook on their present roles, a commitment to further involvement in the field, and a strong sense of belonging within the profession.

1.2 Symbolic capital Interacting with Affect under Profession Identification

1.2.1 Having Symbolic Capital

Symbolic capital, as conceptualized by Pierre Bourdieu, is a form of capital that confers upon its holder a degree of authority, legitimacy, and competence recognized by others within a social field. Bourdieu describes it as authority that exerts influence through "legitimate competence" [8]. He elaborates on this idea by defining symbolic capital as an accumulation of "prestige, celebrity, consecration, or honor"[9], which hinges on "a dialectic of knowledge (*connaissance*) and recognition (*reconnaissance*)"[9]. The concept of symbolic capital, developed by Bourdieu, is "one of the more complex ones"[10] in his thoughts on practice, and "his whole work may be read as a hunt for its varied forms and effects"[10]. The term "hunt," denoting the act of pursuing or attempting to capture, can be interpreted positively as individuals' endeavor to achieve a goal. Similarly, symbolic capital can be regarded as individuals' pursuit of recognition and social status through distinctive competencies since the human innate desire is for a better life. Consequently, as individuals strive for symbolic capital, the recognition, honor, and uniqueness they acquire through their pursuits can bring them a sense of satisfaction. And this satisfaction will further trigger a new chase.

1.2.2 Encountering Affect

Some scholars have defined affect as encompassing feelings, emotions, or a perception of societal drives[11]. Derived from the “Spinozist-inspired philosophy of Deleuze and Guattar”[11], Massumi contends that “affects are not “mere” personal feelings but, rather, prepersonal and precognitive intensities that augment and/or diminish a body’s capacity to act”[11]. As for the “prepersonal and precognitive,” affect could be understood as “our unconscious response which precedes our conscious feelings and decisions”[12], and subjects are forced to “be(come) affected, feel some-thing”[11] through events. And in affect theories, bodies are the place where events take place instead of static entities but “ever-changing assemblage of signs, objects, bodies, languages, discourses, emotions, and so forth”[11]. The bodies here include “human” defined “by what it does and can do”[11] and “nonhuman” as institutions, space, time, etc. Affect theorists advocate possibilities, “openness, interconnectedness”[11] of bodies, and the ways “that affective encounters have the potential to, at any given moment, move us forward ↔ keep us stuck, mark our belonging ↔ non-belonging to social worlds, and attune us to the promise ↔ threat of each relational encounter: the “‘more-than,’ the ‘other-than,’ the different-than”[11]. Accordingly, affect can be seen as an unconscious driving force that motivates individuals to participate in actions based on various experiences that foster a sense of belonging, a key factor in profession identification. Professional encounters and experiences can potentially influence a teacher’s ability to engage and feel connected within their professional settings.

1.2.3 Integrating Affect and Symbolic Capital in Teacher Identification Analysis

Having prestige, status, and value assigned from capital symbolic, associating with a profession could give practitioners a sense of accomplishment or, at the very least, a positive emotional experience. Studies have shown a direct correlation between teachers’ job satisfaction and factors such as promotional opportunities, career advancement, occupational prestige, and salary levels[13-15]. And these are the tangible benefits that symbolic capital can offer.

At the same time some scholars have been active in the field of affect theories, exploring its relevance to pedagogy. Some scholars explore affective teaching strategies[16], and affective influence from psychological perspective[17]. The theory of affect has also entered the field of studying the value of people working in a particular industry with the concept of “affective labour”, defined by Hardt and Negri as the “labor that produces or manipulates affects”[18] because “affects, such as joy and sadness, reveal the present state of life in the entire organism, expressing a certain state of the body along with a certain mode of thinking”[18]. Ahmed further claim that “affect is “what sticks” and goes on to show how affect shapes societies, norms, and our work-life”[18]. Thus, affect and symbolic capital have this natural connection on the topic of teacher identification. Affect can present a state of be(come)ing of a teacher and his tendency to move, which is ultimately reflected in what they do. Teachers’ encounters in the pursuit of symbolic capital are then an intertwined conscious and unconscious process from body to cognition to action in which affect and capital are intertwined with emotions and motives.

The integration of affect with symbolic capital to explore teacher identification give us a better understanding with this profession. Numerous factors influence an individual’s decision to commit to a profession and actively defend their affiliation with it. While capital incentives undoubtedly play a significant role, viewing humans as merely capital-driven entities is reductive. Indeed, there are underlying reasons beyond benefits and interests’ considerations that contribute to one’s professional identity and dedication. One of them is affect, or humanly engagement. Teaching is a profession and an experience, and the journey of becoming a teacher is one in which teachers experience ups and downs but keep going.

1.3 Language Teacher Identification and Career Satisfaction

Social Identity Theory “indicates that an individual’s identification with their occupation could promote career satisfaction”[1]. Building upon this concept, it can be inferred that identification would positively impact job satisfaction among young teachers. Based on the above discussion, we can assume that “affect” and “symbolic capital” also contribute to job satisfaction. Despite this understanding, there is a lack of comprehensive analysis regarding the relationship between identification, symbolic capital, affect, and career satisfaction among young teachers in the higher education system.

1.4 The Present Study

In the present study, the hypothesis will be verified among young teachers in border regions from two routes: First, affect and symbolic capital contribute to identification. Second, professional identification enhances career satisfaction. The rationale behind these two areas of concern will be explored through the following three hypotheses (see Figure 1):

H1: There is a correlation between symbolic capital and affective under professional identity.

H2: Professional identity could be enhanced through the combination of symbolic capital and affect.

H3: Professional identity positively influences career satisfaction.

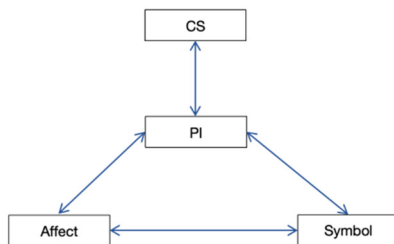


Fig. 1. The relationship between affect, symbolic capital (symbolic), profession identification (PI), and career satisfaction (CS)

2 Methodologies

2.1 Procedure

This study followed an explanatory sequential design, which starts with quantitative data collection and analysis, followed by qualitative research to explain, or elaborate on the quantitative results. The quantitative research, the questionnaire survey in this research, is “suitable for addressing complex research questions or investigating multiple dimensions of a phenomenon”[19]. The questionnaire converts abstract cognitive perceptions of teachers’ professional identification and career satisfaction into specific inquiry items, “enabling researchers to identify variations and make more nuanced interpretations”[19]. Based on results from quantitative analysis, semi-structured in-depth interviews, which are commonly utilized in pedagogy and translation studies to “gain a rich understanding of the study phenomenon”[20], were introduced to validate assumptions as well as probe into the hidden reasons behind those assumptions. The qualitative research approach could provide “the thick (detailed) description of participants’ feelings, opinions, and experiences; and interprets the meanings of their (referring to subjects) actions”[21] and are appropriate for understanding “the human experience in specific settings”[21]. In this phase, the participants’ experiences of teaching and research from the perspective of affect and symbolic capital will be explored.

2.2 Participants

A total of 38 university foreign language instructors in border regions of China comprised the final sample, yielding a valid response rate of 91.42%. These instructors were selected randomly with diverse backgrounds and affiliations with four different universities in the region. The gender distribution in the sample encompassed 16 male teachers (42%) and 22 female teachers (58%) with 7 different ethnic groups. Five of the teachers (see Table 1) were selected according to their age, professional title, teaching experience, and willingness to participate in interviews, as in a qualitative study, “a relatively small and purposively selected sample may be employed, with the aim of increasing the depth (as opposed to breadth) of understanding”[22]. None of the five teachers were permanent residents of the region before they began teaching at their schools, nor did they obtain their postgraduate diploma in the area. Languages taught by these teachers include Russian, Japanese, and English.

Table 1. Profile of participants

	Age	Gender	Education (Degree)	Experience of Employment
1	29	Female	Master	6
2	28	Male	Master	4
3	33	Male	Master	7
4	31	Female	Master	3
5	36	Female	Master	8

2.3 Definition of Young Teachers

Given the professional characteristics of university faculty, which primarily involve teaching and research activities, this study first defines young teachers as those engaged in teaching and with research responsibilities. The age range defining young teachers varies among scholars in China, with some considering “individuals aged 35, 40, or 45 as young teachers” [23]. This study follows the age criteria the Ministry of Education sets for young university faculty applying for research projects of the Humanities and Social Sciences Programs in China. According to the guidelines, young teachers are considered individuals 40 or below. In conclusion, this research focuses on full-time university faculty members aged 40 or below engaged in teaching and research activities in higher education institutions.

2.4 Statistical Analysis Strategy

There is a pre-tested questionnaire before the official experiment commenced through SPSS 27.0. Inappropriate items were then changed or eliminated, leaving a final list of 25 questions. After evaluation, the Cronbach’s α score of the amended questionnaire (reliability) registers at 0.943, suggesting that it is appropriate for the survey.

3 Result and Discussion

3.1 The Correlation

Table 2 depicts the interrelationships among the four dimensions, with the numbers in parentheses indicating the p-values.

Table 2. The correlations between the four dimensions

	Affect	Symbol	PI	CS
Affect	1			
Symbol	0.658(0.002***)	1		
PI	0.32(0.169)	0.586(0.007***)	1	
CS	0.623(0.003***)	0.517(0.020**)	0.345(0.137)	1

Note: The numbers in parentheses represent p-values; ***, **, * represent 1%, 5%, 10% significance level; Abbreviations: CS, Career satisfaction; PI, professional identity.

The correlations between the four variables are shown in Figure 2. The statistics show that there is a positive correlation between affect and symbolic capital, and both are also positively correlated with career satisfaction (CS) (indicated by solid bidirectional arrows in the figure). Surprisingly, the correlation between profession identification (PI) and CS, as well as affect and PI was not shown (indicated by dotted lines in the figure). The reason behind this will be detailed in the last part, along with the results of the in-depth interviews. In the following section, we will analyze and discuss the explicit results.

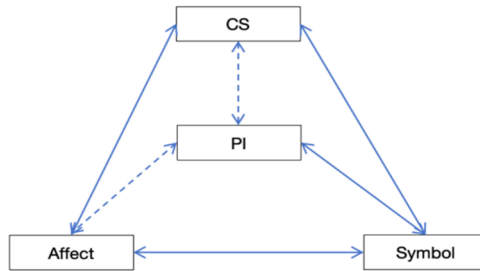


Fig. 2. The correlation between the four dimensions

3.2 H1: The Relationship between Affect and Symbolic Capital

There is a significant relationship between “affect” and “symbolic capital,” supporting the idea that affect propels people forward. Additionally, the results of this study show that symbolic capital consistently fosters affective appearance, creating an upward spiral link between the two variables. Specifically, a series of interactive experiences involving young teachers—such as their involvement in school activities, workplace dynamics, relationships with colleagues, and positive interactions with students—help build their symbolic capital. This capital includes professional recognition, acknowledgment, and opportunities for title advancement. As symbolic capital increases and consolidates, young teachers gain greater access to resources and opportunities, which in turn fosters a new cycle of affective encounters.

To accurately determine their relationship, symbolic capital is used as the dependent variable and the five questions in the affect dimension serve as the independent variables. As seen in Table 3, one of the questions with high correlation ($P < 0.05$) is listed.

Table 3. The Interrelationship between Symbolic Capital and Affect

Questions	Beta	P	VIF	R ²	F
Q16. While interacting with colleagues or students here, I suddenly found that my way of thinking, and behavior habits are gradually changing.	0.88	0.002***	2.564	0.72	F=7.192 P=0.002***

Note: ***, **, * represent 1%, 5%, 10% significance

Herein, a teacher’s response is picked because of its typicality. The question is, “What situation or thing made you feel this way, or what were you doing at that moment?”

“I was putting a lot of effort into getting ready for the Youth Teacher Teaching Skills Competition at the time. I asked myself why I had signed up at that time because I hadn’t anticipated the amount of pressure and labor involved. I could say no. When I recall it now, it just happened.”

- Female Lecture with 8 working experience

During the interview, this teacher reminisced about her experience engaging in a teacher competition. Beneath this decision lay a subtext, “I could say no,” which she ultimately did not. She may not have carefully considered the trade-offs but accepted the task with ease and instinct. This seemingly passive attitude has a very good reason behind it. According to the theoretical framework of “affect moves people forward,” the instructor advances because of her working environment and her coworkers’ behavior, which can be seen as bodies. She engages with these bodies, assimilating some traits from them over time. She decided to compete even though it is unpredictable and there is no guarantee of success. Most importantly, she demonstrated a movement by not back down in response to worries about possible increases in workload or even to consider this issue.

The next question is: Is this related to symbolic capital? The answer is yes. Although her discourse could not tell her ambition, it is still related to symbolic capital. Even though her speech omitted any indication of her desire, symbolic capital is still involved. The teacher’s participation in the competition was not unrelated to resource acquisition, even if she might not have been aware of it. Indeed, the teaching competition was endowed with a deep symbolic capital value by her educational and professional surroundings as well as the teacher management system. In this context, the teaching competition served as a showcase of teaching skills and knowledge and a symbol representing teachers’ professional identity, social status, and prospects for career progression. As a member, the teacher inevitably internalized this symbolism, thus opting to participate in the competition. On a deeper level, her participation and efforts were essentially pursuits and accumulations of symbolic capital, which not only helped her get recognition from her peers and leaders but also might have created greater opportunities for her professional growth.

3.3 H2: Professional Identity with Symbolic Capital and Affect

The findings reveal a significant correlation between symbolic capital and PI, suggesting that elements such as recognition and resource access are tied to teachers’ professional self-conception. Notably, teachers expressed considerable satisfaction with the research and teaching settings provided. However, the relationship between affect and PI was not prominently addressed in this study. The relationships that are not evident will be discussed in Part Four. For now, let’s focus on the explicit connections.

The information shown in Table 4 indicates a complex correlation between the PI and symbolic capital dimensions.

Table 4. Correlation between PI and Symbolic Capital

	PI
Q10 I am satisfied with the library and other academic resources provided by our university for my research.	0.293
Q11 I am satisfied with the system for professional title promotions and evaluations.	0.088
Q12 I want title promotions to access better resources.	0.435*

Q13 I want to enhance my teaching skills to earn recognition from the school, students, and the broader community.	0.716***
Q14 I agree that striving to improve my research ability can promote my professional title.	0.549**
Q15 I agree that working hard to enhance my teaching skills will result in teaching honors or awards.	0.654***

Note: $p < 0.005$, Standardized regression coefficients are reported. Abbreviations: PI: Professional Identification.

The table indicates that administrative issues have a negligible direct impact on PI, although participant perceptions of their research and teaching competencies have significant effects. Interestingly, factors connected to teaching have a bigger impact on PI than research-related factors. This could be explained by the fact that teaching skills, which are essentially procedural knowledge, could be acquired more quickly and easily.

“The training courses and seminars could enhance my pedagogical skills, enabling me to improve my teaching methods.”

- Female Assistant Lecturer with 3 working years

A subtle contradiction has been uncovered in this research. While teachers generally believe they can attain professional titles through their own efforts, they voice dissatisfaction with the current promotion system.

“I am generally content with the school’s professional title evaluation system. However, I perceive a growing difficulty in the evaluation each year, raising concerns about my ability to match the pace of improvement.”

- Female Lecturer with 6 working years

This teacher conveyed her worry about a possible discrepancy between the standards for professional title appraisal and her future potential. Quantitative research assignments are more challenging than subjective teaching assessments from students, as universities usually assess research abilities on measurable research projects and the number of publications.

3.4 H3: Professional Identity with Career Satisfaction

3.4.1 Cyclical Relationship between Affect, Symbol Capital, and Career Satisfactory

Derniko’s argument emphasizes the potential influence of affect on human behavior, which could push individuals forward at any time to clarify their belonging to a certain social world and align them with commitments. Combining with what Bourdieu explains “a habitual state (especially of the body)”[24], the “subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class and constituting the precondition for all objectification and apperception”[25], the dynamics of circulation (see Figure 3) link between affect, symbol capital, and CS can be analyzed.

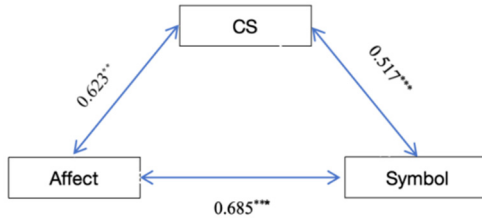


Fig. 3. Diagram of the Cyclical Link between affect, symbol capital and CS

Affective encounters play a significant role in the career advancement of young teachers. Responses to questions Q12, Q13, and Q22 in the questionnaire (see Table 5) indicate that young teachers are very interested in acknowledging and valuing their work. This desire motivates them to improve their research and teaching skills and helps form consistent behavioral and cognitive patterns within their professional field, or “disposition”[24]. In this context, affect serves as a link between their career progression and the accumulation of symbolic capital, which is “a way of being” [24] of a university teacher.

Table 5. Participants Responses of Q12,13 and 22

	Items	Strongly Agree	Agree	Partially Agree	Partially Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
12	I want title promotions to access better resources	47.37%	42.11 %	7.89%	/	2.63%	/
13	I want to enhance my teaching skills to earn recognition from the school, students, and the broader community.	47.37%	44.74 %	7.89%	/	/	/
22	I feel that my current job is respectable, holds high social status, offers good benefits, and is satisfying.	31.58%	44.74 %	23.68 %	/	/	/

Junior faculty members have more social recognition as their careers develop, including better welfare benefits and a stronger sense of self-worth. These motivating factors fortify their sense of belonging in their line of work and further augment their satisfaction. These teachers then put more effort into their careers because of their increased sense of belonging, accelerating symbolic capital's buildup. Junior faculty members gain prestige and position, opening new chances and resources for them. They can then engage in more meaningful interactions, such as detailed conversations with

professionals in their field of interest. These new engagements advance their professional growth once more, creating a positive feedback loop.

3.4.2 The Lack of Professional Identification

Previous studies have demonstrated a positive correlation between career identity and job satisfaction, as Sun demonstrated that “professional identity is significantly and positively related to teacher career satisfaction”[1]. Lu’s study found that “job satisfaction could significantly moderate the relationship between professional identity and burnout”[26], and Zhang further illustrated that “professional identity had an indirect negative effect on turnover intention through the mediating effect of job satisfaction and burnout”[27]. Ostad confirmed the “significant relationship between EFL teachers’ commitment and their job satisfaction”[28].

It was identified that most teachers express satisfaction with their work. This is evident through their proactive approach to nurturing research and teaching abilities and their eagerness to amass scientific research and teaching resources. However, the relationship between PI and affect, as well as PI and CS, is not clear, suggesting that individuals may not fully resonate with their assigned identities or that their job satisfaction does not stem solely from their professions. It is postulated that this gap could result from the teachers’ hidden duties. With the use of in-depth interviews, part four will investigate and discuss the possible reasons.

4 Professional Tensions

Based on the in-depth interviews with participants, it is found that the young teachers had a major conflict between their job responsibilities and their teacher identity. The root of this conflict is the mismatch between their own conception of what a teacher should be and what society or the school requires of them.

4.1 Anticipated Responsibilities

In a university setting, professional teachers are usually categorized into teaching-oriented and research-oriented[29]. In the university management system, year-end performance appraisals and professional and technical title review evaluation systems are two main assessment systems to measure the effectiveness and qualification of teachers. The year-end appraisal mainly focuses on whether teachers have completed their assigned research and teaching workloads, while the title evaluation is directly related to teachers’ research ability and teaching performance. Young teachers are under tremendous pressure to do research in the context of the “publish or perish” reform[30], which has gradually been adopted by China’s universities. They are expected to complete a quantifiable research workload within the contract period, including but not limited to the number of high-quality articles published and the number of successful applications to a certain level of funding research programs. Otherwise, they will face the risk of not renewing their contracts. Against such settings, young educators now view the advancement of their titles—which come along with their research and instructional

skills—as more than merely symbolic capital. It also means “job security”. Young educators, therefore, naturally see research and teaching as their primary tasks.

However, the social functions of universities are developing and multiple, including “learning and teaching, research impact, external leadership, and internal operations”^[31]. These four aspects do not exist independently but are intertwined and interact with each other. For example, student management involves three aspects of internal operations, learning, and teaching, as well as external leadership.

Professional university teachers’ roles are often simplified by young educators to just teaching and research. However, this narrow distinction overlooks the richness and diversity of a university’s social functions. As a result, they may feel confused and uncomfortable when confronted with non-teaching and non-research activities, which can negatively affect their PI.

4.2 Homeroom Teacher: Unexpected Role

Based on the interviews, the term “homeroom teacher” frequently emerged and negatively correlated with teachers’ PI. Participants identified themselves primarily as instructors of major courses but felt that taking on the role of part-time homeroom teacher was beyond the scope of their professional identity. The work of a homeroom teacher is diversified and includes, but is not limited to, the administrative management of the classroom, academic guidance, emotional and social support, crisis management, and parent communication. With the increase in undergraduate enrollment, according to official figures from the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, the gross enrollment rate in higher education has increased from 1.55% in 1979 to 60.3% in 2023, while this figure was 34.5% in 2013. This indicates that there is now more work to be done regarding student management.

In 2018, Tsinghua University explicitly encouraged full-time faculty members to take on homeroom teacher duties^[32]. Nowadays, “young teachers are selected and hired as homeroom teachers by colleges and universities”^[32]. This leads to a cognitive gap because, when they become university teachers, the young are expected to also serve as homeroom teachers, even though they rarely, if ever, observed full-time teachers performing this dual role when they were students, eight to fifteen years ago.

“Psychologically, I feel that these tasks can be reduced or given to a specialized person so that teachers can concentrate on teaching and research, but if it is assigned to me, I can accept it with some reluctance.”

- A female lecturer with 3 years working years

5 Conclusion

This study utilized a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods to explore in depth the dynamics between the four dimensions of affect, symbolic capital, professional intensification, and career satisfaction. After detailed analysis, it is found that there is a positive mutual influence relationship between affect and symbolic capital. Specifically, teachers’ affect encounters can stimulate them to pursue and actualize

their professional symbolic capital, and the gradual accumulation of symbolic capital will further promote the generation of new affective events, forming a virtuous cycle.

Furthermore, a positive cyclical link between affect, symbolic capital, and career satisfaction is discovered in this study. This suggests that the three are interdependent and supportive of each other. However, in the group of young teachers, we observed that they tended to set their work and professional identity apart, showing satisfaction with the symbolic capital attached to their work and the affective exchanges they encountered while holding a relatively negative attitude toward their professional identification. This inconsistency stems mainly from the fact that young teachers' perception of their professional identity lags behind the rapid social development changes, making it difficult for them to adapt and identify with the current educational environment quickly.

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