The Influence of Teacher Professional Identity on Conformity Behavior: The Mediating Role of Perceived Institutional Norms

Chuang Xu (iD)
Dhurakij Pundit University, THAILAND /
Hunan Institute of Technology, CHINA

Yuan-Cheng Chang[*] (iD)
Dhurakij Pundit University, THAILAND

Abstract: Based on institutional theory, this study explores the causal relationship between teacher professional identity, perceived institutional norms, and teachers' conformity behavior in colleges and universities in Hunan Province. A questionnaire survey was conducted on 500 teachers from two universities in Hunan Province. The reliability and validity test results and structural equation modeling analysis show that the professional identity of college teachers positively affects their conformity behavior, and that perceived institutional norms partially mediate the relationship between teacher professional identity and teacher conformity behavior. The research enriches the application of institutional theory in university organization and provides an empirical basis for universities to improve teachers' conformity behavior.

Keywords: *Conformity behavior, perceived institutional norms, teacher professional identity, university teachers.*

Introduction

Conformity is a common and widely debated social phenomenon in recent decades (Xu & Tu, 2023). It was considered an act of behaving in accordance with social rules or norms (Costanzo & Shaw, 1966). In other words, it is the manifestation of an individual's social impact, which stems from other group members (Allen & Land, 1999). Researchers have found that when individuals face peer pressure, their thoughts or behaviors change and they tend to conform to the group (Kiesler & Kiesler, 1964). These conforming behaviors are also commonly seen among university teachers, since university is a loose unity administered by formal and informal norms. For example, when information-based technical teaching software is implemented, many teachers will adopt the new mode of teaching, and traditional classroom instruction will be rapidly replaced. When the teaching competition is encouraged, many teachers actively participate, and the number of applicants increased significantly. Moreover, when classroom management is included in teachers' performance appraisal, teachers would spend more time dealing with and managing students' classroom performance. Oliver (1997) gave a good explanation for this; he believed that in response to the pressure of rules, norms, and internal/external expectations, individuals will adopt a submissive and compromising approach to reach assimilation and conformity. The cognitive norms formed by individuals or groups in specific social and cultural backgrounds regarding behavior, attitudes, values, and other aspects are regarded as perceived institutional norms, which affect the decision-making and behavior of individuals and groups in specific contexts (Scott, 1995).

In institutional theory, institutional norms influence organizations, compelling them to converge from a macro perspective if they are located in the same institutional domain and affected by the same external institutional factors (Hawley, 1968). However, the institutional influence on microlevel conforming behavior can be explored from three aspects: the individual, organizational, and interorganizational levels (Oliver, 1997). At the individual level, organization members, for example, university teachers, will follow norms, habits, and traditions, and their behaviors will consciously and unconsciously influence other colleagues, resulting in surprisingly consistent behaviors in some context (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). At the organizational level, the formal norms enacted by university management and informal norms, which are organizationally induced, are pervasive components of social life that contribute to the formation of human relationships (Fiori, 2018), leading to consistent behaviors by adhering to those norms (Wallace, 2019). At the interorganizational level, the pressure from the government, industry, and social expectations has also clarified what is

* **Corresponding author:**
Yuan-Cheng Chang, Dhurakij Pundit University, Thailand. ✉ yuan-cheg.cha@dpu.ac.th

socially accepted and expected organizational behavior (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Thus, the cultural connotation of higher education, the requirements from superior management department, the priorities of employing units, and expectations from society will all provide normative guidance for university teachers, which in turn will lead them to internalize various norms and generate consistent conformity behavior (Borry et al., 2018; Wallace, 2019). In summary, influenced by institutional norms, university teachers may produce rational consistent behaviors, which can be defined as the university teachers' conformity behaviors, in various aspects and at various levels.

Organizational identity is a key factor in internalizing various normative standards (Shamir, 1990), it can describe the psychological characteristics of individuals in a specific organization, and to reflect their behavioral pattern through the interaction with other group members (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Cheney and Tompkins (1987) defined it as the process of association between individuals and the achievement of organizational goals, thus it exhibits the consistency between the individuals and the organization, and explains the mechanism of taking the success and failure of the organization as one's own personal experience (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). For university teachers, professional identity plays significant role in enhancing their organizational identity and influence their conforming behaviors (Jabbari Maraghoush et al., 2021). Teacher professional identity refers to a teacher's recognition and understanding of their professional status, roles, and responsibilities. It involves teachers' perception and attitude towards themselves as educational professionals, their values and beliefs in the education industry, as well as their understanding and feelings about their role and mission in school and society (P. W. Richardson & Watt, 2018). An empirical study made in China proved that university teachers' professional identity has a significant positive impact on the organizational identity (Caihong, 2011). Both types of identity would increase teachers' sense of belongings, so that they would be more closely related to their organizations, thus triggering collective action under certain circumstances (Klandermans, 2002). Once a person identifies himself or herself as a group member, he or she derives self-esteem from that group membership and adopts behaviors consistent with the norms and stereotypes associated with that particular group identity.

Prior research has explored the impact of organizational identity on teacher conformity (Xu & Chang, 2022). However, whether the teachers' professional identity has a similar impact on their conformity behaviors should be further considered. In addition, the institutional theory posits that institutional factors, which are mainly presented as norms, attach great importance to the collective behaviors of individuals. Thus, the current study tries to investigate the relationship between the professional identity of university teachers' professional identity, institutional norms, and conformity behaviors.

Literature Review

Professional Identity and Conformity Behaviors

Teachers' professional identity refers to their attitudes toward their roles, students, teaching, and learning, as well as social and policy expectations for good teachers and the ideal teacher education (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). Some researchers believed that teachers' professional identity is a process that teachers can gradually develop and confirm from their own experiences (Beijaard et al., 2004). McGriff (2015) synthesized both ideas and believed that teachers' professional identity was not static but dynamic. However, for specific teachers in a certain period, their professional identity was a relatively stable attitude; therefore, it can be used as an indicator to investigate teacher professional development. Teachers' professional identity affects not only the engagement of teachers in their teaching profession but also their concrete professional work behaviors (Schaap et al., 2021).

Professional identity implies both person and context (Beijaard et al., 2004), which means that professional identity is related to the individual's personal experience, cultural and social factors, and legitimacy concerns. Therefore, teachers' professional identity contains the internal epistemology and the external requirements of being a teacher (Bradshaw & Younie, 2016; Chen et al., 2020). Roberts (2000) noted that the formation of professional identity is influenced by group pressure and external constraints; consequently, to alleviate the pressure and comply with the standards, teachers tend to engage in consistent and conforming behaviors with their colleagues. Furthermore, professional identity is a major predictor of behavior (Bird & Schnurman-Crook, 2005). Teachers with a strong professional identity comprehend their own professionalism and social expectations with clarity (Tickle, 2000), which means that they behave in accordance with the broadly accepted images in society and what teachers themselves find important in their professional work. Therefore, they will view their teaching profession as the symbol of their identity and will discipline and develop themselves by adhering to social expectations and professional standards. Thus, teachers will gradually exhibit consistent behavioral patterns. There is a significant positive correlation between teachers' professional identity and their conformity behavior, which means that the stronger a teacher's sense of professional identity, the higher the possibility of his conformity behavior in work (Ali Abadi et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2011). As a highly subjective and proactive group, university teachers have a clear cognition of their professional identity. The positive development of teacher professional identity can improve teachers' job satisfaction, teaching efficiency, and professional development (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Consequently, they would be more compliant with specified behaviors, primarily reflected in teaching, scientific research, and related work (Beijaard et al., 2004). An empirical study on English as a Foreign Language teachers in Chinese college also proved that teachers' professional identity shaped and reshaped in negotiating and balancing between personal beliefs and rules at the institutional, disciplinary, and public levels (Caihong, 2011), indicating the occurrence of conformity behaviors. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Teacher professional identity significantly affects teacher conformity behavior.

Perceived Institutional Norms, Teachers' Professional Identity, and Conformity Behaviors

Institutional norms are typically regarded as valid, socially shared standards for acceptable and expected behavior (Wilson, 1983). According to Wang et al. (2014), institutional norms are a combination of formal systems (e.g., government laws, rules, and formal organizational practices) and informal norms (e.g., social obligations, expectations, customs, imitation, informal practices, and beliefs). Perceived institutional norms refer to individuals' subjective perceptions of institutional norms that conform to particular behaviors and influence decision-making and overt behaviors (Hora & Anderson, 2012). Institutionalization is the process of modifying behavior to meet social expectations that are derived from norms, such as regulatory structures, governmental agencies, laws, professions, and other societal and cultural practices exerting pressure to perform in a particular manner (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Enforcing institutional norms allows individual members to express their central values and clarify what is distinctive about and central to their identity (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Barnhoorn et al. (2019) pointed out that professional identity can be shaped by attitude and process. Teachers' professional identity represents their attitudes and social expectations, and a process of mutual influence between individuals, groups, and organizations, which implies the effects of perceived norms. Furthermore, the formation of teachers' professional identity is a professional socialization process through which teachers identify and understand the norms and expectations of their organizational environment and future profession (Clarke et al., 2013). Therefore, with the formation of teachers' professional identity, their perceptions of the norms change accordingly.

Wicks (2001) stated that institutional theory may also be a microlevel variable that influences individual behavior. Whether informal or formal, institutional norms represent a rational actor behavior model based on conformity and sanctions (Wang et al., 2014). Teachers, whose profession is viewed as institutionalized (Barbour & Lammers, 2015), are inclined to imitate and conform by adhering to social rules and organizational norms. Therefore, college instructors are expected to adhere to written/unwritten rules or formal/informal norms when acting. After gaining experience by adhering to institutional norms, teachers tend to look internally for models to imitate, which also promotes conformity behaviors. The following hypotheses are therefore proposed in this study.

H2: Perceived institutional norms play a mediating role in the relationship between teachers' professional identity and conformity behavior.

Methodology

Research Framework

Based on institutional theory, this study explores the relationship between teachers' professional identity and conformity behavior, and the mediating effect of perceived institutional norms between the two variables. This study verifies the research framework using the structural equation model (see Figure 1).
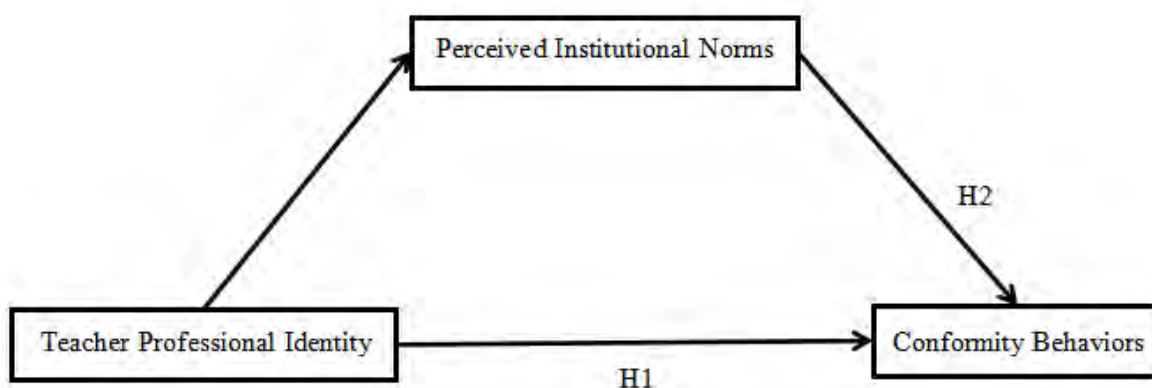

Figure 1. Research Framework

Research Participants

Teachers from two college in Hunan Province, China, were selected as research subjects using convenient sampling. Data collection is conducted through online questionnaire surveys, which are anonymous, objective, and can save time and cost (Wright, 2005). The quantitative method is more suitable since the purpose of this study is to reveal the behavioral characteristics of university teacher group. Questionnaires were filled out via private online communication during their spare time. A total of 524 questionnaires were distributed, 500 questionnaires were collected, with an effective response rate of 95.42%. The research subjects are university teachers in different positions, including teaching staff (like teaching assistants, lecturers, associate professors, professors, and etc.) and administrative staff (including directors, deans, and etc.). There are 254 male respondents, 246 female respondents, 198 young respondents who are under the age of 35, and 168 respondents who obtained doctoral degrees. This study was carried out strictly in accordance with the research

ethics requirements of the National Research Council of Thailand (National Research Council of Thailand, 2015). Participants were informed of the purpose of the study in detail before answering the questionnaire and signed the informed consent. All participants were informed that the research data were only used for this study, not for other purposes, and that the privacy of each subject was guaranteed. Moreover, they have the right to withdraw their data at any stage of the study.

Research Instruments

Part of the role-based identity scale developed by Welbourne and Paterson (2017) was adapted and then employed in the current research to measure teacher's professional identity, with six items from two dimensions, namely, occupational latent factor and the job latent factor. The sample item is "I will tell my family and friends about my job."

Meanwhile, perceived institutional norms was measured by Schminke et al. (2002) formalization scale, which was adapted to measure the strength of perceived institutional norms, a unidimensional measurement scale with five questions. The sample item is "There is a complete written job description for most jobs in this organization."

Lastly, teacher conformity behavior was measured using Xu and Chang (2022) scale, a unidimensional measurement scale with four questions. The sample item is "When all my colleagues receive a certain academic achievement or honor, I try to get it too."

All items were rated using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "1 = *strongly disagree*" to "5 = *strongly agree*." The original scale reliability scores for teacher's professional identity, perceived institutional norms, and teacher conformity behavior were .852, .730, and .848, respectively. In order to improve the reliability and validity of the research, a preliminary questionnaire test is conducted before the formal test. After item analysis, all items meet the standards and are retained. The reliability of the pretest was .891, .779, and .648, respectively, the cumulative explanatory variance was 58.2%, 43.8%, and 35.4%, respectively.

With the assistance of a doctoral student in English at Hunan Normal University, the two original English scales were translated into Chinese to make them more applicable and understandable for Chinese university teachers. The third scale's Chinese version was also measured.

Data Analysis

SPSS 22.0 was used to perform frequency allocation, percentage, mean, and standard deviation statistics on samples. AMOS was used for common method deviation test, reliability and validity analysis and path analysis of each scale.

Results

Reliability and Validity Analysis

The reliability and validity of the data were tested using AMOS. The results reveal the following: skewness = 1.177–1.540; kurtosis = 0.922–2.803; and the Maria coefficient = 20.414, less than 15 (15 + 2) = 255 (Curran et al., 1996; Mardia & Foster, 1983). Thus, the data were consistent with normal distribution. Meanwhile, the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) results are $\chi 2/df$ = 1.148, AGFI = 0.965, NFI = 0.981, CFI = 0.998, RFI = 0.977, CN = 603, indicating the model's goodness of fit (Hair et al., 2009; Schumacker & Lomax, 2004). The factor load ranges from .780 to .860 (see Figure 2.). Moreover, the construct reliability values are as follows: teacher professional identity (.923), perceived institutional norms (.921), and teacher conformity behavior (.890). The following are the average variance extracted values: teacher professional identity (.668), perceived institutional norms (.700), and teacher conformity behavior (.670). All values are greater than .5, indicating that the model has good structural validity (Forza, 2002).
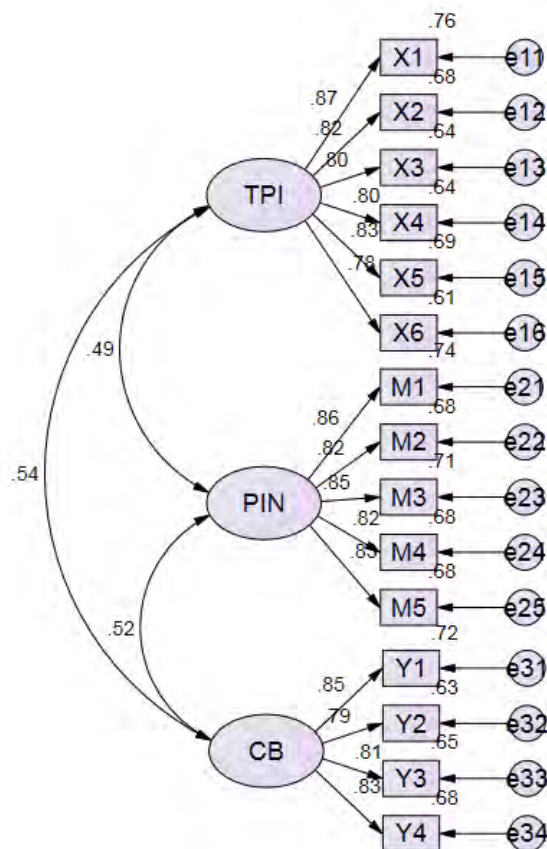
Figure 2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results

TPI: teacher professional identity, PIN: perceived institutional norms, CB: conformity behavior

Common Method Deviation Test

A comparison was made between the multifactor model CFA and the single factor model CFA, and the results showed that the multifactor model was much lower than the single factor model, and the difference was significant (p <.001) (H. A. Richardson et al., 2009). Therefore, the data in this study are not affected by the common method bias, and the relationship between variables derived from the data is credible (as shown in Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison Between the Single Factor Model and the Multifactor Model

Model	χ^2	DF	$\Delta\chi^2$	ΔDF	p
Single factor	2,095.170	90	1995.279	3	<.000
Multifactor	99.891	87			

Structural Equation Model Path Analysis

After performing a common method bias test on all items, this study used the structural equation model analysis to examine the impact relations between the various paths. After the model's CFA, the results of the path analysis show that teacher professional identity has a significant positive impact on teacher conformity behavior (γ =.544, p <.001), supporting H1. Moreover, teachers' professional identity has a significant effect on perceived institutional norms （γ =.489, p <.001), which in turn have a significant positive predictive effect on teacher conformity behavior (γ =.336, p <.001), thus supporting H2. Moreover, the indirect effect is. 489 *. 336 =. 164 (<.544), which is a partial intermediary effect (Figure 3).

The mediating effect was evaluated using the bias-corrected 95% confidence interval Bootstrap (repeated sampling 2,000 times), and the results (Table 2) showed that the indirect effect was between.101 and .243, excluding 0. It reached the significant level, indicating a mediating effect. The direct effect ranges from .259 to.507, excluding 0, which is part of the mediating effect (Cheung & Lau, 2008). Meanwhile, the mediating effect of perceived institutional norms is further tested using the Sobel test, z = 5.660 (p <.001), showing a significant mediating effect (Sobel, 1982).
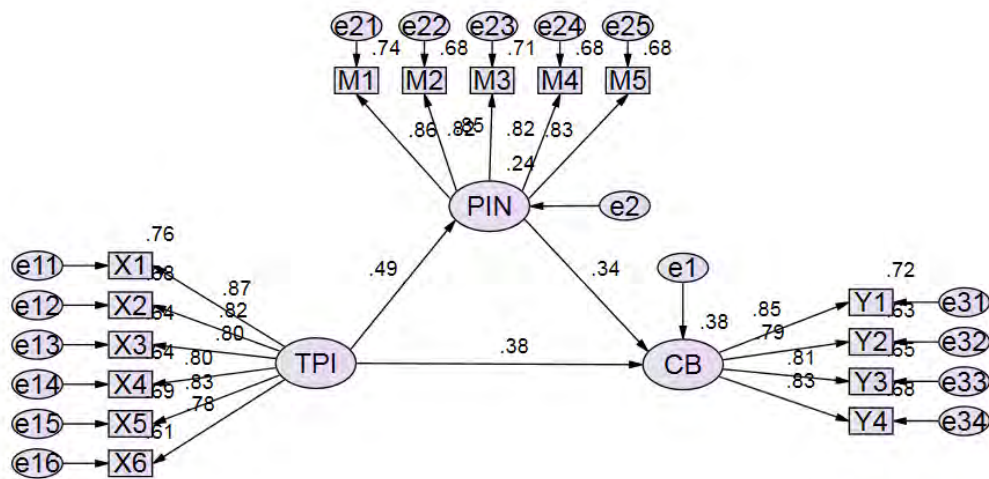
TPI: teacher professional identity, PIN: perceived institutional norms, CB: conformity behavior

Figure 3. Structural Equation Model

Table 2. Path Analysis

Model	Direct Effect[95%CI]	Indirect Effect[95%CI]	Whole Effect[95%CI]	Hypothesis
TPI→CB	.380[.259;.507]			H1
TPI→PIN	.489[.379;.581]	.164[.101;.243]	.544[.447;.632]	H2
PIN→CB	.336[.204;.449]			

*p <.05; ***p <.001

Discussion

Based on the investigation and analysis of the data collected from the university teachers in Hunan Province, the author examines the correlation and causality between the teachers' professional identity, perceived institutional norms, and conformity behavior. The following results are obtained.

Teacher's Professional Identity and Conformity Behavior

University teachers' professional identity has a significant positive effect on their conformity behavior. In other words, the higher the teachers' professional identity, the more frequent is the conformity behavior (Schaap et al., 2021). This is consistent with previous research findings (Bird & Schnurman-Crook, 2005; Roberts, 2000). Teachers with a stronger sense of professional identity pay more attention to the expectations and requirements of the group and the organization and are therefore more likely to conform to the group's behavior and opinions in order to preserve group harmony and minimize conflicts (Chen et al., 2020). On the contrary, teachers with lower professional identity do not know enough about their professional roles and responsibilities and are more likely to show relatively independent and rebellious behaviors. The professional identity and conformity of the teacher also promote each other. Teachers with a strong professional identity pay more attention to professional ethics, professional responsibility, and professional development (Ali Abadi et al., 2023); they are more likely to reflect on and improve their teaching behaviors, thus gaining greater recognition and ideological support (Lee et al., 2011). Conformity behavior can, to some extent, aid educators in gaining the support and understanding of colleagues and students, enabling them to better fulfill their educational responsibilities and uphold their professional values.

It is worth noticing that teachers' professional identity and conformity behavior are also affected by other factors, such as individual traits, personal experience, and working environment (Beijaard et al., 2004). People with a strong professional identity may be more easily respected and acknowledged by coworkers, parents, and students. Moreover, conformity behavior makes it easier for them to gain recognition and attention within the group and organization. However, excessive group conformity may also result in a lack of personalized and original instruction, thereby stifling students' innovative ability (Jefferson & Anderson, 2017).

The Mediating Effect of Perceived Institutional Norms

The results of path analysis reveal that perceived institutional norms mediate the relationship between teachers' professional identity and conformity behavior, with a partial mediating effect. That is, teacher's professional identity can not only directly affect conformity behavior, but also influence conformity behavior through perceived organizational norms. Professional identity is shaped through mutual influence between individuals, groups, and organizations

(Barnhoorn et al., 2019). Individuals' perception of organizational norms will be influenced by the subjective awareness exhibited by this procedure (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Shamir, 1990). The higher the degree of professional identity, the greater the belief that organizations are normative and fair, and the greater the willingness to reinforce internal norms consistent with institutional norms, resulting in institutionalized conformity behavior (Barbour & Lammers, 2015; Wang et al., 2014). Such behavior can serve not only as a basis for managers to judge the rationality of norms, but also as an effective means of enhancing the subjective initiative of organization members, generating internal motivation, and achieving organizational goals.

Conclusion

The current research revealed the relationship between teachers' professional identity, perceived institutional norms, and conformity behavior, showing that teachers' personal attitude (i.e., teacher professional identity) and organizational culture (i.e., perceived institutional norm) are of great significance on teachers' behavior. Given that the teachers' behaviors have the decisive strength for the university development, to some extent, their professional identities and perceptions of organizational norms are of utmost significance to the development and reform of individual teachers and educational organizations.

Teachers, as well as university leaders, should attach importance to teacher professional identity. As the primary component of a university's human resources, teachers are crucial for improving teaching and scientific research. Therefore, managers should strengthen the cultivation of teachers' professional identities, guide their active integration into the organization, and assist teachers in constructing their self-recognition and professional identities through school-based training, management system, teaching philosophy, and organizational culture. Moreover, teachers must be encouraged to collaborate more in teaching and research to increase conformity to their own and the organization's standards.

Meanwhile, universities should reinforce the construction of institutional norms. As the "ark" of the knowledge economy, the speed of college and universities' progress depends on the strength of teachers' "paddling". Only by making teachers' goals, thoughts, and actions consistent with organizational goals can teachers' "driving force" be given full play.

Recommendations

Colleges and universities should actively guide teachers to participate in organizational management and system review, and improve their sense of ownership so that teachers can closely combine organizational development with personal development. In addition, teachers should enhance their sense of identity to the organization from the perspectives of fair treatment, activity support, policy incentive, and psychological care to be willing to make new breakthroughs in teaching, scientific research, and other behaviors. Furthermore, paying enough attention to the construction of organizational culture can implicitly enhance teachers' professional identity and perception of organizational norms and promote the steady development of education.

Certain institutional standards should promote conformity among educators. However, excessive conformity may inhibit educators' innovative teaching and learning abilities. Therefore, in higher education management, teachers and university leaders should pay attention to the promotion of their professional identity and strengthen the cultivation of independence, creativity, and reflective ability, which can not only meet the group's expectations, but also more effectively realize the educational goals and personal development. Future research may employ hierarchical linear modeling for hierarchical analysis of teacher groups and can expand the dimensions of this scale and improve its accuracy.

Limitations

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between teachers' professional identity and conformity behavior in colleges and universities to provide empirical evidence for colleges and universities to strengthen teachers' professional identity and their perception of organizational norms to help colleges and universities realize conformal and leapfrog development from the standpoint of organizational management. However, this study also has some shortcomings. First, in the literature review, social norms play an important role in shaping teachers' professional identities. Due to the unique nature of university organizations, the impact of institutional norms on teachers' professional identity is not considered in this study. Second, this study measured teacher conformity behavior using a single dimension. Although it had certain reliability and validity, it did not differentiate between positive and negative conformity behavior.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of interest

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Authorship Contribution Statement

Xu: Concept and design, statistical analysis, data analysis / interpretation, drafting manuscript. Chang: Admin, technical or material support, supervision, final approval.

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