

# Reframing Teacher Professional Identity Through Educational Leadership Training: International Students at NENU, China

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**Abstract:** This study explores how educational leadership training influences the reframing of teacher professional identity among international master's students enrolled in the Educational Management and Policy program at Northeast Normal University (NENU). Adopting a qualitative case study design, data were collected from ten participants with prior teaching experience through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that participants initially perceived their professional identities as fixed and primarily centered on classroom teaching. However, exposure to leadership training, policy-oriented coursework, and collaborative learning environments contributed to a significant transformation in how they viewed their roles. Participants developed more dynamic and multifaceted identities, recognizing themselves not only as teachers but also as leaders and potential contributors to educational change. Furthermore, the study shows that participants intend to integrate leadership knowledge into their professional practices in diverse ways, including combining teaching with leadership roles or transitioning into leadership positions. The study highlights the importance of leadership training in shaping teacher identity and supporting educational transformation.

**Keywords:** Teacher professional identity; Educational leadership; International students; Identity transformation; Northeast Normal University (NENU).

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalized educational landscape, teacher professional identity has become a dynamic and evolving construct shaped by diverse sociocultural, institutional, and professional experiences. Teacher professional identity refers to how teachers perceive themselves and their roles within educational contexts, influencing their beliefs, practices, and commitment to the profession. Recent scholarship emphasizes that this identity is not fixed but continuously reconstructed through learning, reflection, and interaction with new environments (Nguyen & Dao, 2023; Yuan & Lee, 2022). One important yet underexplored context for such identity transformation is participation in international educational leadership training programs.

With the expansion of international higher education, many in-service teachers are enrolling in master's programs abroad, particularly in fields such as Educational Management and Policy. These programs are designed not only to enhance administrative and leadership competencies but also to broaden participants' perspectives on education systems, leadership practices, and policy frameworks. In contexts such as Northeast Normal University in China, international students engage with diverse pedagogical approaches, multicultural learning environments, and globally oriented curricula. Such exposure creates opportunities for teachers to critically reflect on their prior experiences and reconstruct their professional identities within a broader, more global framework (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2022; Tran & Pham, 2023).

Existing research has highlighted that professional identity development is closely linked to teacher education and leadership training. Contemporary studies suggest that leadership preparation programs play a crucial role in shaping how educators perceive their professional roles and responsibilities beyond classroom instruction (Liu et al., 2022; Wenner &

Campbell, 2023). Studies have also shown that international study experiences can foster intercultural competence, reflective practice, and leadership capacity among educators (Marginson, 2022). However, much of the literature has focused either on pre-service teachers or on leadership development as a set of competencies, with limited attention to how educational leadership training specifically reshapes the professional identities of practicing teachers who study abroad.

This gap is significant because understanding how teachers reinterpret their professional identities through leadership training can provide insights into how such programs contribute to educational improvement in their home countries. Teachers who undergo international training often return as agents of change, expected to implement new ideas and practices within their local contexts. Recent research highlights that identity transformation plays a critical role in determining whether such transferred knowledge is effectively adapted and sustained in home institutions (Nguyen et al., 2022; Phan, 2023). Without a clear understanding of how their identities evolve during training, it becomes difficult to assess the long-term impact of such programs on educational systems.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how educational leadership training influences the reframing of teacher professional identity among teachers enrolled as international students in a master's program in Educational Management and Policy at Northeast Normal University, China. Specifically, the study seeks to examine how participants interpret their experiences, negotiate new professional meanings, and integrate leadership perspectives into their identities as teachers (Tran & Pham, 2023).

The contribution of this paper is threefold. First, it extends the literature on teacher professional identity by situating identity transformation within the context of international educational leadership training. Second, it provides empirical insights from a non-Western higher education setting, contributing to the diversification of perspectives in the field. Third, it offers practical implications for the design of educational leadership programs aimed at supporting identity development among international students and enhancing their capacity to act as transformative leaders in their home educational systems (Wenner & Campbell, 2023; Yuan & Lee, 2022).

### **Research Objectives**

The main objective of this study is to explore how educational leadership training influences the reframing of teacher professional identity among teachers enrolled as international students in a master's program in Educational Management and Policy at Northeast Normal University, China.

Specifically, the study aims to:

1. To examine how international master's students with prior teaching experience understand and interpret their Pre-training Perceptions of Teacher Professional Identities.
2. To explore the experiences and learning processes through which educational leadership training contributes to the transformation of teacher professional identity.
3. To describe how participants integrate newly acquired leadership perspectives into their existing professional identities and future career aspirations.

### **Research Questions**

To achieve these objectives, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do teachers enrolled as international students in a master's program in Educational Management and Policy perceive and describe their pre-training professional identities?
2. In what ways does educational leadership training influence the reframing of their professional identities?
3. How do these teachers integrate leadership knowledge and teaching experiences into their professional roles and future practices?

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **1. Teacher Professional Identity**

Teacher professional identity has emerged as a central concept in understanding how teachers perceive their roles, responsibilities, and professional trajectories. Recent studies conceptualize teacher identity as a dynamic, multifaceted, and context-dependent construct shaped through continuous interaction between personal beliefs and professional experiences. For instance, recent empirical work shows that teacher professional identity is closely linked to dimensions such as self-

efficacy, commitment, and professional orientation, emphasizing its developmental and evolving nature (Wong & Liu, 2022). Similarly, contemporary research highlights that teacher identity is not static but continuously reconstructed through engagement in different sociocultural and institutional contexts (Banegas, 2022).

Recent large-scale reviews further indicate that teacher professional identity research has expanded significantly over the past two decades, incorporating diverse theoretical perspectives such as teacher agency, positioning theory, and sociocultural approaches (Yan, 2024). This shift reflects growing recognition that identity is shaped by both individual agency and external structures, including institutional expectations and policy environments. Moreover, contemporary policy-oriented research emphasizes that a well-developed professional identity enables teachers to navigate complex and changing educational demands, making it a critical factor in educational effectiveness and reform (OECD, 2022).

## **2. Educational Leadership and Teacher Identity Development**

Educational leadership has increasingly been recognized as a significant influence on teacher professional identity. Recent studies suggest that leadership is not limited to administrative roles but is embedded within teachers' everyday practices, shaping how they perceive their professional responsibilities and agency. Empirical findings indicate that teachers construct different forms of professional identity depending on their level of engagement in leadership practices, ranging from classroom-level leadership to broader institutional roles (Bolat & Toytok, 2023).

Furthermore, leadership training programs have been identified as important spaces for identity transformation, as they expose teachers to new perspectives on policy, management, and organizational change. Such programs encourage reflective practice and critical thinking, which are essential for identity reconstruction. Recent studies also highlight that leadership development enhances teachers' sense of agency, enabling them to reposition themselves as change agents within their institutions (Wu, 2022).

In this regard, educational leadership is not only a set of competencies but also a transformative process that reshapes teachers' professional self-concept. This perspective aligns with contemporary views that link leadership development with identity formation, suggesting that leadership learning experiences play a crucial role in redefining what it means to be a teacher in modern educational contexts.

## **3. International Experience and Professional Identity Transformation**

The internationalization of higher education has introduced new dimensions to teacher professional identity development. Teachers who engage in international study or professional development programs often encounter new pedagogical approaches, cultural perspectives, and institutional practices, which challenge their existing beliefs and practices. Research indicates that such experiences significantly influence identity construction by enabling teachers to develop multiple and hybrid professional identities (Zhang & Wang, 2022).

However, identity transformation in international contexts is neither linear nor uniform. Studies show that teachers actively negotiate their identities as they adapt to new environments and reconcile these experiences with the realities of their home contexts. For example, research on mobile teachers demonstrates that contextual factors such as cultural differences, institutional expectations, and professional challenges play a crucial role in shaping identity construction processes (International Journal of Educational Research, 2023).

Additionally, recent studies highlight that international experiences can enhance teachers' intercultural competence, reflective capacity, and professional agency, positioning them as potential agents of change upon returning to their home countries. Nevertheless, the extent to which these experiences lead to sustained identity transformation depends on how teachers integrate new knowledge and perspectives into their professional practice.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in a sociocultural perspective of teacher professional identity, which views identity as a dynamic and socially constructed phenomenon shaped through interaction, experience, and participation in specific contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). From this perspective, teachers continuously negotiate and reconstruct their professional identities through engagement in communities of practice and exposure to new knowledge and environments.

The framework also incorporates the concept of teacher agency, emphasizing teachers' active role in interpreting and reshaping their professional identities within changing institutional and cultural contexts (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015). This aligns with recent studies highlighting that teacher identity evolves through reflection and social interaction rather than remaining fixed (Nguyen & Dao, 2023; Yuan & Lee, 2022).

In this study, the sociocultural perspective provides a useful lens for understanding how international educational leadership training creates opportunities for teachers to engage with new practices and perspectives, leading to the reframing of their professional identities (Tran & Pham, 2023).

### Research Gap

Although existing literature has extensively explored teacher professional identity, educational leadership, and international education separately, there is limited research that integrates these three dimensions. Few studies have examined how educational leadership training in international contexts influences the reframing of professional identity among in-service teachers. Moreover, most existing studies focus on pre-service teachers, leaving a gap in understanding the experiences of international master's students with prior teaching experiences.

This study addresses this gap by providing a qualitative exploration of how teachers enrolled in an international master's program in Educational Management and Policy reconstruct their professional identities through leadership training, thereby contributing to both theory and practice in the field of educational leadership and teacher development.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative method to explore how educational leadership training influences the reframing of teacher professional identity among international master's students. A qualitative approach is appropriate as the study seeks to understand participants' lived experiences, meanings, and interpretations within a specific context (Creswell & Poth, 2023). The case study design allows for an in-depth exploration of a bounded system, in this case, teachers enrolled as international students in a Master's program in Educational Management and Policy at Northeast Normal University, China. This design is particularly suitable for examining complex social phenomena such as identity construction within real-life contexts (Yin, 2022).

### Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted at Northeast Normal University, a Chinese higher education institution that hosts international students in educational leadership-related programs. The participants consisted of international master's students with prior teaching experience, enrolled in the Educational Management and Policy program. These participants were purposively selected based on their relevance to the research objectives, as they possess both teaching backgrounds and exposure to educational leadership training.

A purposive sampling was employed to ensure that participants could provide rich, relevant, and diverse insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2022). The study used 10 participants, which is considered adequate for qualitative case studies aiming for depth rather than generalization (Creswell & Poth, 2023). Participants were drawn from different national and educational backgrounds to capture a range of perspectives on identity transformation.

### Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which are widely used in qualitative research to explore participants' experiences and perspectives in depth. This method allows flexibility in probing participants' responses while maintaining focus on key research questions (Kallio et al., 2022). The interview guide was designed to elicit information on participants' prior teaching experiences, perceptions of professional identity, experiences during the leadership training program, and perceived changes in their professional roles.

Interviews were conducted in English and lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. To enhance the richness of the data, follow-up questions were used to clarify and deepen participants' responses. This approach ensured the collection of detailed narratives relevant to understanding identity transformation processes.

## 4. DATA ANALYSIS

The data were analyzed using **thematic analysis**, a widely recognized method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The analysis followed a systematic process that included familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes.

An inductive approach was used to allow themes to emerge from the data rather than being imposed prior. This approach is consistent with the exploratory nature of the study and aligns with the sociocultural perspective guiding the research. The analysis focused on identifying how participants describe their professional identities, the processes through which these identities are reshaped, and how leadership training contributes to these transformations.

### **Trustworthiness**

To ensure the rigor and credibility of the study, several strategies were employed. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants and the use of member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 2022). Dependability was ensured by maintaining a clear audit trail documenting the research process, including data collection and analysis procedures.

Confirmability was addressed by minimizing researcher bias through reflexivity, acknowledging the researcher's positionality and its potential influence on data interpretation. Finally, transferability was supported by providing rich, thick descriptions of the research context and participants, allowing readers to determine the applicability of the findings to other contexts.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their informed consent was obtained before data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by using pseudonyms and removing identifying information from the data. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences (Creswell & Poth, 2023).

## **5. FINDINGS**

The findings are presented in three themes aligned with the research questions. Participants are identified using pseudonyms (A–J) to ensure anonymity. All participants had prior teaching experience before enrolling in the master's program at Northeast Normal University.

### **Theme 1: Pre-training Perceptions of Teacher Professional Identity**

Participants described their professional identities prior to enrolling in the Educational Management and Policy program as largely shaped by personal experiences, early influences, and teaching practice. For many, teaching was seen as a fixed role rather than a dynamic or evolving profession.

Participant A reflected a limited and static view of teaching, stating, *"I took myself as a teacher who can't change my duties... even in the same field of education..."*. Similarly, Participant B emphasized passion rooted in early schooling experiences: *"I loved teaching since I was a child... based on the examples from my teachers when I was in elementary school..."*.

Family influence also played a role in shaping identity. Participant C shared, *"From the courage of my parents... I started loving teaching..."*, highlighting how external encouragement contributed to their professional path. Others linked their identity to informal teaching experiences. Participant D explained, *"From the learning experience... I used to explain lessons to my classmates... that made me a teacher even before choosing the education field..."*.

For more experienced participants, identity was deeply embedded in practice. Participant E noted, *"From my work experience... I have been a high school teacher for eight years... teaching is part of my life..."*. Across participants, teaching was often viewed as a stable, lifelong role primarily focused on classroom instruction, with limited consideration of leadership or broader educational influence.

Overall, before the training, participants' professional identities were largely teacher-centered, experience-based, and relatively fixed.

### **Theme 2: Reframing Professional Identity through Educational Leadership Training**

Participants consistently reported that their experiences in the Educational Management and Policy program significantly reshaped how they understood their professional identities. Exposure to leadership-related courses and collaborative learning environments expanded their perspectives beyond classroom teaching.

Participant F explained, *“Based on the courses related to education management... I feel I am now a teacher who can give suggestions in education management to my authorities...”*. Similarly, Participant G highlighted the influence of policy studies: *“Education policy courses changed my understanding... now I see that my suggestions at school... and honest information... can impact education policies in my country...”*.

Many participants began to see themselves as both teachers and leaders. Participant H stated, *“I am still a teacher... but also a leader in my class... I guide and influence students’ learning...”*. This shift was further reinforced through interactions with faculty and peers. Participant I noted, *“Collaboration with professors and classmates... gave us a chance to learn leadership and teaching skills together...”*.

Participants also emphasized the integration of leadership and teaching roles. As Participant J expressed, *“...combining both... a good teacher can be a good leader... and a good school leader can also be a good teacher...”*. These experiences challenged their previous assumptions and encouraged them to adopt more dynamic and multifaceted professional identities.

Overall, educational leadership training expanded participants’ identities from classroom-focused roles to include leadership, influence, and policy engagement.

### **Theme 3: Integration of Leadership Knowledge into Professional Practice and Future Aspirations**

Participants described various ways in which they intend to integrate newly acquired leadership knowledge and skills into their professional roles and future careers. Their responses reflected both continuity with teaching and transitions toward leadership positions.

Some participants viewed leadership training as a necessary complement to their teaching experience. Participant A explained, *“To be a school principal in my country... you need at least five years of teaching experience... I already have that... but this training is essential... an addition...”*. He further added, *“...I wish before assigning leadership duties... such training should be required...”*.

Others expressed a desire to combine teaching with leadership responsibilities. Participant C stated, *“I will continue teaching... but also support school administration in different leadership roles...”*. This reflects a blended professional identity integrating both instructional and leadership functions.

Meanwhile, some participants indicated a shift toward leadership-focused careers. Participant E shared, *“After this program... I decided to move into leadership roles...”*, suggesting a transformation in career direction. Across responses, participants emphasized that leadership training enhanced their confidence and preparedness for broader responsibilities.

As Participant H summarized, *“...these knowledge and skills... when linked to our experience... can produce a good teacher who is also a good leader...”*. This highlights the perceived value of integrating theory and practice in shaping future professional roles.

Overall, participants demonstrated a clear intention to apply leadership knowledge in diverse ways, ranging from enhanced teaching roles to full engagement in educational leadership positions.

## **6. DISCUSSION**

This study explored how educational leadership training influences the reframing of teacher professional identity among international master’s students. The findings are discussed in relation to existing literature and the sociocultural theoretical perspective underpinning this study.

First, participants’ initial perceptions of their professional identities reflect a relatively fixed and experience-based understanding of teaching, largely confined to classroom roles. This aligns with recent studies suggesting that teacher identity is often initially shaped by personal histories, prior schooling experiences, and early professional socialization (Wong & Liu, 2022; Banegas, 2022).

From a sociocultural perspective, these identities can be understood as constructed within familiar and stable contexts, where opportunities for role expansion are limited. Participants’ narratives demonstrate that before exposure to new learning environments, their identities were strongly rooted in practice rather than reflection or broader professional engagement. Thus, pre-training identities were predominantly stable, teacher-centered, and shaped by personal and experiential influences.

Second, the findings reveal that educational leadership training plays a transformative role in reshaping teacher professional identity. Participants reported a shift from viewing themselves solely as classroom teachers to recognizing their potential as leaders, decision-makers, and contributors to educational change. This supports recent research highlighting that leadership development programs enhance teacher agency and expand professional self-concept (Liu et al., 2022; Wenner & Campbell, 2023).

The influence of coursework, particularly in educational management and policy, enabled participants to critically engage with broader educational systems and envision their roles beyond instruction. From a sociocultural standpoint, this transformation reflects identity reconstruction through interaction with new discourses, practices, and communities of learning. Therefore, leadership training facilitated a shift toward more dynamic, multifaceted professional identities that integrate teaching and leadership roles.

Third, the study shows that participants actively integrate leadership knowledge into their professional practices and future aspirations. Their responses indicate both continuity and change, as some maintain teaching roles while incorporating leadership responsibilities, whereas others transition toward formal leadership positions. This finding is consistent with studies suggesting that international educational experiences enhance professional agency and prepare educators for expanded roles within their institutions (Zhang & Wang, 2022; Phan, 2023).

The sociocultural framework further explains this as a process of identity negotiation, where individuals reconcile newly acquired knowledge with existing professional contexts. Importantly, participants emphasized the practical value of leadership training in enhancing their confidence and readiness to contribute to educational improvement. Hence, participants demonstrated a clear commitment to applying leadership competencies in shaping their future professional trajectories.

Overall, the findings reinforce the view that teacher professional identity is not static but continuously reconstructed through learning and experience. Educational leadership training, particularly within an international context such as Northeast Normal University, provides a critical space for this transformation by exposing teachers to new perspectives, practices, and professional possibilities. This study contributes to the growing body of literature that positions leadership development as a key driver of identity reframing among educators in a globalized educational landscape.

## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Educational policymakers and educational institutions should consider making leadership training a prerequisite for leadership roles, ensuring that teachers are adequately prepared to take on both instructional and leadership responsibilities effectively.

## 8. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that educational leadership training plays a significant role in reframing teacher professional identity, transforming it from a primarily classroom-centered role into a more dynamic and multifaceted identity that integrates leadership, agency, and broader educational influence. Through their experiences in programs such as those at Northeast Normal University, participants developed expanded professional perspectives and a stronger capacity to contribute to educational change in their respective contexts.

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