

## Identity Development: Analyzing the Professional Identity of After-school Tutors in China's Competitive Private Education Sector

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### ABSTRACT

After-school tutoring has grown rapidly in China, employing millions of tutors. However, little research explores these tutors' professional identity development. This study aims to understand the factors shaping tutors' professional identity in Nanning's private tutoring sector. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 experienced tutors in Nanning selected through purposive sampling. The interview questions explored four dimensions of professional identity and influencing factors. Transcripts were analyzed using qualitative coding techniques. Major Findings show that Tutors' professional identity is shaped by their values, academic background, relationships, and work context. Passion for teaching competes with business priorities. Role confusion and lack of belonging challenge identity. Clear expectations, training, and institutional support are needed. The study concludes that by analyzing tutors' identity formation, this study provides insights into strengthening the tutoring profession. Regular training programs, positive student-tutor relationships, and a supportive work environment can enhance tutors' professional identity. Findings inform policies on tutor development in China's expanding private tutoring industry.

**Keywords:** Professional Identity, After-school Tutors China, Development Guidelines

### 1. INTRODUCTION

After-school tutoring has gained popularity globally, with practically every nation now offering some form of after-school instruction. The after-school tutoring industry's market size in primary and secondary schools exceeded 800 billion yuan, with more than 137 million students and 7 million to 8.5 million teachers in tutoring institutions in China alone (China Daily, 2021). The high participation rates in math, foreign languages, and natural sciences among students in countries such as Greece, South Korea, and Bulgaria, have made after-school tutoring grow significantly throughout the last 25 years of the 20th century, especially in East Asia (Bray, 2022). However, after-school tutoring has social, economic, and pedagogical ramifications that researchers and policymakers are starting to pay special attention to.

A strong professional identity is important for individuals as it provides a sense of purpose and direction, builds trust and credibility with colleagues and clients, and facilitates ongoing learning and development (Zhao, 2022). The original, definitive concept of "professional identity" is not attributed to a single source or individual. It is a concept that has evolved over time through scholarly research and discourse in various fields, including education, psychology, and organizational studies. Generally speaking, professional identity refers to the characteristics, values, beliefs, and behaviors that define an individual's professional role and identity within a particular field or industry. The study explores the outcomes and processes of after-school education teachers' identities to understand whether tutors can reconcile their dual identities and how they understand and develop their identities, contributing to an in-depth understanding of

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the nature and characteristics of their profession and the trajectories of their actions under the influence of their identities.

With tutoring's commercialization, tutors balance profit motives and educational values (Kwo & Bray, 2014). By interviewing experienced tutors, this study examines factors shaping their identity and recommends enhancing their growth and status as professionals, addressing a key gap in research. The research includes interviews with K-12 extracurricular tutors, encompassing subjects such as arts, sports, and academic disciplines, providing a comprehensive perspective on the diverse roles these educators play in the tutoring industry. The research questions are:

1. What factors influence the professional identity of experienced private tutors in Nanning?
2. How can tutors' professional identity and development be strengthened through policy and institutional support?

This study contributes new insights into tutors' identity formation amidst the privatization of education. Findings will inform efforts to elevate tutoring as a profession in China's expanding after-school industry.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Shadow education / After-school tutoring education / Extracurricular education**

The term "shadow education" originated from a study on out-of-school private tuition conducted by the International Development Research Centre of Canada in the early 1990s (Zhang & Bray 2020).

Bray (2022) defined shadow education as fee-based, subject-based, and supplemental tutoring.

In China, Wang (1997) was the first to define after-school tutoring as private and remedial instruction for primary and secondary school students.

Peng (2007) summary of foreign studies on extracurricular tuition revealed that it is privately funded and complements mainstream education based on academic curricula.

### **2.2 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and teachers' professional identities**

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a theory proposed by Abraham Maslow in his 1943 paper "A theory of Human Motivation" (Maslow, 1943).

The connection between Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory and teachers' professional identity has been explored in various studies. Maslow's theory, which posits a hierarchy of human needs from physiological needs to self-actualization, has been applied to understand the needs and motivations of teachers in their professional roles. For instance, a study by Yilmaz & Ilhan (2017) touches upon how Maslow's hierarchy and the hierarchy of teachers' identities intersect, suggesting that the fulfillment of basic needs influences teachers' professional identity.

Additionally, the work of Xu (2023) indicates the importance of belonging and love, components of Maslow's hierarchy, in shaping teachers' sense of professional identity. These studies collectively highlight how the satisfaction of different levels of needs as per Maslow's theory can impact the development and perception of a teacher's professional identity.

### **2.3 Factors influencing teachers' identity**

Research by Van et al. (2017) reveals that engagement in staff development programs and continuous learning can shape teachers' professional identities.

Wang (2018) research highlighted that formal state training, improved educational backgrounds, and increased state emphasis on youth physical fitness have significantly enhanced the identity of Chinese primary and secondary school physical education teachers.

Zhang and Wang (2021) research demonstrated that the workplace environment and contextual factors, such as school culture and leadership, have a substantial influence on a teacher's identity. Teachers' personal backgrounds and experiences can influence how they perceive their professional identity.

#### **2.4 A structural study of teachers' professional identity**

Chinese scholar Wei (2008) introduced a four-dimensional model for teachers' professional identity, which includes centrality, valence, solidarity, and self-presentation. In her doctoral dissertation, Wei Shuhua conducted a comprehensive study, combining theoretical development and empirical research. Her findings identified that the professional identity structure of Chinese primary and secondary school teachers comprises four dimensions: occupational values, role values, occupational sense of belonging, and occupational behavioral tendencies.

Fang and Mao (2018) developed the "University Teachers' Professional Identity Questionnaire" based on four dimensions: professional value identity, professional emotional identity, professional competence identity, and professional social status identity. He conducted a questionnaire survey with 441 university teachers and found that the current level of professional identity among university teachers is generally moderate.

In contemporary research, the focus often lies on clarifying the structural aspects of teacher identity using literature analysis, which results in the development of a multidimensional structural framework. Nonetheless, there remains a lack of unanimous agreement on this subject. In the present study, the researcher introduces a four-dimensional framework to encompass teacher identity, comprising professional cognition, professional emotion, professional will, and professional behaviors.

#### **2.5 Double Reduction Policy**

In July 2021, the Chinese government released the "Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and Off-campus Tutoring for Students at the Stage of Compulsory Education" policy, known as the Double Reduction (双减) policy (CCP Central Committee & State Council, 2021). This landmark education reform aims to ease excessive academic pressure on primary and secondary school students by reducing excessive homework and restricting after-school tutoring institutions (ASTIs) (Yuan, 2022).

Specifically, the Double Reduction policy includes measures such as banning written homework for first and second graders, capping daily written homework time, improving quality of in-school teaching, expanding after-school services, tightening approval and regulation of ASTIs, controlling tutoring fees, and enhancing coordination across government departments (CCP Central Committee & State Council, 2021). This reform responds to public concerns about student overwork and reflects the government's increasing prioritization of child wellbeing over academic achievement (Zuo, 2021).

Early research shows the policy has led to positive changes like less homework and reduced tutoring participation, but there are ongoing challenges in implementation and monitoring (Zhou & Peng, 2023). Critics argue the top-down approach overemphasizes control and neglects providing quality public education alternatives (Wang, 2021). The "Double Reduction" policy signals a historic shift in China's competitive education system, but further research is needed on its long-term effects on educational equity, quality, and student development.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

To study the current situation of tutors' professional identity in private institutes and further optimization of professional identity, the researchers have the following procedures.

### 3.1 The Sample Group

This qualitative study explores the professional identity of tutors at private after-school tutoring institutions in Nanning, China. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 tutors to gain insights into factors shaping their professional identity and recommendations for enhancing it. Notably, interviews were conducted in Chinese and translated to English by the researcher.

### 3.2 Participant Selection

Purposive sampling was used to recruit experienced tutors in leadership roles at reputable institutes who could provide rich perspectives. Tutors had to have at least 5 years of experience and be willing to participate in hour-long interviews. The small sample size of 10 enabled deeper exploration of individuals' experiences.

### 3.3 Data Collection and Interviewee Recruitment

The recruitment strategy leverages the researcher's personal and professional networks, involving colleagues, friends, and acquaintances in the search for suitable interviewees. Potential participants are required to meet specific recognition and success criteria, including:

**Experience:** A minimum of 5 years' experience as a private tutor or coach in a tutoring institution.

**Position:** Holding a title indicating a level of responsibility within the institution, such as head tutor, senior tutor, or tutor supervisor, or being the institution owner.

**Diversity:** An effort is made to ensure a gender-balanced representation among the interviewees.

**Variety:** A mix of subject tutors and interest-based class tutors is sought among the interviewees.

These eligibility criteria are designed to identify experienced and successful tutors with a comprehensive understanding of the tutoring industry, contributing to the exploration of their professional identity, challenges, rewards, and motivations.

Before interviews commence, a series of key preparation steps are taken:

**Equipment Testing:** The researcher rigorously tests the equipment, ensuring the functionality of recording devices and audio quality. Adequate memory capacity is verified to capture the entire interview.

**Location Selection:** Interviews are conducted in a comfortable and private setting, either at a quiet cafe or via online platforms like Tencent Meeting.

**Informing Participants:** Potential interviewees receive detailed information about the study, including its purpose, expected time commitment, and any incentives for participation. The voluntary nature of their involvement and the option to withdraw from the study at any point are emphasized during this pre-interview communication.

In summary, the data collection and recruitment strategy is strategically structured to gather insights from experienced and successful tutors in the private tutoring sector. The preparation process ensures the technical and ethical integrity of the interviews, ultimately contributing to a comprehensive understanding of their professional identities and experiences.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

Transcripts were coded using thematic analysis to identify common themes related to the research questions on factors influencing tutor identity and ways to strengthen it. Key themes were categorized, interpreted, and reported with illustrative quotes.

## 4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

### 4.1 Basic Information

**Table 1** Background of ten tutors

Item	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
-Male	4	40%
-Female	6	60%
Age		
-25 to 30	6	60%
-31 and above	4	40%
Duration of Tutoring Career		
-5 years to 10 years	8	80%
-11 years and above	2	20%
Education Level		
-Diploma	2	20%
-Bachelor	6	60%
-Master	2	20%
Current Position		
-Owner	4	40%
-Employee	6	60%
Duty		
-Administration and teaching	5	50%
-Teaching or coaching	5	50%
Qualification		
-Teacher qualification certificate	6	60%
-Other professional qualification		
-Both	2	20%
	2	20%
Teaching Training Programme		
-Yes	10	100%
-No	0	0
Understanding of Professional Identity		
-Yes	9	90%
-No	1	10%

Table 1 presents the demographic and professional background of ten tutors. The table is structured around various items, including gender, age, duration of tutoring career, education level, current position, duty, qualification, teaching training, and understanding of professional identity. The data is presented in terms of frequency and percentage.

### 4.2 Professional Cognition

The interviews revealed that most tutors primarily identified as teachers driven by a passion for education. As a 35-year-old male English tutor stated: "I see myself as a teacher first. My goal is to help

students learn, not just earn a paycheck." (Interviewee A). This aligns with previous research showing that identity stems from perceived purpose and personal values (Beijaard et al., 2004).

However, some tutors also acknowledged their dual role as business owners and employees tasked with administrative duties. A 29-year-old female piano tutor explained: "While teaching is my priority, I have to balance that with managing institute operations and sales. The business side is a necessity" (Interviewee B). This highlights the tensions tutors face between professional values and market realities (Kwo & Bray, 2014).

All tutors emphasized the importance of continuous training, such as the 37-year-old male basketball coach who stated: "Regular coaching workshops help me improve and stay updated on new techniques" (Interviewee C). This links to literature on the need for ongoing professional development to strengthen identity (Trent, 2010).

#### **4.3 Professional Emotion**

The tutors expressed general satisfaction and support in their roles. A 45-year-old female Chinese literature tutor said: "I feel fulfilled when students make progress thanks to my teaching" (Interviewee D). However, some noted role confusion, like the 32-year-old male math tutor who stated: "I sometimes feel torn between my duties as an educator and an employee" (Interviewee E). Literature shows teacher identity can be fragmented when responsibilities conflict (Pillen et al., 2013).

Positive student feedback is indeed a significant motivator for teachers and plays a crucial role in sustaining their professional identity. This is highlighted in the work of Izadinia (2014) who reviewed the literature on teacher educators' identity. According to Izadinia, such affirmation from students helps teachers validate their efforts and contributes to the development and maintenance of their professional identity. This concept is supported by the statement of a 28-year-old male fine arts tutor who finds validation in student feedback, emphasizing the importance of positive reinforcement in their teaching role (Izadinia, 2014).

#### **4.4 Professional Will**

The tutors emphasized goal-setting, rest, and values alignment to maintain motivation and withstand pressure. However some described ethical dilemmas regarding fees and student placement. As a 55-year-old female logical thinking tutor explained: "I want to help every student succeed, but sometimes their needs exceed my qualifications" (Interviewee G). Research shows such dilemmas can undermine educators' sense of purpose (Elango et al., 2015).

Most tutors prioritized their teaching responsibilities over other interests when needed. However, literature suggests a prolonged imbalance between work and life can threaten professionals (Cinamon, 2016).

#### **4.5 Professional Behavior**

Behaviors like preparation, parent communication, and caring for students were seen as vital. A 25-year-old male basketball coach stated: "Lesson planning and rapport with parents are key to being a professional tutor" (Interviewee H). Sales skills also proved important for some tutors' incomes and institutions' success. But there are concerns such commercial activities could detract from teaching quality (Zhang, 2014).

Institutes that provided training, incentives, and clear expectations helped reinforce positive behaviors. As a 40-year-old female fine arts tutor explained: "Workshops on communicating with parents have really boosted my confidence" (Interviewee I). This aligns with research showing organizational support aids teacher identity (Schepens et al., 2009).

## 5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored the professional identity of experienced tutors at after-school private institutes in Nanning, China. The findings reveal the multifaceted nature of tutors' identities shaped by their values, relationships, and work context.

Most tutors were driven by a passion for education, which competed with business priorities. This echoes previous research on marketized tutoring. However, this study provides a nuanced perspective on how tutors navigate this tension.

Tutors expressed role confusion but felt pride seeing students' progress, aligning with literature on emotional impacts. This study enriches understanding of tutors' specific challenges and motivations.

Setting goals and upholding ethics sustained motivation, though dilemmas arose regarding fees and student-fit, furthering insights into tutors' will. Balancing obligations also proved difficult, highlighting risks of work-life imbalance.

Required behaviors like communication and caring were central for tutors, though sales skills presented a quandary between quality and revenue, an issue this study explores in depth. Institutional support aided growth.

In summary, by analyzing tutors' identity formation, this study offers new perspectives on strengthening tutoring as a profession amidst the privatization of education in China. Recommendations around clarifying roles, enhancing training, and elevating status can help tutors develop a coherent identity and thrive. Further research on policies supporting tutors is warranted.

## 6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDIES

For a more comprehensive understanding of the after-school tutoring industry's impact and policy regulations, future research should expand its scope. This includes gathering data from a larger and more diverse group of teachers across different institutions. Recognizing that each teacher's background, experiences, beliefs, and values are distinct and may change over time is crucial. Moreover, as this study primarily focuses on teachers in small institutions and studios, future studies should more accurately categorize the target population to enhance research precision.

**Author contributions:** Huang Rui was responsible for the conception, design, and writing of the manuscript. The advisors provided critical revisions, guidance on the research direction, and insightful feedback to enhance the study's quality and integrity. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Consent to Participate:** All the respondents were informed about the objectives of the study. They were informed that they could withdraw from the interview at any stage when they felt uneasy or did not want to participate. All the informants were also informed that their personal information would not be exposed. The researchers followed all other ethical guidelines necessary for qualitative study.

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**Declaration Statement of Generative AI:** This statement serves to affirm that no artificial intelligence (AI) was utilized in this study, with the sole exception being for grammar-checking purposes.

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