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Constructing Identity where it Matters: Sociocultural Factors Influencing Pre-service EFL Teachers during Rural Teaching Practicums in China

Wenjie Wu* 

Universiti Putra Malaysia
 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia
 Handan University
 Handan, Hebei, China

Norhakimah Khaiesa Binti Ahmad , **Nooreen Noordin** 

Universiti Putra Malaysia
 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

Mengfei Zhao 

Universiti Putra Malaysia
 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia
 Anhui University of Technology
 Maanshan, Anhui, China

Abstract. As China intensified efforts to achieve educational equity and rural revitalization, increasing numbers of pre-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers undertook their teaching practicums in rural schools. These settings presented distinct sociocultural challenges and critical opportunities for professional identity construction. Guided by Wenger's Communities of Practice (1998), Akkerman and Meijer's dialogical identity model (2011), and Lasky's mediated agency framework (2005), this qualitative study investigated how institutional, instructional, student-related, interpersonal, communal, and emotional factors influenced the identity construction of pre-service EFL teachers during rural practicums. Data collected through semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and classroom observations from three pre-service teachers identified several key factors shaping their identity trajectories. These included mismatched teaching assignments, excessive administrative demands, limited instructional resources, varied student needs, emotional tensions in home-school interactions, and differing levels of engagement and inclusion within professional communities. Additional roles individual agency and emotional alignment with the

*Corresponding author: Wenjie Wu; 920178626@qq.com

teaching role were pivotal in mediating identity negotiation. Collectively, these factors contributed to an ongoing and context-sensitive process of identity disruption, negotiation, and reconstruction. The findings highlighted that teacher identity was not a fixed entity, but rather a socially embedded and dynamically evolving construct. This study enriched theoretical understandings of teacher identity formation in rural contexts and provided practical insights for enhancing teacher education programs, practicum designs, and educational policies.

Keywords: professional identity construction; pre-service teacher identity; sociocultural factors; rural Chinese schools; teaching practicum

1. Introduction

With the global spread of English as a lingua franca, the demand for qualified English teachers has increased sharply across both developed and developing nations. In non-English-speaking contexts, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers are tasked not only with language instruction but also with cultivating intercultural competence and facilitating global communication (Nghia & Vu, 2023; Rintaningrum et al., 2023). In China, national policies promoting educational equity have led to a growing number of pre-service teachers being placed in rural schools for teaching practicums—an initiative designed to strengthen English education in underserved areas. This cross-regional teacher mobility, however, carries significant implications for professional identity construction.

Faced with unfamiliar sociocultural environments, pre-service teachers frequently encounter misalignments between their expectations and local realities, which may lead to identity dissonance, internal conflict, and the need for psychological adjustment (Ai et al., 2022; Wang & He, 2022). Emotional negotiation, reflective practice, and adaptive agency become central mechanisms through which these novice teachers make sense of their roles and reconstruct their emerging professional identities. Understanding how identity transformation unfolds in rural practicum settings is therefore critical not only to addressing pedagogical challenges but also to supporting the professional and emotional development of future educators.

Professional identity is widely understood as a dynamic, multifaceted construct shaped by sociocultural interactions, personal histories, and contextual experiences (Solari & Martín Ortega, 2022). Rather than being a fixed trait, it comprises multiple dimensions—including self-image, teaching beliefs, emotional engagement, and role perception—that evolve through reflection, interaction, and practice (Yazan, 2023). This identity is particularly fluid in transitional or challenging teaching contexts, such as rural school practicums, where novice teachers face misalignments between expectations and realities, requiring constant renegotiation of their professional self (Bowen et al., 2021).

Drawing on sociocultural theory and the Communities of Practice framework (Wenger, 1998), this study views identity construction as an ongoing, socially

mediated process influenced by participation, discourse, and power relations within educational communities. This perspective allows for a deeper understanding of how pre-service EFL teachers develop and redefine their professional identities in response to the specific sociocultural demands of rural practicums in China.

International research has consistently highlighted the pivotal role of sociocultural contexts in shaping teachers' professional identities, particularly through mechanisms such as cultural norms, institutional discourses, and community engagement (Burn & Menter, 2021; Lu & Tang, 2025; Sahling & De Carvalho, 2021). When teachers enter environments where local pedagogical values and community expectations differ from their prior beliefs, they experience identity tension and engage in ongoing negotiation to reconcile personal and contextual demands (Burn & Menter, 2021; Lu & Tang, 2025).

In rural China, sociocultural dynamics—such as hierarchical school governance, parental authority, and collectivist community ties—intersect with institutional limitations to influence how pre-service teachers reinterpret their roles and beliefs. Drawing on Akkerman and Meijer's (2011) dialogical model and Lasky's (2005) mediated agency framework, this study examines how community norms, parental involvement, leadership expectations, and limited teaching resources interact to shape identity construction. By identifying these mechanisms, the study contributes theoretical insights and offers practical implications for designing teacher education programs responsive to rural sociocultural realities.

Compared to urban schools, rural teaching environments in China present unique sociocultural conditions that significantly influence how pre-service teachers negotiate and construct their professional identities. Challenges such as limited teaching resources, weak professional communities (Sulasmi et al., 2023), misalignments between local and institutional educational values (Addessi et al., 2025), and differing parental expectations (Hou & Li, 2022) often complicate the integration of novice teachers into these settings.

These constraints not only impact instructional practices but also intensify identity tensions, requiring pre-service teachers to engage in adaptive negotiation to reconcile their prior assumptions with local realities. As Sahling and De Carvalho (2021) argued, teacher identity is shaped by mechanisms such as contextual agency, emotional regulation, and participation in situated practices—mechanisms that are often weakened in under-resourced rural schools lacking structural support and mentorship.

Against this backdrop, the present study aimed to explore how the distinctive sociocultural conditions of rural Chinese schools influenced the professional growth and identity construction of pre-service EFL teachers during their teaching practicum. Grounded in sociocultural theory, the study drew on Wenger's (1998) Communities of Practice framework, Akkerman and Meijer's (2011) dialogical model of teacher identity, and Lasky's (2005) mediated agency

framework to analyze how identity is continuously negotiated and reshaped through social participation, emotional experience, and institutional mediation. Particular attention was paid to how pre-service teachers either engaged in or were marginalized from core educational practices, and how these interactions shaped their evolving sense of belonging, competence, and identity trajectory. By examining identity construction as a dynamic and context-dependent process, this study not only advances theoretical understanding of teacher identity in rural settings but also offers practical implications for enhancing teacher preparation programs and developing more context-responsive educational policies. The following research questions guided this inquiry:

RQ1: How do institutional, instructional, and student-related factors influence pre-service EFL teachers' identity construction during rural practicums?

RQ2: How do interpersonal, communal, and emotional factors contribute to identity construction in rural school contexts?

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Sociocultural Construction of Pre-service EFL Teachers' Professional Identity

Professional identity is widely recognized as a dynamic, multifaceted construct shaped by personal, social, and contextual influences. Fitzgerald (2020) defines it as teachers' self-perception formed through experience and role negotiation, while Sawatsky et al. (2023) emphasizes its evolution in response to competing discourses such as native-speakerism, standardized testing, and communicative teaching mandates, particularly in EFL contexts.

In these settings, identity is further influenced by multicultural dynamics, institutional mandates, and policy frameworks (Chen & Reay, 2021; Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021). Yang et al. (2022) highlight the link between identity and long-term teaching commitment, whereas Yazan (2023) underscores its sociocultural nature by illustrating how teachers' identities are shaped through interactions with students, colleagues, cultural values, and institutional norms. This perspective positions identity not as a fixed attribute, but as a product of ongoing participation in socially and culturally mediated practices.

2.1.1 Institutional and Policy-Driven Influences

Institutional expectations, policy mandates, and school governance structures play a foundational role in shaping how pre-service teachers interpret their roles. In China, national initiatives promoting educational equity have led to the placement of pre-service EFL teachers in rural schools, introducing new responsibilities within unfamiliar systems. Neupane (2024) emphasizes that access to institutional resources and training is a key mediator of identity construction. Rural schools, often lacking stable mentorship and material support, present settings where teachers must redefine their pedagogical agency (Nazari et al., 2023; Tajeddin et al., 2023). Yang et al. (2022) argue that professional identity is closely tied to institutional stability and role clarity—both of which are often challenged in under-resourced environments. These

dynamics create a structural backdrop that complicates identity negotiation and professional growth.

2.1.2 Interpersonal Relationships and Community Norms

In addition to institutional factors, interpersonal dynamics and cultural expectations embedded within rural communities act as significant sociocultural forces. Rushton and Reiss (2021) assert that family history, school culture, and community values are integral to how teachers form their professional self-conception. In rural Chinese settings, teachers are often situated within tight-knit communities where parental involvement, informal expectations, and collectivist norms influence instructional decisions and relational boundaries (Gong & Gao, 2024; Hou & Li, 2022).

Cheung et al. (2023) found that the presence or absence of professional community engagement shapes identity coherence. According to Wenger's (1998) Communities of Practice framework, these micro-level interactions shape teachers' sense of legitimacy, participation, and belonging. When pre-service teachers are unable to integrate into these interpersonal networks, they frequently encounter role ambiguity and professional dissonance (Boada, 2022).

2.1.3 Emotional Responses and Identity Negotiation

Emotions are not isolated psychological states but are produced and shaped through social interaction and cultural positioning (Lindquist et al., 2022). In rural practicum settings, pre-service teachers often report feelings of dislocation, frustration, or inadequacy as they face conflicts between their training-based expectations and the demands of the local school culture. Lau et al. (2022) describe these responses as "emotional pushbacks" that trigger reflective identity work.

Within constrained and unfamiliar contexts, such emotions function as internalized reactions to external forces. Boada (2022) notes that identity negotiation occurs not in isolation, but within communities that validate or suppress emotional expression. In line with Lasky's (2005) mediated agency framework, a teacher's ability to negotiate these emotional tensions depends on both personal motivation and the sociocultural affordances available. Thus, emotion becomes both an outcome of and a response to identity-related conflict.

In summary, sociocultural forces—including institutional demands, relational expectations, and emotional regulation—intersect to shape the professional identity of pre-service EFL teachers. These forces are particularly salient in rural school contexts, where teachers navigate role ambiguity, limited resources, and emotionally charged environments. While past research has addressed identity in general or urban settings, few studies have examined how these sociocultural dimensions jointly influence identity construction in rural China. This study responded to this gap by providing a context-sensitive, thematically structured exploration of identity construction as a socially mediated and emotionally situated process.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by Wenger's (1998) theory of Communities of Practice (CoP), which conceptualizes identity formation as an interactive, socially situated process. A community of practice refers to a group of individuals who are united by a common concern, shared problems, or a strong interest in a particular topic, and who continuously enhance their knowledge and skills through sustained mutual engagement and interaction. According to Wenger, a CoP consists of three defining characteristics:

Mutual Engagement – active participation in community interactions that foster a sense of belonging; Joint Enterprise – a negotiated understanding of shared goals and responsibilities that bind members together; and Shared Repertoire – a collection of communal resources including language, tools, symbols, and norms that enable collaboration and meaning-making within the group. This framework is particularly useful for analyzing how pre-service EFL teachers engage with or are marginalized from the social and professional practices in rural school communities, and how these interactions shape their sense of belonging, legitimacy, and identity trajectories.

To enrich the analysis, this study also draws on Akkerman and Meijer's (2011) dialogical model of teacher identity, which highlights the dynamic interplay between multiple, and at times conflicting, identity positions within individuals. This perspective is especially relevant to pre-service teachers who experience tensions between their personal ideals and the normative expectations of rural school environments.

Furthermore, Lasky's (2005) mediated agency framework informs the study's examination of how broader institutional and sociocultural conditions—such as leadership expectations, community norms, and access to resources—mediate the ways teachers enact agency in their identity construction. This perspective is particularly valuable for interpreting how emotional responses, structural pressures, and context-specific constraints influence the teacher's capacity to negotiate and assert professional identity within rural school settings.

In summary, these three theoretical lenses allow for a more comprehensive analysis of how identity is negotiated at the intersection of individual cognition, institutional discourse, and community interaction. Together, they provide a robust framework for capturing the complexity of identity construction within the socially, institutionally, and emotionally textured environment of rural teaching practicums.

3. The Study

3.1 Research Design

Given the objective of this study—to explore how institutional conditions, interpersonal dynamics, and emotional experiences shape the professional identity construction of pre-service EFL teachers during rural teaching practicums—a qualitative multiple case study design was employed. This approach allowed for cross-case comparisons and a deeper understanding of the

diverse identity trajectories experienced by participants in different rural school settings. Case studies are particularly effective for investigating complex phenomena in real-life contexts, as they enable in-depth exploration of individual experiences and sociocultural processes (Yin, 2018). The multiple case study method was selected for its ability to capture variations in participants' responses to contextual factors, aligning closely with the study's aim to uncover both common patterns and unique challenges in rural practicum settings.

3.2 Participants

This study involved three pre-service EFL teachers who were assigned to rural schools for their 18-week teaching practicum. They were purposefully selected based on their willingness to participate, their placement in schools with distinct rural characteristics, and their capacity to provide reflective and sustained engagement throughout the study. All participants were sixth-semester undergraduate students majoring in English Education at a teacher training university in northern China. Before the practicum, they had completed core coursework in English teaching methodology, second language acquisition, educational psychology, and curriculum design, providing them with the necessary pedagogical foundation to engage in real classroom practice.

Due to persistent teacher shortages in rural schools, the participants were required to teach not only English but also additional subjects such as moral education or music, placing them in multifaceted teaching roles. Their experiences offer valuable insights into how identity is negotiated under the pressures of rural educational realities. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants' background information. All names used are pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

Table 1. Participants' profile

Name	Gender	Age	Practicum School	Subject	Grade
Chan	Female	21	One rural junior secondary school	English and geography	7
Lin	Female	22	One rural junior secondary school	English, biology and politics	8
Lee	Female	20	One rural primary school	English and science	5

The three participants in this study completed their teaching practicums in rural schools located in eastern, southern, and northern China, respectively. Each school presented distinct institutional features, such as differences in material resources, administrative structures, and school-community relationships. For instance, the school in eastern China was relatively better equipped and had formal mentoring systems in place, whereas the southern and northern schools lacked consistent supervision and suffered from larger class sizes and limited teaching resources.

These regional and institutional variations shaped the participants' pedagogical and sociocultural experiences differently affecting how they managed

classrooms, built rapport with students and local stakeholders, and perceived their professional roles. As a result, each participant encountered unique opportunities and challenges that contributed to a differentiated trajectory of identity construction during their practicum.

Chan was placed in a rural junior high school in eastern China, where students were divided into "excellent" and "regular" academic tracks. The school emphasized exam-oriented performance and maintained a rigid administrative culture, with strong expectations for discipline and teacher accountability. Due to a teacher shortage, she initially taught geography to Grade 7 students for the first three weeks, then transitioned to teaching English to two regular-track classes for the remaining 15 weeks. She taught 22 lessons per week and served as deputy homeroom teacher for Class 8, handling student discipline and classroom management.

Additionally, she was assigned corridor supervision duties, working closely with the academic affairs office to monitor classroom routines and teacher punctuality. This highly structured and hierarchical school culture placed considerable pressure on Chan to meet institutional expectations, which in turn shaped her evolving sense of professional responsibility, authority, and self-efficacy. While the heavy workload was demanding, Chan gradually developed a stronger awareness of the complex role's teachers play beyond instruction, including management, surveillance, and emotional labor.

Lynn completed her practicum at a rural boarding junior high school in southern China, characterized by a severely under-resourced teaching environment and chronic staff shortages. She taught English to Grade 8 Class 5 for 10 lessons weekly and was additionally required to teach biology and politics to the same class for 12 more lessons. Every three days, she performed supervisory duties, including waking students, overseeing morning exercises, and managing mealtime routines. The intensity of her workload, coupled with the lack of instructional support and inadequate subject-specific training, left her feeling overwhelmed and emotionally drained in the initial weeks.

However, these demanding conditions pushed her to develop new coping strategies, adapt quickly, and reflect deeply on what it meant to be a responsible and multi-faceted rural teacher. Through these experiences, Lynn began to reframe her professional identity—not just as an English instructor, but as a comprehensive caregiver, moral guide, and life mentor for her students. This transformation was shaped by the rural school's expectation that teachers fulfill multiple social and emotional roles beyond academic instruction.

Lee was assigned to a rural middle school in northern China, where she was the only English major among the staff. However, due to staffing shortages, she was unexpectedly assigned to teach Science instead of English, which conflicted with her professional training and career expectations. Although her teaching hours were relatively fewer than those of the other two participants, she was appointed as an acting homeroom teacher because the regular homeroom

teacher was on medical leave. This role involved managing students' daily affairs and frequent parent communication, which significantly disrupted her focus on instructional practice.

Moreover, the school administrators repeatedly assigned her unrelated administrative duties without providing meaningful English teaching opportunities, which made her feel marginalized and professionally unrecognized. As a result, she developed a strong sense of disillusionment and emotional fatigue, questioning her identity as a future teacher and the viability of a long-term career in education. These structural and interpersonal dynamics not only hindered her professional development but also led to an emotional rupture in her teacher identity construction.

3.3 Instruments

To ensure data trustworthiness and triangulation, this study employed three qualitative instruments: semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and classroom observations.

Semi-structured interviews (SS), guided by Cohen et al. (2017), served as the primary data source. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese to allow participants to express their views and experiences more naturally and accurately within their native linguistic and cultural context. The flexibility of the format allowed participants to express evolving perspectives on their professional identity and sociocultural experiences. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were later translated into English for analysis, with back-translation and peer review employed to ensure accuracy and faithfulness to original meanings. Credibility was enhanced through member checking, whereby participants verified the accuracy of transcripts and interpretations.

Reflective journals (RJ) offered longitudinal insights into participants' thoughts, emotions, and role perceptions during practicum. Dependability was supported by maintaining a consistent weekly journaling protocol and using prompts to ensure coherence across participants (Miller et al., 2023).

Classroom observations (CO) followed a structured checklist to ensure consistency in documenting classroom practices. These observations enabled confirmability by providing behavioral data to cross-check self-reported identity perceptions. Additionally, an audit trail was maintained throughout the research process to document data collection, coding, and analysis procedures. Thick descriptions of the cases and settings were included to enhance transferability of the findings to similar educational contexts.

3.4 Data Collection

Data collection spanned 18 weeks and continued until thematic saturation was reached. Each participant completed three semi-structured interviews (pre-, mid-, and post-practicum), which were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Reflective journals were collected weekly, capturing real-time reflections and emotional shifts. Each participant was observed twice, teaching

two full-length lessons, to document their instructional practice and classroom interactions comprehensively. Triangulation was applied by cross-referencing data from interviews, journals, and observations, ensuring comprehensive coverage of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions of identity construction.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the seven-step process outlined by Marshall and Rossman (2014), which includes: organizing the data, immersing in the data to become intimately familiar, generating initial categories and themes, coding the data, interpreting patterns and meanings, considering alternative understandings, and writing up the findings. This framework was chosen because it offers a flexible yet systematic structure for analyzing qualitative data across multiple sources. Its iterative nature supports the emergence of nuanced insights, making it particularly appropriate for exploring complex and evolving phenomena such as professional identity construction.

All transcripts, journals, and observation notes were first imported into NVivo 12 for systematic management. The researcher read each transcript multiple times to ensure familiarity before open coding began. An inductive thematic approach was applied to allow themes to emerge from the data without imposing pre-existing categories. Coding units included not only recurring words or concepts, but also shifts in emotional tone, critical incidents, and identity-related metaphors.

To ensure triangulation, interview data were compared with journal entries and observation records to validate and enrich interpretations. For example, one participant described in her reflective journal that “students finally called me ‘teacher’ without hesitation,” which aligned with observational data showing increased student engagement and improved classroom control. Such cross-verification helped establish the credibility and depth of each theme.

Emerging themes were iteratively reviewed and refined through constant comparison, resulting in a set of interconnected categories representing the identity construction trajectories of the three pre-service EFL teachers. These categories were further organized into three overarching dimensions—cognitive, emotional, and behavioral—reflecting how identity was shaped across different experiential domains. Discrepancies and tensions among data sources were treated as analytically significant and used to capture the complexity of identity negotiation.

The final themes not only reflect the influence of sociocultural factors but also illustrate how the participants negotiated their ideal, actual, and feared selves in response to specific practicum challenges. This process enabled a contextualized and multidimensional understanding of how professional identity was formed, disrupted, and reconstructed in rural teaching contexts.

4. Findings

This study identified several key sociocultural factors that influenced the professional identity construction of the three pre-service EFL teachers. These findings reflect and build upon the theoretical and empirical themes previously reviewed in the literature, where institutional constraints, community expectations, and emotional responses were discussed as critical forces shaping identity in rural contexts. To enhance clarity and coherence, this chapter is organized into two thematic categories corresponding to the two research questions: (1) institutional, instructional, and student-related influences, and (2) interpersonal, communal, and emotional influences. The findings are organized and discussed under the following thematic categories.

4.1 Institutional, Instructional, and Student-related Influences (Address RQ1)

4.1.1 *Institutional Structures and Role Conflict*

This theme explores how school-level hierarchies and ambiguous teacher roles disrupted pre-service teachers' professional development. Within the practicum settings of rural schools in China, pre-service EFL teachers' professional identity construction was profoundly shaped by institutional arrangements and role assignments. The analysis revealed three interrelated issues: the temporary and mismatched nature of teaching assignments, the passive undertaking of administrative responsibilities, and the additional duties imposed by boarding school systems.

Conflicting expectations between pre-service teachers' professional preparation and the roles they were assigned during the practicum often created significant tension and disrupted their identity development. This was evident in Chan's case, where she was initially required to teach Geography rather than English due to staff shortages. She admitted: "Every day in class felt exhausting; I even started to question whether I still wanted to be a teacher" (SS1, L15-20). Her cognitive dissonance between professional training and actual responsibilities reflected identity disorientation.

Lynn faced a similar situation when she was assigned to teach Biology and Politics in addition to English. She noted: "I had to relearn things I wasn't good at, and the pressure was overwhelming" (SS1, L8-10). The constant switching between disciplines not only caused emotional fatigue but also diluted her sense of subject-specific expertise, which hindered identity consolidation. Lee's experience reinforced this pattern. She wrote: "I am an English major. I joined the practicum to develop my teaching skills in English, not in science" (RJ1, L3-6). From a sociocultural perspective (Wenger, 1998), these mismatches disrupted their engagement in communities of practice as legitimate peripheral participants in EFL teaching.

Beyond teaching, Chan and Lee were also required to take on administrative responsibilities, such as serving as assistant homeroom teacher and classroom monitor. Lee expressed her frustration: "The school kept assigning me tasks unrelated to teaching. It was a complete waste of my time and energy" (SS2,

L28–31). These non-teaching roles not only fragmented their daily attention but also reinforced a peripheral, marginal identity within the teaching community.

Meanwhile, Lynn—placed in a boarding school—had to manage students' daily routines, including morning exercises and meals. These caregiving responsibilities blurred the boundaries between professional teaching duties and parental roles, placing additional emotional demands on her. As a result, her understanding of what it meant to be an English teacher shifted from focusing solely on subject instruction to encompassing broader responsibilities related to students' daily lives and well-being.

4.1.2 Resource Limitations and Practical Pressures

This theme addresses how inadequate resources, high workload, and low teaching autonomy shaped teachers' professional practice and perceived competence. Shortages in teaching resources, workload pressure, and the imbalance between physical infrastructure and student quality in rural areas all significantly impacted the construction of professional identity among the pre-service EFL teachers.

Chan and Lynn experienced substantial teaching loads. The burden of preparing lessons, creating instructional materials, and grading assignments frequently left them physically and mentally exhausted. As Chan remarked: "I had to prepare so many lessons each week, and there were always PowerPoints to make and assignments to grade. Being a teacher is just exhausting." (SS1, L24). Lynn echoed this sentiment, noting: "I was constantly overwhelmed teaching during the day, preparing lessons and grading at night. It felt like there was never enough time in a day." (SS1, L33).

Although Lee had relatively fewer scheduled teaching hours, she was appointed as an acting homeroom teacher due to the regular homeroom teacher's sick leave. This role required her to manage students' day-to-day affairs, which added considerable emotional and administrative pressure. She noted in her reflective journal: "Every day I was dealing with student issues and unexpected phone calls from parents. I could hardly focus on teaching anymore." (RJ2, L5–7).

These accounts revealed that the shortage of qualified personnel in rural schools placed significant demands on pre-service teachers. The resulting overload not only constrained their opportunities for reflective practice and professional growth but also contributed to emotional exhaustion and psychological detachment from their envisioned roles as effective English teachers.

In addition, while many rural schools had relatively adequate hardware infrastructure, the quality and motivation of students were generally lacking. Lee observed: "These students don't enjoy learning at all. Every day, they try to find ways to escape class and play outside." (SS2, L12). This mismatch between external school infrastructure and internal student engagement created a structural tension that undermined instructional confidence. From a

psychological perspective, it induced feelings of frustration, helplessness, and diminished teacher agency.

These emotional responses disrupted the internalization of a competent teacher identity, as participants struggled to reconcile their pedagogical aspirations with classroom realities (Yang et al., 2022). As a result, the ability to view themselves as empowered and effective EFL teachers was weakened.

4.1.3 Student Diversity and Emotional Labor in Parent–School Relations

This theme discusses how students' academic disparities and family engagement added emotional and instructional burdens on pre-service teachers. The rural school environment—characterized by students' weak academic foundation, lack of motivation, and limited parental engagement—had a profound impact on the emotional experiences and evolving identity of the pre-service EFL teachers.

Chan described her initial frustration with low student achievement levels: “When I first took over this class, there were more than 50 students, but only one passed the English test. After a month of giving them my all, only four students managed to pass.” (SS2, L34–36). This stark discrepancy between effort and outcome exemplified a significant source of emotional and cognitive tension, highlighting the discrepancy between Chan's idealized teacher self and the challenging educational reality.

Lynn encountered widespread student disengagement and resistance to learning: “Most students here believe that learning is pointless. They think going to high school is useless and just want to graduate from middle school and start working. I spent a long time trying to change this mindset... but I didn't see much progress.” (SS2, L45–47). Lynn's reflection illustrated a critical form of identity dissonance, as her persistent attempts to change students' mindsets collided repeatedly with deeply embedded sociocultural attitudes toward education in rural contexts.

Lee struggled to maintain students' attention and participation. The second round of classroom observations confirmed these difficulties: “During this lesson, overall student engagement was low. Several students had difficulty staying focused and repeatedly requested to listen to music, watch videos, or play games. The teacher had to continuously boost classroom atmosphere, using a mix of coaxing and guiding strategies to maintain participation. Managing classroom discipline proved challenging, and instructional efficiency was compromised.” (CO2). From a researcher's perspective, Lee's struggles were indicative of the profound emotional labour required in these rural contexts, extending significantly beyond instructional duties. This constant negotiation exhausted her psychological resources, weakening her professional efficacy.

These emotional challenges reflected what Tavares (2024) described as the emotional geographies of teaching, where the gap between teachers' ideal selves and situated realities created identity tension. The researcher contends that the persistence of low achievement and behavioural resistance disrupted

participants perceived efficacy, triggering self-doubt, emotional fatigue, and identity fragmentation. In addition to pedagogical obstacles, limited parental involvement further intensified emotional strain. Participants were compelled to assume caregiving and disciplinary responsibilities beyond their instructional roles. Chan noted: “When I tried to involve parents in addressing student issues, some outright rejected my help... I knew the student needed support, but if the parent wouldn’t let me intervene, should I keep putting my time and energy into this student?” (SS2, L51–54). Chan’s experiences underscored how limited parental cooperation not only amplified her emotional burden but also blurred the boundaries between instructional and caregiving roles, complicating professional identity boundaries.

Lynn elaborated: “Many of my students’ parents work far from home. Most of the children are left behind and raised by grandparents... I constantly felt like a mother at school, taking care of everything both academically and personally.” (SS2, L60–63). Lynn’s narrative further reinforced the concept of role boundary ambiguity, highlighting the sociocultural reality of rural China where intergenerational care responsibilities increasingly fall upon teachers, significantly reshaping their professional identities.

Lee encountered open hostility: “Some parents didn’t just refuse to cooperate—they came to school and argued with me. That made me question if I was too young or just not cut out for teaching.” (RJ5, L13–14). Lee’s negative encounter illustrated what Yip (2023) described as professional vulnerability, where external hostility exacerbated feelings of inadequacy and diminished professional confidence, leading to identity destabilization. Such emotionally charged interactions reflected the cultural and social realities of rural China. Parental migration, intergenerational care, and hierarchical notions of teacher authority shaped the emotional labour of teaching (Lan, 2023).

As a result, participants experienced what Akkerman and Meijer (2011) described as dialogical tension between their imagined identity as subject-specific educators and the enacted identity of emotional caretakers and mediators. In the researcher’s analysis, this emotional burden not only blurred professional boundaries but also diluted participants’ sense of competence and legitimacy as EFL teachers, highlighting the essential role of sociocultural context in professional identity formation.

4.2 Interpersonal, Communal, and Emotional Influences (Address RQ2)

4.2.1 Collegial Relations and Community Participation

This theme examines the role of peer support and school community in shaping teacher identity through shared practices and interactions. The quality of pre-service teachers’ interactions with school leaders, mentor teachers, and peers—and their degree of integration into the professional community—significantly shaped their identity trajectories across emotional, relational, and sociocultural dimensions. Drawing on Wenger’s (1998) Communities of Practice theory and Lasky’s (2005) notion of mediated agency, the findings demonstrated how social participation and perceived support (or lack thereof) mediated pre-service teachers’ ability to negotiate and internalize their professional identities.

Chan and Lynn both benefited from emotionally supportive and professionally empowering school environments. These environments functioned as enabling contexts that fostered mutual engagement, a key component of legitimate peripheral participation (Wenger, 1998). This support allowed them to move from marginal to more central roles within the teaching community. Chan reflected: “The school leaders were very kind to me and always responsive to my needs. Most of my colleagues were young like me, so we got along well. My mentor teacher helped me tremendously... She helped me transition quickly from a student to a teacher.” (SS2, L44–48). Her experience highlighted how affective validation, and professional mentoring supported her agency and facilitated identity alignment.

Lynn similarly noted: “At first, I couldn’t understand the local dialect... But with the help of students and colleagues, I gradually overcame the barrier... Our relationship is great.” (SS2, L38–43). Overcoming linguistic and cultural differences contributed to her sense of belonging. It also reinforced her imagined identity as an adaptable and respected teacher (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011).

In contrast, Lee faced exclusionary power structures and a lack of support, which led to identity fragmentation: “The school leaders kept assigning me non-teaching work... I asked for more English lessons, but they just wouldn’t agree.” (SS3, L26–30). Lee’s marginal participation and constrained agency illustrated how institutional dominance and power asymmetries suppressed identity development. Her case exemplified identity dissonance—a state in which external expectations conflicted with one’s internalized vision of professional self. This tension ultimately led to emotional exhaustion and role detachment.

Finally, the level of participation in school affairs served as a symbolic marker of identity consolidation. Chan and Lynn, functioning as core teaching members, had more opportunities for practice-based affirmation and identity articulation. Lee, on the other hand, remained at the periphery of the school’s professional community. This marginalization reinforced her status as an auxiliary figure and delayed the consolidation of her EFL teacher identity.

4.2.2 Emotional Commitment and Identity Meaning making

This theme highlights how emotional connection to the teaching role fostered long-term identity development in sociocultural contexts. By the end of their teaching practicum, the participating pre-service teachers demonstrated divergent emotional trajectories in their professional identity construction. These emotional orientations were not isolated reactions. Rather, they were deeply shaped by the interplay between individual agency, institutional experiences, and sociocultural contexts (Hökkä et al., 2023; Toker-Bradshaw & Tezgiden-Cakcak, 2025). Drawing on the notion of emotional geographies in teacher identity formation, this section explores how emotional identification either reinforced or undermined participants’ commitment to the profession.

Chan articulated a strong sense of professional mission by framing the teacher's role as that of a "giant's shoulder" upon which rural students could broaden their worldview: "Many rural students have never left the places where they were born. Being their teacher feels like becoming a giant's shoulder... Through me, they learn knowledge and expand their horizons, which makes me feel a heavy sense of responsibility." (RJ17, L21-24).

This metaphor reflected Chan's internalization of teaching as a transformative act. Her experience closely aligned with the concept of "moral purpose" in teaching (Han, 2024). Her narrative showed that emotional engagement served as a catalyst for affirming her teacher identity within the constraints of rural education.

Lynn emphasized the social value of teaching and demonstrated deep emotional investment in the profession: "Although teaching is tiring, I love it—especially when I see my efforts reflected in students' learning outcomes... The identity of being a teacher means a lot to me. It has already become part of my life." (RJ18, L6-9). Lynn's commitment illustrated the concept of identity continuity (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). Emotional validation from successful student engagement helped consolidate a coherent and enduring teacher identity. Her case reflected how identity meaning was actively co-constructed through relational affirmation and situated performance.

In contrast, Lee expressed emotional exhaustion and professional disillusionment. These feelings were largely shaped by the cumulative pressures of her practicum experience: "Being a teacher means tolerating many frustrations—doing a tremendous amount of work for very little pay... This teaching practicum in a rural school completely destroyed my passion for the teaching profession." (SS3, L89-92). Lee's statement evidenced what Fitchett et al. (2021) described as "vulnerability" in teaching. External constraints and unmet expectations contributed to identity rupture. Her negative emotional narrative represented a case of emotional dissonance, leading to an unresolved or regressive identity trajectory.

These differentiated emotional trajectories highlighted the affective dimension as a central mechanism in identity development. Emotional experiences did not merely accompany professional growth—they shaped the very meaning of becoming a teacher in context-bound ways. Institutional structures, sociocultural dynamics, and dialogical negotiations between self and environment collectively mediated whether pre-service teachers embraced, sustained, or rejected the teacher role.

5. Discussion

This study examined the sociocultural factors shaping the professional identity construction of pre-service English teachers during their rural teaching practicum in China. The findings explicitly address the two research questions regarding how institutional, instructional, student-related (RQ1), as well as interpersonal, communal, and emotional factors (RQ2) shape professional

identity construction. Institutional structures, teaching resources, student demographics, home-school interactions, and community engagement levels all exerted profound and context-sensitive influences on identity trajectories, substantiating and extending prior literature emphasizing sociocultural embeddedness (Kamali & Nazari, 2023; Karimpour et al., 2023; Pishghadam et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2022).

First, addressing RQ1 (institutional and instructional factors), the mismatch between pre-service teachers' academic preparation and assigned roles emerged as a recurring structural barrier. Participants frequently taught subjects outside their expertise or assumed administrative responsibilities, diluting their self-concept as EFL teachers. While this aligns with Farwa et al.'s (2024) assertion of organizational role conflict, this study uniquely highlights how these mismatches destabilize identity through prolonged negotiation and emotional fatigue, especially in rural, resource-constrained settings. Extending Arvaja and Sarja's (2021) perspective on identity tension, the findings indicate identity formation is closely linked to emotional validation within constrained environments.

Second, further addressing RQ1, the inadequacy of instructional resources and challenging working conditions clearly constrained the professional agency of pre-service teachers, as evidenced by participants' consistent self-reported emotional exhaustion and diminished opportunities for reflective practice. Although previous studies (e.g., Chang & Kidman, 2024) documented the impact of material conditions on teaching performance, this qualitative study reveals specifically how resource constraints manifested in restricted pedagogical innovation and suppressed reflective engagement.

The participants frequently described the extensive emotional labour involved in addressing students' academic deficits and familial absences. This qualitative evidence, drawn from interviews and reflective journals, underscores the intersection of emotional strain and social responsibility, thus deepening our understanding of identity formation in marginalized contexts (Donohue, 2021).

Third, addressing RQ2 (interpersonal and communal factors), differential access to supportive interpersonal relationships decisively influenced identity development. Participants embedded in inclusive school cultures with accessible mentors reported stronger professional affirmation and emotional resilience. This finding supports Wenger's (1998) Communities of Practice theory while offering new insights into the psychosocial costs of exclusion. Teachers on the margins experienced identity inertia or rejection, underscoring institutional relational dynamics (McDonald & Mercieca, 2021). Thus, identity formation emerges as hierarchically negotiated within organizational ecosystems.

Finally, further addressing RQ2 (emotional factors), the emotional meaning attributed to teaching was sociocultural mediated, resulting in highly individualized identity outcomes. While some participants affirmed their educator roles through positive engagement and purpose, others experienced

emotional rupture—a disconnect between professional aspirations and institutional realities. Unlike prior research positioning emotion primarily as an identity outcome (Bloom et al., 2021), this study demonstrates that affect serves as both input and mechanism in shaping identity commitments. Liu et al. (2025) similarly argue emotional dissonance undermines long-term teacher retention, particularly in underserved areas.

In summary, this study contributes theoretically by illustrating how teacher identity is co-constructed via emotional, social, and institutional mechanisms in context-specific ways. Practically, findings advocate school policies aligning teacher preparation with teaching assignments, support systems mitigating emotional burnout, and inclusive communities fostering belonging. Specifically, targeted supports—such as reduced non-teaching duties and structured mentoring—could significantly enhance identity integration and professional stability for novice teachers in rural China.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated how pre-service EFL teachers in China construct their professional identities during rural practicums, revealing identity development as a dynamic process shaped by the interplay of personal, institutional, and sociocultural factors. Key findings demonstrate that mismatched teaching roles, excessive administrative demands, inadequate mentoring, and weak home-school connections collectively challenge identity coherence. At the same time, supportive interactions and community participation enhance emotional engagement and professional affirmation.

Theoretically, this study extends sociocultural and identity construction frameworks by illuminating the emotional and relational mechanisms through which identity is shaped in under-resourced rural settings. Practically, the findings suggest that teacher education programs should provide rural practicum preparation modules, ensure alignment between teaching assignments and professional training, and establish structured mentoring systems. Educational policies must address workload imbalance and improve rural school infrastructures to sustain novice teachers' commitment and well-being.

Despite these valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the small sample size and single practicum cycle limit the generalizability of the findings. The experiences presented are context-specific and may not reflect broader institutional realities. Second, the reliance primarily on self-reported data (interviews and journals) introduces potential biases in perception and recall, affecting the objectivity of identity interpretation.

Future research should address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs to trace identity development beyond the practicum stage, and expanding the participant pool to encompass diverse school types and regions. Including mentors, supervisors, and administrators as additional data sources is recommended to enrich perspectives and enhance data triangulation.

Comparative studies between urban and rural practicum contexts could further illuminate how institutional culture differentially shapes teacher identity, offering guidance for more context-responsive teacher education policies.

7. Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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