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The Current Status and Countermeasures of Professional Identity among Special Education Publicly Funded Normal Students

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Abstract: This study aims to explore the current status and influencing factors of professional identity among publicly funded special education normal students. Utilizing a university student professional identity questionnaire, a survey was conducted among 205 publicly funded special education normal students. The findings reveal that: 1) the overall professional identity of these students ranks moderately above average, with scores descending in the order of affective identity, cognitive identity, behavioral identity, and suitability identity; 2) significant differences exist among grade levels, with freshmen and sophomores scoring notably higher than juniors and seniors; 3) the major selection basis significantly impacts professional identity, whereby students who self-selected their major exhibited markedly higher scores than those who chose based on parental preference or assignment. The results provide empirical evidence and pragmatic pathways for optimizing training programs and enhancing professional identity among publicly funded special education normal university students.

Keywords: Special Education; Publicly Funded Normal Students; Professional Identity; Altruistic Motivation; Major Selection Basis

1. Introduction to the Issue

Special education stands as a vital embodiment of educational equity and serves as a hallmark of societal progress and civility. China has successively implemented three phases of the "Special Education Enhancement Plan", explicitly advocating for the principle that "every child should have access to fair and high-quality education". The high-caliber development of special education fundamentally hinges upon a professional and specialized teaching workforce [1]. Publicly funded normal students specializing in special education represent the core reserve of future special educators, whose level of professional identity profoundly influences their academic engagement, career planning during their studies, as well as their post-graduation commitment and instructional efficacy [2,3]. In recent years, incidents of failure to fulfill their service obligations among publicly funded normal students in regions such as Beijing and Guangdong have surfaced, revealing a discernible deficiency in professional identification with special education. This situation underscores the urgent need to investigate the mechanisms shaping their professional identity.

Professional identity constitutes a multifaceted integration of an individual's cognitive acceptance, emotional affiliation, behavioral investment, and perceptual fit regarding their chosen field of study[4]. Fitzgerald conceptualizes professional identity across multiple dimensions, encompassing actions and behaviors, knowledge and skills, values and ethics, socialization contexts, and identity recognition [5]. Wang Dingming et al. emphasize that professional identity involves an ongoing cognitive engagement, positive emotional experiences, and proactive behavioral tendencies developed throughout the learning process[4]. Existing studies indicate that university students' professional identity generally resides at a moderate level[6]. This pattern extends to special education normal students as well; irrespective of whether they are enrolled in Ministry of Education-affiliated key normal universities[7] or regional institutions[8,9-10], their professional identity within the special education discipline consistently falls short of an elevated standard.

Factors influencing professional identity encompass external elements such as national policies, socio-cultural environment, and

educational settings, as well as intrinsic aspects including personal interests, abilities, and value systems[11]. Among these, altruistic motivation stands out as a core competency requisite for the special education profession—indeed, the *Professional Competency Standards* explicitly mandates that special education teachers embody the principles of moral cultivation and educational care [12]. Prior research has identified a correlation between altruistic motivation and professional identity[13]; however, a systematic exploration of this relationship and its underlying mechanisms specific to the cohort of publicly funded special education normal students remains absent. Moreover, while existing studies have predominantly focused on the influence of gender on professional identity [14], analyses concerning critical variables such as academic year and major selection basis remain insufficiently addressed. Consequently, this study employs an empirical approach to elucidate the current state of professional identity among publicly funded special education normal students, delineate the impact of altruistic motivation, academic standing, and major selection basis on their professional identity, and thereby furnish foundational insights to inform the refinement of training strategies. The novelty of this research lies in its inaugural investigation into the interactive effects of academic year, Major selection basis, and altruistic motivation on the professional identity of this unique student population, thus enriching the dimensional framework of studies centered on their professional identity.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Participants

This study surveyed publicly funded special education normal students from a designated university through an online questionnaire. A total of 205 responses were received, all of which were deemed valid, yielding a response validity rate of 100%. Regarding gender distribution, 39 participants were male (constituting 19.0% of the total), while 166 were female (accounting for 81.0%). In terms of academic standing, 68 freshmen (33.2%), 25 sophomores (12.2%), 64 juniors (31.2%), and 48 seniors (23.4%) participated. Concerning the basis of their major selection, 135 students (65.9%) chose their major voluntarily, 45 students (22.0%) chose their major based on

parental or others' preferences, and 25 students (12.2%) were assigned their major through adjustment.

2.2 Research Instruments

2.2.1 College students' professional identity questionnaire

This study employed the Professional Identity Questionnaire for College Students, developed by Qin Panbo, to assess participants' professional identity[7]. The instrument comprises 23 items encompassing four dimensions: cognitive identity, affective identity, behavioral identity, and suitability identity. Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree", scored 1 to 5 sequentially, where higher scores indicate a greater level of professional identity. Specifically, cognitive identity reflects the degree of understanding of the major; affective identity captures the emotional affinity toward the major; behavioral identity assesses professional behavior manifestations; and suitability identity gauges the congruence between the major and the individual. The questionnaire demonstrated excellent reliability and validity in this study, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.95.

2.2.2 Data analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26.0. Analytical techniques included descriptive statistics, one-sample *t*-tests, independent samples *t*-tests, and correlation analyses. Prior to conducting data analyses, exploratory factor analysis utilizing Harman's single-factor test was performed to assess common method bias within the professional identity questionnaire dimensions. The unrotated factor analysis extracted 11 factors with eigenvalues exceeding 1. The first principal factor accounted for 37.59% of the variance, below the critical threshold of 40%, indicating that common method bias in this dataset was not of significant concern.

3. Research Findings

3.1 Current Status of Professional Identity among Publicly Funded Special Education Normal Students

To elucidate the current state of professional identity among publicly funded special education normal students, descriptive statistics including means and standard deviations were

computed, accompanied by one-sample *t*-tests. The overall mean score of professional identity was *M* =3.78 (*SD* = 0.46), significantly exceeding the theoretical midpoint of 3 (*t*(205)=24.29, *p*＜0.001), indicating a relatively high level of professional identity among these students. Specifically, the average scores for cognitive identity, affective identity, behavioral identity, and suitability identity were 3.94, 4.02, 3.73, and 3.44 respectively, all surpassing the theoretical midpoint of 3. Affective identity attained the highest mean score, suggesting that these students possess a profound emotional affiliation with special education students. Conversely, suitability identity received the lowest score, reflecting students' recognition of the necessity to enhance their knowledge and skills pertinent to the special education discipline.

3.2 Analysis of Variance in Professional Identity among Publicly Funded Special Education Normal Students across Different Variables

An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to examine gender differences in professional identity scores, revealing no significant disparity between male and female students. One-way ANOVA analysis on grade levels indicated a statistically significant difference in professional identity, with freshmen and sophomores demonstrating substantially higher scores than juniors and seniors. Similarly, one-way ANOVA based on major selection basis revealed significant differences; students who autonomously chose their specialization exhibited markedly higher levels of professional identity compared to those whose choices were influenced by parents or others, or who entered via adjustment procedures. The detailed results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Differences in Professional Identity among Publicly Funded Special Education Normal Students by Gender, Grade, and Major Selection

Factor	Dimension	Professional Identity	
		M	*SD*
Gender	Male (N=39)	3.68	0.50
	Female (N=166)	3.80	0.45
	F	0.28	
Grade	Freshman (N=68)	3.87	0.45
	Sophomore (N=25)	3.97	0.34
	Junior (N=64)	3.70	0.48
	Senior (N=48)	3.66	0.46
	F	3.97**	
	Post hoc Comparison	1＞3*, 1＞4*, 2＞3*, 2＞4*	
Major selection basis	Self-selected (N=135)	3.88	0.39
	Parent/Others (N=45)	3.64	0.54
	Adjustment (N=25)	3.50	0.50
	F	10.72***	
	Post hoc Comparison	1＞2**, 1＞3***	

Note: ** stands for *p* < 0.01; *** stands for *p* < 0.001.

4. Discussion

4.1 General Characteristics of Professional Identity among Publicly Funded Special Education Normal Students

This study reveals that the overall professional identity of publicly funded special education normal students is moderately above average, a finding somewhat divergent from prior studies (such as Guan Chunlan et al. [7]), which identified it at a "medium level." This discrepancy may stem from variations in the training models of the sampled institutions, with the current institution potentially placing greater emphasis on practical pedagogy and the cultivation of professional values, thereby elevating students' sense of identification.

Analyzing the dimensions, affective identity scores highest, indicating that students exhibit strong emotional attachment and empathetic concern toward children with special needs, consistent with the profession's intrinsic altruistic nature and the students' prosocial disposition. Conversely, suitability identity scores lowest, reflecting a perception among some students of inadequacy in aligning their knowledge and skills with the demands of special education. This may be attributable to insufficient prior understanding of the specialty before enrollment and a relative paucity of intensive practical skills training during their studies.

4.2 Influence of Grade Level and Major selection basis on Professional Identity

4.2.1 Grade differences: interpreting the decline in professional identity among senior students

The significantly higher professional identity scores among freshmen and sophomores relative to juniors and seniors contradict the expectation

that advanced students, with clearer career plans, manifest stronger identity[14]. This phenomenon may be explained by the initial enthusiasm and idealized perceptions of lower-grade students who are in the initial stages of professional cognition, contrasted with the more pragmatic and pressured realities faced by upperclassmen—such as the complexities of teaching children with special needs during internships and anxieties concerning employment prospects and workload. These factors likely induce a more critical appraisal of the profession and a temporary dip in identity. Such findings underscore the necessity for targeted interventions focusing on "coping with occupational stress" and "enhancing practical competencies" among senior students to prevent further erosion of professional identity.

4.2.2 Major selection basis differences: the advantages of autonomous choice and challenges of non-voluntary placement

Students who autonomously select their major demonstrate significantly higher professional identity than those whose choices are influenced by parents, others, or adjustment procedures, aligning with previous research[8,10]. Choosing a major voluntarily reflects a preliminary familiarity and intrinsic interest in the field, fostering proactive engagement with professional knowledge. Conversely, students placed non-voluntarily may lack intrinsic motivation due to a sense of passivity, thereby diminishing their professional identification. Consequently, recruitment strategies should intensify efforts in "guiding professional awareness", while training programs must provide non-voluntary students with opportunities for "professional fit exploration", such as cross-disciplinary experiences and mentorship from distinguished special education faculty.

4.2.3 The disappearance of gender differences: the dual role of social perceptions and institutional education

Previous studies have suggested that male students possess lower professional identity than females[15], attributed to entrenched gender stereotypes surrounding the teaching profession. However, this study did not detect significant gender disparities, potentially reflecting a paradigm shift in societal attitudes toward increased acceptance of males in special education. Additionally, the institution's deliberate efforts to dismantle the stereotype of

special education as a female-exclusive vocation likely contribute to the convergence of identity levels between genders. This outcome indicates that gender disparities in professional identity among publicly funded special education normal students are not inherent and can be mitigated through societal advocacy and targeted educational interventions.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Research Conclusions

The professional identity of publicly funded special education normal students is generally moderately above average, with affective identity ranking highest and suitability identity lowest; altruistic motivation also resides at a moderately elevated level, with the self-transcendence dimension scoring the highest.

Significant disparities in professional identity exist across grade levels (freshmen and sophomores > juniors and seniors) and major selection basis (self-selected > parental/others' influence or assignment via adjustment), while no significant gender differences were observed.

5.2 Suggested Countermeasures

5.2.1 Establishing a "professional competency"-driven training system

Enhance practical engagement through the implementation of a "1+1 Accompaniment Growth Program", whereby each student teacher mentors a special needs child over the course of one academic year, committing to no less than eight in-person sessions per semester—such as homework assistance and rehabilitation training—and maintaining a *Reflective Practice Journal* to document the child's development alongside their own professional growth.

5.2.2 Designing a grade-based professional identity maintenance framework

For lower-grade students (freshmen and sophomores), initiate "Professional Cognition Enlightenment" activities, including lectures by distinguished special education experts and visits to special needs institutions to deepen their professional aspirations; facilitate workshops featuring role-play scenarios—such as portraying parents of special needs children and special education teachers—to enrich understanding of the profession's intrinsic values. For upper-grade students (juniors and seniors), introduce courses on "Occupational Stress

Adjustment", inviting seasoned special education practitioners to share insights on workload management and fostering professional fulfillment; establish an "Internship Mentorship System" that pairs each student with an experienced frontline special educator to guide teaching practice and career development, thereby strengthening their sense of suitability identity.

5.2.3 Optimizing professional identity guidance throughout the admission and training pipeline

Admission phase: Reinforce professional awareness screening by incorporating a "Professional Cognition Assessment," utilizing teaching videos and case studies of special needs children to evaluate candidates' understanding and enthusiasm; prioritize admission of applicants with volunteer experience serving special needs populations. Training phase: Provide tailored professional adaptation support, offering "Exploration of Professional Fit" courses to non-voluntary students, including opportunities to audit courses in other disciplines for one semester; establish a "Special Education Major Transfer Channel" allowing students who remain unsuited after one academic year to apply for a change of major, thus mitigating low identity stemming from passive study.

5.2.4 Perfecting the "career development assurance" mechanism

Career incentives: Enhance the attractiveness of the special education vocation by instituting a "Special Education Service Tenure Points System", awarding two points per year of service, with ten points granting priority enrollment in in-service master's programs or overseas special education study opportunities; collaborate with disability federations to create the "Special Education Teacher Honor Medal", publicly recognizing those who have served in remote areas for over five years at the provincial level. Support system: Alleviate early career pressures by assigning "Dual Mentors" (academic plus psychological) to publicly funded graduates during their first three years of employment—academic mentors guiding teaching skills and psychological mentors addressing occupational stress; regularly organize experience-sharing sessions featuring exemplary alumni cases in the education of special needs children to bolster professional identity.

In summary, this study, based on a sample of 205 publicly funded special education normal students and employing questionnaire surveys and data analysis, systematically elucidates the current state and influential factors of their professional identity. It highlights differential impacts of grade level—freshmen and sophomores exhibiting significantly higher identity than juniors and seniors—and major selection, with students who self-selected their major displaying markedly superior identification. The overall professional identity is moderately above average, yet with a notable weakness in suitability identity. These insights offer targeted directions to address prevailing challenges such as the decline of identity among senior students, skill mismatch, and diminished motivation in non-voluntary students. Through a tripartite approach encompassing motivation stimulation, competency transformation, and institutional assurance, the professional identity of publicly funded special education normal students can be continuously elevated. Future research expanding sample breadth across multiple regions and institutions, coupled with longitudinal designs tracking students from enrollment through employment, would yield a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamic evolution of professional identity, thereby furnishing more robust empirical support for the stable construction and high-quality development of China's special education workforce.

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