

Original Paper

Guardians of Music Education in Township Schools: A Study on Teachers' Professional Identity and Development

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Abstract

More than half of music teachers in China work in township schools. Among them, music teachers in township senior high schools occupy a particularly distinctive position: they are required to teach regular classes while simultaneously undertaking the training of students preparing for music-related entrance examinations. Taking the question “Who are they?” as its point of departure, this study adopts a narrative inquiry approach and draws on in-depth interviews with two female music teachers from a township senior high school.

By retracing their personal educational trajectories and everyday teaching practices, the study presents a grounded portrayal of township music education under real-world pressures. The findings indicate that, within constrained conditions, these teachers sustain the meaning of music education in different ways. They are not only transmitters of musical knowledge and cultural tradition, but also guardians who accompany students along their paths of growth.

By listening closely to teachers' narratives, this paper seeks to reveal the internal processes through which professional identity is constructed among township music teachers, and calls for renewed scholarly attention to the often-overlooked experiences of grassroots music educators.

Keywords

music education, township schools, teacher professional identity, professional mission, narrative inquiry

1. Introduction

Townships may be understood as spaces situated on the margins of cities—gazing toward urban prosperity while constrained by administrative structures that shape population mobility and limit access to educational resources. In recent years, music education studios and workshops have flourished in China's first- and second-tier cities, whereas music education in township secondary

schools has continued to struggle within narrow institutional spaces. In this sense, township music teachers often constitute the entirety of township music education.

According to statistics derived from national education data, music teachers working in township primary and secondary schools account for approximately half of the total number of music teachers in China (Note 1). Despite this numerical significance, scholarly attention to this group remains strikingly limited. Music, which should function as a life-oriented experience that enhances well-being and enables emotional expression, has gradually been reduced in township senior high schools to an instrument for examination-oriented advancement. Such a distorted educational orientation runs counter to John Dewey's conception of education as an integral part of life, leaving both teachers and students disoriented under persistent utilitarian pressures.

It is against this backdrop that two township senior high school music teachers—Ms. Fan and Ms. Qin—come into focus. Beyond teaching singing and instrumental skills, they are committed to guiding students to discover joy and aspiration through music, integrating musical learning into everyday life rather than treating it solely as preparation for examinations. Through interviews exploring their personal growth and teaching narratives, this study seeks to listen to the voices of these “guardians of music education” in township schools, to illuminate their inner worlds and practical significance, and to call for renewed scholarly attention to the educational contributions of this often-overlooked group.

2. Method

This study adopts a narrative inquiry approach and employs semi-structured interviews to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' career trajectories and professional reflections. The two participants are music teachers at Jiangzhou No. 1 Senior High School, located in Jiangzhou Township, a fourth-tier city in China. Ms. Fan (aged 55) has 32 years of teaching experience and specializes in vocal music, while Ms. Qin, fifteen years younger, has expertise in both piano and vocal performance. The interviews focused on the teachers' personal backgrounds, motivations for entering the profession, teaching experiences, and perspectives on music education. A substantial body of first-hand textual data was generated through these interviews. By analyzing the teachers' narratives, this study identifies core themes related to teacher professional identity and professional development, which are subsequently discussed in dialogue with relevant theoretical perspectives.

3. Findings

3.1 Teachers' Personal Experiences and Educational Ideals

Both teachers grew up in ordinary farming families. Their educational journeys were marked by hardship, yet sustained by a persistent love for music. Ms. Fan recalled that during her studies at a teachers' college, she struggled constantly to cover her tuition. Her family pawned her mother's ring and managed to raise 660 yuan, which she discreetly carried to the provincial capital to pay her fees. Throughout this period, she remained deeply committed to her musical aspirations. Reflecting on that

time, Ms. Fan explained:

“I kept thinking that I still wanted to study music... I knew what I was doing. I wasn’t taking the money to enjoy myself... As long as the goal is clear and you keep working toward it, there will definitely be results.”

It was precisely this determination that eventually enabled her to transfer from a rural school to Jiangzhou No. 1 Senior High School, where she became the only music teacher at the time.

Ms. Qin’s educational trajectory was equally marked by twists and challenges. Coming from a rural background, she faced strong pressure to marry at the age of seventeen, yet chose to persist in pursuing her education. She recalled:

“People throughout my village kept saying, ‘Why are you still studying? Why are you still studying as a girl?’ They believed that girls our age—seventeen—should get married right away... But my belief was relatively firm. I felt that girls didn’t necessarily have to live the way they described, because the world outside had to be different.”

In order to gain admission to a teachers’ university, Ms. Qin worked at a kindergarten during the day while studying late into the night, devoting herself fully to exam preparation in the period leading up to the national entrance examination. These experiences not only strengthened her resilience but also shaped her core educational values: education has the power to transform life trajectories and should not be constrained by one’s social origins. As Ms. Qin later reflected, her greatest source of pride lay in having “cultivated these art-track students and enabled them to become future music educators and cultural inheritors.” This orientation beyond personal achievement and toward future generations exemplifies a strong sense of professional mission.

3.2 “Guarding” Local Music Education

In their teaching of regular classes, both Ms. Fan and Ms. Qin actively sought to transmit local musical culture. During the early years of her teaching career, Ms. Fan single-handedly taught music to seven or eight junior high school classes across the entire school. Despite the rudimentary conditions, she found genuine enjoyment in her work. Several years later, she participated in a city-initiated folk song heritage project and began introducing local folk songs into her classroom teaching.

During one lesson, Ms. Fan asked whether any students came from Chengmen Township—the place of origin of the local mountain songs—and whether anyone could sing them. When a first-year senior high school student stood up, shy yet resolute, and performed a folk song, explaining that he enjoyed listening to such music and found it genuinely appealing, she was deeply moved. Recalling this moment, Ms. Fan stated:

“It truly moved me... This first-year student showed that he had really entered into the music. That is why he could genuinely like it from the bottom of his heart, and why he sang it so well.”

This moment allowed both teacher and students to experience the power of music rooted in local culture. The student gained a sense of cultural confidence, while the teacher witnessed a tangible moment of educational fulfillment. Although students initially found dialect-based folk songs difficult

to accept, adaptations that incorporated youthful rhythms gradually transformed resistance into enthusiastic engagement. In this sense, Ms. Fan used music to build a bridge between students and their hometown culture.

At the same time, both teachers maintained a clear awareness of the limitations inherent in local cultural education. Ms. Qin candidly acknowledged:

“At best, we can only play a very limited role. We can’t really popularize it at all. What we can do is let them know that such things exist, so that they develop some cultural confidence and realize that music has always lived in the hearts of ordinary people.”

As the school did not offer dedicated folk music courses, students’ exposure to local music relied primarily on short-term, project-based instruction. More often than not, the teachers could only quietly plant seeds of cultural awareness. As Ms. Qin emphasized, for schools to take music heritage seriously, music teachers must first engage in long-term, often invisible labor and demonstrate its value over time:

“Schools won’t offer free training just for the sake of music heritage unless... we manage to make this work visible and significant. Only when the school sees that what you’re doing really matters will it be willing to support you. So in the early stages, it has to be music teachers who contribute quietly and persist over many years.”

Throughout these experiences, both teachers maintained a deep sense of reverence for music and a sustained passion for education. Through their actions, they gave concrete expression to the belief that culture is rooted in local life and that education is the means through which it takes root and grows.

3.3 “Guarding” the Development of Music Examination Students

Most students preparing for music-related entrance examinations in township schools come from modest family backgrounds, yet they carry strong aspirations. Fully aware of the limited opportunities available in a fourth-tier city, Ms. Fan and Ms. Qin deliberately positioned their educational goal not as producing professional performers, but as cultivating a new generation of music educators.

Reflecting on her work at the senior high school level, Ms. Qin emphasized the particular significance of this stage of music education. Beyond providing general music instruction to regular classes, she viewed the preparation of music-track students as a key responsibility of high school music education, with the aim of enabling them to become future music educators and cultural inheritors. Guided by this belief, the two teachers jointly established a “music class” in 2010 to provide intensive training for students preparing for music examinations.

In its early stages, the conditions of the music class were extremely poor. Worn desks, long benches, and discarded pianos were commonplace. Although students initially found the experience novel, their learning was largely limited to basic skills. Ms. Qin recalled that the material conditions were “poor to the extreme,” at times leaving the teachers with a sense of powerlessness. Nevertheless, both teachers remained resolute, emphasizing that they could not abandon their students because, as teachers, they bore responsibility for their development. This sense of responsibility and perseverance constitutes a

concrete manifestation of their professional identity.

After years of sustained effort, the two teachers began to witness tangible outcomes. Among the first cohort of music class students, some went on to become music teachers in major cities, while others pursued further professional development by establishing their own training programs. By relinquishing their own aspirations for a “small stage,” the teachers entrusted broader musical ambitions to their students. As Ms. Qin reflected, two female students who grew up in impoverished townships later forged divergent yet self-determined paths—one returning to teach in a major city, the other remaining locally to accompany her family. In doing so, they quietly moved beyond the constraints of township schooling and escaped the expectation of early marriage imposed upon them in adolescence.

Such narratives not only bring emotional affirmation to the teachers’ professional lives but also underscore the deeper meaning of their vocational pursuit: through music education, life trajectories can be reshaped, and the value of education can be sustained across generations.

4. Analysis and Discussion: Teacher Professional Identity and Development

Building on the interview findings presented above, this section situates the experiences of the two teachers in dialogue with theories of teacher professional identity and professional development, in order to examine the formation and evolution of their professional beliefs. Teacher professional identity is commonly understood as the degree to which individuals recognize, accept, and internalize their professional roles. Previous research suggests that teacher professional identity is a multidimensional construct, encompassing self-positioning, perceptions of the working environment, and professional values, among other dimensions (Note 2).

Within township contexts, the construction of professional identity takes on distinctive characteristics. In addition to their role as teachers, rural educators often assume responsibilities as transmitters of local culture. The narratives of Ms. Fan and Ms. Qin provide a vivid illustration of this layered and complex identity configuration.

Self-Identity: Responsibility and Professional Mission

From the perspective of self-identity, both teachers demonstrate a strong sense of educational responsibility and professional mission. The persistence and sacrifice evident in their early educational experiences fostered a profound awareness of education as a lifelong commitment. Ms. Qin resisted village-level prejudice against girls’ continued schooling and completed her education despite social pressure, while Ms. Fan quietly accumulated musical expertise before securing a stable teaching position. As previous studies have indicated, teachers as a professional group tend to exhibit relatively high levels of professional identity and a strong sense of responsibility toward education.

In the narratives of both teachers, the terms “mission” and “responsibility” recur frequently. Ms. Qin expressed pride in cultivating future music educators, while Ms. Fan viewed the transmission of local musical culture through song as her personal calling. This alignment between value orientation and

professional goals reflects a process of identity construction in which personal musical interests are integrated with broader social responsibility.

Group and Social Identity: Recognition and Structural Constraints

From the perspective of group and social identity, the teachers' experiences reveal a dynamic and often tension-filled process. Within an objective context characterized by the concentration of educational resources in urban centers and the relatively low status and remuneration of township teachers, the two educators experienced a sense of marginalization—from their schools, local communities, and the broader educational system. Music education, in particular, was often undervalued, and opportunities for professional training were limited.

At the same time, both teachers actively sought external recognition through practice. Ms. Qin repeatedly emphasized the importance of “demonstrating value through action” in order to gain institutional support, while Ms. Fan attempted to enhance the visibility and legitimacy of music education by participating in local cultural heritage projects and engaging with external stakeholders. Such efforts represent attempts to strengthen recognition of the music teacher group and to enhance societal acknowledgment of their labor, thereby reinforcing professional belonging.

However, as previous research has noted, insufficient institutional and social support can intensify identity crises among rural teachers (Note 3). Both teachers explicitly described feelings of powerlessness and frustration, indicating that their professional identity was shaped by the interplay of internal motivation and external structural constraints.

Identity Transformation and Professional Development

From the perspective of identity transformation and professional development, the two teachers exhibit clear trajectories of professional growth. Educational research suggests that teacher professional identity extends across the entire career span and continues to evolve through teaching practice (Note 4). Beginning as grassroots educators, Ms. Fan and Ms. Qin gradually enhanced their confidence and professional competence through sustained teaching practice—Ms. Fan through continual refinement of folk song pedagogy, and Ms. Qin through the incremental accumulation of resources and experience in the music examination program.

Concurrently, their role orientation shifted: they moved from being individuals with personal musical aspirations to educators guided by explicit educational ideals. This process of role transformation represents a key outcome of professional identity construction. Throughout the interviews, both teachers repeatedly referred to notions of effort, mission, and responsibility, suggesting an ongoing reconstruction of self-image through reflection on professional meaning. As previous studies have argued, teachers continually negotiate and reshape their professional identities through interaction with practice, introspection, and action (Note 5).

Professional Mission as a Driving Force

It is particularly noteworthy that both teachers display a pronounced sense of professional mission throughout their development. In their narratives, education is framed as a responsibility rather than a

mere occupation; students are treated with familial care, and music is approached with enduring commitment. Ms. Qin's assertion that "we cannot give up, because we are their teachers and we are responsible for them," articulated under difficult material conditions, encapsulates a spirit of professional perseverance and altruism.

Moreover, the successful progression of former music examination students emerged as a primary source of professional fulfillment for both teachers. As educational scholarship has observed, teachers frequently regard students' growth and success as the foundation of their own professional achievement. Taken together, these findings suggest that a strong sense of professional mission serves as a central psychological driver of action and plays a critical role in strengthening teacher professional identity.

Professional Development in Township Contexts: Opportunities and Constraints

Finally, the experiences of Ms. Fan and Ms. Qin highlight both the distinctive characteristics and structural challenges of professional development among township music teachers. On the one hand, both educators actively sought opportunities for growth: Ms. Fan leveraged local cultural resources and participated in training programs, while Ms. Qin collaborated with colleagues to establish a music class and provide extracurricular instruction. Through reflective practice, they continuously adjusted their teaching strategies, aligning with research that emphasizes reflection-driven professional development. On the other hand, they faced systemic constraints, including limited institutional support and resource scarcity. Existing studies have shown that rural teachers often encounter restricted access to professional training and promotion opportunities, leaving them in a prolonged state of marginalization and partial exclusion from professional communities (Note 6). The teachers' narratives convey a clear sense of frustration regarding these constraints. Yet it is precisely these challenges that render their professional identity particularly resilient: when external conditions are unfavorable, they rely more heavily on an internally grounded sense of mission to sustain their commitment.

5. Conclusion

Through a narrative analysis of two music teachers working in a township senior high school, this study has portrayed their distinctive professional identities as "guardians of music education." With sustained commitment and care, they safeguard both local musical culture and their students' aspirations for musical growth. Their stories illuminate the multidimensional nature and generative mechanisms of teacher professional identity: personal experiences and beliefs form the foundation of identity, while social recognition and collective support shape its development. At the same time, a strong sense of professional mission emerges as a central driving force sustaining their long-term engagement in teaching.

The findings indicate that although resource scarcity and institutional constraints generate tensions and challenges in the construction of professional identity, teachers' professional responsibility and sense of ownership are continually reinforced through everyday practice. This dual dynamic highlights both the difficulties faced by township music teachers and their indispensable value within the broader

educational ecosystem.

Based on these insights, this study argues that the professional development of township music teachers should be supported through multiple pathways. At the institutional level, improved teaching conditions, targeted funding, and expanded access to professional training are essential for enhancing teachers' sense of belonging and professional identity. At the collective level, the establishment of teacher communities can facilitate collaboration and experience sharing, helping to alleviate the sense of isolation often experienced by township educators. At the societal level, greater respect and understanding from parents and the wider public are needed to strengthen teachers' social recognition. The cases of Ms. Fan and Ms. Qin demonstrate the power of intrinsic motivation in sustaining professional growth. Only when external support structures align with teachers' internally grounded sense of mission can meaningful and sustainable professional development be achieved. Future research may extend this line of inquiry by examining narratives of teachers from different subject areas and township contexts, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the rural education ecosystem.

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