

# The Impact of Teacher-Student Relationships on Teacher Identities: Voices From a Chinese University

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## Abstract

This study explored the impact of teacher-student relationships on teacher identities, focusing on perceptions and recognition. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, quantitative data were gathered through questionnaires from Chinese mathematics and economics students regarding their perceptions of their local English teachers' roles. Qualitative insights were obtained through focus group discussions with these teachers, analysing both student responses and related topics. Sociocultural analysis was applied, emphasising a relational approach. Results revealed a paradoxical relationship, where participants valued closeness with students, but also sought some distance due to the pressure caused by it. The resulting stress may influence preferred teacher identities and well-being, necessitating further research on teacher-student connections.

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## 1 Introduction

Teacher identities are dynamic, multifaceted, and relationally constructed over time (Varghese et al., 2005; Wang et al., 2021). Teachers' perceptions of their professional identities affect teaching effectiveness, development, adaptation to educational changes, and teaching practices (Beijaard et al., 2000). From a sociocultural (SCT) perspective, teacher identities are formed through social interactions, not as universally given constructs (Hong & Francis, 2022). Student perceptions of teachers and their roles impact teacher identities, which rely on recognition from others (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Gee, 2000, 2001). Teacher well-being, a developing research area (Mercer, 2018; Sulis et al., 2021; Sulis et al., 2023), may be influenced by whether students acknowledge teachers' professional identities, thereby affecting teaching experience and learning quality.

By exploring the relationships between teachers and their students from a teacher identity perspective, it is possible to understand how certain perceived roles impact job satisfaction (Hong, 2010) and subsequent teacher retention. Teacher identity shapes teachers' actions, decision-making, engagement in professional development, and perceived role responsibilities (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Furthermore, establishing an in-depth understanding of teachers' perceptions of their roles in context serves to develop their awareness of their well-being and methods for improving this vital component of teaching (Sulis et al., 2023).

1.1 Aims and objectives

This study aimed to explore how teachers perceive their own Language Teacher Identity (LTI) in comparison to the way their students perceive them, thereby filling a gap in the research, which has predominantly focused on pre-service teacher identities and their well-being (Sulis et al., 2023). Perceptions of LTI were examined by gathering quantitative data through questionnaires given to teachers and their students, comparing how teachers related to certain roles. The role that the recognition of these perceptions played was explored further through a qualitative Focus Group Discussion (FGD) between three Local English Teachers (LETs). Solari and Ortega (2022) argue that a teacher's professional identity is shaped by others' perceptions, necessitating understanding and recognition from students. The following research questions were analysed from an SCT perspective, adopting a relational approach to further understand this important teacher-student relationship:

- 1. How do teachers perceive their own LTIs, compared to their students' perceptions of their roles?
- 2. What role does recognition play in the ways teachers and students perceive teacher identities?

1.2 Context

The study took place at a university in Southern China, specifically at a joint institute between a British university and a national university of China. The student participants who took part in the questionnaires were the students of the teacher participants. They were all mathematics or economics students who were required to complete their degrees in English. The teachers were LETs from China who were responsible for teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP) to the students. This context provides an insight into the complex world of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

2 Literature review

2.1 SCT

From an SCT perspective, identities are socially constructed through mediation and negotiation that include understandings of past experiences and social norms (Vygotsky, 1978). From a Community of Practice (CoP) perspective, which refers to a group of people sharing concerns, problems, or interests, such as teaching, these social processes occur in definable contexts that contribute to the development of professional identities (Clarke, 2008; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Building on this foundation, teacher identity can be analysed through the levels shown in Figure 1, taken from Solari and Ortega (2022, p. 646) in relation to Vygotsky's (1978) principles of the genetic method.

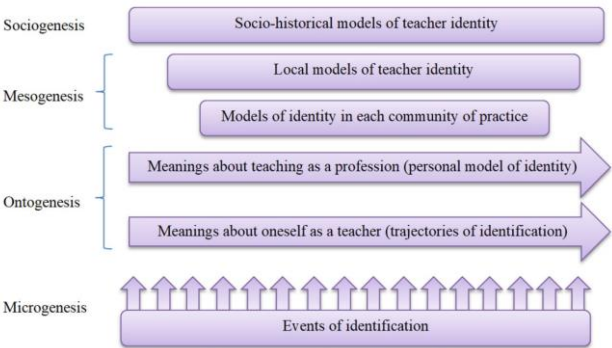


Fig. 1. Levels of analysis for teacher identity research

At the *sociogenetic* and *mesogenetic* levels, Solari and Ortega (2022) suggest focusing analysis on context and different types of meanings. As for the *microgenetic* level, “the units of analysis are the events of meaning negotiation (of the teaching profession and of themselves as teachers) that form the individuals’ professional trajectories during the period studied” (p. 647). This requires questioning what socially recognised identities the teachers are intending to enact and what kind of similar identities they recognise in themselves. Finally, the *ontogenetic* level, which is recognised for its dynamic and ever-changing nature through the evolution of meanings and dialogical construction within communities of practice, is suggested to be studied longitudinally. From a discursive perspective, instances of each level of this model are useful tools for analysing teacher identity from a structured theoretical foundation.

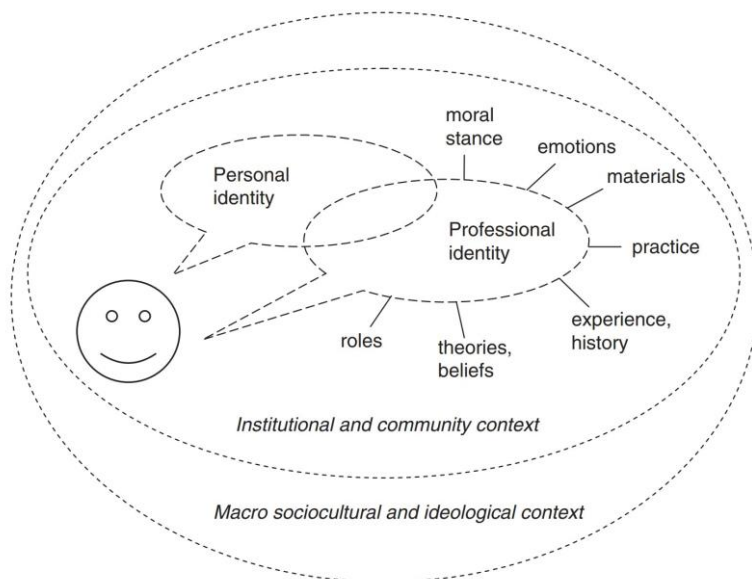
## **2.2 Relational approach: Assimilation and differentiation**

The relational approach acknowledges identity as dynamic and multifaceted, being constructed and reconstructed over time due to interactions and engagement with others through complex relationships (Solari & Ortega, 2022). Mercer and Gkonou (2020) emphasize the centrality of teachers in various relationships within education, which greatly influence their professional identity. Gee (2000, 2001) describes identity as being shaped through performance in context, leading to multiple identities linked to society. Bucholtz and Hall (2005, p. 598) expand on this, highlighting that identities gain meaning in relation to other available positions and social actors. Understanding the teacher-student relationship is crucial for understanding teachers’ professional identities.

Exploring assimilation and differentiation, where identification occurs through shared characteristics or differences, respectively, offers insight into teachers’ perceptions of their relationships and constructed professional identities (Solari & Ortega, 2022). Examples of assimilation may include teachers agreeing that it is important to take on the role of a sociable teacher, and that students would recognise this characteristic. In contrast, differentiation may occur when teachers believe that there should be a more professional social distance between themselves and students. Both processes result in insights into teacher identity due to the relationship between teachers and students as revealed through the discussions teachers have in this situation. Focusing on these aspects enables the exploration of teachers’ perceptions of their relationships and their professional identities.

## **2.3 Identity: Perceptions and recognition**

Earlier literature (Erikson, 1968; Mead & Morris, 1934) conceptualised identity in terms of “self” and an understanding of one’s self-concept. The construction and maintenance of identity are connected to the negotiations that occur in social interactions and the roles associated with these contexts, which are individually internalised. There is often an overlap between personal and professional identities within both an institutional and community context as well as the wider macro socio-cultural and ideological context, as shown in Figure 2, taken from Barkhuizen and Mendieta (2020). Each element attached to a teacher’s professional identity in Figure 2 is linked to how teachers perceive themselves and to their relationships with students. For example, if a teacher perceives themselves as light-hearted and easy-going in their personal lives, they may portray this image in their professional identity as a sociable teacher. The acknowledgement of this role from their students could be significant for this teacher in maintaining a sense of self in their professional domain and overall job satisfaction and well-being (Sulis et al., 2023). Therefore, both perceptions and recognition of professional identity roles occur internally within teachers and externally through others, such as students.



**Fig. 2. Facets of language teacher professional identity**

Beijaard et al. (2000) conducted an exploratory study of how teachers perceive their professional identities as a subject matter expert, as a pedagogical expert, and as a didactical expert. Farrell (2011) discovered sixteen main professional role identities, which focused on three main clusters: teacher as manager, teacher as “acculturator”, and teacher as professional, while a study by Wood (2021) used twenty-four different roles, including motivator, cross-cultural expert, and entertainer, to understand how teachers perceive their teacher identities. Essentially, teachers may relate in varying degrees to certain roles that provide an indication of the professional identities they perceive for themselves.

Self-perception alone is not enough to form a solid professional identity. According to Solari and Ortega (2022), how others perceive a teacher is fundamental in shaping their professional self-understanding. When students recognise their teacher as effective, the teacher is more likely to see themselves in a positive light (Barkhuizen & Mendieta, 2020). However, recognition alone is not sufficient; teachers must actively interpret and incorporate this feedback into their self-concept. As Schachter (2014) argues, identity is not just about who we are, but also about claiming who we are. Therefore, the acknowledgement and validation of teachers by students are crucial for the development of their professional identities.

## **2.4 Teacher well-being**

Teacher well-being is a broad term, encompassing many emotional and psychological factors. However, it is a vital aspect of the teaching and learning experience and deserves attention (Mercer, 2018). In this study, teacher well-being is understood as being socially structured and context dependent, meaning it is not just about individual agency, but is relationally connected to others (Sulis et al., 2023). The meaning of well-being is most significantly related to a balance between positive and negative emotions which are connected to contextual factors (Sulis et al., 2021). For teachers, these emotions are likely to be crucially connected to their students, and students’ perceptions or recognition of teachers’ own perceptions of their professional identities is inextricably linked to teacher well-being. A previous study (Sulis et al., 2023) focused on language teacher well-being across the career span, highlighting balancing priorities and domains as one of the macro-themes, including periods of time when teachers focus their energy more on their work compared to stages

of balancing personal and professional life issues. Teacher-student relationships and the perceptions and recognition that are associated with this are a key example of this balance that requires further study.

## 2.5 Studies

Xing et al. (2024) conducted a study which also recognised the dynamic nature of teacher identity and how personal and professional domains combine to influence how teachers perceive their teacher identities. Their narrative inquiry investigated the identity development of a female Chinese language teacher throughout her pre-service and in-service teaching phases. Drawing on Dialogical Self Theory (DST), the study examined how her internal and external "I-positions", representing her various roles and perspectives, interacted and evolved over time. The research utilised data from interviews, classroom observations, and written reflections to explore these dynamics. The study underscored the fluid and multifaceted nature of teacher identity, highlighting how personal and professional factors continually interact to shape identity development. It emphasised the importance of supporting teachers in navigating these dynamics through reflective practices and professional development opportunities that acknowledge and address the complexities of their evolving identities.

Wang et al. (2021) conducted a single case study examining the dynamic construction of a Chinese EFL teacher's identity across three phases: before a practicum, during the practicum, and during the first year of teaching. Utilising the Dynamic Systems Model of Role Identity (DSMRI), the study analysed qualitative data to trace changes in the teacher's ontological beliefs, goals, self-perceptions, and action possibilities. The findings highlighted how temporal and situational factors contribute to the alignment or misalignment of these components, fostering a more negotiated, adaptive, and realistic teacher role identity.

Xing et al. (2024) position teacher-student relationships as central to the ongoing construction of teacher identity. These relationships act as a mirror, reflecting and reshaping how teachers see themselves. Through interactions with students, teachers refine their sense of purpose, adapt to challenges, and develop a more nuanced professional identity. Wang et al. (2021) emphasise how teachers' beliefs about student needs and their interactions with students lead to constant negotiations of their sense of self as educators. A key theme is that teacher identity transformation occurs when educators are confronted with conflicting role expectations, including from their students. While both these studies acknowledge the significance of teacher-student relations as part of the ongoing construction of teacher identities, they do not provide an in-depth exploration of the teacher perspectives, which also contain input on how their students perceive their roles. Furthermore, there is a lack of data which provide further understanding of how the professional and personal domains of teachers' identities are influenced by teacher-student relations. This study aims to elaborate on these key aspects of LTIs.

## 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Participants

The teacher participants in this study were LETs from China—Scarlett, Jenny, and Kate (pseudonyms)—working at a university in Southern China. They held Master's degrees in fields relevant to teaching English and had prior teaching experience at Chinese universities. Their ages ranged from the late twenties to early forties. They viewed themselves as experienced language teachers who were continuously learning.

Their students were first- and second-year Chinese learners aged 18 to 20, enrolled in a dual degree programme for mathematics and economics at a joint institute between a British university and the Southern Chinese university where this study took place. Taught in English, their courses necessitated EAP and IELTS classes with the teachers during the first two years of their degrees.

They had a high percentage of graduates studying abroad following their current degrees. Despite the significance of English language proficiency for their courses, the students’ ability levels were exceptionally varied. This was often because students were more focused on their mathematics courses and did not pay enough attention to their EAP classes.

3.2 Context

The study took place at a joint institute between a British and Chinese university focusing on mathematics and economics in Southern China. All aspects of the courses were conducted in English. The joint institute required all students to complete an EAP course to develop their English ability to succeed in the English-taught courses for their majors. Students were also required to pass IELTS with an average score of 6.0 to obtain both of their degrees from the British and Chinese university. The institute had a high percentage of graduates studying abroad and placed significant value on this. This context was selected due to the insights it could provide for understanding LTIs of teachers teaching EFL in East Asia.

3.3 Data collection

A mixed-methods approach was adopted for this study due to the benefits it offers for an exploratory study of teacher identity (Solari & Ortega, 2022). Quantitative data were collected through questionnaires given to the students of the teacher participants and the teachers themselves (see Table 1). Qualitative data were collected from a two-hour FGD between the three teacher participants one week after the questionnaires were completed.

Table 1. Number of completed student questionnaires for each teacher participant

Teacher Participants	No. of Student Participants
Kate	120
Jenny	108
Scarlett	82

The rationale for the questionnaires (Appendices A and B) was to provide content for the teachers to discuss during the FGD, establishing insights into how their students perceived their roles as teachers. The twelve teacher roles for the questionnaires were selected from past studies (Farrell, 2011; Wood, 2021) due to their usefulness for creating discussions related to LTIs between participants, with a focus on more personal/social roles (entertainer, disciplinarian, motivator, storyteller, friend, and socialiser) and professional roles (cross-cultural expert, language expert, interaction manager, presenter, knowledgeable, and learner). Student participants were administered the questionnaires through a Chinese app similar to Google Forms at the end of the first semester in the academic year. They were asked to rank how their teachers related to the roles on a scale of 1-7, and teachers completed the same questionnaire focusing on their own relatability to these roles. The resulting radar graphs (Figures 4 to 6) show the teachers’ self-perception in comparison to the average scores collected from their own students’ perceptions of them.

Following the questionnaires and the creation of the radar graphs, an FGD was conducted between the teacher participants. The FGD lasted for 2 hours and took place in a teacher’s lounge in the department building, which was pre-booked for privacy so the teachers could engage in an open discussion. The radar graphs were provided to the teachers as part of a handout (Appendix C), which included guided questions focusing on self-reflection for the participants and that had been highlighted as an essential method for discussing “self” and identity (Beijaard et al., 2004) from the past, present, and future perspectives. The majority of the FGD was focused on the participants following the handout provided, with occasional inclusion of the researcher to facilitate the discussion. The FGD was recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

### 3.4 Data analysis

From an epistemological perspective, the data were analysed and interpreted through inductive reasoning, which is a “discovery-oriented approach grounded in data, instead of attempting to prove or disprove hypotheses deduced from theories” (Hong & Francis, 2020, p. 209). Therefore, it was necessary to analyse the data with an open mind when exploring identity.

Over 10,000 words were transcribed through the app Descript from the FGD and were analysed based on the framework explained in the literature review. An SCT perspective focused on the different levels of teacher identity analysis (see Figure 1) provided a clear rationale for selecting and exploring the collected data, which were further articulated from a relational approach. Instances of identification through assimilation and differentiation further guided the process of selecting and analysing the excerpts in the results section.

Following this initial process of analysis and interpretation, the data were thematically divided into aspects that related to the aims of this research and were selected to be discussed in this article. Thematic analysis, a well-established method of managing qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2021), was the foundation of this study.

The process of qualitative data collection and analysis resulted in a surprising degree of focus on the personal lives of the teachers. Often the FGD provided an opportunity for venting, which is a common form of discussion for teachers in these contexts (Sulis et al., 2023), and offered in-depth perspectives of the relationship between the personal and professional identities of the teachers in this study.

## 4 Results and analysis

### 4.1 Radar graphs

The radar graphs (Figures 3 to 5) were developed from the data collected following the questionnaires given to the teacher participants and their students, showing a comparison of how the teacher participants (appearing as self-perception in blue) related to twelve teacher roles (scale 1-7, 7 being the highest) and how their students (appearing as student perception in pink) perceived them to relate to the same roles. A similar relatability score for each teacher role indicated recognition from the teachers’ students.

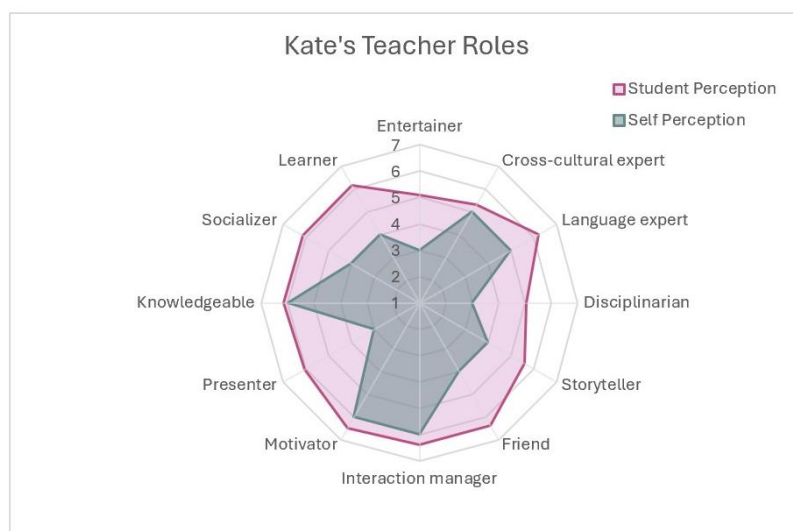


Fig. 3. Kate's teacher roles

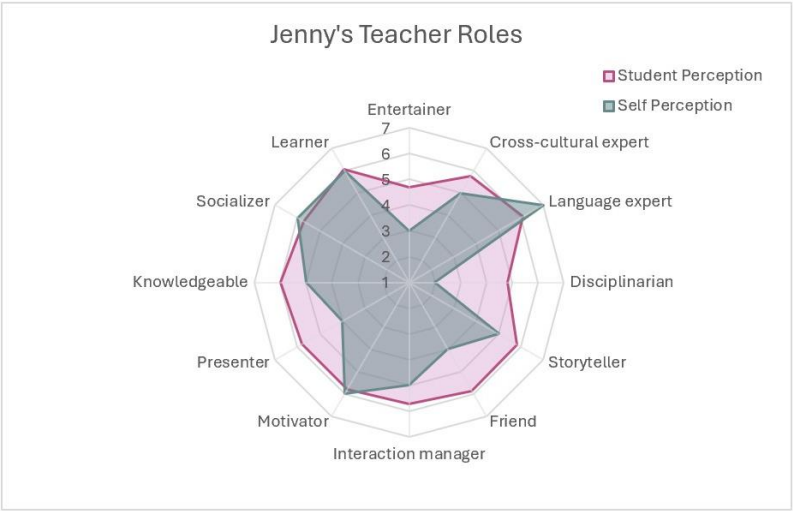


Fig. 4. Jenny’s teacher roles

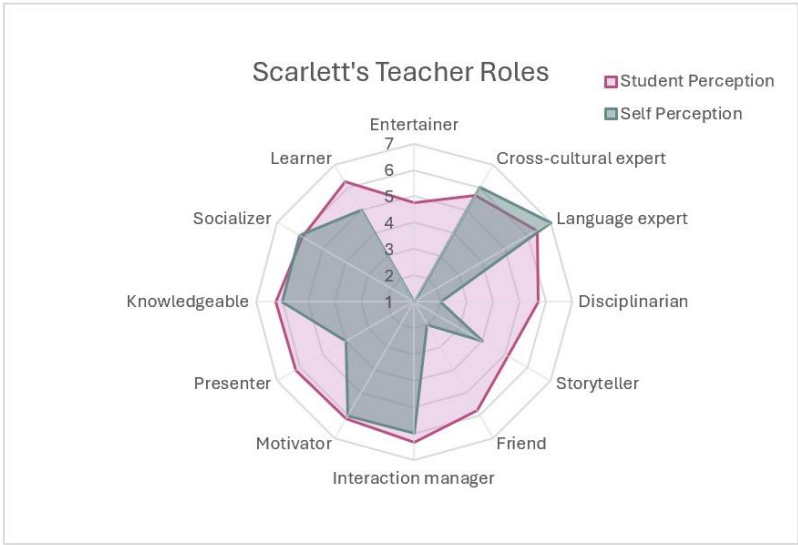


Fig. 5. Scarlett’s teacher roles

For Kate, the roles of being *knowledgeable*, a *motivator*, *interaction manager*, *language expert*, and *cross-cultural expert* were most recognised by her students, as shown by their similar recognisability scores. The main differences between her self-perceptions and her students’ perceptions were in the roles of *entertainer*, *presenter*, *friend*, *learner*, *socialiser*, and *disciplinarian*.

Jenny’s students appeared to most recognise her perceived teacher roles as a *learner*, *socialiser*, and *motivator*. The least amount of recognition was found in the perceptions of the roles of *presenter*, *friend*, *disciplinarian*, and *entertainer*.

Scarlett’s students showed recognition for her perceived roles as a *socialiser*, being *knowledgeable*, a *motivator*, *interaction manager*, *language expert*, and *cross-cultural expert*. The main differences and indicators of less recognition were in the roles of *entertainer*, *presenter*, *friend*, and *disciplinarian*.



From the data presented in the radar graphs, the roles of *entertainer*, *disciplinarian*, and *friend* were the most notable indicators of difference in perceptions and lack of recognition. Interestingly, these were all personal/social roles that would be more associated with the teacher's personality rather than professional roles indicating teaching methods and content-knowledge. These results also highlighted a form of relationship between the teachers and their students which became more evident during the FGD.

## 4.2 FGD excerpt interpretations and analysis

The results from the FGD are presented in Excerpts 1 to 5 following the four stages that guided the discussions on the handout provided to the teacher participants. The excerpts were selected after detailed analysis because of the insights they provide for the purpose of this study and for exploring the most salient theme.

### Most salient theme

The most salient theme outlined below emerged following analysis of the recorded and transcribed data from the FGD due to the insights it provided for exploring the relationship between perceptions of teaching and recognition from students:

Social relations between teachers and students: a paradoxical relationship.

### Past perspective

#### Jenny

But I'm not a strict teacher. I tend to be very relaxed in my class. I need to make sure that I feel relaxed in my class, so that I can enjoy the teaching. That's my priority. I think so in the end it will be teacher centred. Student centred you invite them. Uh, you share. I share a lot of my stories in my class. So, when they feel connected with me, we all feel relaxed, very relaxed in my class. Students talk about their relationship with their girlfriends, boyfriends, with family members, their depression and many, many different things in my class. So, we all feel quite close and connected to each other. So, I don't know if it is teacher centred or student centred, but I think we talk a lot, we share a lot in class, and they feel quite relaxed, yeah, and feel happy.

#### Scarlett

Yeah, actually this will be a very common concern about how to balance the student centred and also how to achieve the teaching goals, the students learning expectations, yeah. And actually, when I received my master's degree, Yeah, I was, um, very similar with Jenny's idea about that, um, I mean, we both learned about teacher-oriented education pedagogy when we were in the bachelor and also the master's degree. And actually, I was not prepared myself to be a teacher, and I was more interested in research oriented in case that I know there'll be a lot of the dilemma and also the struggling when you try to put your, like your philosophy, teaching philosophy into the real practice. Yeah, so actually, I was always. Um, not much interest in the real teacher role in my, when, when I received my master's degree.

### **Excerpt 1**

Excerpt 1 reveals Jenny's ambiguity regarding her teaching style (teacher-centred vs. student-centred), but it emphasises the significance of a relaxed social atmosphere in her classroom. Jenny perceived her approach as teacher-centred due to her personal relaxation, but acknowledged its student-centred aspect in fostering student expression. She explicitly claimed to be "not a strict teacher" and underscored her students' relaxed and happy demeanour. This suggests she valued student perceptions and recognition. Scarlett also noted the need for a balance between teacher-centred and

student-centred methods, driven by her educational background. She felt unprepared for teaching and leaned towards research. This self-perception suggests a teacher prioritising internal professional identity over social connections with students.

At the *ontogenetic* level, this delves into the meaning of teaching as a profession and the teachers' self-conception. Jenny valued sociability for personal well-being and student learning, while Scarlett felt unprepared and focused on research. At the *microgenetic* level, Jenny illustrated how her teaching fostered student relaxation and sociability, aligning with her preference for closer student relationships.

From a relational perspective of *assimilation*, both Jenny and Scarlett recognised the importance of balancing teacher-centred and student-centred approaches. Understanding their shared perspective likely influenced their identifications with teaching.

### Present perspective

#### Jenny

It occurred to me that, uh, I think I, I, I changed my teaching a lot, um, especially in the speaking class. So, the first year I came here, I taught something, um, topics like advertising, um, education. Some big topics. Yeah, the speaking, for the speaking class. Uh huh. Those topics are I think they are essential to a great extent. But then one day, I saw one student posting something on WeChat. Yeah, it's quite negative, saying that she was studying English that can't be used in real life, in this institution I mean, she thought she learnt something useless in institution because those, um, the content, the knowledge she learned in class is all very academic.

#### Scarlett

Theoretical?

#### Jenny

Not very theoretical, just the language is quite formal, not something that can be applied in real life. Oh, they want some more daily English. So, this year I changed all my content for my speaking class.

(discussion focusses on the participants sharing teaching methods for speaking classes based on the comments by students highlighted above, focussing class content more on daily English rather than academic English)

#### Jenny

So, I think I changed everything this year for the speaking class. Uh, but in the past, I thought, yeah, I need to teach something difficult. Something sounds very professional, something sounds challenging so that they will feel that, okay, the teacher is knowledgeable, but it's wrong. Teach something they can use in life.

#### Scarlett

But how can you balance the academic?

#### Jenny

Well, they have got, they got other classes, the reading class, the writing class, their math classes. They learned so much professional knowledge in their area of expertise. They developed their language in that aspect. What I need to ensure in my speaking class is that the language can be used in daily life.

### **Excerpt 2**

In Excerpt 2, Jenny mentioned that she altered her teaching approach after discovering a negative comment on social media from a student who felt they had learned something useless in her speaking class. She shifted focus to teaching English for everyday use instead of EAP, indicating the importance she placed on student feedback. In contrast, other participants prioritised EAP in their teaching methods. Scarlett questioned Jenny's balance between academics and practicality. Jenny acknowledged that this event changed her teaching perspective and she realised the importance of teaching practical skills rather than challenging content solely for the sake of appearing knowledgeable. This significant shift suggests Jenny was highly influenced by student feedback.

This emphasises Jenny's identification process at the *microgenesis* level, initiated by a student's comment. It offers insight into identity formation within her CoP at the *mesogenesis* level, prompting Jenny to adapt her teaching beliefs from prioritising academic material to using simpler content in response to contextual demands.

From a relational perspective of *differentiation*, Jenny identified herself as a teacher in this example due to the methods she used in her speaking class, and the rationale behind this variation appeared to come from an acknowledgement of the need for her students to recognise her ability to teach them what they expected in the classroom.

### Radar graphs

#### Scarlett

I think, uh, it's not much differences between my evaluation and students' evaluation in these two domains (*Knowledgeable* and *Language Expert*). Yeah, it's very similar. And yeah, but if they give me a much lower evaluation than me, then maybe I would think twice that what happened. Is there something wrong in my teaching something? In case that this is language class, of course, the language parts are very important. If they feel that they learn little from the language class about language, then obviously this is my, um, irresponsibility. So, yeah, obviously if they give me much lower marks than I do, then I will think twice and maybe I will ask someone to talk with me. There must be some reason why. Yeah, yeah, yeah. But, yeah, just, but, but if they give me, like, the full of, full of entertainer or friends role, like, I mean, much lower than I do, then I don't much care about it. About friends or entertainer or something. Because this class is not for socializing. Not just for fun. Yeah, not just for fun, so this doesn't matter. But for language, I care, yeah

#### Jenny

It depends on how you balance, not, not balance. Well, I learned from the papers that, there is huge difference about a class for entertainment and a class that has entertainment in it. So, um, students can feel happy in the class, but if the whole class is just about being happy, then some advanced students will definitely complain. But, um, if it is a class that Um, has some jokes in it. Students will be more active in the class. So, it depends on how you balance the two. What you want is a class that can make them feel happy, or a class that is fun and interesting. That's what I think. Uh, well, for the knowledgeable language experts, if they gave me a low, uh, rate, I will be frustrated, for sure, yeah, because your major is language teaching. If students don't acknowledge your ability to be a good English teacher, that means you, you kind of fail in your, at your job.

### **Excerpt 3**

In Excerpt 3, Scarlett emphasised alignment between her self-perception as a knowledgeable language expert and her students' perceptions of her. She valued their recognition of her expertise, especially in a language classroom. However, she deemed their perception of her as an entertainer or friend less important and prioritised language goals. Jenny agreed, stressing the significance of being seen as a competent English teacher, while acknowledging the value of some entertainment

to enhance student engagement. This underscores the importance that both teachers placed on professional recognition from their students.

At the *ontogenesis level*, this excerpt provides insight into some meanings of teaching as a profession, specifically language teaching and the roles that were expected from students and themselves in this context. While the participants, particularly Jenny, understood the importance of creating a relaxed social environment in the classroom, they appeared to value more the students' perceptions related to being teachers that are knowledgeable language experts.

From a relational perspective, the *assimilation* that occurred in Excerpt 3 between Scarlett and Jenny's valuation of students' perceptions of their teaching could buttress their own self-perceptions of their roles as teachers and their professional identities in the future.

#### Future perspective

##### Scarlett

Uh, for me, I think that the change, um, just as mentioned that I wonder maybe, um, about my image, like, um, I don't, you know, as I mentioned that I would tend to have the poker face in my class without consciousness. So I think that maybe I would try to keep remind myself to smile a lot, smile more, something to, and yeah, and I know that, um, even in my, um, daily life, some friends, they have told me that when I do not smile, my face is really a kinds of, um, looks, looks kinds of tough for the other people. Yeah. So, yeah, maybe I, I think that this is not very good in the teaching environment. So yeah, maybe for me, I will try to change a bit more about that to get my image to be more friendly, approachable, more to be an entertainer, entertainer (laughs). Smile more. Maybe.

#### **Excerpt 4**

Jenny

For me, well, one drawback of playing the nice image in front of students can be that they think you are quite approachable. Um, yeah, I saw that students gave me high rating on being their friends. I, I do feel that, um, when some girls approach me and, they call me sister, like, yeah, instead of teacher.

Scarlett

Oh, I have been called beauty in the email. Someone just writes down the email. Hi, beauty, comma, blah, blah, something like that. Oh my gosh, I just can't believe it. That's not my name.

Jenny

Yeah. They say, can I have your WeChat? Because I, um, I, I turned off that function on my WeChat. I didn't allow students to send a friend request to me. I blocked that, all of that, all the functions. So, um, when they approach, when I look at them, they are so lovely, so sometimes adorable, and they, they say, um, I like you, can I have your WeChat? I really, really, um, yeah, they say something nice. And then I feel that, okay. Yeah, it's okay. But in the future, maybe I should distance myself from my students a little bit. Like, yeah, I don't want them to approach me. I don't want them to be in my, in part of my private life. I tend to keep a very private life. Yeah. Not being friends. Sometimes I got messages from them saying that girls, not boys, girls will say, um, Teacher, would you like to celebrate Christmas with us? We are going to the hot pot restaurant. We are going to the shopping mall. Would you like to go shopping with us? Or something like that?

Scarlett

Yeah, so I don't really take being a sister. I haven't got any invitation either. Like to go shopping all together or something. No, no, no, never.

Jenny

That's why I say in the future, I shouldn't look that approachable. Because they think you smile a lot.

Kate

But why? You don't want them to be your friends?

Jenny

Well, during the class break is okay. In class is okay. Yeah, if they like to use English to speak more, to share more, it's fine, because that is, that can also develop their language skill, but after class, you want to lead a private life.

Scarlett

Well, but students will be confused, I mean, they will feel like you are very approachable in class, but then after class, you just say no. Suddenly change. Yeah, suddenly change. Suddenly no.

Jenny

I keep telling them I don't check my WeChat moment because too many people on my WeChat. Okay. Like almost a thousand people. So yeah, I, because they will tell me, oh teacher, you don't give me a thumb, thumbs up on you. Don't give me a like on my WeChat. You didn't see that? I thought, oh, because yeah, I don't check my WeChat moment.

Scarlett

They ask you something like that. They really take you as a sister. I have to say again.

Kate

Yeah

Jenny

Well, it depends on whether you made it positive or negative. I mean, I don't like it. I don't like it. So, um, yeah, just after class, I won't reply any messages. Yeah, if it's not anything to do with study, with homework. Yeah, that's something I will change, definitely, for sure.

### Excerpt 5

In Excerpt 4, Scarlett discussed changing her teacher image by smiling more and avoiding her "poker face". She acknowledged that while friends outside teaching recognised this toughness as part of her personality, it was not suitable for teaching. Prior excerpts have shown a struggle to balance sociability with students, teacher-centred vs. student-centred approaches, and differing views on friendliness. Scarlett now acknowledged the need to be more sociable, aiming for a

friendly, approachable, and entertaining image. Despite earlier criticism of the entertainer role, Scarlett saw its value for student engagement, suggesting she valued student recognition more than she had realised.

In Excerpt 5, Jenny reflected on her evolving teacher role, realising that being too approachable to students could blur professional boundaries. She now considered distancing herself from students to maintain privacy, despite previously prioritising a friendly environment. Her colleagues were surprised by how close her relationship with students was, with some students even calling her "sister." Jenny acknowledged the need for balance between professional and personal identity, suggesting she might prioritise her well-being over student recognition in the future.

These excerpts reflect identification from a *microgenesis* level of real events to an *ontogenesis* level for the participants' meanings about teaching as a profession and as individuals. For Jenny, past experiences with her students impacted her own well-being and led to her desiring a different balance of social relations with her students and opting to distance herself more in the future. Scarlett, through the FGD, appeared to recognise the need to be more sociable, thus changing her personal identity in a professional context due to what she believed her students preferred.

From a relational perspective, Jenny recognised her current professional identity through *differentiation*, as her relationship with her students was significantly different from that of her colleagues. An interesting process of *assimilation* occurred in which Jenny and Scarlett sought to find a balance closer to each other in terms of their social relations with their students. Perhaps the discourse and negotiations which took place during this FGD were a key reason for this altered understanding of their professional identities.

## 5 Discussion

### 5.1 Perceptions of teacher identities

Throughout the FGD, the participants negotiated their perceptions of the relationships between themselves and their students on a personal and professional level, which provided an insight into their teacher identities. Initially Jenny highlighted her perception of the importance of establishing a relaxed social environment for her students in the classroom. While Scarlett and Kate agreed in principle with having a close relationship with students, due to the benefits this brought to their own teaching goals and student learning, they differed significantly in the methods of achieving this and the degree of closeness the relationship should have. This differentiation is not surprising, as "each teacher constructs meaning in different ways, even if they work in the same school context" (Hong & Francis, 2020, p. 209). Therefore, the fact that the participants shared different perceptions in this regard may reflect personal preferences that conflicted with their professional identities. This conflict of interests developed as the FGD progressed and the negotiation of meanings continued, revealing a paradoxical relationship between the participants' perceptions of the link between teachers and students. Jenny eventually shared a change in her perceptions regarding how much she should socially engage with her students and decided she would try to be less approachable in the future because of the stress this caused in her personal life. This aligns with Sulis et al.'s (2023) findings about balancing priorities and domains, and the negative impact this may have on teacher well-being. Mercer & Gkonou's (2020) study also highlighted this paradox in how teachers perceive investing in social relationships with their students. They found that teachers recognise the value of developing strong social relationships with their students for their own well-being as well as the students' while also finding this an emotionally draining process. The teacher in Xing et al.'s (2021) study shared a similar conflict of interests because of her perceptions of her role as a teacher as her initial belief in fostering close teacher-student relationships led to difficulties in maintaining discipline. Scarlett also mentioned that she should try to change her personality in the classroom, feeling the need to smile and be more approachable as she believed that students should perceive her language class as more relaxed than their other mathematics classes. The management of emotions for language teachers in the classroom can involve not showing anger, frustration, or even humour so the learners can feel

more comfortable (Mercer & Gkonou, 2020, p. 167). The impact that this paradox has on the participants' professional identities is not clear, but the overlapping nature of teacher identity in terms of a personal and professional identity (see Figure 2) is causing a conflict that can negatively affect the well-being of teachers.

Due to the dynamic and multifaceted nature of identity, it stands to reason that the way teachers perceive their professional identity may vary greatly based on the context and their activities at that time (Barkhuizen & Mendieta, 2020). The participants highlighted that the language classroom in this context enabled them to engage more with their students on a social level, which they perceived to be beneficial for themselves and the students to a certain extent, but also stressful and in conflict with their personal identity. Teachers and learners are able to benefit from positive interpersonal relations, particularly in a language classroom where cooperation on a social level is so vital (Mercer & Gkonou, 2020). However, teachers should be supported and provided with the freedom to choose their own balance regarding how much they connect with students on such an intimate, and possibly emotionally consuming, social level.

## 5.2 Recognition of teacher identities

The results of this study provided insights into the role of recognition for teacher identities on three levels: personal recognition, recognition from colleagues or institution, and recognition from students. Wang et al. (2021) found that teachers negotiate their professional identities in response to student feedback, which is a direct form of recognition. The participants in this study valued the recognition received from radar graphs of teacher roles, which they perceived to be more related to "being professional", such as being a *language expert* and being *knowledgeable*. This recognition appears to be important for their teacher identities in relation to all three levels previously highlighted. On the other hand, factors related to creating a relaxed social environment for students, such as *entertainer* and *friend*, do not require recognition from any of these levels. This may be because of the personal preferences the participants had developed about teaching. Farrell (2011, p. 55) explains that "how teachers recognize their roles within their world ... involves their beliefs, values, and assumptions about teaching and being a teacher". It is possible that this context resulted in more emphasis on achieving language goals, rather than establishing a relaxed environment for students.

The extent to which recognition of these valued roles affects teacher identities is uncertain and complex. Solari and Ortega (2022, p. 631) highlight that:

It is not the intention of those who perform an action what defines it as an act of recognition; rather, it is the effect that this action has on the other person, depending on that person's interpretation of it, its meaning within the context where it takes place, and the impact that the significant other has on the recognized person, that makes it an act of recognition

Exploration of these acts of recognition would require further studies, particularly from the student perspective. However, in many ways, a "teacher's professional identity is the product of the various ways in which a teacher can establish a relationship with others" (Solari & Ortega, 2022, p. 632). Wang et al. (2021) emphasise that alignment or misalignment between teacher expectations and student responses can reinforce or challenge a teacher's professional identity. Furthermore, the participant in Xing et al.'s (2024) study expressed feeling motivated and validated by positive student feedback. If students expressed that they were learning and benefiting from her teaching, she felt a stronger sense of professional purpose. This aligns with the idea that teacher identity is relational and shaped by external validation from students. Therefore, the results of this study, and the paradox previously described, provide an insight into the conflicts that may occur for teachers in recognising their own professional identities. An understanding of how teachers recognise their own professional identities and how students recognise them is vital and would benefit from future observational studies and longitudinal interviews from the teacher and student perspectives. The vali-

dation of one's identity may come from making claims that are externally affirmed through interactions, but this affirmation can also be found in self-reflexivity, meaning that self-reflexive validation of identity is also possible (Schachter, 2014).

This study provided an insight into how the participants valued recognition in varied ways at different levels of their context. The ways teachers invest in their relationships with students vary, reflecting the personality, experiences, and expectations of individuals (Mercer & Gkonou, 2020). All the participants acknowledged a positive feeling of being perceived as a *friend* by their students, and Jenny appeared to value her colleagues' opinions about how she socially engaged with her students. When teacher identities are accepted and acknowledged in a context where their beliefs and practices are recognised by their colleagues and the wider institution, a satisfactory perception of one's professional identity is more likely to occur (Barkhuizen & Mendieta, 2020). However, the roles that are valued at any given time can change; even within this single FGD, Jenny's opinion of how she socially engaged with her students changed, perhaps because of the negotiations that took place. Gee (2000, p. 99) points out that:

The "kind of person" one is recognized as "being," at a given time and place, can change from moment to moment in the interaction, can change from context to context, and, of course, can be ambiguous or unstable.

Therefore, developing any concrete understanding of how student recognition may impact teacher identities is further complicated when the focus is on a single context and time. Nevertheless, recognition is clearly significant, and teachers can benefit from understanding what kind of recognition they value from discussions like those this study provided. According to Barkhuizen and Mendieta (2020, p. 12): "Being a good teacher means knowing who we are so that we can do what we do better – for ourselves and our learners". The ways that teachers choose to relate to their students are just one way that they establish and maintain their professional identities, and they should consciously and continuously reflect on them.

## 6 Conclusion

This study found that teachers perceive their professional identities in varied ways from one other, even when they teach in the same context. Perceptions of their roles as teachers may be different from how students perceive them, and the relationship between teachers and students is complex. The social relationships between teachers and students require further research to understand how they may impact teacher identities. The paradoxical relationship between how teachers and students connect on a social level, which has been previously highlighted (Mercer & Gkonou, 2020), requires specific focus and may be a key factor for teacher identities and well-being.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution of rich individual teacher perspectives towards understanding teacher identity from an SCT perspective which benefits from a broad and inclusive exploration. It is vital for teachers to gain a better understanding of their professional identities to foster a more stable concept of themselves and their well-being (Mercer, 2018; Sulis et al., 2021; Sulis et al., 2023). This may reduce burnout or attrition, which results in low levels of teacher retention. The FGD used in this study could be designed as workshops by department leaders in universities to benefit their teachers. Farrell (2011) suggests that these types of discussions "seem to be a useful way of releasing teachers from the isolation of their classrooms so that they can consciously explore their identity roles as part of their ongoing professional development". Mercer and Gkonou (2020) recommend teaching socio-emotional competences to teachers as a means of enhancing the way teachers construct and maintain healthy relationships for themselves as individuals, but also as teachers, to enhance the well-being of teachers and learning outcomes of students. It is suggested that considering the paradoxical teacher-student relationships from a teacher perspective by key stakeholders and teachers in an institutional context could help provide a better work-life balance (Sulis et al., 2023). By developing our understanding of how social relationships between



teachers and students impact the professional identities of teachers, it is possible to help teachers become more conscious and achieve healthier longevity in their careers.

This study was limited by the lack of qualitative data from the students' perceptions of their teacher's roles which were focused on as a key element of teacher identity. Furthermore, the timeframe used for gathering data only offered a narrow window for exploring teacher identity. It did not consider its dynamic nature from a relational perspective where interactions and engagements with students are likely to change the concepts of perceptions and recognition. Therefore, future studies would benefit from conducting interviews or similar FGDs with students and ideally over a longer period to provide more insights into how the relationships between teachers and students influence teacher identity.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### Perceptions of Roles as a Teacher

On a scale of 1-7 (1 being the least and 7 the highest), rank how much you perceive yourself to relate to the following roles as a teacher. Write your answers on the line provided.

1. Entertainer (teacher provides entertainment for the class) \_\_\_\_\_
2. Cross-cultural expert (teacher provides knowledge about other cultures) \_\_\_\_\_
3. Language expert (teacher can explain complex aspects of language, including grammar and use of vocabulary) \_\_\_\_\_
4. Disciplinarian (teacher manages the class through strict expectations) \_\_\_\_\_
5. Storyteller (teacher tells stories to provide lessons and engage with the class) \_\_\_\_\_
6. Friend (teacher is easy to relate to and communicate with) \_\_\_\_\_
7. Interaction manager (teacher helps to control student-student conversations in English) \_\_\_\_\_
8. Motivator (teacher actively provides stimulating feedback and comments to motivate students) \_\_\_\_\_
9. Presenter (teacher's class content mostly focuses on presentation, such as PPTs) \_\_\_\_\_
10. Knowledgeable (teacher has a lot of knowledge of the English language and other subjects) \_\_\_\_\_
11. Socialiser (teacher engages with students in a sociable way) \_\_\_\_\_
12. Learner (teacher shows willingness to learn from the students and reflects on feedback well) \_\_\_\_\_

### Appendix B

#### Perceptions of Your Teacher's Role

On a scale of 1-7 (1 being the least and 7 the highest), rank how much you perceive your teacher to relate to the following roles. Write your answers on the line provided.

1. Entertainer (teacher provides entertainment for the class) \_\_\_\_\_
2. Cross-cultural expert (teacher provides knowledge about other cultures) \_\_\_\_\_
3. Language expert (teacher can explain complex aspects of language, including grammar and use of vocabulary) \_\_\_\_\_
4. Disciplinarian (teacher manages the class through strict expectations) \_\_\_\_\_
5. Storyteller (teacher tells stories to provide lessons and engage with the class) \_\_\_\_\_
6. Friend (teacher is easy to relate to and communicate with) \_\_\_\_\_
7. Interaction manager (teacher helps to control student-student conversations in English) \_\_\_\_\_
8. Motivator (teacher actively provides stimulating feedback and comments to motivate students) \_\_\_\_\_
9. Presenter (teacher's class content mostly focuses on presentation, such as PPTs) \_\_\_\_\_
10. Knowledgeable (teacher has a lot of knowledge of the English language and other subjects) \_\_\_\_\_
11. Socialiser (teacher engages with students in a sociable way) \_\_\_\_\_
12. Learner (teacher shows willingness to learn from the students and reflects on feedback well) \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

### Focus Group Discussion Handout

#### **Past**

Thinking back to your time as pre-service teachers (training to be a teacher; completing your Master's), discuss what you considered to be important aspects of teaching. Use the following questions to help your discussion:

- What do teachers and students expect from teaching/learning?
- How did you prepare yourself to achieve teaching/learning goals?
- What would be a measurement of success in the classroom from a teacher's and students' perspectives?

#### **Present**

Focusing on your current teaching context, discuss what your role as a teacher is expected to be. Use the following questions to help your discussion:

- Are there any more or less expected roles in your teaching context?
- Why are some roles more or less expected in your teaching context?
- Can you provide examples of performing these roles?

#### **Reactions to radar graphs**

Take some time to analyse your radar graphs and compare one other's results. Try to provide some examples from the classroom for some of the most noticeable aspects of the radar graphs. Use the following questions to help your discussion:

- How do your own perceptions of your teacher roles compare to those of the students?
- Why do you think there are certain similarities and differences?
- Is it important for your own perceptions to match your students' perceptions of you? Why?
- How do your own perceptions of your teacher roles compare to those of the other teachers?

#### **Future**

Looking forward, discuss whether you expect your role as a teacher to change in the future. Use the following questions to help your discussion:

- What role changes do you expect?
- Why do you select these roles?
- Who benefits from these role changes?