

The Impact of Perceived Employment Barriers on Classroom Engagement of English Education Majors: The Mediating Role of Professional Identity

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Abstract—This study investigated 131 English Education majors at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, using the Classroom Engagement Scale, Normal Students' Professional Identity Scale, and Subjective Employment Barriers Questionnaire. SPSS 27.0 was employed for descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and mediation effect testing to explore the relationships among perceived employment barriers, professional recognition, and classroom engagement, as well as the mediating role of professional recognition. The results indicate that: (1) English Education majors' classroom engagement ($M = 4.04$, 5-point scale) and professional recognition ($M = 3.66$, 5-point scale) are both above the moderate level, while perceived employment barriers ($M = 2.42$, 4-point scale) are below the moderate level; (2) Classroom engagement shows a significant positive correlation with professional recognition ($r = 0.656$, $p < .001$), but the correlations between perceived employment barriers and classroom engagement ($r = -0.088$, $p = .316$), and between perceived employment barriers and professional recognition ($r = -0.057$, $p = .519$) are not significant; (3) Mediation analysis reveals that the indirect effect of professional recognition in the relationship between perceived employment barriers and classroom engagement is -0.0244 , with a Bootstrap confidence interval of $[-0.1035, 0.0714]$ containing 0, indicating no significant mediation effect. The predictive effect of perceived employment barriers on professional recognition is not significant ($\beta = -0.0190$, $p = .519$), leading to a breaking of the mediation chain. The study finds that among English Education majors—a group with clear career orientation—students' stable professional identity remains unshaken by perceptions of employment barriers, and employment barriers do not directly weaken classroom engagement. This provides a new perspective for understanding the learning motivation mechanism of specific professional groups and offers empirical evidence for teaching management and career guidance in university English education programs.

Keywords—perceived employment barriers, professional recognition, classroom engagement, English Education major, mediation effect

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Research Background

Education is an important long-term plan for the country and the Party. A high-quality teaching force is the fundamental guarantee for building a strong educational nation. Normal universities, in the cultivation of teacher education, bear the core mission of cultivating qualified and even excellent teachers for basic education. Among these, English Education, as a key discipline for cultivating students' international perspectives and cross-cultural communication skills, has the quality of its teacher training directly related to the competitiveness of the nation's future talents. However, a concerning phenomenon is gradually emerging: many students majoring in English Education are unwilling to engage in English teaching after graduation. Research shows that only 15% of students have achieved a relatively high level of teacher professional identity [1]. Simultaneously, the promotion of new-type urbanization and adjustments in fertility policies have led to a sharp reduction in the school-age population and increased imbalance in spatial distribution. The contradiction between supply and demand of educational resources between urban and rural areas, regions, and schools has become increasingly prominent. Dramatic population changes have resulted in significant structural imbalances in teacher supply and demand. From a spatial distribution perspective, population mobility has exacerbated the "spatial mismatch" of teacher allocation. In population outflow areas such as Northeast China and Gansu, declining student numbers have caused student-teacher ratios in primary and secondary schools to fall below national standards, creating severe teacher "overstaffing" phenomena. In contrast, population inflow areas like Guangzhou face the dilemma of not having enough

teachers for primary and secondary school. For instance, in one district, non-registered students account for 49.96%, with an actual shortage of 441 full-time teachers [2]. Constrained by their normal education nature and geographical limitations, the career choices of English majors in normal universities remain excessively narrow, affecting students' learning motivation to some extent [3]. Students' classroom engagement affects their professionalism, thereby influencing the quality of future English teachers [3]. Therefore, exploring the relationship between English Education majors' perceptions of societal expectations for English teachers and their classroom engagement is particularly important.

B. Research Purpose

This study aims to investigate the status and interrelationships among perceived employment barriers, classroom engagement, and professional identity in English Education majors, and further examine the mediating role of professional identity between perceived employment barriers and classroom engagement. The goal is to deeply reveal the internal mechanisms affecting students' classroom engagement and provide a theoretical basis and practical guidance for enhancing English Education majors' professional identity and classroom engagement levels.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. The Relationship Between Professional Identity and Classroom Engagement of English Education Majors

Professional identity refers to an individual's positive evaluation of their profession, manifested as identity of professional value, pursuit of meaning, and enjoyment derived from it [4]. Among normal students, professional identity specifically manifests as acceptance of their identity as normal students and future teaching profession [5]. Wang and Kasa [6] further point out that professional identity refers to an individual's attitude toward their profession, encompassing normal students' cognition and understanding of professional value, playing a crucial role in their career development. Research has found that professional identity is an important factor affecting teacher professional growth and behavioral performance, with such effects manifesting even during the career preparation stage. High levels of professional identity can prompt normal students to actively devote themselves to education and abide by professional ethics, while low levels may lead to reduced teacher well-being, burnout, and turnover intentions [6]. Professional identity is not immutable, but a dynamic process continuously constructed and evolved through interaction between individuals and professional contexts [7].

Classroom engagement is a multidimensional concept encompassing behavioral, cognitive, and emotional aspects. Qu [8] defines it as the synthesis of cognition, emotion, and behavior in university students' classroom learning. Qu [8] and Fang *et al.* [9] focus on positivity and participation in English learning, emphasizing its

contributions to language acquisition. Hong [10] provides a more detailed definition: in classroom teaching environments, student engagement refers to the "constructive, positive, proactive, emotionally positive, and cognitively focused participation state" demonstrated by students in learning activities. Behavioral engagement manifests active participation degree and effort level in learning tasks, specifically manifested as sustained, activity participation, and response proactivity in classroom interactions; emotional engagement involves emotional responses to learning tasks, classroom interactions, and the participation process itself; cognitive engagement refers to learners' intellectual investment in learning processes, encompassing sustained attention, willingness to exceed basic requirements, and ability to use self-regulated learning strategies—these elements jointly promote successful completion of learning tasks [10].

Existing research indicates that classroom engagement is closely related to students' sense of life meaning, learning interest, and perception of course value [11]. Professional identity indirectly enhances classroom engagement through positive perception of course value. In other words, the higher the students' identity of the teaching profession, the stronger their intrinsic motivation and emotional investment in English classroom learning.

B. The Relationship Between Perceived Employment Barriers and Professional Identity

Perceived employment barriers refer to difficulties and obstacles individuals perceive in job seeking or career development. Qiu [12] defines them as subjective evaluations or cognitions of career obstacles, emphasizing their origin from negative interpretations of objective environments, and distinguishes between subjective employment barriers and subjective career barriers—the former focusing on perceived obstacles during job seeking, the latter focusing on post-employment position and role difficulties. Pociute *et al.* [13] systematically define perceived career barriers: perceived career barriers are generally defined as difficulties individuals perceive in achieving career goals. Specifically, these barriers can be understood as "events or situations, originating within the individual or from the external environment, that hinder career development". Among these, internal barriers focus on the individual level, involving perceptions of insufficient ability, lack of career motivation, or disinterest; external barriers focus on the environmental level, encompassing diverse situational factors such as economic pressure, family responsibilities, and employment policy constraints.

Normal students' professional identity is influenced by multiple factors, including gender, grade, region, school type, as well as personal motivation, life experiences, social support, etc. [1, 7, 14]. Among these, social support has a significant positive impact on the formation of professional identity. Perceived employment barriers, as individuals' cognition of the social environment, often negatively affect professional identity. When normal students perceive future employment as fraught with

difficulties, their identity in the teaching profession may correspondingly decline.

The rapid expansion of the scale of higher education provides the macro background for this. As Beaumont *et al.* [15] point out, the rapid expansion of higher education scale is termed “massification”, a phenomenon leading to intensified competition for traditional graduate employment positions, thereby reducing the value of academic credentials. Although diversification in graduate employment positions somewhat mitigates this effect, competition for high-quality positions remains fierce due to the large number of graduates. Consequently, graduates recognize that academic credentials alone are merely the basic threshold for employment—they also need to provide other “value-added” experiences, skills, and qualities. Confidence and self-efficacy, along with self-esteem, are all important moderating factors affecting employment competitiveness, and strategic autonomous career choice behavior has also been confirmed as a key element in enhancing students’ confidence levels [15]. This macro-level change in the employment environment undoubtedly intensifies education major students’ concerns about employment prospects in the teaching profession, which could, in turn, diminish their sense of professional identity.

C. The Impact of Perceived Employment Barriers on Classroom Engagement of English Education Majors

Classroom engagement is influenced not only by individual intrinsic motivation but also by external environment and future expectations. Qu [8] points out that the main influencing factors of classroom engagement include learning interest, academic expectations, teacher-student relationships, peer effects, etc. Among these, academic expectations are one of the key variables affecting engagement [8].

For English Education majors, their expectations of future employment constitute an important component of academic expectations. When students perceive employment barriers—such as intense competition, scarce positions, and low social recognition—their academic expectations may decrease, thereby affecting the positivity and persistence of classroom engagement. In other words, perceived employment barriers, through their negative effect on academic expectations, indirectly weaken students’ behavioral participation, cognitive investment, and emotional experience in the classroom.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

A. Research Hypotheses

Based on the above review, this study proposes the following core hypotheses and constructs a mediated hypothesis model (Fig. 1):

- H1: Perceived employment barriers have a significant negative impact on English Education majors’ professional identity.
- H2: Professional identity has a significant positive impact on classroom engagement.

- H3: Perceived employment barriers have a significant negative impact on English Education majors’ classroom engagement.
- H4: Professional identity mediates the relationship between perceived employment barriers and classroom engagement.

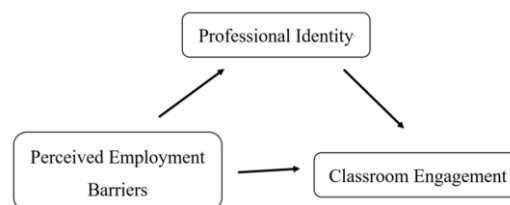


Fig. 1. Research hypothesis.

B. Research Subjects

Based on convenience sampling, students from the School of English Education at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies were selected as subjects. Data were collected online using questionnaires containing the Classroom Engagement Scale, Normal Students’ Professional Identity Scale, and Subjective Employment Barriers Scale. Sampling was conducted from January to February 2026. A total of 131 questionnaires were distributed and recovered; after screening, 131 valid questionnaires were obtained, yielding a 100% valid response rate. Among the valid sample, there were 12 males (12.98%) and 114 females (87.02%). By grade, 27 were freshmen (20.61%), 46 sophomores (35.11%), 53 juniors (40.46%), and 5 seniors (8.1%). Detailed informed consent was provided to all participants before data collection, and all participants voluntarily participated in the research.

C. Research Instruments

This study used Cronbach’s coefficient to test questionnaire reliability, with coefficients greater than 0.7 indicating good scale reliability (Guifedro, 1995).

Classroom Engagement: The Classroom Engagement Scale compiled by Qu Jiaqi was used. This scale, based on organizing learning engagement theories and referencing relevant scales from existing research, investigates university students’ classroom engagement levels. It comprises three dimensions: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement. The scale has 24 items using a 5-point scoring method, where 1 represents “completely not accord” and 5 represents “completely accord”. The Cronbach’s α coefficient for the University Student Classroom Engagement Scale is 0.944, demonstrating high reliability and validity.

Professional Identity: The Normal Students’ Professional Identity Scale compiled by Wang Xinqiang, Zeng Lihong, and Zhang Dajun was used. This scale comprises four dimensions: professional will, professional efficacy, professional willingness and expectations, and professional value. It includes 12 items using a 5-point scoring method, where 1 represents “completely disagree”,

and 5 represents “completely agree”. The Cronbach’s α coefficient for the Normal Students’ Professional Identity Scale is 0.882, demonstrating high reliability and validity.

Subjective Employment Barriers: The University Student Subjective Employment Barriers Questionnaire compiled by Wu Xuemei was used. The questionnaire contains 37 items across 6 dimensions: professional knowledge, social ability, and professional level as internal career barriers; employment competition, family attitudes, and family background as external career barriers. A 4-point scoring method was used, where 1 represents “completely impossible”, and 4 represents “definitely will”. The Cronbach’s α coefficient for the Subjective Employment Barriers Scale is 0.957, demonstrating high reliability and validity.

D. Statistical Tools

All data were analyzed and processed using SPSS 27.0 statistical software.

IV. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

A. Overall Situation

Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted on the three variables of classroom engagement, professional recognition, and perceived employment barriers, with results shown in Table I. Results indicate that the average score per item for classroom engagement was 4.04, significantly higher than the theoretical median of 3; the average score per item for professional recognition was 3.66, higher than the theoretical median of 3; the average score per item for perceived employment barriers was 2.42, lower than the theoretical median of 2.5 (4-point scale). This indicates that, in this study, English Education majors’ classroom engagement and professional recognition are above moderate levels, while perceived employment barriers are below moderate levels. Regarding standard deviation, individual differences in perceived employment barriers are substantial (SD = 18.33).

TABLE I. OVERALL SITUATION

| Name | N | Minimum | Maximum | Average | Standard deviation | Variation |
|---------------------------------------|-----|---------|---------|---------|--------------------|-----------|
| Classroom Engagement total points | 131 | 46.00 | 125.00 | 96.9084 | 12.03102 | 144.745 |
| Professional recognition total points | 131 | 19.00 | 60.00 | 43.9466 | 6.12977 | 37.574 |
| Perceived employment total points | 131 | 42.00 | 148.00 | 98.5725 | 18.33325 | 336.108 |
| Valid cases | 131 | - | - | - | - | - |

B. Correlation Analysis Between Variables

To explore the intrinsic relationships among classroom engagement, professional recognition, and perceived employment barriers, Pearson product-moment correlation was used to analyze correlations among variables, with specific results detailed in Table II.

Analysis results show a significant positive correlation between classroom engagement and professional recognition ($r = 0.656, p < .001$). This indicates that the higher the English Education majors’ identity of the teaching profession, the higher their cognitive, emotional,

and behavioral engagement in classroom learning, demonstrating close synergy between the two.

However, data analysis reveals that the correlation coefficients between perceived employment barriers and classroom engagement ($r = -0.088, p = .316 > .05$), and between perceived employment barriers and professional recognition ($r = -0.057, p = .519 > .05$) are both negative but do not reach statistical significance. This indicates that, although the direction of correlation coefficients aligns with theoretical expectations (i.e., higher perceived barriers tend to be associated with lower engagement and recognition), this negative linear relationship is not significant in this sample.

TABLE II. CORRELATION ANALYSIS BETWEEN VARIABLES

| Item | Data Name | Classroom Engagement Total Points | Professional Recognition Total Points | Perceived Employment Total Points |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Classroom Engagement total points | Pearson Correlation | 1 | 0.656** | -0.088 |
| | Sig.(2-tailed) | - | < 0.001 | 0.316 |
| | N | 131 | 131 | 131 |
| Professional recognition total points | Pearson Correlation | 0.656** | 1 | -0.057 |
| | Sig.(2-tailed) | < 0.001 | - | 0.519 |
| | N | 131 | 131 | 131 |
| Perceived employment total points | Pearson Correlation | -0.088 | -0.057 | 1 |
| | Sig.(2-tailed) | 0.316 | 0.519 | - |
| | N | 131 | 131 | 131 |

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The non-significant correlation between perceived employment barriers and core variables in this study may relate to the specificity of the sample. The subjects of this

study are English Education majors at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, a major with clear career orientation (e.g., English teachers). Moreover, since

subjects are primarily freshmen to juniors, the vast majority have not yet participated in employment competition. Therefore, even if they perceive external employment competition pressure, this pressure has not yet substantially impacted their stable professional recognition and existing classroom engagement behaviors.

C. Mediation Effect Results and Analysis

Based on correlation analysis results, this study employed Hayes' (2012) SPSS macro program PROCESS (Model 4), controlling gender and grade, to further test the mediating effect of professional recognition between perceived employment barriers and classroom engagement. Significance testing used a bias-corrected percentile Bootstrap method with 5000 resamples, calculating 95% confidence intervals.

Analysis results (see Tables III–V) show that: First, the predictive effect of perceived employment barriers on professional recognition is not significant ($\beta = -0.0190$, $t = -0.6463$, $p = 0.519$), so H1 is not supported; second, the positive predictive effect of professional recognition on classroom engagement is significant ($\beta = 1.2823$, $t = 9.8024$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H2; third, after controlling for the mediating variable, the direct predictive effect of perceived employment barriers on classroom engagement is also not significant ($\beta = -0.0335$, $t = -0.7670$, $p = 0.445$), with the confidence interval for direct effect c' being $[-0.1201, 0.0530]$ containing 0, so H3 is not supported.

Bootstrap analysis of the mediation effect shows that the indirect effect value of professional recognition between perceived employment barriers and classroom engagement is -0.0244 , with a Bootstrap confidence interval of $[-0.1035, 0.0714]$. Since this interval contains 0, the mediating effect of professional recognition is not significant, and H4 is not supported.

Synthesizing the above results, professional recognition does not play a significant mediating role between perceived employment barriers and classroom engagement. Although professional recognition significantly positively predicts classroom engagement, there is no significant association between perceived employment barriers and professional recognition, leading to a broken mediation chain. Considering the characteristics of this study's sample, a possible reason is that the research subjects are English Education majors at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, a group with clear career orientation and a high baseline of professional identity. Their stable professional beliefs may, to some extent, buffer the impact of employment barrier perceptions on professional recognition, thus preventing the mediation effect from manifesting.

Model: 4

Y: ktrd

X: gzjya

M: zyrkd

Sample Size: 131.

D. Summary of Research Findings

This study, with English Education majors at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies as subjects,

explored the relationships among perceived employment barriers, professional recognition, and classroom engagement, as well as the mediating role of professional recognition between perceived employment barriers and classroom engagement. Through descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and mediation effect testing, the following main findings emerged:

(1) English Education majors' classroom engagement ($M = 4.04$, 5-point scale) and professional recognition ($M = 3.66$, 5-point scale) are both above the moderate level, while perceived employment barriers ($M = 2.42$, 4-point scale) are below the moderate level. This indicates that, in this study, students' overall learning status is good, they have relatively high identity of the teaching profession, and they are not yet troubled by employment pressure. Regarding standard deviation, individual differences in perceived employment barriers are substantial ($SD = 18.33$), indicating significant difference in different students' perceptions of employment difficulties.

(2) There is a significant positive correlation between classroom engagement and professional recognition ($r = 0.656$, $p < .001$), indicating that the higher students' identity of the teaching profession, the higher their engagement in classroom learning. However, the negative correlations between perceived employment barriers and classroom engagement ($r = -0.088$, $p = .316$), and between perceived employment barriers and professional recognition ($r = -0.057$, $p = .519$) do not reach significant levels, suggesting that within this specific group with high professional identity, the negative impact of subjective employment barriers may be buffered by their inner professional conviction.

(3) The indirect effect value of professional recognition between perceived employment barriers and classroom engagement is -0.0244 , with a Bootstrap confidence interval of $[-0.1035, 0.0714]$ containing 0, therefore the mediation effect is not significant. Specifically, although professional recognition significantly positively predicts classroom engagement (H2 supported, $\beta = 1.2823$, $p < .001$), the predictive effect of perceived employment barriers on professional recognition is not significant (H1 not supported, $\beta = -0.0190$, $p = .519$), leading to a broken mediation chain. This result rejects the H4 hypothesis proposed in this study.

Overall, the core finding of this study is: within the English Education major—a group with clear career orientation—students' high identity of the teaching profession is not significantly shaken by perceived employment barriers, nor do perceived employment barriers directly weaken students' classroom engagement. This finding may be closely related to the specificity of the sample. The subjects of this study are English Education majors at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, a major with clear career direction (English teachers). Moreover, subjects are primarily freshmen to juniors, the vast majority of whom have not yet truly participated in employment competition. Therefore, even if they perceive external employment competition pressure, this pressure has not yet substantially impacted

their stable professional recognition and existing classroom engagement behaviors. In other words, professional recognition in this study manifests more as a stable intrinsic motivational resource rather than a buffer variable easily influenced by external environment. This result provides a new perspective for further exploring the mechanism of employment barriers in specific professional groups.

E. Research Limitations and Future Prospects

While striving for rigor in theoretical construction and research design, this study still has several limitations that require improvement in future research.

First, sample representativeness is limited. This study used convenience sampling, only targeting English Education majors at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies. The sample source is single, sample size is relatively small ($N = 131$), and gender ratio is imbalanced (females account for 87.02%). This limits the generalizability of research conclusions. Future research could expand sample sources to include English Education majors from different types of universities and regions, and strive to balance gender ratios to enhance external validity.

Second, the cross-sectional nature of the research

design. This study employed a cross-sectional questionnaire survey, unable to reveal causal relationships among variables. Although this study constructed a mediation model based on theory, relationships among variables may change over time. Particularly, the impact of perceived employment barriers on professional recognition and classroom engagement may be more pronounced when students approach graduation. Future research could adopt longitudinal tracking designs, repeatedly measuring variables at different time points (e.g., freshman, sophomore, junior, senior years) to examine dynamic change trajectories and causal directions.

Finally, neglect of potential moderating variables. This study found that the main effects between perceived employment barriers and professional recognition, and between perceived employment barriers and classroom engagement were not significant, suggesting possible moderating variables at play. For example, individual psychological resilience [12], social support [7], personal growth initiative, and other variables may buffer or enhance the impact of perceived employment barriers. Future research could introduce moderating variables to construct moderated mediation models, more comprehensively revealing the mechanism of perceived employment barriers.

TABLE III. REGRESSION MODEL FOR MEDIATION ANALYSIS

| Outcome Variable | Model Summary | | | | | | |
|------------------|---------------|---------|---------|---------|--------|----------|---------|
| | R | R-sq | MSE | F | df1 | df2 | p |
| zyrkd | 0.0568 | 0.0032 | 37.7431 | 0.4177 | 1.0000 | 129.0000 | 0.5192 |
| | - | coeff | se | t | p | LLCI | ULCI |
| | constant | 45.6480 | 2.6867 | 16.9901 | 0.0000 | 40.3322 | 50.9638 |
| | gzjya | -0.0190 | .0294 | -0.6463 | 0.5192 | -0.0771 | 0.0392 |
| ktrtd | - | coeff | se | t | p | LLCI | ULCI |
| | constant | 43.5610 | 7.1828 | 6.0646 | 0.0000 | 29.3486 | 57.7735 |
| | gzjya | -0.0335 | 0.0437 | -0.7670 | 0.4445 | -0.1201 | 0.0530 |
| | zyrkd | 1.2823 | 0.1308 | 9.8024 | 0.0000 | 1.0235 | 1.5411 |

TABLE IV. DIRECT EFFECT OF X ON Y

| Effect | se | t | p | LLCI | ULCI |
|--------|--------|---------|--------|---------|--------|
| -.0335 | 0.0437 | -0.7670 | 0.4445 | -0.1201 | 0.0530 |

TABLE V. BOOTSTRAP TEST OF INDIRECT EFFECT(S) OF X ON Y

| | Effect | BootSE | BootLLCI | BootULCI |
|-------|---------|--------|----------|----------|
| zyrkd | -0.0244 | 0.0436 | -0.1035 | 0.0714 |

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study preliminarily reveals the relationships among perceived employment barriers, professional recognition, and classroom engagement in English Education majors. Although the mediation effect was not supported, the research findings provide a new perspective for understanding the learning motivation mechanism of specific professional groups. Future research can continuously deepen in areas such as sample expansion, research design, tool optimization, variable expansion, and intervention practices, contributing more

empirical evidence for improving the quality of normal student cultivation.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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