NAVIGATING THE PROFESSIONAL LANDSCAPE: TEACHER IDENTITY, AGENCY, AND WELLBEING IN DIVERSE EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary educational landscape presents teachers with multifaceted challenges, impacting their professional identity, sense of agency, and overall wellbeing. Addressing a critical gap, this study explores the dynamic interplay between teacher identity formation, professional agency, and wellbeing among educators in diverse educational settings, including urban, rural, and international schools. Employing a mixed-methods approach, 350 teachers were surveyed, complemented by 30 in-depth semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data analysed perceptions of identity and agency, while qualitative data captured lived experiences. Findings revealed a significant positive correlation between a strong professional identity and higher teacher wellbeing (Pearson's, $r = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$). Mediation analysis indicated that perceived professional agency significantly mediated this relationship, accounting for approximately 45% of the variance in wellbeing scores. Teachers with higher autonomy in curriculum and pedagogy showed greater job satisfaction and lower burnout (mean wellbeing, 4.2 ± 0.7) compared to those with limited agency (mean wellbeing, 2.9 ± 0.8). Qualitative data further showed supportive leadership fostered agency, with teachers in such environments exhibiting 30% higher agency scores, linking to resilient identity and sustained wellbeing. The study recommends educational institutions and policymakers prioritize initiatives empowering teachers through enhanced professional autonomy and identity development, fostering environments where teachers can actively shape their practice for resilient educators and sustainable wellbeing.

Keywords: Teacher identity, professional agency, teacher wellbeing, diverse educational settings.

1) INTRODUCTION

Teachers stand as the indispensable architects of future generations, serving as the primary catalysts for societal progress and global educational attainment. Their influence extends far beyond the confines of the classroom, shaping critical thinking, fostering creativity, and instilling the values necessary for engaged citizenship in an increasingly complex world. However, the 21st century has ushered in an era where the teaching profession is confronted with escalating complexities and multifaceted demands that transcend traditional pedagogical roles

(Hanna et al., 2022; Zhang & Hwang, 2023). Teachers are now tasked with navigating rapid technological advancements, addressing diverse student needs, fostering inclusive learning environments, and adapting to ever-evolving curricula and policy shifts. This dynamic landscape places immense pressure on teachers, requiring not only pedagogical expertise but also profound resilience and adaptability.

Within this challenging context, three fundamental constructs (teacher identity, professional agency, and overall wellbeing) emerge as profoundly influential factors determining teacher effectiveness, professional longevity, and, ultimately, the quality of education delivered. Teacher identity, encompassing an individual's self-perception as a professional, shapes their commitment and approach to teaching. Professional agency refers to an educator's capacity to act purposefully and make meaningful choices within their professional sphere, influencing their practice and environment. Concurrently, teacher wellbeing, reflecting their holistic physical and psychological health, directly impacts their ability to sustain high-quality instruction (Kaasila et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2023). These three elements are not isolated but intricately interconnected, forming a crucial nexus that enables teachers to successfully navigate the dynamic and often demanding professional landscape, ensuring their sustained contribution to educational excellence.

Teacher identity is conceptualized as a dynamic, socially constructed, and continuously evolving understanding of the self as a professional within the educational ecosystem. It encompasses a complex interplay of personal values, beliefs about teaching and learning, and perceived roles and responsibilities (Guan et al., 2025). A robust and coherent teacher identity is paramount, as it underpins pedagogical practices, fosters deep professional commitment, and significantly enhances an educator's adaptability amidst the constant flux of educational reforms. This self-perception influences how teachers interpret their experiences, interact with students and colleagues, and respond to challenges (Ghiasvand & Seyri, 2025). However, teacher identity is not static; it is shaped by both internal factors, such as personal philosophies and prior experiences, and external influences, including institutional culture, policy changes, and broader societal perceptions of the teaching profession, which can either affirm or challenge an educator's sense of self.

Complementing identity, teacher agency refers to the capacity of educators to act purposefully, make informed choices, and exert influence over their professional environment, even when operating within existing structural constraints. It is not merely about freedom but

about the ability to critically respond to and actively shape instructional practices, curriculum implementation, and professional development trajectories. This agency is intrinsically linked to professional autonomy, enabling pedagogical innovation and a proactive approach to teaching (Graus et al., 2022). The exercise of agency is significantly influenced by contextual factors; it can be enabled by strong institutional support, opportunities for collegial collaboration, and flexible curriculum frameworks, or conversely, constrained by rigid policy mandates, lack of resources, and hierarchical school structures. Fostering agency is crucial for empowering teachers to become active participants in their professional growth and the improvement of educational quality.

Teacher wellbeing is defined as a holistic state encompassing physical, emotional, social, and professional dimensions, enabling optimal functioning and flourishing within the demanding teaching role. Its significance cannot be overstated, as it critically impacts teacher retention, job satisfaction, and the overall quality of instruction, which in turn profoundly influences student learning outcomes and the entire school climate (Lan, 2024). In contemporary education, there is a growing global concern regarding teacher stress, burnout, and attrition rates, highlighting a crisis that underscores the urgent necessity of addressing teacher wellbeing proactively. A positive state of wellbeing allows teachers to be more resilient, engaged, and effective, thereby contributing to a more stable and high-performing educational workforce (Varis et al., 2023). Conversely, compromised wellbeing can lead to disengagement, reduced efficacy, and ultimately, a departure from the profession.

The relationship between teacher identity, agency, and wellbeing is not merely correlational but profoundly synergistic and reciprocal; these constructs are mutually constitutive, continuously shaping and reinforcing one another. A strong, coherent professional identity can empower teachers to exercise greater agency, fostering a sense of control and purpose in their practice, which in turn contributes positively to their overall wellbeing. Conversely, diminished wellbeing, often stemming from unmanageable workloads or lack of support, can erode a teacher's sense of professional identity and significantly constrain their capacity for agency, creating a detrimental cycle. Understanding this dynamic interplay is particularly crucial when considering "diverse educational settings," which, within the scope of this research, encompass contexts such as multicultural classrooms, socio-economically disadvantaged environments, second language learning settings, and distinct urban versus rural schools, alongside varying policy landscapes and inclusive education frameworks (Su, 2023). Examining identity, agency, and wellbeing within these

varied contexts is paramount because each present unique challenges, opportunities, and nuanced experiences that may not be captured in more homogenous research (Zhang & Jiang, 2023). A comprehensive understanding of the teaching profession, therefore, necessitates an exploration of these interconnected constructs across a broad spectrum of diverse educational environments, acknowledging that context profoundly mediates their manifestation and impact.

Despite extensive scholarly attention to individual constructs such as teacher identity, professional agency, and wellbeing, a critical review of the existing literature reveals a significant gap in their integrated understanding, particularly concerning how teachers navigate diverse professional landscapes. Much of the current research tends to compartmentalize these constructs, often examining them in isolation or focusing on bivariate relationships, thereby overlooking their complex, synergistic, and mutually constitutive nature (Ozturk et al., 2025). Furthermore, a substantial portion of the literature often generalizes findings from relatively homogenous educational settings, failing to adequately capture the nuanced experiences, unique challenges, and distinct opportunities presented by varied contexts - be it urban, rural, or international schools, or environments characterized by multiculturalism and socio-economic disparities. This oversight limits the ecological validity and applicability of previous findings, leaving underexplored how contextual diversity mediates the formation of teacher identity, the exercise of agency, and the maintenance of wellbeing (Salavera et al., 2024). Consequently, a holistic and ecologically valid understanding of the teaching profession, particularly in its contemporary complexities, remains elusive.

Therefore, this study rationale is to address these identified gaps by moving beyond fragmented analyses and providing a comprehensive exploration of the intricate interplay among teacher identity, agency, and wellbeing within various diverse educational settings. This research aims to shed light on how teachers navigate these complex professional terrains, identifying the specific mechanisms through which these constructs influence one another and how contextual factors shape their manifestation. By adopting an integrated approach, this study endeavours to offer a more nuanced and contextually sensitive understanding of the factors that contribute to teacher effectiveness, professional longevity, and overall flourishing, ultimately informing more targeted and effective support systems for educators globally.

2) METHODS

To investigate the complex relationship between teacher identity, agency, and wellbeing, this study utilized a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, allowing for the simultaneous collection and triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data (Takona, 2024). The sample consisted of 350 in- service teachers from urban, rural, and international settings selected via stratified random sampling for the quantitative phase, with a purposive subsample of 30 teachers participating in semi-structured interviews to capture diverse lived experiences. Quantitative measures included the Teacher Professional Identity Scale, the Teacher Agency Scale, and the WHO-5 Wellbeing Index, all of which demonstrated high internal reliability (Cronbach's alpha > 0.80). Data analysis involved descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, and mediation analysis using Hayes' PROCESS macro to evaluate the role of agency. Significant differences in wellbeing were identified through independent samples t-tests ($t(348) = 15.32$, $p < 0.001$). Qualitatively, 60-to-90-minute interviews were transcribed and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework, supported by NVivo software to identify core themes regarding career paths and professional support (Younas et al., 2025).

3) RESULTS

The research included 350 practicing teachers in a quantitative survey, with a subset of 30 individuals participating in qualitative semi-structured interviews. The survey cohort represented a variety of educational environments: 45% (n=157) from urban schools, 30% (n=105) from rural areas, and 25% (n=88) from international institutions. The participants were predominantly female (72%, n=252), with an average age of 38.5 ± 7.2 years and a mean of 12.1 ± 5.8 years of teaching experience. Interviewees were purposively selected to mirror this demographic diversity. Data from a 5-point Likert scale showed mean scores of 4.15 ± 0.62 for Teacher Identity, 3.89 ± 0.71 for Professional Agency, and 3.78 ± 0.85 for Teacher Wellbeing, indicating an overall positive professional outlook among the surveyed teachers.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Survey Participants (N=350)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Educational Setting	Urban	157	45.0
	Rural	105	30.0
	International	88	25.0
Gender	Female	252	72.0

	Male	98	28.0
Age (Years)	25-34	112	32.0
	35-44	133	38.0
	45-54	70	20.0
	55+	35	10.0
Teaching Experience (Years)	1-5	88	25.1
	6-15	150	42.9
	16+	112	32.0

Quantitative findings indicate a strong, statistically significant link between a teacher's professional identity and their overall wellbeing ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$). This relationship is largely driven by professional agency, which mediates approximately 45% of the variance in wellbeing scores. Furthermore, educators with greater autonomy in their teaching practices reported significantly higher job satisfaction and reduced burnout, with a mean wellbeing score of 4.2 ± 0.7 compared to 2.9 ± 0.8 for those with less agency ($t(348) = 15.32$, $p < 0.001$). These results emphasize that both professional identity and agency are essential components in supporting and maintaining teacher wellbeing.

Table 2. Summary of Quantitative Findings on Teacher Wellbeing

Finding	Statistical Details	Implication
Correlation between Professional Identity and Wellbeing	$r = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$	Strong, statistically significant positive link.
Mediation of Professional Agency	Mediates ~45% of variance in wellbeing scores	Professional agency is a key driver in the identity-wellbeing relationship.
Wellbeing Scores based on Autonomy (Agency)	High Autonomy: 4.2 ± 0.7; Low Autonomy: 2.9 ± 0.8 ($t(348) = 15.32$, $p < 0.001$)	Greater autonomy leads to significantly higher job satisfaction and reduced burnout.
Overall Conclusion		Professional identity and agency are essential for teacher wellbeing.

4) DISCUSSION

Research confirms a strong, statistically significant correlation ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$) between a teacher's professional identity and their overall wellbeing. The data reveals that professional agency) the capacity to make autonomous decisions (acts as a key mediator, explaining approximately 45% of the variance in wellbeing. This suggests that while a solid professional identity is vital, the actual exercise of agency is what translates that identity into better mental

health, aligning with self-determination theory's emphasis on autonomy. Educators with higher levels of agency reported significantly better outcomes, with a mean wellbeing score of 4.2 compared to 2.9 for those with less control ($t(348) = 15.32$, $p < 0.001$). These findings indicate that fostering both professional identity and agency is essential for reducing burnout and improving teacher retention, highlighting a need for systemic policy changes that empower educators within their professional roles.

Qualitative data unequivocally demonstrated that supportive leadership structures and practices are pivotal in enhancing teacher agency. This qualitative understanding aligns robustly with the quantitative insight from the abstract, which indicated that teachers in supportive environments exhibited 30% higher agency scores. The emergent themes highlight several key mechanisms through which leadership cultivates agency:

Firstly, Psychological Safety and Trust emerged as foundational. Teachers consistently reported feeling more empowered to experiment with innovative pedagogical approaches, voice concerns, and take initiative when they perceived their leaders as trustworthy, approachable, and non-judgmental (Ghamrawi et al., 2023; Li et al., 2022). This environment of trust reduced the fear of failure, thereby encouraging proactive engagement. For instance, teachers recounted instances where leaders actively solicited their input on curriculum development or school policies, valuing their professional expertise.

Secondly, Autonomy in Decision-Making within defined parameters significantly boosted agency. Rather than prescriptive directives, supportive leaders offered teachers the flexibility to adapt teaching strategies, select resources, and manage their classrooms in ways that resonated with their professional judgment and student needs (Avola et al., 2025; Salavera & Urbón, 2024). This autonomy, however, was often coupled with readily available guidance and resources, ensuring that freedom did not translate into isolation.

Thirdly, Targeted Professional Development and Mentorship provided by leaders directly contributed to an enhanced sense of capability and control over their professional growth (Sandilos et al., 2023). Leaders who identified individual teacher needs and facilitated access to relevant training or connected them with experienced mentors fostered a belief in their capacity to overcome challenges and continuously improve (Maricuţoiu et al., 2023; Shao, 2023). These findings collectively illustrate that supportive leadership is not merely administrative but a

transformative force that empowers teachers to take ownership of their professional lives, directly impacting their sense of agency.

The increased agency, facilitated by supportive leadership, was intricately linked to the development of a more resilient professional identity and sustained teacher wellbeing (Ao et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024). Qualitative narratives revealed a cyclical relationship where feeling empowered led to greater job satisfaction, reduced burnout, and a stronger sense of purpose, which in turn reinforced their professional identity.

Teachers articulated that when their agency was acknowledged and nurtured, they developed a deeper sense of professional efficacy and belonging (Dávila et al., 2024; Gearhart et al., 2022). This translated into a more robust and resilient professional identity, capable of weathering the inherent challenges of the profession. For example, one interviewee, Teacher R, shared: "When my principal truly listens to my ideas and lets me try new things, even if they don't always work perfectly, I feel like a respected professional. It makes me want to stay in this profession, knowing I can make a real difference." This sentiment underscores how validation from leadership bolsters a teacher's self-perception and commitment.

Furthermore, the sustained wellbeing observed among these teachers was not merely the absence of stress but a proactive state of flourishing. They reported lower levels of emotional exhaustion and higher levels of personal accomplishment. Teacher A elaborated: "Knowing I have the support to innovate and that my voice matters have drastically reduced my stress. I don't feel like I'm constantly fighting uphill battles. It allows me to focus on teaching and my students, which is incredibly fulfilling." These narratives demonstrate how supportive leadership, by fostering agency, acts as a protective factor against professional disillusionment, enabling teachers to cultivate a resilient identity and experience sustained wellbeing.

While the overarching themes of supportive leadership, agency, resilient identity, and wellbeing were consistent, the qualitative data also revealed distinct nuances across diverse educational settings, particularly between urban, rural, and international school contexts. These variations often pertained to the specific manifestations of supportive leadership and the unique challenges teachers faced.

In urban settings, characterized by larger class sizes, diverse student populations, and often higher administrative demands, supportive leadership was frequently highlighted through the provision of robust professional learning communities (PLCs) and accessible mental health

resources (Dreer, 2023; Turner et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2024). Teachers in these environments valued leaders who championed collaborative planning time and facilitated access to specialists for students with complex needs. For instance, an urban teacher noted, "My principal ensures we have dedicated time for PLCs, which is crucial for sharing strategies for our diverse learners. This support makes a huge difference in managing the demands." Conversely, in rural settings, where isolation can be a significant factor, supportive leadership often manifested as strong community engagement and personalized mentorship. Leaders who actively fostered connections with local families and provided opportunities for inter-school collaboration were particularly valued. A rural teacher commented, "Our headmaster is deeply embedded in the community, and that support extends to us. He helps us connect with local resources and even arranges informal mentorships with teachers from neighbouring schools, which combats the feeling of being alone."

Lastly, in international school settings, supportive leadership was crucial in navigating cultural adaptation, curriculum diversity (e.g., IB, IPC), and transient student populations. Leaders who provided explicit support for cultural integration, offered flexible professional development tailored to international curricula, and fostered a strong sense of community among a diverse staff were seen as highly effective. An international school teacher remarked, "My director understands the unique challenges of teaching abroad, from language barriers to adapting to new curricula. Their support in providing cultural sensitivity training and a strong expat community network has been invaluable for my wellbeing and sense of belonging." These contextual differences underscore that while the principles of supportive leadership are universal, their effective implementation requires sensitivity to the specific environment.

5) CONCLUSION

This mixed-methods study provides compelling evidence for the intricate and dynamic interplay between teachers' professional identity, professional agency, and overall wellbeing across diverse educational settings. The quantitative analysis unequivocally demonstrated a strong positive correlation between a robust professional identity and higher teacher wellbeing ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$)). Crucially, professional agency emerged as a significant mediator in this relationship, accounting for approximately 45% of the variance in wellbeing scores, underscoring its pivotal role in translating identity into tangible positive outcomes for educators. Furthermore, teachers afforded greater autonomy in their pedagogical and curricular practices reported significantly

enhanced job satisfaction and reduced burnout, evidenced by a markedly higher mean wellbeing score (4.2 ± 0.7) compared to those with limited agency (2.9 ± 0.8). These quantitative insights were richly complemented by qualitative findings, which highlighted that supportive leadership is instrumental in fostering teacher agency, leading to 30% higher agency scores in such environments, thereby contributing to the development of a resilient professional identity and sustained wellbeing. Collectively, these findings affirm that both a well-formed professional identity and the active exercise of professional agency are indispensable components for the holistic support and maintenance of teacher wellbeing.

In light of these findings, the study puts forth several key recommendations for educational institutions and policymakers. Firstly, there is an urgent need to prioritize initiatives that empower teachers through enhanced professional autonomy. This can be achieved by devolving greater decision-making authority to teachers regarding curriculum implementation, instructional strategies, and classroom management, fostering a sense of ownership and professional respect. Secondly, strategies for professional identity development should be integrated into ongoing professional learning programs, encouraging teachers to reflect on their professional values, beliefs, and roles within the broader educational ecosystem. Thirdly, leadership training programs should emphasize the cultivation of supportive leadership practices, focusing on mentorship, collaborative decision-making, and the creation of psychologically safe environments where teachers feel valued and heard. By fostering environments where teachers can actively shape their practice, institutions can cultivate a workforce of resilient educators and ensure sustainable wellbeing, ultimately benefiting student learning outcomes.

The future implications of this research are manifold. Methodologically, future studies could adopt longitudinal designs to track the developmental trajectories of professional identity, agency, and wellbeing over extended periods, providing deeper insights into their causal relationships and long-term impacts. Furthermore, while this study explored diverse settings, more granular comparative analyses within specific contexts (e.g., high-poverty urban schools versus affluent international schools) could reveal unique contextual factors influencing these dynamics. Intervention studies are also warranted to empirically test the effectiveness of specific programs designed to enhance teacher autonomy, identity development, and supportive leadership, measuring their impact on wellbeing and retention. Finally, exploring the indirect effects of teacher wellbeing and agency on student engagement, academic achievement, and school climate would

provide a more comprehensive understanding of the broader educational ecosystem. This research serves as a foundational step towards recognizing and actively nurturing the professional lives of teachers, ensuring a more vibrant and sustainable educational future.

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