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## **BARRIERS OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY FORMATION: THE JUSTIFICATION FOR INCREASED TEACHER ATTRITION RATE**

### *Abstract*

This study delves into the barriers to forming teacher identity in Kazakhstan after a year of study and development. Early career teacher attrition is often seen as a problem related to personal or contextual factors. This research examined attrition as a process involving both individual and contextual elements. Based on semi-structured interviews with 38 school English teachers about their first professional career path, experiences, and expectations, the thematic analysis revealed 15 themes, which were then categorized into four main themes: higher salary expectations, status, lack of pre-teaching training, and bureaucracy. This article offers practical recommendations, including the development of programs for preserving cultural heritage and professional development, to contribute to the successful formation of teacher identity. Overall, this study discusses critical aspects of modern education in Kazakhstan, outlines the main conclusions, and explores prospects for improving the education system and supporting the development of professional identity among teachers, considering the peculiarities of national culture.

*Keywords:* teacher identity; educational barriers; cultural diversity; professional development; educational standards; socio-cultural challenges; traditional values; self-development; educational support.

**Introduction.** The purpose of this study is to identify and analyze the barriers that Kazakh teachers face in the process of forming their professional identity after a year of training and development. The scientific importance of this study lies in the acknowledgment that a teacher's identity formation significantly impacts the efficiency of the educational process, student education, and the establishment of a national educational environment. Kazakhstan, being a diverse state, encounters educational challenges linked to cultural and linguistic diversity. Examining the processes of a Kazakh teacher's identity formation in this context becomes a vital stride in understanding the mechanisms for ensuring high-quality and multi-level education.

The research aimed to offer valuable insights into the factors that impact the formation of professional identity among pre-service educators in a specific educational setting. The study focused on Kazakh teachers who had completed a year of training and professional development. This method is systematic and adaptable, aiding researchers in uncovering the

significance and patterns present in the data.

More importantly, the result of the study serves not only as an evaluation tool but also as a basis for developing strategies to support the professional identity of Kazakhstan teachers along with lowering attrition rate. By understanding and addressing these practical barriers, educational institutions can adapt programs and development programs to include greater language skills, cultural understanding, and technology. Additionally, the information gained from this research provides opportunities for policymaking that promotes a more formal and inclusive education system and creates an environment conducive to teacher development as a whole.

There is an old Kazakh proverb: "a teacher shapes the future" (*ustaz keleshektiń ustasy*). Teaching is a profession of great significance and worth that serves as the foundation for all other professions. In 2022, due to a rapid increase in the birth rate, Kazakhstan experienced a shortage of 1906 teachers (Syzdykov, 2022). However, less than half of the graduates of

pedagogical specialties work in this specialty, and even fewer are permanently employed and stay there to work. Pedagogical activity in modern conditions is multidimensional and includes both a professional component and a methodological, a communicative-psychological, an organizational, a pedagogical and many others. It is the development of this multidimensionality that causes certain difficulties for a young teacher, but it is it that enables him to realize himself in different directions (aspects) of pedagogical activity.

The importance of examining the formation of a Kazakh teacher's identity after a year of training and development in the current educational environment is crucial and represents a pivotal area for the research of this issue (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2006). The continual and systematic changes taking place in both societal and educational realms, along with the pervasive impact of globalization, significantly shape the dynamics of educational institutions and the evolving path of teacher professionalism.

In the context of the rapidly evolving educational milieu, a nuanced comprehension of the multifaceted factors that contribute to the construction of a Kazakh teacher's identity and the subsequent delineation of their professional self-awareness becomes imperative. The modern educational space is not merely a static environment but a dynamic arena shaped by a confluence of internal and external forces (Beijaard et.al, 2000). As educators navigate through this complex landscape, they encounter diverse challenges that necessitate a comprehensive understanding of the intricate interplay between cultural, social, and pedagogical factors.

The shortage of teachers has been identified as a pivotal concern on a global scale (UNESCO, 2016). The worldwide demand for educators is propelled by factors such as the expansion of the school-age population and the escalating student-teacher ratio in classrooms across the globe. Teacher scarcity is a significant challenge faced by schools in Kazakhstan. Teacher recruitment is likewise considered a contributing factor to the shortage of teachers in Kazakhstan. The percentage of students who intend to

pursue a career in teaching after graduation is also significantly declining in Kazakhstan (Syzydykov, 2022). Overall, attracting the most proficient graduates to the teaching profession has become a global predicament (Klassen, 2021; Edwards & Secretary, 2021).

The development of a Kazakh teacher's identity is closely connected to the changing paradigms of education, cultural influences, and the requirements of a globalized world. Globalization, in particular, has led to a blending of cultural perspectives, teaching methods, and technological advancements, requiring educators to constantly adapt and evolve (Gaziel, 1995). The integration of traditional Kazakh educational values with modern global trends presents both opportunities and challenges for teachers, highlighting the need for a reflective and adaptive approach to their professional growth (Chan, 2002).

Moreover, the role of a teacher extends beyond the mere transmission of knowledge; it encompasses the cultivation of critical thinking, cultural awareness, and adaptability among students. As such, understanding the factors influencing the formation of a teacher's identity is pivotal for the effective execution of their roles in shaping the next generation of citizens in a rapidly changing world (Edwards & Secretary, 2021).

The purpose of the study is identify and analyze the primary barriers that Kazakhstani teachers face in the early phases of their careers which potentially hinder their professional identity development. By diagnosing these obstacles, the study aims to offer evidence-based recommendations for educational institutions and policymakers to develop targeted strategies.

**Materials and methods.** The study focused on a single pedagogical university in Kazakhstan, addressing two main research questions:

- (a) What factors can influence pre-service teachers' attrition?
- (b) What are the key implications for improving pre-service teacher education?

A total of 38 interviews were completed. In terms of gender, out of 38 participants, 32 were (84%) and 6 were men (16%). 33 respondents (86.8%) chose to interact in Russian, whereas 5 respondents (13.2%) spoke in Kazakh.

Participants were graduates with pedagogical majors from Astana (n=28), Almaty (n=8) and Karaganda (n=2). The interview is conducted orally, in a quiet, comfortable environment in the presence of two people – the interviewer and the interviewee. The university offered a diverse range of academic programs, exceeding 80 in number, covering education levels from college to Ph.D. degrees. This comprehensive scope aimed to cater to the varied educational needs and interests of the student population. The study aimed to provide valuable insights into the factors influencing pre-service teachers' professional identity within this specific educational context (Sagintayeva, 2022). The object of the study was Kazakh teachers who completed a year of training and development. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups, as well as quantitative methods including questionnaires, were used to collect data.

The semi-structured interview provides an opportunity to analyze the spheres of life of young teachers concerning the choice of profession. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method used to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes within a dataset, typically textual data. It is a systematic and flexible approach that helps researchers gain insights into the meaning and patterns within the data (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

All stages of the study, including preparation and development of the methodology, data collection and analysis, and discussion and interpretation of the results, were conducted with respect for ethical standards, including ensuring the confidentiality of data and obtaining consent from study participants.

**Results and Discussion.** The study on barriers to the formation of the identity of Kazakh teachers following a year of training and development elicits a multifaceted discussion, shedding light on critical issues that necessitate thorough consideration. One primary aspect deserving attention is the systemic barriers entrenched in the process of identity formation for teachers. The educational environment's heterogeneity, coupled with various factors like the linguistic context, nationally oriented educational programs, and the assimilation of modern teaching technologies, emerges as

pivotal points for discourse. Liu & Onwiegubuzie (2012) highlight similar issues, emphasizing the complex interplay between these factors in shaping teachers' professional identities.

Comparing our findings with existing literature, it is evident that the challenges faced by Kazakhstani teachers are not unique. For instance, Mynbayeva (2012) and Steinter-Khamsi (2007) discuss how performance pressure, inadequate pay, and low pay regard for the teaching profession contribute to the decline in professional identities of teachers, similar to the challenges identifies in our study. However, a distinct aspect in our findings is the specific structure of the teaching load and the concept of «stavka», which is unique to the post-Soviet context and adds a layer of complexity to the salary expectations and workload issues that teachers face.

Globalization processes constitute another significant dimension warranting discussion regarding their impact on the identity of Kazakh teachers. Examining how shifts in world culture and education influence professional identity and the structural frameworks of educational programs is imperative. This prompts considerations on the development of teaching approaches that align with global trends, ensuring the adaptability and relevance of Kazakh teachers in an ever-evolving educational landscape. Miles and Knipe (2018) suggest that personalized support programs are Essential in helping teachers navigate these global changes, a notion that aligns with our recommendations for more tailored support mechanisms.

Central to the discourse is the efficacy of support from educational institutions. Engaging in a dialogue surrounding this matter necessitates an exploration of the requirement for more personalized support programs. Additionally, understanding the roles of mentoring and community experiences in the intricate process of identity formation can uncover avenues for enhancing institutional support structures. Flores (2014) argue that effective mentoring and community engagement are critical in supporting novice teachers, which corroborates out findings and recommendations.

Within the realm of intercultural interaction, there emerges a critical question pertaining to

the management of diversity in educational organizations. Discussions in this sphere could encompass pedagogical strategies for teaching cultural diversity, effective interaction with parents and students from diverse backgrounds, and the formulation of recommendations for the seamless integration of Kazakh teachers into a multinational educational milieu. Similar concerns are raised by Harris-Van Keuren (2011), who emphasizes the importance of intercultural competence in teacher training programs.

In essence, a comprehensive and reflective discussion on these issues has the potential not only to deepen our understanding of the barriers obstructing the formation of a Kazakh teacher's identity but also to foster the development

of concrete strategies for surmounting these hurdles. Such discourse can play a pivotal role in creating a more conducive and supportive educational environment that nurtures the identity formation of Kazakh teachers.

Developing a professional identity is a pivotal aspect of an individual's career journey. It encompasses the process of defining oneself within a chosen profession, forging a unique identity that reflects one's skills, values, and aspirations. However, this journey is not without its challenges. The thematic analysis helped us to develop 15 codes. The codes were structured into following themes: *higher salary expectations, status, pre-service teacher training, and bureaucracy* which are discussed in more details below.

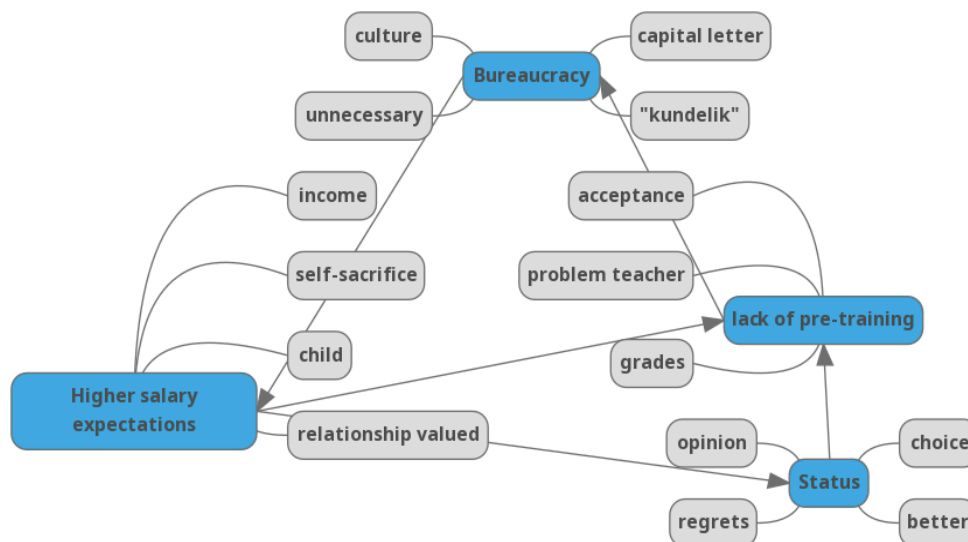


Figure 1: Thematic map, showing the main 4 themes

Understanding these obstacles is the first step towards overcoming them. It is imperative for individuals, educational institutions, and employers to recognize and address these challenges, fostering an environment where individuals can confidently shape their professional identities. As we delve into these barriers, it becomes evident that the journey of developing a professional identity is not merely a personal endeavor; it is a collective effort that requires support, resilience, and determination to navigate successfully.

Higher salary expectations were one of the codes under the theme of the barrier of Kazakh

teacher's identity formation after a year of initial teaching. The participant D2 states that the salary is proportional to teaching hours.

*My salary is proportional to my teaching hours, although I spend all 8 hours at work from 9am till 6 pm. Let's say I have classes from 9 am to 11 am and from 3 pm to 5 pm, besides this work time will not be counted for my stavka. I find it exhausting, because preparation time for classes is not included in my work hours. As a result, it is not encouraged in our system to focus on the preparation process and office hours for students.*

According to the practical research carried out in Kazakhstan, as emphasized by Mynbayeva, the combination of performance pressure, inadequate pay, and the relatively low regard for the teaching profession has led to a decline in the professional identities of teachers (Mynbayeva, 2012). Consequently, the occupation is perceived as a part-time, unappealing, and unprofessional line of work (Steiner-Khamsi, 2007). A crucial distinction in the teaching load structure is that the base salary of teachers solely consists of the time they spend instructing in the classroom, whereas OECD teachers who adhere to a workload salary structure encompass teaching, meetings, and preparation time. In the five Central Asian countries, the specific Russian term “stavka” is implemented. This system, which originated from the Soviet era, provides teachers with a foundational salary solely for the duration of their teaching activities. The author highlights two essential characteristics of the stavka or teaching load structure: the base pay and a fragmented and variable salary structure. Therefore, reconsideration of teaching load also should be based on office hours and other teaching profession responsibilities.

The next code of the theme found in the research is the status of teachers. The teaching profession holds a very important place in Kazakh society, which is expected to provide its members with high status. However, many studies show that the status of teachers is getting low. Participant G12 claimed how the teaching profession in Kazakhstan is not highly esteemed as in other countries:

*Every time I mention my profession of teaching, I feel ashamed and weird, seeing my friends and family find being a teacher at school something as not highly esteemed. I've been told that I could work in those countries, where this profession is highly valued and paid. I'm, if honestly, not sure of it, anyways, we will see what comes by in the near future.*

In the Ministry of Education and Science's Strategic Plan for the years 2017-2021, it is reported that there has been a 10 percent growth in the number of teachers when compared to the 2013-2014 period. According to the State Programme for Education Development 2011-2020 (SPED), several initiatives are being

pursued or planned with the aim of augmenting the status of teachers in Kazakhstan. These initiatives encompass the implementation of the “Teacher of the Year” and other competitive events, collaborative projects with mass media, as well as forums dedicated to teacher-innovations (Yakavets, 2014). For example, during the Presidential Address, it was emphasized that the ‘Law on the Teacher’s status’ was accepted in Kazakhstan in 2019, with the intention of safeguarding teachers against excessive workload and clarifying their legal entitlements (Karabassova, 2020).

Lack of pre-service training is the third code of the theme. In Kazakhstan, the process of preparing teachers consists of three distinct stages. These stages include pre-service training, concurrent training, and in-service training. Pre-service training is administered at the collegiate or university level and typically requires a completion time of four years. Concurrent-service training is targeted towards non-certified educators, commonly referred to as para-teachers, who seek to acquire specialized knowledge in a specific subject area. In-service training aims to provide continuous professional development opportunities for teachers who are currently working in the field (Harris-Van Keuren, 2011).

In Kazakhstan, teachers receive their pre-service education through Pedagogic Institutes, involving a four-year full-time study program. This is evident in the acceptance of students with an average United National Test (UNT) score of 70 by the state national university, and a score of 50 by the state pedagogical institutions. The lack of prestige associated with the profession of teaching is also evident in the rates at which higher education scholarships are awarded by the Ministry of Education.

*It is easier to enroll for a pedagogical university with full scholarship, rather than other professions. My family could not afford paying tuition, so the only way to study on full scholarship was becoming a teacher. I would not say I dreamed of being a teacher.*

In fact, a significant proportion of students, ranging from 30% to 70%, who are enrolled in seven pre-service teaching universities, are classified as “contract students.” These individuals possess the financial means to pay for their tuition fees but do not meet the

minimum academic requirements to gain admission into more esteemed degree programs. Consequently, these students contribute to the financial resources of the university while also incurring additional costs for the institution.

On the other hand, “budget students”, who are recipients of government scholarships, are granted the opportunity to pursue higher education without any financial burden due to their exceptional academic accomplishments. It can be argued that these factors directly impact the professional status, standing, and reputation of teachers in Kazakhstan. Although the government of Kazakhstan aims to improve the socio-economic conditions of teachers, the process of selecting individuals for admission into teacher education programs should be regarded as an indicator of status. For instance, in Finland, candidates are required to successfully pass a written examination on pedagogy during the second stage of the selection process, as well as participate in a clinical activity that simulates a school setting and showcases their skills in social interaction, communication, and teaching attitudes and behaviors. Following this, the most exceptional candidates are interviewed and expected to provide an explanation for their decision to pursue a career in teaching.

As for the fourth code found in the research as bureaucracy, Kazakhstan’s education system is characterized by a high degree of centralization, featuring thorough central planning and a comprehensive set of standards (OECD, 2020). Additionally, the system is marked by bureaucracy, primarily due to its administrative frameworks and accountability mechanisms. This has implications for how reforms are understood and put into practice, as well as the role that teachers assume within this context. The presence of bureaucracy, a top-down management approach, and limited resources and inadequate facilities acted as barriers to driving changes in these work environments. When graduates endeavored to implement their expertise and abilities in state agencies, institutions, and civil service organizations, they encountered substantial obstacles. The presence of bureaucratic systems, a management style based on hierarchy, and limited resources and inadequate facilities acted as obstacles to implementing changes within these professional environments.

The presence of a robust bureaucracy within the civil service sector, as well as national and state agencies, is a phenomenon that has been acknowledged as a systemic problem across various sectors. Former members of these organizations often described them as exemplifying a management style specific to Kazakhstan or a management culture inherited from the Soviet era, both of which had a demotivating effect on employees. These issues, for some individuals, resulted in a sense of indifference and a loss of hope in their ability to enact change (Jonbekova, 2024).

**Conclusion.** We must acknowledge that our data collection methods were constrained to just two primary qualitative methods. Consequently, it may be challenging to extrapolate our findings to a broader population. Nevertheless, we have succeeded in pinpointing significant concerns related to pre-service teachers. Therefore, further research can be carried out for a more diverse range of participants.

It was found that Kazakhstani teachers in their early career phase are experiencing various challenges, which in turn potentially might hinder their professional identity development. The results show that there are 4 main barriers of Kazakh teacher’s identity formation after a year of initial teaching such as higher salary expectations, status, lack of pre-teaching training and bureaucracy. Thus, the recommendations are based on barriers found in this study: reconsideration of workload salary; introduction of process of selecting individuals for admission into teacher education programs and mentoring programs.

Importantly, these findings do not merely serve as a diagnostic tool but provide a foundation for the development of targeted strategies aimed at supporting the professional growth of Kazakh teachers. By understanding and addressing these systemic barriers, educational institutions can tailor training and development programs to encompass language proficiency enhancement, cross-cultural understanding, and technological proficiency. Furthermore, the insights garnered from this research contribute to the formulation of policies that promote a more standardized and cohesive educational framework, fostering an environment conducive to the holistic development of teachers.

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