To Be Resourced or to Become a Resource: Understanding Novice University Teachers’ Resource-Mediated Identity Construction

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Abstract

This article reports on a multiple-case study which aims to investigate how novice university teachers construct professional identities as they process and utilize resources to promote professional development. Data were collected from 35 novice university teachers in China through prolonged individual interviews as a major source of data, with journal entries and other written protocols as a supplement. Data analysis reveals three types of resource-mediated identities, that is, resource collectors, resource providers, and resource users. The difference between the three types of identities further shows that resource utilization can be most effectively optimized if teachers display a higher degree of autonomy deriving from their agency and proactively engage with resources to resolve specific problems in self-directed efforts. Suggestions with regard to promoting teachers’ problem awareness and improving organizational management are discussed.

Keywords

resource utilization, professional identities, university teachers, professional development, novice teachers

Introduction

Resource, in a traditional sense, is the material of various visible and invisible forms that can be used to promote human development in a particular organization (Boldrini et al., 2019). Therefore, resource is one of the important topics of inquiry in the field of higher education (Han & Zhong, 2015). With reference to the professional development of university teachers, researchers have demonstrated a persistent interest in the outcome of resource investment and placement, on which previous research has produced a large number of implications and suggestions regarding university management policies and administrative improvements (Barnes, 2014; Glover et al., 1996; Gustafsson et al., 1999; Sugrue & Solbrekke, 2017; Weiner, 2016). As resource plays such a pivotal role in the professional development of university teachers, it is equally important to further examine the effect of resource on their professional identity construction as they process and utilize resources to promote professional development. Identity is generally understood as how people understand their relationship to the world, as well as the construction of that relationship across time and space (Norton, 2000). Because one’s identity reveals how they understand themselves as well as their relation with the outside world, investigation into how professional identity construction is influenced by resource utilization will help us understand how resource utilization impacts on teachers’ professional development from a more individual stance. This may also help discern more implications on optimizing resource utilization from the teacher’s point of view. For that matter, more research is needed to better understand how university teachers perceive, conceive, and receive resources; how they process and utilize resources; and how such resource-mediated activities influence their professional identity construction which, in turn, impacts on their professional development. So far, previous studies have rarely investigated the resource issue from the lens of teacher identity construction as a complex cognitive and social process (Bostock, 2019).

To address this gap in literature, this study aims to examine the influence of resource utilization on teachers’ identity construction. Specifically, the current study focuses on what professional identities university teachers construct as they process and utilize the resources to which they have access.
As resources are fundamentally a mediational means which supports development only when effectively processed and utilized (von Glasersfeld, 1997), how resource utilization impacts on professional development as is manifested in and revealed by teachers’ professional identity construction becomes a tremendously crucial research issue.

**Resource Utilization and Professional Identity Construction**

How placement of resources promotes teachers’ professional development has been of sustained interest to both university administrators and higher education researchers (Glover et al., 1996; Weiner, 2016). There has been some consensus that resource plays a necessary role in the promotion of professional development but does not suffice as the sole variable in determining the outcome of resource consumption (Ringwood et al., 2005). At least two types of variables have been identified as influential to the outcome of resource use. First, the changing missions of universities from traditional ones to the more recent “entrepreneurial makeovers” have an impact on the professional responsibilities and accountabilities of academics (Sugrue & Solbrekke, 2017, p. 130). This contextual change has had a profound impact on the visions of university leaderships and thus the policies they develop and implement (Ball, 2012; Barnes, 2014). The transforming policy directly impacts on the intended outcome of professional development resources and consequently shapes the way they are arranged and placed with a clear “outcome-desirability bias” included in the entire process (Gustafsson et al., 1999, p. 327). Such placement of resources decreases the uncertainty of the role of resources and enhances the institutionalization of resources as an organizational instrument (Biel & Gärling, 1995; Xu, 2013), but this also removes a huge part of the potential of resource which can be tremendously diversified given the agency of university teachers who engage with resources (Gao, 2013; Giddens, 1984). Such agency is usually encouraged and exposed as teachers construct and reveal certain professional identities (Carter & Marony, 2021): when they understand themselves as autonomous professionals, teachers are more likely to exercise such agency (Kong, 2020); when they identify themselves as constrained or even suppressed members of the professional community, they tend to withdraw such agency (Souto-Manning, 2019). However, how such agency, entwined with the complex and dynamic identity construction, is activated and exercised under the circumstances of outcome-desirability bias has not been fully investigated.

The other type of variables which influences the outcome of resource use is relational or relationship-related. Startup’s (1979) pioneering study which examines how resources shape academic activity reveals the crucial relationship between academics and ancillary staff. The results indicate that ancillary staff may have countervailing power through their specialized knowledge of administrational procedure and formality, and therefore influence the allocation and use of resources for university teachers’ academic activities and professional development. Many studies have further explored other interactional patterns in this relationship as well as other relationships which likewise influence resource placement and use in universities (e.g., Han & Zhong, 2015; Nghia, 2017; Schoorman & Bogotch, 2010; Thomas, 1999). These studies by and large interpret the influence of these relationships from the perspective of university management and governance, which carry vast implications for reforming administrative structures and promoting teacher autonomy in communities of cooperation (Wenger, 1998; Xu, 2015). Nonetheless, little has been specifically revealed about how the influence of social relationships on resource utilization emerges, develops, and takes effect. Again, this issue is largely identity-related, as identity construction is essentially both the drive for and result of relation building (Poza, 2019).

In other words, it is imperative that teachers’ identity construction should be more closely examined to shed light on how social relationships in universities influence teachers’ resource utilization.

As can be observed, in the realm of higher education, existing literature investigating the impact of resource on university teachers’ professional development overwhelmingly concerns management issues, whether problems stem from external factors like the changing missions for university or internal factors like faculty–staff relationships. This management perspective, though discerning administrative implications, does not seem to provide much insight into the concrete processes of resource use by individual teachers to produce the outcome as has been described in previous studies, creating a gap for further investigation. A closer examination is needed to further unveil how resources for professional development are specifically processed and utilized, mediating teachers’ professional identity construction, which is influenced by various factors identified and discussed in previous research. This may also elucidate, from a more personal point of view, how the effectiveness of resource use can be enhanced or attenuated with individual teachers as agents full of autonomy and reaction to the administrative structure.

Based on the above literature review which defines the research gap, the current study aims to investigate university teachers’ professional identity construction in activities involving resource utilization. Specific research questions the study attempts to answer are as follows:

**Research Question 1:** What identities do novice university teachers construct as they process and utilize resources to promote professional development?

**Research Question 2:** How does their resource-mediated identity construction impact on their professional development from their own point of view?
Method

Research Design

This study adopted a multiple-case design, as the researcher had little control over the participants’ situations and did not have much assumption regarding the research questions (Yin, 2013). Specifically, before the empirical study, the researcher was largely unaware of the concrete circumstances where the research participants were situated, rendering it unlikely for the researcher to predict the behavioral patterns of the participants; likewise, little could be discerned by the researcher from existing literature regarding how the participants might think and act because of the scarcity of previous studies dedicated to unveiling the dynamics entailed in resource-mediated identity construction. Therefore, the multiple-case design would be the best to help the researcher explore the research issue with good flexibility and openness.

The major source of data is prolonged interviews conducted with the participants individually, with journal entries and other protocols produced by the participants as a supplement to the data set. Data analysis generally followed the qualitative analysis strategy proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994).

Participants

The participants were selected purposively from novice teachers who taught foreign languages across China. In the current study, novice university teachers referred to those who had less than 3 years of work experience (Farrell, 2012). The 35 participants (six males), aged 30.4 years on average, were chosen from the volunteers, considering the languages they taught, the nature of the programs, regions, and types of their universities. Twenty-one of them taught English to non-language majors; 14 taught in foreign language programs (nine in English, two in French, one in Japanese, one in German, and one in Korean). They taught at 16 universities in 10 provinces or municipalities directly under the Central Government (i.e., Beijing and Shanghai). Seven universities were key universities recognized by the Ministry of Education. None of the participants knew the researcher or was known to the researcher before the study.

Data Collection

As is mentioned above, the data set of the study consisted of interview as the major source of data and other protocols as a supplementary source such as journal entries, emails, and evaluation forms the participants filled in and submitted to the human resource department.

The researcher conducted a prolonged face-to-face individual interview with each of the participants at places of their convenience, ranging from 1 hr 21 min to 3 hr 4 min. The semi-structured interview guide the researcher followed was twofold. One strand of questions were related to the participants’ daily work including job requirements, research engagements, teaching practices, training for continuing professional development, and so on. Examples of questions in this strand are as follows:

- How does the university assess your performance?
- What research are you doing recently? Are you working on a research project? What is your role if you are not the principal investigator?
- How much teaching do you need to do each semester? What course or courses are you teaching?
- What kind of training do you get from your university for professional development? Do you seek training opportunities on your own?

The other strand of questions concerned the focus of the current study, that is, how resources for professional development were utilized by the participants, and how resource utilization affected the participants’ identity construction. Examples of the questions are as follows:

- How do you understand “resources” for professional development?
- What kind of resources do you think are useful? Why?
- How do you use resources in your work? How do you use them to promote your own professional development?
- What do you think your roles are when you use different resources? Does your use of resources affect how you look at yourself?

During interviews with the participants, the researcher also tried to contextualize these questions for a more situated understanding of participants’ conceptions and perceptions of resources, how they processed and utilized them, as well as how they thought about and identified themselves. After initial data analysis of the interview protocols, the researcher conducted 20 short follow-up interviews (15–22 min each) with 20 of 35 participants to confirm or clarify certain important issues that were not clear enough in the first prolonged interviews.

The participants were also encouraged to write journals elaborating their understanding of and interaction with resources for professional development in their contexts. The researcher finally received 29 journal entries from 24 participants. There were also six participants who shared with the researcher their correspondences with colleagues (two emails), administrators (15 emails and six text messages), and school/department leaders (three emails). The researcher also received from two participants the evaluation forms they filled in and submitted to the human resource department. All of the data were collected in Chinese and were translated into English when presented in this article.
Data Analysis

When analyzing the data set consisting of interviews and other protocols, the researcher followed the qualitative analysis strategy proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), which consists of four stages, that is, collection, reduction, displays, and conclusions, for the purpose of extracting meaningful themes related to a particular research focus from a huge volume of data.

The first stage of collection as an analysis procedure refers to the meaningful rearrangement of raw data in a way convenient for further analysis. In this stage, the researcher read through the complete data set many times, and sorted out two types of data excerpts: one type shows the participants’ conceptions and perceptions of resources that play a role in their professional identity construction; the other reveals how the participants interacted with the resources by identifying them, processing them, utilizing them, or avoiding/removing them in some particular cases. In the second stage of reduction, the researcher reduced the number of excerpts by selecting the more relevant ones while disregarding the less relevant ones. This helped the researcher to focus, in the third stage of displays, on the more meaningful data in describing how the participants constructed their professional identities as they processed and utilized resources, so as to demonstrate possible patterns in such processes. Finally, in the fourth stage of conclusions, the researcher interpreted the reasons why resources were processed and utilized in different ways which then had different impacts on the participants’ professional identity construction. In the whole process of data analysis, discussions were often conducted during which the researcher’s colleagues and masters students provided valuable feedback regarding the researcher’s tentative interpretations and conceptualizations, which served as a measure to enhance validity of data analysis.

Findings and Discussion

In this section, findings will be presented which depicted the three basic types of professional identities, as well as how they were constructed, as the participants processed and utilized resources in their own settings, that is, resource collectors, resource providers, and resource users. Then how resource utilization impacts on participants’ professional identity construction will be discussed.

Resource Collectors: “I’m Constantly Making Preparations”

Before they began to work in a university, many teachers believed that they would become people who had the easiest access to professional development resources, as can be seen from the following extracts:

I believed that the university was where resources were least lacking . . . I thought I would be provided with a variety of professional development resources. Well, in a sense, I used to think that I would be taken very good care of. Anyway, novice teachers are beginners who need more support. (Interview; an English teacher from Yunnan)

I had never doubted [before joining the university] that a fledgling like me would be given more attention, say, being offered plenty of useful resources to support my learning. (Interview; a French teacher from Hubei)

It is obvious that these teachers, before beginning to work in a university, identified themselves as novice members who should take for granted external support like professional development resources. When they became in-service, there did seem to be numerous online and offline resources that were made available to university teachers by organizations (e.g., teacher development department of universities, and academic presses) and individuals, such as seminars on research methods, and workshops on writing research papers for publication and writing research project proposals. Most participants (31 out of 35) expressed their interest in and assumed a positive attitude toward this kind of resources in interviews, as is shown in the following extract:

My colleagues who are about 20 years my senior often comment that resources are so abundant today. When they joined the university, they literally had nowhere to get these resources . . . I want to keep them [the resources] in my storage, and save them for a rainy day. (Interview; an English teacher from Yunnan)

As can be seen, after comparing the circumstances between her time and about 20 years ago, this English teacher attached greater value to the resources she had access to. Nonetheless, there seemed to be no particular cause that inspired her to focus on particular resources to be processed and utilized to solve a particular problem. She simply wanted to “save them for a rainy day.”

Such a belief seemed to promote their motivation to engage in activities for the purpose of acquiring these resources, as is shown in the following extracts:

I sign up for lots and lots of seminars and workshops . . . The university sponsors our participation, covering all expenses . . . I participate in all kinds of workshops on whatever topics. (Interview; an English teacher from Beijing)

We [teachers who teach languages other than English] have difficulty in reading literature in English, but there are more and more handbooks and guidebooks published in Chinese [on research-related topics]. We can also get the same basic things from them as colleagues in the English department. Then we also have a good foundation for research abilities. (Interview; a French teacher from Hubei)

The extracts above further confirm that resources were indeed accessible, and the teachers’ purpose of gaining them was by and large for future use. Therefore, it seemed quite likely that in such a process of resource utilization, teachers
adopted the identity of resource *collectors* as if collecting valuable things like stamps.

However, such an identity of resource collector, coupled with the outcome of learning promoted by the motivation for resource storage rather than problem-solving, seemed to be discouraging in the long run, as is shown in the following extract:

I feel I’m a little bit fed up with them [the seminars and workshops]. They keep me on business trips . . . I felt inspired and encouraged [when participating in the seminars and workshops]. But when I returned to the university and my daily work, the inspiration was gone very quickly . . . Sometimes, I would participate in the same workshop for a second time . . . I always felt that I was a starter again in the second time I participated in the same workshop. I forgot what I had learnt in the first time . . . I’m constantly making preparations for my academic development. I hardly get down to the development in itself, though. (Interview; an English teacher from Hebei)

As is clearly shown in this extract, being a mere resource collector and learning without a specific aim, for example, solving a particular problem in research or teaching, was likely to demotivate the teachers to further engage with the resources, because they would find that the resources, even if they processed them with investment of time and energy, were difficult to be retained. Keeping the resources in storage as a resource collector is only an act of “making preparations” rather than professional development in its essential sense. Moreover, the identity of resource collector might stem and transform from their initial identity of a “fledgling” who is expected to be “taken good care of” as one becomes a university novice teacher.

**Resource Providers: “I Am Not Resourced But Become a Resource Myself”**

Besides being resource collectors collecting resources in forms of books, workshops, and so on, the participants also identified themselves as resource *providers*, as they participated in certain activities that required them to provide themselves as a resource in their workplaces. These activities generally take place involving the participants and the more senior colleagues in their universities. The extract below shows a typical situation as such:

I have been kept very busy since I began to work in the university, much busier than when I was a Ph.D. candidate . . . I was encouraged to take part in the deputy dean’s project . . . I helped her to collect and analyse data. Of course I learnt a lot. I had a clearer idea about what key projects were like. Maybe one day I should be submitting a proposal for that . . . They told me that if you have a senior academic title, it would be your responsibility to lead a project . . . As I attended all of the group meetings [with other researchers and research assistants in the project], I also learnt how to organise such meetings, and I learnt a lot about how a project should be implemented, for instance, how to design a few stages each of which had a specific aim . . . But I generally feel that I am a resource myself, I am not using the so-called resources in a fundamental way. (Interview; an English teacher from Hubei)

This extract reveals that participation in activities led by the seniors helped novice teachers learn certain things such as “how to organise . . . meetings” and “how to design [research] stages.” However, these possibilities of learning did not guarantee that the intended learning would take place, while they might even make the participants feel that they were “utilized” as a resource by their seniors. Such “side effects” of the activities were also reported by an English teacher participant from Guangdong. She showed the researcher two of her annual evaluation forms submitted to the human resource department of the university, which recorded the research projects with her as a participating investigator rather than a principal investigator. In the first 2 years of working in the university, she contributed in such a way to six research projects altogether. When she reflected on how this affected her identities, she said,

Taking part in these projects helped a lot at the very beginning when everything seemed fresh. Then it soon became a repetitive job, rather than a creative one. I just completed the part I was assigned. I did not design that, I just implemented that . . . Participation in research projects is far less important than leading a project in the assessment system . . . I felt I was an employee of my boss [head of the English department] in the department, rather than an employee of the university. You know the difference? An employee of my boss takes a part, but an employee of the university becomes a part. You can only become a part by doing your own research as an independent researcher . . . Sometimes, I even feel that like a prostitute in a night club, I need to sell myself to buy myself back. [In ancient China, prostitutes, once purchased and owned by a pornography service, needed to exchange their freedom with a huge amount of money which could only be obtained via savings from their clients’ tips or a full donation by one of them. With this emotional analogy, the participant tried to emphasise and complained about her becoming a resource for others rather than being resourced for her own professional development.] (Interview; an English teacher from Guangdong)

As can be seen from this extract, some teachers may be subjected to an identity of resource providers who become a resource for others rather than be resourced for their own professional development. Participation in senior researchers’ projects was not valued later as much as when the teacher just came in. Although the activities novice teachers engaged in as resource providers entailed specific problems to be solved (e.g., objectives of research projects), these problems were not identified and defined by the novice teachers themselves, and the efforts to solve the problems were not really initiated by them, either.

Teachers who finally constructed the resource provider identity seemed to have rich experiences of participating, as less important members, in large research projects during
their PhD studies. The following extracts reveal how such experiences contributed to their inclination to serve as “physical labor” from the onset of teacher career.

I think I was quite used to working as a member, or more precisely as a resource, in a large community, even before I joined the university . . . I didn’t need to worry about anything that required intellectual labour which takes lots of real pains; instead, I found myself fairly comfortable with paying physical labour. (Interview; an English teacher from Hubei)

I was on my supervisor’s research team throughout my Ph.D. studies . . . The team was quite productive, you know, it was more productive than the sum of all of the individual members. It seemed, at that time, everybody was happy about this kind of productivity, because everybody benefited from this productive culture . . . We [Ph.D. students] didn’t have to do the whole thing [work], but we could share the whole thing [outcome]. More importantly, I guess, we didn’t have to contribute intellectually. (Interview; an English teacher from Guangdong)

Obviously, the “more productive” culture rendered the teachers less intellectually active and autonomous. In other words, the initial identity of being a “member” of “physical labor” might explain why they gradually reduced themselves to resource providers during their first years as university novice teachers.

**Resource Users: “I Choose What I Need, Not What Is Given”**

Besides resource collectors and providers, another type of identities, that is, resource users, also emerged from data analysis. Teachers who adopted this type of identities seemed to have more experiences of independent research, as is illustrated by the following extract:

During four-year my Ph.D. studies, I was quite unlucky because my supervisor was absent in the UK as a visiting scholar for two years. I was, ironically, quite lucky as well because I didn’t have to be asked to do this and that . . . I believe I would have had to do what I were asked. It is a matter of face value and power . . . I was consequently able to do research on my own, no matter how poorly designed that was . . . I was doing the whole lot of things on my own. (Interview; an English teacher from Jiangsu)

After being in-service, teachers adopted the identity of resource user because they had a strong motivation to solve a specific problem based on their own observation. Their engagement with resources was not aimed at collecting and keeping them for future use; it was not for offering themselves, often unwillingly, as a resource for the problem-solving intended and initiated by senior colleagues in the workplace. It was initiated by and for themselves as resource users. Below is an extract revealing a participant’s identity construction as a resource user:

In my teaching, I found that the students did not really like internet-based learning. They were bored with it . . . I guessed it was because of lack of interaction—interacting with the computer is not real interaction . . . I asked a few students. I was surprised that the real reason was that they did not like the content . . . This was totally contrary to my hypothesis . . . I consulted a professor who was an expert on pedagogical research. She advised me to conduct an action research. Then I read a book on that . . . I collected some data, not knowing how to analyse them [this teacher had a Ph.D. in British literature, so she was not familiar with empirical research], so I signed up for a workshop, spending two days in Beijing learning how to do it . . . I discussed with my colleagues, friends, and even my husband about my action research, and I even organised a small forum in the department on the project I was working on . . . I [later] published a paper, and got a research project grant from Jiangsu Province. (Interview; an English teacher from Jiangsu)

As can be seen from this extract, this teacher from Jiangsu first experienced in her teaching situation the “cognitive imbalance” (Piaget, 1985) caused by her hypothesis of lack of interaction and her students’ feedback about the uninteresting content. This imbalance, calling for readjustment and equilibration, provided the initial impetus for all of her follow-up efforts to solve this problem by means of an action research. In the whole process, she took the initiative to seek and utilize various resources (e.g., consulting colleagues, reading books, participating in workshops) in a self-directed manner, demonstrating a strong identity of resource user. A Japanese teacher from Fujian has claimed this resource user identity more straightforward in his journal, “I choose what I need, not what is given.”

As to the characteristics of social interaction involving teachers who identified themselves as resource users, it seems that they exercised a considerable degree of autonomy and therefore enjoyed more autonomy in return, as is shown in the following extract from the English teacher in Jiangsu mentioned above:

I see the importance of participation. No participation, no pains. No pains, no gains. But I need to make my pains maximally worthwhile and rewarding. I need to design how I “suffer,” and how much I “suffer” . . . I design the participation, and I participate, making others participate as well . . . You shouldn’t participate in what others want to achieve without making others participate in what you want to achieve . . . When you make some beginning achievements, you will see that you have accumulated experience and some “capital” for further development. (Interview; an English teacher from Jiangsu)

This extract very well reveals that this participant demonstrated a high degree of autonomy in her professional development, which enabled her to adopt and develop the resource user identity. The outcome of her autonomy and the strategic employment of resource strategies in “participating” making others participate as well” brought about more autonomy on her part owing to her accumulation of
“experience and . . . ‘capital’ for further development.” Therefore, it is quite clear that the resource utilization by resource users often begins with a specific situation which causes cognitive imbalance and thus calls for efforts to achieve equilibration, and proceeds based on teachers’ exercise of autonomy in seeking and processing resources including those in various forms of social interaction in a self-directed manner.

Discussion

So far, in response to the research questions raised earlier, teachers’ identities constructed as they processed and utilized professional development resources have been investigated, and teachers’ own understandings of the impact of such identities on their professional development have also been examined. The three types of resource-mediated identities, that is, resource collectors, providers, and users, not only reflect teachers’ varied purposes of resource utilization as well as the diverse ways they engage with resources, but also reveal the impact of different ways of resource utilization on their professional identity construction. The identities, thus constructed, then further influence teachers’ views of their own professional development. Teachers with an identity of resource collector engage with resources to get prepared for future engagements that might promote professional development more directly than engagements for the mere collecting and keeping of resources. Teachers with an identity of resource provider engage with the resources as access to the more established or advanced community led by senior researchers in the university, though at the same time reducing themselves, apparently for an exchange, to a resource utilized by that community. Teachers with an identity of resource user engage with the resources as a means to serve their own needs and purposes for professional development. The above conceptualizations of these resource-mediated identities elucidate the dynamic interactions and connections between teachers’ resource utilization and their cognitive and social development from the lens of professional identity construction. This shows a different perspective from previous research on professional development resource which generally defines and categorizes resource based on its content and source (Glover et al., 1996; Weiner, 1996).

The formation or construction of the three types of identities had quite a lot to do with teachers’ prior experiences (e.g., those during their PhD studies) and initial identities as they became university teachers. The identities of both resource collector and resource provider transformed from initial identities that possessed less autonomy such as a green hand that took external support for granted and a less active member of a more productive team. Nonetheless, the identity of resource user might evolve from previous identities that reflected experiences characterized by independence and autonomy.

The three types of identities fundamentally differ in their impacts on teachers’ professional development in different phases of meaning construction, that is, cognitive imbalance, interaction, and equilibration (Piaget, 1985). In the beginning phase of cognitive imbalance which provides the drive for effort investment in the next phase of interaction, the construction of resource provider and user identities is clearly mediated by the problem arising in the learning situation, whereas the construction of resource collector identities does not seem to stem from a problem situation. In the second phase of interaction which is motivated by the cognitive imbalance caused in the previous phase, teachers with resource user identities obviously show more proactiveness because they need to exert influence on the environment to achieve their professional development objectives, whereas teachers with the other two types of identities, that is, resource collector and provider, to a large extent, show more reactiveness as they respond to interactional initiatives from the environment. Then in the third phase of equilibration which is achieved by efforts in the interaction phase, identity construction is completed, as it were, when meaning construction is completed, successfully transforming teachers’ identities into those of resource collectors, providers, or users, in a relatively solid and stable manner. As is revealed by the current study, throughout the process of meaning construction, the construction of resource-mediated identities is tremendously influenced by teachers’ autonomy deriving from their agency (Gao, 2013; Giddens, 1984). Therefore, it is quite possible that teachers’ resource-mediated identity construction can be effectively optimized for professional development when teachers exercise more agency in proactively engaging with resources to solve specific problems in self-directed efforts, as is the case of the resource users in the current study.

The findings of the current study corroborate previous research that delineates the influence of outcome-desirability bias on resource utilization (Ball, 2012; Barnes, 2014; Gustafsson et al., 1999; Sugrue & Solbrenke, 2017). As is in the case of resource providers illustrated in this study, novice university teachers’ participation in senior colleagues’ research projects is not only an individual act, but also represents a permeating culture in China’s universities today by the name of “team building,” which is tremendously encouraged in both academic discourse and by the management system. This is obviously a form of outcome-desirability bias that impacts on teachers’ resource utilization, identity construction, and professional development in a wider sense. As to the influence of outcome-desirability bias, the current study further clarifies the specific mechanism by which such biases play a part at the level of individual behavior and identity construction contextualized in the local culture.

Conclusion

This study investigates how novice university teachers construct professional identities as they process and utilize
resources to promote professional development. The study reveals three types of resource-mediated identities, that is, resource collectors, resource providers, and resource users. The difference between the three types of identities further shows that resource utilization can be most effectively optimized if teachers display a higher degree of autonomy deriving from their agency and proactively engage with resources to resolve specific problems in self-directed efforts.

Some implications can be discerned from the findings of the current study. First, it is of paramount importance to promote novice university teachers’ observational sensitivity to problem situations. Identifying the problem and evaluating the value of investing efforts to solve it serves as trigger for the effective resource utilization mechanism to be initiated. Such problem awareness may also strengthen teachers’ positive identities such as resource users that support autonomous professional development. Second, organizational reforms are needed to restrict or regulate community activities that may be quite likely to cause subordinate identities such as resource providers to emerge and develop which may ultimately lead to a kind of nonparticipation that demotivates teachers in their pursuit of professional development (Wenger, 1998).

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