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Beyond Conceptual Fragmentation: An Integrative Ecological Framework of Teacher Professional Identity

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Highlights

Please indicate how your work links to systems science via your contributions to systems practice, theory, and/or methodology.

- This study reframes teacher professional identity as a dynamic ecology of meaning shaped by reciprocal relations among theoretical lenses, fields of meaning, identity processes, and ecological conditions.
- It offers a systems-oriented analytical heuristic for examining interdependence, contextual negotiation, and ongoing change without assuming a unified explanatory theory.

What are the main findings and/or the implications of the main findings?

- This research reorganizes existing teacher professional identity scholarship into four interconnected analytical components, addressing conceptual fragmentation without introducing new identity dimensions.
- It provides teacher educators with a shared conceptual language for facilitating reflective dialogue about identity development, tensions, and contextual influences.

Abstract

Teacher Professional Identity (TPI) has become a central construct in teacher education, yet its theoretical expansion has also produced conceptual fragmentation. Reviews and bibliometric studies have documented the breadth of the field, including its varied definitions, theoretical traditions, and research contexts. This conceptual paper proposes an Integrative Ecological Framework that reorganizes existing scholarship into four analytically distinct but interconnected components: Theoretical Lenses, Fields of Meaning, Identity Processes, and Ecological Conditions. The framework is guided by four questions: Through which lens is identity understood? Where does professional identity acquire meaning? How does it develop and change? Under what ecological conditions is it enabled, constrained, or redirected? These questions are not presented as novel in themselves; their contribution lies in their coordinated use as a meta-analytical heuristic. The framework does not assume that theoretical traditions are fully compatible or that the proposed relationships are causal. Rather, it makes their different analytical contributions and potential tensions more explicit, supporting more precise research, reflective practice in teacher education, and future empirical inquiry.

Keywords: teacher professional identity; conceptual integration; theoretical lenses; fields of meaning; identity processes; ecological conditions; teacher education; professional learning

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1. Introduction

Teacher Professional Identity (TPI) has become a central construct in contemporary teacher education and educational research. Over the past three decades, it has increasingly been used to understand teachers' professional learning, instructional decision-making, agency, commitment, resilience, well-being, and career development [1–4].

Rather than being viewed as a stable personal attribute, TPI is widely conceptualized as dynamic and contextually situated, developing as teachers interpret professional experiences, negotiate competing expectations, and construct meanings of who they are and who they aspire to become [1,5–7].

The growing prominence of TPI reflects both transformations in the nature of teaching and an expanding understanding of what it means to be a teacher. Beyond pedagogical expertise, teachers are expected to navigate policy reforms, accountability demands, technological innovation, cultural diversity, collaborative professional practices, and changing societal expectations. Accordingly, research has expanded beyond earlier emphases on professional socialization and reflective practice to address emotional well-being, resilience, professional agency, policy enactment, digital competence, ethical decision-making, and engagement with emerging technologies, including generative artificial intelligence. Professional identity has also become increasingly relevant to policy discussions concerning teacher development, professional autonomy, retention, and the quality and sustainability of educational systems [8].

This expansion is reflected in a growing body of systematic reviews, meta-reviews, bibliometric analyses, and scoping reviews documenting the development and diversity of TPI scholarship [9–12]. Collectively, these syntheses portray TPI as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing psychological, relational, pedagogical, emotional, sociocultural, political, technological, and future-oriented dimensions. They also reveal a field characterized by diverse theoretical traditions, methodological approaches, educational contexts, and conceptual vocabularies. These contributions provide substantial resources for understanding professional identity. At the same time, the accumulation of perspectives and findings raises an important analytical question: how can these contributions be distinguished and related in ways that support a more coherent understanding of TPI without obscuring the theoretical differences among them?

Different theoretical traditions illuminate distinct aspects of TPI while reflecting different assumptions about the nature and constitution of identity. Psychological and professional identity perspectives commonly foreground teachers' self-understandings, biographies, beliefs, values, and professional commitments [1,2,7,13]. Sociological and sociocultural approaches emphasize social membership, participation, recognition, and identity formation within communities of practice [14,15]. Dialogical approaches conceptualize identity as plural and negotiated across positions and voices [5,16], whereas post-structural and critical perspectives foreground discourse, power, institutional regulation, and the conditions under which particular identities become possible or legitimate [17–19].

These perspectives differ not only in their explanations of identity but also in their underlying assumptions about what identity is, how it is constituted, and where its meanings are located. Psychological approaches tend to emphasize individual self-understanding and subjective continuity, whereas sociological and sociocultural approaches give greater prominence to social relations, collective membership, recognition, and shared practices. Dialogical and post-structural perspectives further complicate a straightforward distinction between the individual and the social by emphasizing the plurality of identity positions and the constitutive role of discourse and power. These traditions are therefore not interchangeable, and their differences should not be collapsed into a single, undifferentiated definition of identity. Personal, collective, and professional identities are related but ana-

lytically distinct constructs. When the theoretical lens informing a study remains implicit, distinctions among these constructs may become blurred, making it difficult to determine what is being investigated as identity and what the resulting findings actually explain.

Conceptual fragmentation in TPI scholarship is evident not only in the coexistence of different theoretical perspectives but also in the ways identity is defined, investigated, and related to adjacent constructs. In Ref. [1], for example, distinguished among studies focusing on identity formation, the characteristics of professional identity, and the representation of identity through teachers' narratives. Their review also identified considerable variation in how professional identity was defined, noting that some studies did not explicitly define the construct and that its relationship with teachers' personal practical knowledge was not always sufficiently clarified. These differences have important analytical implications: a study investigating identity as a developmental process does not necessarily examine the same phenomenon as one focusing on identity characteristics or narrative representations, even when both employ the term *professional identity*. Meaningful comparisons therefore require attention to the definition of the construct, the analytical purpose of the inquiry, and the level of analysis at which its claims are situated.

Related difficulties arise when identity, agency, professionalism, belonging, positioning, and role are discussed in overlapping terms without sufficiently differentiating their analytical functions. Agency, for example, may be conceptualized as an individual capacity in one account and as an emergent property of interactions between individuals and their social contexts in another. Although these conceptualizations may illuminate related phenomena, they do not necessarily refer to the same analytical object. Similarly, the substantive dimensions of identity, the fields of meaning through which these dimensions acquire significance, the processes through which identity develops, and the conditions shaping these processes may be addressed simultaneously without being explicitly distinguished. Such overlap does not necessarily indicate theoretical contradiction. Rather, it creates the risk of conflating distinct questions and levels of explanation, thereby limiting conceptual precision and complicating the comparison and integration of research findings.

Recent scholarship illustrates both the persistence of this challenge and significant efforts to address it. Ref. [11] bibliometric review documents the breadth of TPI research and its engagement with multiple theoretical lenses, disciplinary perspectives, and research approaches. This diversity reflects the richness of the field while highlighting the challenge of navigating a body of literature in which definitions and dimensions of identity remain open to interpretation. In Ref. [20], in turn, propose a reconceptualization of teacher identity that integrates multiple intersecting identities within sociocultural and historical contexts, agentic and goal-directed processes, and identity negotiation through professional experiences and community standards. Their work represents an important integrative contribution and illustrates the analytical complexity of TPI, particularly the interrelationships among the multiplicity of identities, the processes through which they are negotiated, and the social and professional contexts in which this negotiation occurs.

These contributions should not be interpreted as evidence that existing frameworks are inadequate or that their insights need to be replaced. Rather, they demonstrate the value of conceptual integration while highlighting the continuing need to clarify the relationships among different analytical questions. Systematic reviews and bibliometric studies have advanced understanding by mapping the scope of TPI research, identifying prominent dimensions and contexts, and documenting patterns in theoretical and methodological approaches. Conceptual frameworks, in turn, have sought to organize and integrate these insights. A complementary analytical task is to examine more explicitly how theoretical assumptions shape conceptions of identity, how professional identity acquires substantive meaning, how it develops and changes, and under what conditions particular forms of

identity become possible, sustained, or transformed. This task is particularly relevant when comparing studies that employ similar terminology but operate with different definitions, assumptions, or levels of analysis.

The need for conceptual clarification is especially pressing in teacher education. As research increasingly addresses teacher attrition, resilience, well-being, professional agency, educational innovation, and technological transformation, there is a tendency to expand the identity construct by incorporating additional dimensions and concerns. Yet adding dimensions does not necessarily enhance conceptual clarity. Teacher education also requires accessible ways of structuring reflection and professional dialogue, particularly when time is limited and identity-related discussions bring together different assumptions about the self, professional roles, social membership, values, and practice. A useful conceptual framework should therefore do more than map the complexity of TPI. It should help teacher educators and student teachers identify the questions they are addressing, distinguish among different meanings of identity, and examine how these meanings relate to professional experiences and the contexts in which teachers work.

Conceptual Approach and Development of the Framework

This paper adopts a theory-oriented conceptual synthesis rather than a systematic literature review. Its purpose is not to provide exhaustive coverage of empirical studies on teacher professional identity (TPI), but to examine how established theoretical perspectives conceptualize identity and to reorganize their contributions within an integrative analytical architecture. The aim is to clarify conceptual distinctions and relationships that can support a more coherent analysis of TPI while preserving the epistemological differences among the theoretical traditions informing the field. This approach draws on conceptual scholarship that understands theoretical integration as a process of identifying distinctions among concepts, examining relationships between constructs, and developing a coherent framework that opens up further analytical possibilities [21].

The literature was selected purposively according to three complementary considerations: (1) foundational contributions to the conceptualization of professional and teacher identity; (2) theoretical perspectives that conceptualize identity as a psychological, sociocultural, dialogical, or discursively constituted phenomenon; and (3) recent reviews and research syntheses documenting the expansion and conceptual diversity of TPI scholarship. The selection was therefore guided by theoretical relevance rather than intended to be exhaustive. Foundational theoretical works were considered alongside contemporary reviews to connect established conceptual arguments with current developments in the field. The synthesis involved examining the assumptions underlying different conceptualizations of identity and identifying analytical questions that recur across the literature but are not always clearly distinguished.

The contribution of this paper is not to propose an entirely new theory of TPI, but to reorganize existing theoretical knowledge into a clearer analytical architecture. Four guiding questions structure this reorganization: Through which lens is identity being understood? Where does professional identity acquire meaning? How does it develop and change? Under what ecological conditions are these processes enabled, constrained, or redirected? Together, these questions direct attention to the theoretical assumptions informing an inquiry, the substantive fields through which professional identity acquires meaning, the processes through which it is negotiated and transformed, and the contextual conditions shaping these processes.

In response to these questions, the paper proposes an Integrative Ecological Framework of TPI, which conceptualizes identity as a dynamic ecology of meaning rather than as a single attribute or an inventory of dimensions. The framework comprises four intercon-

nected components: *Theoretical Lenses*, *Fields of Meaning*, *Identity Processes*, and *Ecological Conditions*. The four questions are coordinated with these components, but the relationship is analytical rather than strictly causal or one-to-one. The first question clarifies how identity is conceptualized; the second identifies the symbolic, epistemic, relational, and normative fields through which identity acquires substance; the third concerns how identity is formed, negotiated, sustained, and transformed; and the fourth examines the conditions that enable, constrain, or redirect these processes.

The guiding questions organize the inquiry, while the four components constitute its conceptual architecture. Theoretical Lenses refer to the assumptions and interpretive orientations through which identity is conceptualized and investigated. Fields of Meaning refer to the symbolic, epistemic, relational, and normative systems through which professional identity acquires content and significance. Identity Processes concern the ways identity is formed, negotiated, sustained, and transformed over time. Ecological Conditions encompass the individual, relational, institutional, sociocultural, policy-related, and digital circumstances within which identity is constructed and negotiated. These conditions shape the framework as a whole rather than corresponding exclusively to a particular stage or operating as a single linear cause.

Each guiding question serves a distinct but complementary analytical purpose. *Through Which Lens?* makes theoretical assumptions explicit and clarifies what a particular perspective foregrounds or leaves less visible. *Where Does Identity Acquire Meaning?* directs attention to the professional, symbolic, epistemic, relational, and normative fields through which identity becomes significant. *How Does Identity Develop and Change?* focuses on processes of reflection, negotiation, positioning, continuity, and transformation. *Under What Ecological Conditions?* directs attention to the circumstances and power relations that enable, constrain, or redirect identity work. The practical implications of these questions for teacher education and professional practice are considered separately in the implications section.

Taken together, the four questions provide a meta-analytical heuristic for making the distinctions and relationships within TPI research more explicit. Their contribution does not lie in the novelty of the individual questions, but in their coordination within a common analytical architecture. This coordination can help researchers identify which aspects of identity a study foregrounds, clarify how its claims relate to other levels of explanation, and identify relationships that warrant further investigation. Importantly, the framework does not assume that different theoretical perspectives share the same epistemological foundations or can be fully reconciled. Instead, it offers a structured means of examining their respective contributions, clarifying their analytical emphases, and exploring how they may inform a more integrated understanding of teacher professional identity.

Figure 1 presents the overall architecture of the proposed framework.

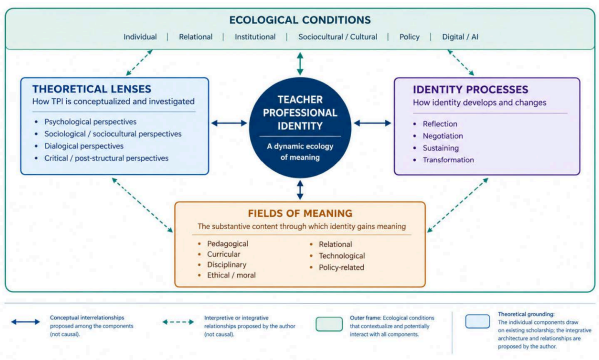


Figure 1. The Integrative Ecological Framework of Teacher Professional Identity.

2. Theoretical Rationale and Integrative Logic of Figure 1

Figure 1 presents the proposed Integrative Ecological Framework of Teacher Professional Identity (TPI). Rather than introducing a new set of identity dimensions or proposing an entirely new theory, the framework reorganizes existing theoretical knowledge into four analytically distinguishable yet interconnected components: Theoretical Lenses, Fields of Meaning, Identity Processes, and Ecological Conditions. Each component addresses a different analytical question, while their integration provides a common architecture for examining how professional identity is conceptualized, acquires substantive meaning, develops over time, and is shaped by the conditions within which teachers interpret and enact their professional lives. Table 1 summarizes the principal theoretical anchors of the components and distinguishes these established contributions from the integrative propositions advanced in the present paper.

Table 1. Theoretical Anchors and Integrative Contribution of the Proposed Framework.

Framework Component and Guiding Question	Selected Theoretical and Review Sources	Integrative Contribution of the Proposed Framework
Theoretical Lenses \nThrough which lens is TPI conceptualized?	[1,2,5,7,16,17,19,22]	Makes the assumptions underlying different conceptualizations of TPI explicit. It distinguishes psychological, sociocultural, dialogical, and critical or post-structural perspectives while acknowledging their different epistemological commitments and avoiding their reduction to a single explanatory position.
Fields of Meaning \nWhere does professional identity acquire meaning?	[1,13–15,18,23–25]	Organizes the symbolic, epistemic, relational, and normative systems through which professional identity acquires content and significance. It distinguishes these substantive fields of meaning from the theoretical perspectives used to interpret identity and treats the fields as open and context-dependent rather than exhaustive categories.
Identity Processes \nHow does professional identity develop and change?	[2,4–6,20,26–28]	Brings together processes through which identity is formed, negotiated, sustained, and transformed. These include reflection, changing self-understandings, dialogical negotiation, professional identification, positioning, and the interpretation of experiences over time. The framework treats these processes as potentially overlapping and context-dependent rather than as a fixed sequence of stages.
Ecological Conditions \nUnder what conditions are identity processes enabled, constrained, or redirected?	[3,7,8,13,18,19,28,29]	Situates identity meanings and processes within interacting biographical, relational, institutional, sociocultural, political, policy-related, and technological conditions. It directs attention to the ways these conditions shape teachers' professional possibilities, commitments, vulnerabilities, and identity negotiations.

Table 1. *Cont.*

Framework Component and Guiding Question	Selected Theoretical and Review Sources	Integrative Contribution of the Proposed Framework
Cross-component synthesis \nHow can diverse contributions to TPI research be conceptually related?	[9–11,21,30,31]	Reorganizes insights from conceptual scholarship, systematic reviews, bibliometric analyses, and scoping reviews within a shared analytical architecture. The four components are treated as interconnected analytical categories whose relationships generate propositions for further theoretical and empirical inquiry, rather than as established causal relationships.

Note. The sources represent selected foundational contributions and more recent reviews and conceptual studies relevant to the proposed framework. They are illustrative rather than exhaustive. The final row synthesizes the relationship among the four components and does not constitute a fifth framework component.

Theoretical Lenses refer to the conceptual assumptions and interpretive orientations through which TPI is understood and investigated. Psychological and professional identity scholarship foregrounds teachers' self-understandings, beliefs, values, and professional commitments [1,2]. Sociocultural perspectives illuminate the significance of participation, social relations, recognition, and communities of practice [14,15]. Dialogical approaches direct attention to the negotiation of multiple voices and identity positions [5,16], whereas critical and post-structural perspectives foreground discourse, power, institutional regulation, and the conditions under which particular professional identities become possible or legitimate [17–19]. These traditions provide distinct theoretical resources and are not assumed to be fully compatible. Their inclusion in the framework makes their respective contributions, assumptions, and potential tensions more explicit. Theoretical Lenses therefore operate as interpretive orientations informing the analysis of all the framework's components, rather than as a substantive domain of identity or an independent stage in identity development.

Fields of Meaning refer to the substantive, symbolic, epistemic, relational, and normative systems through which teachers interpret their professional roles, knowledge, relationships, responsibilities, and commitments. These fields may include pedagogical, curricular, disciplinary, ethical or moral, relational, technological, and policy-related concerns. Existing scholarship addresses aspects of these meanings through research on professional self-understanding, teachers' knowledge and values, participation in professional communities, and the discursive and normative conditions of professional life [1,13–15,19]. The integrative contribution of the present framework is to organize these varied concerns under the analytical category *Fields of Meaning*. This category is proposed here as a means of examining how professional identity acquires substantive significance; it is not attributed to any single theoretical tradition as an established, shared construct. Nor does it imply a fixed or exhaustive list of identity domains. Rather, it allows researchers to investigate which fields of meaning become salient in particular professional contexts and how their significance is interpreted and negotiated.

Identity Processes concern how professional identity is formed, negotiated, sustained, and transformed over time. Research on teacher identity has examined reflection, dialogical tensions, changing self-understandings, professional positioning, and the relationships between professional experiences and identity development [2,5–7,20]. The proposed framework brings these processes into a shared analytical category, directing attention to how teachers interpret experiences, negotiate competing expectations, maintain or reconsider professional commitments, and develop changing understandings of themselves as

professionals. Identity Processes unfold in relation to Fields of Meaning: teachers negotiate not identity in the abstract, but the significance of particular roles, forms of knowledge, values, relationships, and responsibilities. These processes are also situated within Ecological Conditions that may enable, constrain, or redirect their development. The processes represented in Figure 1 are illustrative rather than exhaustive, and they should not be interpreted as a fixed sequence of developmental stages.

Ecological Conditions encompass the individual, relational, institutional, sociocultural, political, policy-related, and digital circumstances within which professional identity is conceptualized, interpreted, and negotiated. These include teachers' personal histories and beliefs, professional relationships, institutional expectations, wider social norms, policy requirements, and technological environments. Their inclusion draws on scholarship emphasizing the socially situated and context-dependent character of professional identity and the significance of vulnerability, institutional expectations, and relations of power [7,13,19]. In the proposed framework, Ecological Conditions constitute a cross-cutting dimension rather than a discrete stage or a single explanatory variable. They shape the fields of meaning available to teachers, the relative significance of particular professional commitments, and the processes through which identity is formed and negotiated. At the same time, teachers' interpretations and practices may reproduce, negotiate, or challenge aspects of their professional and institutional contexts. This reciprocal possibility does not imply that all contextual influences operate equally or that every identity process produces a corresponding contextual change.

The framework's integrative contribution lies in clarifying the distinct analytical functions of the four components and proposing how they may be related. Theoretical Lenses inform how the components are conceptualized and interpreted; Fields of Meaning identify the systems through which professional identity acquires substantive significance; Identity Processes address how these meanings and associated professional commitments are negotiated, maintained, and transformed; and Ecological Conditions shape the possibilities and constraints within which these processes unfold. These functions are analytically distinguishable but not independent. Their integration provides a shared conceptual architecture for examining questions that are often addressed across different theoretical traditions and research contexts, without assuming that these traditions employ identical concepts or share the same epistemological commitments.

The relationships represented in Figure 1 must therefore be distinguished from the theoretical grounding of the individual components. Existing scholarship informs the concepts and processes associated with each component and provides a basis for examining their interconnections. However, the specific organization of these four components within a common framework, together with the proposed relationships among them, constitutes the integrative conceptual proposition advanced in this paper. These relationships were developed through the comparison and reorganization of existing theoretical contributions; they are not attributed to any single source as an already established model. As summarized in Table 1, the framework draws on existing scholarship while proposing a more explicit analytical organization of its contributions.

The arrows in Figure 1 represent theoretically informed conceptual relationships rather than established causal directions. They should not be interpreted as indicating that all components influence one another equally in every instance. In particular, Theoretical Lenses function as interpretive orientations across the framework, whereas Fields of Meaning and Identity Processes concern the substantive meanings of professional identity and their formation, negotiation, and transformation. Ecological Conditions operate across these dimensions by shaping the contexts, relations, and possibilities within which identity meanings and processes emerge. The framework is consequently intended as a relational

heuristic for conceptual clarification and empirical investigation, not as a predictive model or an empirically validated causal account.

The four guiding questions—*Through Which Lens?; Where Does Identity Acquire Meaning?; How Does Identity Develop and Change?;* and *Under What Ecological Conditions?*—provide a practical heuristic for applying the framework. They direct attention, respectively, to the assumptions underlying an inquiry, the fields through which identity acquires significance, the processes through which identity develops and changes, and the conditions that enable, constrain, or redirect identity work. The questions are complementary rather than sequential, and their analytical value lies in making explicit which aspects of identity are being examined and how they relate to other dimensions of explanation. The broader significance of this organization for research, teacher education, and professional practice is addressed in the implications section; it is a question concerning the value and application of the framework, not a fifth component.

Figure 1 thus presents a theoretically grounded conceptual proposal that extends existing scholarship through the explicit organization of its contributions and the articulation of relationships among them. By distinguishing established theoretical insights from the integrative propositions advanced here, the framework aims to enhance conceptual clarity, support more focused empirical inquiry, and facilitate reflective work in teacher education while preserving the plurality of theoretical perspectives informing TPI research.

3. Through Which Lens? Theoretical Assumptions About Identity

The first analytical question concerns the theoretical lens through which identity is conceptualized. Rather than referring to a domain of identity, it examines the assumptions that guide how researchers define identity, understand where it is constituted, and determine which aspects warrant analytical attention. Theoretical lenses thus shape not only how identity is explained but also what is recognized as identity in the first place.

Different theoretical traditions foreground different aspects of identity. Psychological perspectives emphasize individual self-understanding, biography, beliefs, values, subjective continuity, and personal uniqueness [1,2,13]. Sociological and sociocultural perspectives focus on social membership, participation, recognition, shared practices, and the constitution of professional identities within social and institutional contexts [14,15]. Dialogical approaches conceptualize identity through multiple voices and positions through which individuals negotiate understandings of themselves [5,16]. Post-structural and critical perspectives examine how discourse, power, and institutional regulation shape the conditions under which particular identities become possible, legitimate, or constrained [17–19].

These orientations are neither mutually exclusive nor internally uniform. Their different emphases nevertheless influence how researchers conceptualize the relationship between personal, collective, and professional identity. Personal identity concerns individuals' self-understandings and senses of uniqueness and continuity; collective identity involves identification with a group and engagement with its shared meanings, practices, and commitments; and professional identity concerns how individuals understand and negotiate who they are in relation to their occupation, professional roles, practices, values, and communities. Although analytically distinguishable, these forms of identity are interrelated and should not be treated as interchangeable or assigned exclusively to particular theoretical traditions.

Importantly, these distinctions do not imply that personal identity is inherently stable while professional identity is more fluid or adaptable. Both may involve continuity and transformation across time and contexts. Personal self-understandings may change through life experiences and social relationships, while professional identity may sustain continuity through enduring values, commitments, and affiliations. Conversely, professional experi-

ences and institutional changes may reshape how individuals understand their professional roles, just as personal experiences may influence their professional commitments. The relationship between continuity and change therefore needs to be examined empirically and theoretically rather than presumed on the basis of the type of identity under consideration.

The implications of theoretical positioning become particularly apparent when the same teacher's professional identity is examined from different perspectives. A psychological approach may foreground the teacher's self-understanding and professional commitments; a sociocultural approach may focus on participation in, and recognition by, a professional community; and a critical approach may investigate how institutional discourses and power relations shape legitimate understandings of the teaching role. These perspectives need not contradict one another, but they address different aspects of a broader phenomenon. When their underlying assumptions remain implicit, however, it becomes difficult to determine whether studies investigate the same conception of identity or examine distinct dimensions of it.

Accordingly, *Through Which Lens?* provides a starting point for reflective discussions of teacher professional identity in teacher education. Making the theoretical lens explicit can help teacher educators and student teachers recognize how different assumptions shape the understanding of professional identity and direct attention to different aspects of it. Rather than prescribing a particular perspective, this question supports a more nuanced and reflective examination of professional identity by clarifying the conceptual standpoint from which it is explored. Within the proposed framework, it serves as an initial point of orientation for considering the fields of meaning, identity processes, and ecological conditions through which professional identity is understood and negotiated.

4. Fields of Meaning: The Symbolic Architecture of Professional Identity

While Theoretical Lenses clarify the conceptual standpoint from which identity is understood, Fields of Meaning direct attention to the symbolic and relational systems through which teacher professional identity acquires meaning. This component focuses on the different fields of professional significance within which teachers interpret their roles, commitments, knowledge, and practices.

Drawing on symbolic and sociocultural perspectives [23–25], the framework considers how teachers construct and negotiate professional meanings across interconnected fields. Each field is organized around a foundational question that helps illuminate a particular aspect of professional identity. These fields are not discrete or fixed categories; they overlap and may reinforce, challenge, or reshape one another. From this perspective, professional identity involves more than the acquisition of knowledge and competencies: it also encompasses how teachers interpret the significance of their work and negotiate what it means to be a teacher within different professional and sociocultural contexts.

In teacher education, this component can support reflective discussion by helping student teachers and teacher educators identify the different fields of meaning through which professional identity is interpreted. It thereby complements the initial consideration of theoretical lenses by directing attention from the assumptions underlying the discussion to the substantive meanings through which professional identity is understood and negotiated.

This conceptual shift is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Fields of Meaning as Epistemic Anchors of Teacher Professional Identity.

Epistemic Big Question	Field of Meaning	Core Logics/Assumptions	Professional Focus	Implications for TPI Formation
What is learning and how does it occur?	Pedagogical Field of Meaning	Learning as cognitive, social, and situated process	Instructional design, teaching strategies	Positions teachers as designers of learning environments and pedagogical decision-makers
How is student well-being developed?	Socio-Emotional and Ethical Field	Education as relational, moral, and holistic practice	Care, inclusion, classroom climate, ethics	Expands TPI toward moral and relational agency
What constitutes disciplinary knowledge and expertise?	Disciplinary Knowledge Field	Knowledge as structured and epistemically bounded	Subject mastery and content authority	Frames teachers as disciplinary experts with epistemic legitimacy
How does curriculum function and is enacted?	Curricular Field	Curriculum as interpreted, mediated policy text	Curriculum enactment and adaptation	Positions teachers as mediators between policy and practice
How do fields interact in practice?	Integrated TPI Configuration	Identity as dynamic and contested system	Professional judgement and reflexivity	TPI emerges as intersection of competing meaning systems rather than additive competencies

As Table 3 illustrates, each field of meaning is organized around a central epistemic question that illuminates a distinct aspect of teachers' professional understanding. The fields are not simply categories of professional knowledge or competence; they represent interconnected systems of assumptions, values, and interpretations through which teachers make sense of their work and professional commitments. Their contribution to teacher professional identity lies not only in the meanings associated with each field but also in the relationships among them. These relationships may involve convergence, tension, or shifts in emphasis across contexts, shaping how teachers interpret their roles and exercise professional judgement. From this perspective, TPI can be understood as a dynamic configuration of interacting fields of meaning rather than an additive set of competencies. In teacher education, this conceptualization provides a basis for reflective discussion of the different meanings through which teachers understand their profession and negotiate their professional commitments.

Table 3. Theoretical Lenses and Their Analytical Emphases in Teacher Professional Identity Research.

Theoretical Orientation	Primary Analytical Emphasis	Implications for Understanding Identity
Psychological	Self-understanding, biography, beliefs, values, subjective continuity, and personal commitments	Foregrounds how teachers understand and interpret themselves and their professional experiences
Sociological and sociocultural	Social membership, participation, recognition, shared practices, and institutional contexts	Foregrounds the social constitution of identity through relationships, communities, and professional practices

Table 3. *Cont.*

Theoretical Orientation	Primary Analytical Emphasis	Implications for Understanding Identity
Dialogical	Multiple voices, positions, and negotiations between different understandings of the self	Foregrounds identity as plural and negotiated rather than singular or internally unified
Post-structural and critical	Discourse, power, institutional regulation, and the legitimacy of identity positions	Foregrounds how broader discursive and institutional conditions enable, constrain, or shape professional identities

Note. These orientations are presented as analytical emphases rather than mutually exclusive categories. Individual studies and theoretical traditions may draw on more than one orientation. The table is intended to clarify the different questions and aspects of identity that these perspectives bring into focus, rather than to provide an exhaustive classification of identity theories.

5. Identity Processes: How Professional Identity Evolves

Fields of Meaning identify the substantive meanings, values, and commitments through which professional identity becomes significant, but they do not, in themselves, explain how teachers interpret, negotiate, sustain, or transform these meanings over time. The third component, Identity Processes, therefore shifts analytical attention to the ongoing interpretive and relational activity through which professional identity is formed and reworked. The distinction between meanings and processes is analytical rather than absolute: meanings become consequential through the ways teachers engage with them, while identity processes may, in turn, reshape how particular meanings are understood and prioritized.

Rather than conceptualizing identity development as a linear trajectory toward a coherent or stable professional self, the framework identifies four recurring meta-processes: reflective sense-making, negotiation of tensions, dialogic positioning, and practice-based meaning integration. Each directs attention to a distinct but related aspect of identity formation. Reflective sense-making concerns how teachers interpret professional experiences and reconsider what these experiences mean for their understanding of themselves and their work. Negotiation of tensions foregrounds the ways teachers respond to competing commitments, expectations, and understandings of professional responsibility. Dialogic positioning directs attention to how teachers locate and reconsider themselves in relation to pupils, colleagues, mentors, institutional expectations, and broader professional discourses. Practice-based meaning integration concerns how experiences of teaching and participation in professional practice become incorporated into, or prompt revisions of, teachers' understandings of their professional selves.

These processes are analytically distinguishable but may intersect and recursively inform one another. An experience of disagreement with a mentor, for example, may prompt reflective sense-making, bring competing understandings of good teaching into focus, and lead a student teacher to reconsider their position within the professional community. Subsequent teaching experiences may reinforce, complicate, or redirect these interpretations. Such interactions do not necessarily produce resolution or greater coherence; they may also sustain uncertainty, expose contradictions, or lead teachers to retain competing commitments. The framework therefore treats identity formation as an open-ended process of interpretation and negotiation rather than as a predetermined sequence of developmental stages.

These recurring processes are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Core Meta-Processes of Teacher Professional Identity Formation.

Meta-Process	Analytical Definition	Temporal Expression	Contextual Mediation	Implications
Reflective Sense-Making	Ongoing interpretation of experiences in relation to self and practice	Intensifies at key transitions (e.g., pre-service to induction) but continues throughout the career	Structured by opportunities for reflection and dominant professional discourses	Positions identity as continuously interpreted rather than given
Negotiation of Tensions	Managing alignment and dissonance between competing values, demands, and expectations	Heightened in early career and during periods of reform or change	Mediated by policy pressures, institutional norms, and accountability systems	Explains identity coherence, fragmentation, or strain
Dialogic Positioning	Constructing identity through interaction, discourse, and social positioning	Expands with participation in professional communities	Situated within communities of practice and power relations	Highlights the relational and socially constructed nature of identity
Practice-Based Meaning Integration	Embedding and stabilizing identity through enacted practice	Develops cumulatively across career stages	Emerges within situated practice and local ecologies	Connects identity formation to observable pr

These processes operate recursively rather than sequentially, with each potentially shaping and being reshaped by the others. Reflective sense-making enables teachers to interpret professional experiences; negotiation of tensions brings competing expectations, values, and commitments into focus; dialogic positioning illuminates how teachers locate and reconsider themselves in relation to professional communities and institutional discourses; and practice-based meaning integration concerns how professional experiences inform, reinforce, or revise emerging understandings of the self as a teacher. These processes are not universal developmental stages, nor do they necessarily lead to greater coherence or resolution. Rather, they represent analytically distinguishable forms of identity work through which professional identity remains open to reinterpretation across teachers' professional lives.

6. Ecological Conditions: Context as Constitutive Rather than Contextual

The previous components clarify the theoretical orientations used to examine identity, the fields through which identity acquires meaning, and the processes through which it develops. The fourth component addresses the ecological conditions within which these processes unfold and through which particular identity possibilities are enabled, constrained, or transformed. These conditions are constitutive of identity work rather than merely a background to it.

Teacher professional identity is situated within interacting ecological systems operating simultaneously at individual, institutional, policy, societal, cultural, and digital/AI levels. Individual biographies, emotions, beliefs, and aspirations interact with school cultures, leadership practices, accountability systems, curriculum reforms, technological innovation, generative artificial intelligence, globalization, and changing societal expectations. These influences do not simply affect identity from the outside; they participate in producing the meanings through which teachers interpret themselves and their work. The framework therefore treats context as constitutive of identity rather than as a background variable added after identity has been formed.

Consequently, professional identity emerges through reciprocal interaction between teacher agency and ecological affordances and constraints. Agency is neither assumed to be fully autonomous nor reduced to structural determination; it is enacted within conditions that teachers interpret, negotiate, reproduce, and sometimes transform. This provides the rationale for the fourth guiding question: Under What Ecological Conditions Is Identity Enabled, Constrained, or Changed? The question concerns the circumstances and relations shaping identity work, not a universal or singular cause of change.

7. Integrating the Framework: Four Questions for Organizing TPI Research

The significance of the Integrative Ecological Framework lies in how it organizes the relationship among different forms of inquiry into teacher professional identity (TPI). Conceptual diversity in this field does not necessarily constitute fragmentation: different theoretical traditions may illuminate complementary aspects of identity while advancing assumptions and interpretations that cannot be fully reconciled. The analytical challenge is to clarify what each perspective contributes, how its claims relate to other dimensions of the phenomenon, and where important distinctions or tensions remain. The framework addresses this challenge by distinguishing complementary analytical tasks while preserving the theoretical plurality from which they emerge.

This distinction offers a way to reconsider conceptual fragmentation beyond the proliferation of definitions and dimensions. Fragmentation may also arise when studies address different analytical questions without making those differences explicit, or when theoretical assumptions, professional meanings, identity processes, and contextual conditions are discussed without clarifying their respective functions. In such cases, apparent conceptual disagreement may reflect not only competing interpretations of identity, but also differences in the questions being asked and the levels of analysis being foregrounded. Making these distinctions visible does not resolve the disagreements; it provides a basis for examining their sources and implications more precisely.

8. The Relationships Among the Framework's Components the Integrative Logic of the Framework

The integrative logic of the framework rests on distinguishing among its analytical components while recognizing their interdependence. Theoretical Lenses inform how professional identity is conceptualized and interpreted; Fields of Meaning direct attention to the substantive meanings, values, and commitments through which teachers understand their professional work; Identity Processes illuminate how these meanings are interpreted, negotiated, affirmed, or revised; and Ecological Conditions bring into view the social, institutional, cultural, and policy circumstances within which such processes unfold. Although these components serve distinguishable analytical purposes, their significance emerges through their relationships in particular contexts.

Consider, for example, a student teacher whose initial understanding of good teaching emphasizes building trusting relationships with pupils, responding to individual needs, and fostering inclusive participation. During a school placement, the student teacher encounters a school culture in which effective teaching is associated primarily with classroom control, adherence to established routines, and the ability to demonstrate immediate learning outcomes. The resulting experience cannot be adequately understood as a discrepancy between personal beliefs and institutional expectations. It also raises questions about how professional identity is conceptualized: as the development of an individual professional self, as participation in an established professional culture, or as an ongoing negotiation

between personal commitments and socially recognized expectations. The Fields of Meaning at stake include pedagogical beliefs, relational and ethical commitments, and emerging understandings of professional responsibility. Identity Processes become visible as the student teacher interprets feedback, seeks recognition from the mentor teacher, reconsiders previously held assumptions, and negotiates a developing sense of professional legitimacy. Meanwhile, Ecological Conditions—including the mentoring relationship, the school's organizational culture, the expectations of the teacher education programme, and the wider institutional arrangements governing practicum assessment—shape the opportunities available for interpreting and acting upon these commitments.

This example illustrates how the four components can illuminate different but interrelated aspects of the same identity-related situation. A theoretical perspective emphasizing socialization might foreground the student teacher's incorporation into an existing professional culture, whereas a perspective emphasizing agency and identity negotiation might direct attention to the ways the student teacher interprets, questions, or selectively appropriates its expectations. These interpretations need not be mutually exclusive, although they may differ in their assumptions about professional agency, institutional power, and the conditions under which identity change occurs. The framework does not resolve such theoretical differences in advance. Rather, it helps make their analytical implications more explicit.

Accordingly, the framework should not be understood as an additive model in which four components are combined to produce a comprehensive account of professional identity, nor as a sequential model in which theoretical assumptions determine meanings, meanings generate identity processes, and contextual conditions produce particular outcomes. Its purpose is more modest and analytical: to provide an organized way of examining how distinct but interdependent dimensions of professional identity become relevant in particular circumstances. The relative significance of each dimension may vary across educational settings, professional experiences, and stages of development. Likewise, the relationships among the dimensions remain open to theoretical interpretation and empirical investigation rather than being prescribed by the framework itself.

This integrative perspective also helps clarify the relationship between professional identity and professional competence. Subject knowledge, pedagogical skills, and the capacity to plan, teach, and assess are important resources in teachers' professional work, but their possession or enactment does not, in itself, establish their significance for professional identity. In the example above, the student teacher's ability to manage a classroom or implement a lesson plan becomes identity-relevant insofar as these experiences are interpreted in relation to emerging beliefs about good teaching, professional responsibility, belonging, and recognition. The analytical question is therefore not only what a student teacher knows or can do, but also how professional knowledge and practice acquire meaning within a developing professional self and in relation to the expectations and relationships of teacher education and school contexts. Professional identity is thus approached not as an inventory of attributes or competencies, but as an ongoing interpretive and relational accomplishment.

9. Implications for Research and Teacher Education

As a conceptual heuristic, the framework can support greater analytical transparency in empirical research on teacher professional identity. Its contribution lies not in prescribing research designs or ensuring comprehensive coverage of identity, but in helping researchers articulate the relationship between their theoretical commitments, research questions, analytical focus, and interpretation of findings. It also provides a basis for distinguishing between the dimensions of professional identity explicitly examined in a study and those that remain outside its analytical scope. Such distinctions are particularly relevant in a field characterized by conceptual diversity, where similar empirical phenomena may be

interpreted differently depending on the assumptions and analytical priorities guiding the inquiry.

In qualitative and longitudinal research, the framework may inform interview protocols, narrative analysis, and comparisons across professional contexts and career stages. Researchers might examine not only how teachers describe their professional roles and commitments, but also how particular experiences acquire identity-related significance, how teachers interpret recognition or contestation by others, and how institutional, relational, cultural, and policy conditions enter into these interpretations. Longitudinal inquiry may further explore whether and how the meanings teachers attach to their professional roles are sustained, reconsidered, or transformed over time. These possibilities do not imply that all four components must be addressed in every study. Rather, they encourage researchers to make explicit the analytical choices through which particular aspects of professional identity become visible, while remaining attentive to alternative interpretations and to the limits of the claims their evidence supports.

In teacher education, the framework may serve as a resource for structuring reflective dialogue about the formation and negotiation of professional identity. Consider a student teacher who receives contrasting feedback during a school placement: a mentor teacher praises the student teacher's responsiveness to pupils' questions and willingness to adapt lessons, while another teacher characterizes these practices as evidence of insufficient structure and control. Such feedback may raise questions extending beyond the student teacher's acquisition of classroom-management skills. It may prompt reflection on competing understandings of good teaching, the meanings attached to pedagogical responsiveness and professional authority, the role of recognition in developing a sense of professional legitimacy, and the influence of mentoring relationships and school culture on the interpretation of professional experience. The framework offers a way to examine these interconnected dimensions without assuming in advance which interpretation should prevail or what the student teacher ought to become.

The educational value of such reflection lies partly in shifting attention from the evaluation of an individual teacher's attributes or decisions to the processes through which professional meanings are constructed and negotiated. Rather than treating uncertainty as evidence of an individual deficit, teacher educators can invite student teachers and experienced teachers to examine how their understandings of professional responsibility are shaped through interactions with pupils, colleagues, mentors, and institutional expectations. This does not diminish the importance of professional knowledge, pedagogical competence, or accountability. It situates their significance within the broader interpretive and relational processes through which teachers understand themselves and their work.

The framework therefore offers a non-prescriptive resource for teacher education and professional learning. It does not define a preferred professional identity, assume that identity development follows a uniform trajectory, or imply that tensions between personal commitments and institutional expectations can always be resolved. Instead, it supports a more differentiated examination of how professional identities become intelligible and consequential within particular educational contexts. Its potential contribution lies in making the assumptions, meanings, processes, and conditions involved in such examinations more explicit, thereby supporting reflective inquiry without reducing professional identity either to an individual attribute or to a direct effect of institutional structures.

10. Scope and Contribution of the Framework

The proposed framework is best understood as a conceptual reorganization of existing scholarship rather than as a new or validated explanatory model. Its contribution lies in making explicit and coordinating analytical distinctions that may otherwise remain implicit

or insufficiently differentiated in research on teacher professional identity (TPI). By distinguishing among Theoretical Lenses, Fields of Meaning, Identity Processes, and Ecological Conditions, the framework provides an organized point of reference for examining how different theoretical perspectives illuminate related aspects of TPI, without assuming that these perspectives are fully compatible or can be subsumed under a single explanatory account. The framework neither claims to introduce an entirely new theory of identity nor establishes that its components exhaust the phenomenon or that particular causal relationships exist among them. The relationships proposed are conceptual and remain open to empirical examination.

The components and categories identified in the framework are illustrative rather than exhaustive. Their salience may vary across educational systems, cultural contexts, professional groups, and career stages. The framework also does not assume that identity processes are necessarily coherent, cumulative, or progressive. Contradiction, discontinuity, uncertainty, and power relations may be integral to teachers' negotiations of professional identity rather than deviations from an expected developmental trajectory. Such experiences should not automatically be interpreted as deficits or as temporary obstacles on the way toward a stable professional self.

Although developed in relation to TPI, the framework may also provide a starting point for examining the professional identities of school leaders, teacher educators, mentors, and higher-education faculty. Such applications would require attention to the distinctive meanings, practices, institutional arrangements, and professional expectations of each group. The framework's applicability beyond teacher identity should therefore be treated as a question for further conceptual development and empirical inquiry, rather than as an established property of the model.

Ultimately, the framework's contribution rests not on the comprehensiveness of its categories, but on the analytical clarity that may emerge from their coordinated use. It offers a way to make explicit what different theoretical perspectives foreground, how their analytical concerns relate to one another, and which aspects of professional identity remain insufficiently examined within a particular account. In this sense, integration does not mean theoretical unification, nor does analytical coherence require the elimination of conceptual differences. The framework instead provides a provisional basis for more explicit and productive dialogue across perspectives, while leaving the interpretation of professional identity, the relationships among its dimensions, and the adequacy of the proposed organization open to continued critical and empirical examination.

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