Teacher Organizational Identification under China's Double-High Cluster Construction: a Policy-Discourse Analysis

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Abstract: China launched the "Double-High" Plan in 2019 to build a limited number of world-class vocational schools and professional clusters. By explicitly ranking institutions into key and non-key tiers, the reform concentrates state resources and public recognition on the selected few. This article asks how the policy's own texts construct teacher identity, and what that construction implies for organizational identification among vocational teachers. Drawing on organizational identification theory and a policy-as-discourse perspective, we conduct a directed content analysis of three foundational policy documents. The analysis finds that the texts install a clear key/non-key hierarchy, attach fiscal and honour resources almost exclusively to selected clusters, and position teachers mainly as trainers to be developed rather than members to be included. Read together, these signals prefigure a divide in organizational identification: teachers in key clusters are framed as insiders, while those in non-key clusters are left at the periphery. We argue that this gap is a structural effect of policy design rather than an individual failing, and we outline collaborative-governance responses.

Keywords: Double-High Plan; Vocational Teachers; Organizational Identification; Policy Discourse; Collaborative Governance

1. Introduction

In 2019, China's Ministry of Education and Ministry of Finance jointly launched the "Double-High" Plan, officially the Policy on Building High-Level Vocational Schools and High-Level Professional Clusters with Chinese Characteristics. The plan selects, through open competition, a small number of vocational institutions and professional clusters to receive concentrated state investment, with the stated aim of producing a cohort of world-class, Chinese-characteristic exemplars. Vocational education supplies most of China's skilled workforce, so the reform reaches well beyond the campuses it names. Unlike earlier capacity-building programmes that spread resources more broadly across the sector, the Double-High design is explicitly selective: only a fraction of institutions and clusters are designated as "key" (zhongdian), while the large majority remain outside the recognised tier.

For vocational colleges, the distinction between key and non-key status is not cosmetic. It reshapes budgets, enrolment quotas, industry partnerships, and, less visibly, how teachers within these institutions understand their place in the organisation. Teacher organizational identification, the degree to which a teacher adopts the school's identity and interests as part of their own self-concept, is a well-documented driver of commitment, retention, and teaching quality. When a reform simultaneously celebrates some units and leaves others unmarked, it is reasonable to ask whether the policy itself plants the seeds of an identification divide.

Surprisingly little research has examined this question directly. Studies of the Double-High Plan to date have concentrated on its macro effects: institutional upgrading, industry linkage, and internationalisation. A separate but related body of work on vocational teacher identity has shown that organizational climate and teachers' own sense of efficacy strongly shape how vocational teachers see themselves [1], and that social identity already differs across school types [2]. These two lines of work rarely consider the policy itself. The reform that reorganises the sector is seldom treated as something that produces identity effects. The teacher's lived sense of belonging under stratification has remained largely unexplored.

This study takes the policy texts themselves as the object of analysis. Rather than measuring

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teachers' attitudes through surveys, we examine how the foundational Double-High documents construct the categories of "key" and "non-key," distribute recognition and resources, and position teachers as subjects. We start from a simple observation: before an identification divide can appear in practice, it is first encoded in the policy language that authorises the reform. Treating the documents as primary data lets us ask what the policy assumes about teachers, and what it quietly does to their standing.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. Section 2 sets out the conceptual tools, organizational identification and policy-as-discourse. Section 3 describes the document corpus and the analytical procedure. Section 4 reports four sets of discursive signals drawn from the texts. Section 5 discusses the implications for collaborative governance and the limits of the present reading.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Organizational Identification

Organizational identification describes the process by which an individual incorporates an organization's identity into their own self-concept [3, 4]. In a school setting, a teacher who strongly identifies with the institution is more likely to act in its interest, withstand setbacks, and remain committed over time. Identification is not a fixed trait; it is continuously negotiated through the signals an organization sends about who belongs, who is valued, and who is marginal. Mael and Ashforth [5] show that perceived similarity and shared fate strengthen identification, whereas visible status gradations within an organization can fracture it. For vocational teachers, whose professional identity already sits at the intersection of occupational and educational logics, such gradations matter acutely. Identification is also behavioural: teachers who identify with their institution are more willing to contribute discretionary effort, defend the school's reputation, and remain through difficulties. When a reform redraws the boundary between valued and unvalued units, it does not merely redistribute budgets; it redistributes the conditions under which identification can form. This is why a selective policy deserves to be read as an identity intervention, whether or not identity appears in its stated aims.

2.2 Policy as Discourse

A policy document is never a neutral description of facts; it is a discursive act that names problems, assigns roles, and distributes legitimacy [6]. The vocabulary a policy uses, who is called a "demonstration unit," who is "supported," who is merely "encouraged," performs real boundary work. Reading policy as discourse means attending to the categories it creates and the hierarchies those categories imply. In the Double-High case, the act of listing key clusters and omitting others is a discursive placement that prefigures insiders and outsiders before any teacher is surveyed. The policy need not intend to divide teachers for this to occur. The categories a selective scheme must use carry identity consequences that travel well beyond the budget line. A tier that is named and funded becomes a social fact inside the institution, shaping how insiders and outsiders come to see themselves.

3. Method

3.1 Corpus

The analysis draws on three foundational policy texts that define the Double-High reform and its immediate policy environment. These are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Policy Corpus Analysed in This Study

Document	Issuer	Year	Role in the analysis
Opinions on Implementing the Double-High Plan (MOE & MOF) [7]	Ministry of Education & Ministry of Finance	2019	Master framework; defines selection, support, and assessment
Measures for the Selection and Management of Double-High Projects [8]	Ministry of Education	2019	Operationalises the key/non-key tiering
Implementation Plan for the National Vocational Education Reform [9]	State Council	2019	Broad reform backdrop that the Double-High Plan instantiates

All three texts are publicly available on the issuing ministries' official websites. We focus on these foundational texts rather than on later

implementation guidelines because they carry the reform's original categorization logic; later documents largely repeat and operationalise the same distinctions. We also note that the texts have remained stable since issuance, which makes them a reliable basis for reading the reform's intended architecture. Because the study analyses published documents and involves no human participants, it required no ethics approval.

3.2 Procedure

We conducted a directed content analysis [10], starting from two a priori dimensions, organizational identification and policy discourse, and refining them against the data. Coding proceeded in three passes: first, we located passages that establish institutional tiers; second, we located passages that attach resources, honours, or obligations to those tiers; third, we located passages that name or position teachers. A single coder performed the reading. Given the small, bounded corpus, inter-coder reliability was not computed, and we present the reading as interpretive rather than exhaustive. The aim was not to quantify frequencies but to surface the categorical logic the texts rely on, which is why a close, passage-level reading was preferred over a purely computational count.

4. Findings

4.1 an Explicit Hierarchy

The master Opinions frame the plan as supporting "a batch of" high-level schools and clusters to "lead" the sector, and the Selection Measures turn this ambition into a ranked list with entry, mid-term, and exit mechanisms. Institutions are sorted into tiers, and the documents make clear that tier status is dynamic: those that underperform can be demoted. Ranking is central to how the reform operates, and it draws a visible inside and outside from the outset. The hierarchy is also built on a vocabulary of competition: "selection," "demonstration," "leading." This framing casts the non-selected as runners-up rather than partners. A teacher reading these texts encounters, almost immediately, a map of who matters most in the reformed sector.

4.2 Resource and Honour Concentration

Fiscal support, model status, and public recognition are repeatedly tied to the selected units. The documents promise central and local co-funding, flagship "demonstration" labelling, and favourable enrolment and recruitment policies for key clusters, whereas non-key institutions are addressed only through generic exhortations to "catch up." The distribution of both money and honour is asymmetrical by design, and the asymmetry is what makes the tier matter in everyday institutional life. Honour is as important as money here: being named a demonstration unit changes how an institution is seen by students, parents, and industry, and by its own staff. For teachers, the honour attaches to the unit they belong to, which means identification becomes partly a function of which side of the tier line they fall on.

4.3 Teachers Positioned through Performance, Not Belonging

When teachers appear in the texts, they are most often cast as practitioners to be "upgraded" into "high-level dual-qualified faculty" through state-sponsored training and performance-pay reform. This is a developmental positioning: teachers are objects of capacity-building, not subjects whose belonging is at stake. Teachers in non-key clusters, who are not the explicit target of the flagship training schemes, are effectively absent from the recognition narrative. That silence is itself identity-relevant; it renders non-key-cluster teachers a structural periphery whose recognition is mediated entirely by a status they do not hold. The reform thus addresses teachers in two different modes at once, as invested assets inside key clusters and as an unmarked background outside them, and the difference is encoded without ever being named.

4.4 Interpretive Synthesis: a Prefigured Identification Divide

Read together, the three signals, tiering, resource concentration, and developmental positioning, construct a clear boundary. Key-cluster teachers are implicitly framed as organizational insiders whose units carry the school's prestige; non-key-cluster teachers are left at the periphery of the recognition system. The policy does not state this divide outright, but its discursive architecture makes it available. This reading is consistent with evidence that organizational climate and self-efficacy shape vocational teachers' identity [1], and that vocational teachers' social identity already varies across school types [2]. The synthesis is necessarily

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interpretive: we are arguing that the texts contain the structural conditions for an identification divide, not that the divide has already been measured. Table 2 summarises how each coding dimension maps onto an identification implication.

Table 2. Coding Dimensions and Their Identification Implications

Coding dimension	Dominant signal in the texts	Implication for identification
Institutional tiering	Explicit key/non-key ranking with entry-exit	Creates an insider/outsider boundary
Resource & honour	Concentrated on selected clusters	Reinforces status asymmetry
Teacher positioning	"Dual-qualified" trainers to be developed	Non-key teachers unmarked, peripheral

5. Discussion and Implications

5.1 From Problem to Structure

The identification gap traced here reflects the structure of a selectively designed reform rather than any weakness in individual teachers' commitment. When recognition flows only to designated units, teachers outside them receive a quiet message about their standing, even when no one intends to send it. This reframing matters because it moves the remedy from "fix the teacher" to "redesign the governance." It also changes who is accountable. The relevant question becomes how an institution can organise recognition so that tier status does not become a proxy for worth. On this reading, the identity divide is a governance failure that can be headed off, rather than a shortcoming of the teachers themselves. Treating it early, through the governance moves outlined below, is far cheaper than repairing commitment after it has eroded.

5.2 Collaborative-Governance Pathways

Drawing on collaborative governance theory [11], we propose four responses. First, build inclusive narrative ownership so that non-key-cluster teachers co-author the school's reform story rather than receive it passively. A reform communicated only as a victory for the few will be experienced as a loss by the many; a reform that names every teacher's place in it can soften the boundary it creates. Second, open participatory governance structures so that cluster status does not determine a teacher's voice; committees that span key and non-key units give the periphery a routine channel into decisions that affect it. Third, reconstruct recognition regimes to value diverse contributions, teaching, mentoring, community service, rather than only cluster-linked output, so that prestige is not monopolised by the selected units. Fourth, rebalance resources so that basic identity support, such as professional development and institutional belonging, is decoupled from selection status. None of these requires abandoning the Double-High ambition; they ask only that the governance around it refuse to let the tier define a teacher's worth.

5.3 Beyond China

Elite-selecting reforms are not unique to China. Several systems use flagship-institution or centre-of-excellence models that similarly rank providers [12], and the logic of concentrating prestige to drive quality is widespread. The identification divide observed here should warn anyone designing such schemes: any reform that concentrates honour and resources on a few exemplars should anticipate the belonging of those left outside, and build governance mechanisms accordingly. The specific Chinese vocabulary of "key clusters" is local, but the organisational dynamic it triggers, status becoming identity, is portable, which is precisely why a reading grounded in one reform can speak to others.

5.4 Limitations and Next Steps

This is a documentary study; the identification asymmetry is inferred, not measured. The reading rests on a small, bounded corpus and a single coder, so the findings should be taken as a structured interpretation rather than a closed conclusion. We also note that policy texts and implementation can diverge, and the documents may not capture how schools actually enact the tier on the ground. Empirical validation, survey and interview work comparing key- and non-key-cluster teachers, is the necessary next stage of this research program and will convert the policy signal into a measured effect.

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