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Fostering Virtue through Education: Synergistic Cultivation of Professional Identity and Professional Sentiment among Vocational College Students

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Abstract: Vocational education in China has moved from expansion to a stage of high-quality development, and this shift has changed what is expected of vocational graduates. Technical competence alone is no longer sufficient: students are also expected to develop a stable professional identity and a durable professional sentiment, that is, an attachment to their occupation that carries with it responsibility, a sense of mission and ethical commitment. In research and in practice, however, these two dispositions are usually addressed separately, and vocational colleges often treat values education as an addition to professional formation rather than as an element of it. Adopting the perspective of fostering virtue through education (lide shuren), this paper develops an integrated account of professional identity and professional sentiment and proposes a framework for cultivating them in synergy. It argues that professional identity supplies the cognitive and normative foundation, professional sentiment supplies the affective and evaluative force, a sense of professional mission mediates between the two, and practice is the arena in which both are formed. On this basis, the paper identifies four persistent weaknesses in vocational colleges (shallow occupational cognition, values education detached from specialised teaching, fragmented practical training, and evaluation systems that reward skills over dispositions) and traces them to societal, familial, institutional and pedagogical sources. It then sets out three cultivation pathways, namely curriculum-based ideological and political education, structured practical training and a skills-oriented campus culture, together with four supporting mechanisms covering faculty development, evaluation reform, cross-disciplinary teaching and research, and college–enterprise–family collaboration. The framework offers vocational colleges a coherent basis for designing and evaluating moral education that is embedded in, rather than appended to, professional formation.

Keywords: Fostering virtue through education, Vocational colleges, Professional identity, Professional sentiment.

1. Introduction

Vocational education is the principal route through which young people in China acquire technical skills, and it is central to industrial upgrading. Since 2019, policy has shifted from expansion to quality, stressing industry–education integration and the cultivation of "high-quality technical and skilled talent" rather than the mere transmission of operational skills [1, 2, 3].

This shift has raised expectations: employers look for employees who can adapt, work in teams and take responsibility for quality. Policy expresses the same expectation in the language of fostering virtue through education (lide shuren): curriculum, practice, assessment and campus life should develop technical competence and moral disposition together [4, 5]. In practice, however, two difficulties persist. Professional identity is often weak, because many students enter vocational programmes through examination scores rather than vocational choice [6, 7, 8]. Professional sentiment is often detached from specialised teaching, as values education is delivered through stand-alone courses rather than through the disciplines, producing the "two skins" problem (liang zhang pi) [9].

These difficulties are usually studied separately: research on identity has concentrated on measurement and predictors [8, 10], while work on sentiment has remained largely normative. What is missing is an account of their relationship and of their joint cultivation. This paper argues that identity and sentiment are two moments in a single developmental process, mediated by professional mission and realised in practice, and derives cultivation pathways and mechanisms from that argument.

Section 2 describes the approach, Section 3 the framework, Sections 4–6 the challenges and proposals, and Section 7 the conclusions.

2. Research Approach

2.1. Sources of Evidence

This is a conceptual study. Its argument is built from three bodies of material. The first consists of national policy documents on vocational education issued between 2019 and 2022, which define the normative expectations that vocational colleges are required to meet. The second consists of peer-reviewed scholarship, in Chinese and in English, on professional identity, professional sentiment, curriculum-based ideological and political education and collaborative approaches to talent cultivation. The third consists of published empirical studies of vocational college students in China, which provide indirect evidence about the state of professional identity and about the factors that shape it.

2.2. Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeded in four steps. First, the two central constructs were clarified through definitional analysis: each was distinguished from neighbouring concepts such as

occupational choice, job satisfaction, professional ethics and organisational commitment, and specified in terms of its dimensions. Second, the relationship between the constructs was reconstructed as a set of propositions about direction, mediation and context. Third, those propositions were used to derive cultivation pathways: if identity and sentiment are formed in the way the model claims, then certain kinds of educational experience should be more productive than others. Fourth, the institutional conditions required to sustain those experiences were specified as supporting mechanisms. The procedure is analytical rather than empirical. It generates propositions that can be tested; it does not claim to have tested them.

2.3. The Wider Empirical Programme

The framework is intended to be examined empirically. The wider programme of which this paper forms part employs a sequential mixed-methods design. A questionnaire survey of vocational college students across disciplines and year groups measures professional identity, professional sentiment, perceptions of curriculum-based ideological and political education, internship experience, learning engagement and career adaptability, and is analysed for correlations and for mediating and moderating effects. Semi-structured interviews with subject teachers, ideological and political education teachers, counsellors, enterprise mentors, parents and students are used to reconstruct critical incidents in the formation of professional sentiment. Comparative case studies of exemplary courses, internship arrangements, campus cultural activities and teacher evaluation reforms provide institutional detail. Action research during curriculum development and internship design allows the resulting interventions to be revised in use. The present article reports the conceptual and strategic strand of this programme; the empirical strands are treated separately.

3. Conceptual Foundations

3.1. Professional Identity

Professional identity is the psychological relationship that an individual establishes with an occupation. It is not a single attitude but a composite state with cognitive, affective, evaluative and behavioural components. Cognitively, it involves an understanding of what the occupation is, what it requires, how it is organised and where it can lead. Affectively, it involves a sense of belonging and, at its strongest, pride. Evaluatively, it involves assent to the values the occupation embodies and to the standards it imposes. Behaviourally, it involves a willingness to act as a member of the occupation, to accept its disciplines, defend its standards and invest in its future [8].

Two features of this definition matter for cultivation. The first is that professional identity is developmental. It is assembled over time rather than acquired at a single point, and Chinese scholarship commonly describes the sequence as one running from professional cognition through professional emotion, professional will and professional behaviour to professional values. The second is that identity is relational. It depends not only on what students believe about an occupation but on how others respond to it. Recognition from teachers, employers and the wider society confirms that the identity is worth holding; contempt or indifference undermines it. The low social standing of some vocational occupations is therefore not merely a background condition. It enters students' self-understanding and becomes part of the material that identity formation has to work with.

In the Chinese vocational system, identity formation is complicated by the structure of admission. Many students are allocated to programmes by examination score, and the allocation is widely read as a judgement about ability. Students may therefore begin their studies with what can be called a borrowed identity: they occupy the role of a nursing student or a machinist without having chosen it and without yet believing that it fits them. The educational task is not to presuppose an identity that is already present but to make one available.

3.2. Professional Sentiment

Professional sentiment (*zhiye qinghuai*, sometimes rendered as professional devotion) is a relatively stable affective and evaluative orientation towards an occupation. It is formed through sustained learning and practice and binds a person to the purpose of the work and to the ethical standards the work implies. The term is broader than passion. Passion denotes intensity of feeling and is often transient; sentiment denotes a settled disposition that survives changes in mood and circumstance. It is also broader than satisfaction, which registers how well an occupation meets a person's expectations, and broader than commitment, which concerns the intention to remain.

The construct has at least five dimensions: professional emotion, the attachment to the work and to the people it serves; professional responsibility, the acceptance of obligations towards clients, colleagues and the public; professional mission, the conviction that the work has a purpose beyond income; professional spirit, the disposition to take craft seriously and to hold oneself to its standards; and professional will, the capacity to persist when the work is difficult or unrewarding. The emphasis on craftsmanship in recent vocational policy reflects this fourth dimension [11]. Within the framework of fostering virtue through education, professional sentiment also carries a civic dimension: the recognition that skilled work contributes to national development and to the wellbeing of others, and that the exercise of a skill is therefore a form of public service [12].

The distinction between sentiment and ethics is worth stating. Professional ethics is a normative code; it specifies what practitioners ought to do. Professional sentiment is the motivational and affective force that makes the code matter to the practitioner. A code without sentiment is experienced as external constraint and is obeyed, if at all, only when compliance is monitored. Sentiment without a code is diffuse goodwill that offers little guidance in hard cases. Cultivation therefore has to address both and to connect them [13].

3.3. The Synergy between Identity and Sentiment

The relationship between the two constructs can be stated in four propositions, summarised in Figure 1.

First, identity is the cognitive foundation of sentiment. Students cannot feel responsible for a practice they do not understand. Knowledge of an occupation's history, norms, risks and social function gives sentiment an object and a vocabulary. A nursing student who understands why infection control matters, and what happens when it fails, has something specific to care about; the same student who has learned only the steps of a procedure has learned a routine.

Second, sentiment is the affective consolidation of identity.

An identity that remains merely cognitive is fragile, because it has no hold on behaviour when the work becomes tedious, frightening or unrewarding. When students experience the work as meaningful, when a patient recovers, a component meets tolerance or a village gains a service it did not have, the identity acquires weight and becomes something the student is willing to defend.

Third, professional mission mediates between the two. Mission is the interpretation of "this is my occupation" as "this work matters and I am answerable for it". It is the point at which cognition becomes obligation and obligation becomes attachment. Colleges can cultivate mission indirectly, by exposing students to the consequences of skilled work and to practitioners who take those consequences seriously, but they cannot install it by exhortation.

Fourth, practice is the arena in which the relationship is realised. Neither construct is formed by instruction alone. Both are formed in encounters with real tasks, real standards and real consequences, and both are revised when those encounters go badly. This is why classroom-based values education, however well designed, cannot by itself produce professional sentiment.

Synergy, on this account, means more than the co-occurrence of two programmes. It means that the cultivation of each construct is designed to produce effects that serve as inputs to the other, and that the two are assessed together rather than separately. Recent work on professional ethics education makes a similar point: coordination among units is not the same as integration, and the latter requires a shared mechanism of formation rather than parallel activities [14]. A curriculum that builds identity without providing occasions for responsibility will produce knowledgeable but uncommitted graduates; a practice regime that generates emotional attachment without conceptual understanding will produce enthusiasm that cannot survive complexity. The two have to be calibrated.

The developmental sequence that follows from these propositions runs from cognitive foundation to emotional activation, value internalisation, behavioural practice and identity reinforcement. The sequence is iterative rather than strictly linear: practice feeds back into cognition, and a strengthened identity makes further practice more intelligible. Cultivation is therefore best understood as a spiral in which the same elements recur at higher levels of complexity across the study cycle.

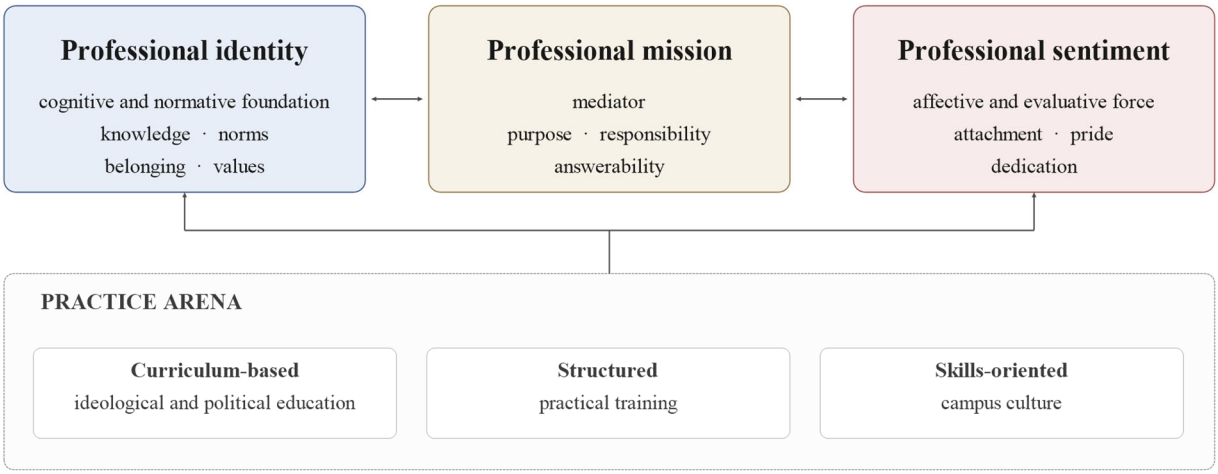


Figure 1. A synergistic model of professional identity and professional sentiment.

4. Current Challenges and Their Causes

The obstacles to synergistic cultivation are not primarily failures of intention. Vocational colleges have invested considerable effort in top-level design, in identifying ideological and political elements within courses, in building practical platforms and in teacher training. The problem lies in the way cultivation is organised: the elements exist, but they are not connected to one another or to the formation of a professional self.

4.1. Four Persistent Challenges

The first challenge is shallow occupational cognition and, as a consequence, unstable identity. Students' knowledge of their occupation is often confined to the tasks they have been taught. They know how to perform a procedure but not why the occupation exists, how it is changing, what its ethical tensions are or what career paths it supports. Identity formed on this basis remains provisional. It is easily unsettled by a negative placement experience, by a relative's disapproval or by the discovery that the starting salary is lower than expected. Some students treat vocational study as a waiting room, a transitional arrangement to be endured while other options are explored.

The second challenge is the separation of values education from specialised teaching. Ideological and political elements are often identified and inserted into professional courses as a short moralising passage at the end of a lesson. Students quickly learn to recognise the genre and discount it. The difficulty is not only one of technique. Many subject teachers are uncertain about which value questions genuinely belong to their discipline, as distinct from which slogans can be attached to it, and they have little preparation for running the kind of discussion in which those questions could be examined.

The third challenge is fragmented practical training. Internships are frequently treated as placements rather than as

curricula. Tasks are assigned according to the immediate needs of the enterprise, supervision is intermittent, and evaluation reduces to attendance records and a supervisor's signature. Students may acquire speed without acquiring judgement, and they may learn that the point of practice is to satisfy the supervisor rather than to serve the user. Reflection, where it occurs, is informal and undocumented, so the experiences that might have changed a student's understanding of the occupation are not converted into learning.

The fourth challenge is an evaluation system that rewards skills over dispositions. Institutional metrics concentrate on employment rates, certificate pass rates, competition awards and the uptake of vocational skill certificates. These indicators are visible, comparable and consequential for institutional reputation, whereas professional identity and professional sentiment are hard to observe, difficult to compare and carry little consequence for reputation. What is measured is managed, and what is not measured is left to the informal curriculum. The result is a systematic bias in favour of the demonstrable.

4.2. A Layered Account of Causes

These challenges have causes at several levels, and the levels interact.

At the societal level, credentialism and the hierarchy of occupational prestige shape how vocational education is perceived. Academic qualifications continue to function as a general signal of ability, and vocational qualifications are often read as a second-best outcome. Stereotypes about manual work, amplified by media representation, are available to students long before they enter a vocational programme. These perceptions are not simply imposed on students; students draw on them to interpret their own position, and the interpretation can settle into self-doubt.

At the family level, parents often lack direct experience of vocational education and reason about it in instrumental terms, weighing employment prospects and income against the risks of a less prestigious path. Their concern is legitimate, but it can crowd out the student's own interests and aptitudes. When a family treats vocational study as a fallback, the student receives a clear message about the value of the identity the college is trying to build.

At the institutional level, curriculum-based ideological and political education is often implemented as a series of discrete requirements rather than as an integrated design. Practical training is weakly connected to classroom learning. Campus culture makes limited use of the symbolic resources of the trades. School–enterprise cooperation is frequently shallow, with enterprises participating in recruitment and equipment provision but not in curriculum design or assessment. Administrative units responsible for academic affairs, student affairs and ideological and political education work in parallel rather than jointly.

At the pedagogical level, teachers' capacity and incentives are the binding constraint. Many vocational teachers are strong practitioners who have received little training in course design or in the discussion of value questions. Their workload leaves little time for cross-disciplinary planning, and promotion criteria reward research outputs and competition results more than teaching and mentoring. Where exemplary practice exists, it often depends on individual commitment rather than on institutional arrangements that would make it reproducible.

These layers are not independent. Societal hierarchy is transmitted through family expectations, ratified by institutional metrics and finally internalised by students as a judgement on their own worth. An intervention that addresses only one layer tends to be absorbed by the others: a well-designed course can be undermined by an assessment regime that ignores what it teaches, and a supportive family can be offset by a labour market that offers no recognition. This is the strongest argument for treating cultivation as a systemic problem rather than as a sequence of discrete activities.

5. Synergistic Cultivation Pathways

The three pathways set out below correspond to the three settings in which vocational students spend most of their time: the curriculum, the workplace and the campus. They are not alternative options among which a college might choose but different moments in the formation process. The curriculum supplies the cognitive and normative map; practice supplies the test and the emotional charge; campus culture supplies recognition and collective identity. Each is weak without the others.

5.1. Curriculum-Based Ideological and Political Education: Building the Cognitive and Normative Map

Curriculum-based ideological and political education works when it is designed into a programme rather than appended to its courses [15]. The first requirement is top-level design: the graduate profile should state what kind of practitioner the programme intends to produce, and course objectives should specify which part of that profile each course contributes to. Without this mapping, value content is distributed arbitrarily and repeats or contradicts itself across courses.

The second requirement is the identification of value-bearing problems that belong to the discipline. In manufacturing, these include precision and tolerance, safety and the consequences of shortcuts, and the relationship between craft and productivity. In nursing, they include the dignity of patients, the allocation of scarce attention and the ethics of coercion in care. In agriculture-related programmes, they include food security, environmental responsibility and the future of rural communities. In construction, they include structural responsibility and the long life of a building after the contractor has left. These are genuine professional problems, not illustrations of pre-existing slogans, and treating them as such is what distinguishes curriculum-based ideological and political education from sloganeering.

The third requirement is pedagogical. Case-based, experiential and dialogic methods are more suitable than lecture-based exhortation because they require students to take a position and defend it. A well-constructed case presents a conflict between legitimate goods, such as speed and safety, or cost and care, and asks students to reason through it with the resources of the discipline. Simulation, site visits, oral history projects and structured debate can serve the same purpose. Digital resources, including a shared case repository and virtual simulations of high-risk situations, extend the range of experience available in the classroom.

The fourth requirement is assessment. If examinations test only technical knowledge, students will infer that values are decorative. Process-oriented assessment, including reflective writing, professional narratives and the analysis of cases,

signals that the normative dimension is part of competence. Assessment should reward the quality of reasoning rather than the fluency of moral vocabulary, and it should close the loop between course design, delivery and revision [16].

The mechanism through which this pathway works is conceptual. It gives students a vocabulary for what they are already experiencing, and it makes visible the normative dimension of knowledge they might otherwise treat as neutral technique. A student who understands why a standard exists is in a better position to care about it than one who has merely memorised it.

5.2. Structured Practical Training: Turning Competence into Commitment

Practical training is the point at which professional sentiment is most likely to be formed, and the point at which it is most often wasted. The difference lies in design.

Internships should be constructed as curricula with learning objectives, a progression of tasks, specified supervision and assessment criteria. A defensible progression moves from observation to assisted performance to independent performance under supervision, with responsibility increasing at each stage. Students should know what they are expected to be able to do at the end of each phase and what evidence will count.

The duration and timing of placements matter, but less than is sometimes assumed. Programmes in Chinese vocational colleges commonly place students for three to six months, and length alone does not produce commitment. Continuity, responsibility and supervision do. A student who spends six months performing a single repetitive task may learn less than one who spends three months moving through a planned sequence with a mentor who explains the reasons behind each step.

Reflection is the mechanism that converts experience into sentiment. Internship journals, professional narratives and structured debriefings around critical incidents give students a way to interpret what they have seen. A critical incident, such as a patient's fear before surgery, a near-miss on a production line or a farmer's response to a new technique, is educationally valuable precisely because it disrupts routine and demands interpretation. Without debriefing, the incident remains a story; with it, the incident can become a reason.

Service-learning extends the same logic beyond the workplace. Projects in which students use their skills for rural revitalisation, community health screening, equipment repair for elderly residents or environmental monitoring produce visible social value. The visibility matters. Students who see the effect of their work on people who are not their teachers or supervisors encounter the public dimension of their occupation directly, and this is the experiential basis of the civic element in professional sentiment.

The pathway should be closed with a cycle: objectives before practice, targeted guidance during practice and reflective evaluation after practice. The cycle ensures that the experience is not merely undergone but used.

5.3. Skills-Oriented Campus Culture: Recognition and Collective Identity

Campus culture matters because identity is conferred as well as chosen. The symbolic environment of a college tells students how much the occupation is worth.

Signature events are the most visible instrument. Skill festivals, competitions, lectures by master craftsmen and "model workers on campus" programmes bring accomplished practitioners into contact with students and make excellence visible. The value of these events depends on their seriousness. A competition that is staged as entertainment teaches students that skill is a performance; a competition judged by people whose judgement students respect teaches them that skill is a standard.

Rituals mark entry into an occupation and are especially important in programmes with a strong professional culture. Orientation programmes, apprenticeship ceremonies, nursing cap-bestowing ceremonies and oath-taking give students a public occasion on which they are recognised as members of a group. The sociological function of such rituals is well understood: they separate a status from the one that preceded it and oblige the community to treat the person differently.

The physical environment carries the same message. Workshops that are clean and well equipped, corridors that display students' work, and public spaces that document the history of the trade all signal that the occupation is taken seriously. Neglected facilities signal the opposite, and students read the signal accurately.

Media and peer culture extend recognition beyond the campus. Short videos, alumni profiles and reporting on graduates who have solved difficult problems can counter the stereotype of vocational work as unskilled. Student associations organised around professional interests, and mentoring by senior students, create a peer group in which taking the occupation seriously is normal rather than embarrassing.

5.4. Sequencing the Pathways across the Study Cycle

The three pathways are most effective when they are sequenced across a typical three-year programme. In the first year, the task is to make the occupation intelligible and to confer a provisional identity: orientation, occupational biography, site visits, basic skills and entry rituals. In the second year, the task is to build the cognitive and normative map through curriculum-based ideological and political education, to test it in simulated and laboratory practice and to provide a first short placement with structured reflection. In the third year, the task is to move into extended practice with real responsibility, to work through critical incidents and to manage the transition to employment with the support of alumni mentors and enterprise supervisors.

The same activity can have different effects at different stages. A site visit in the first year broadens the imagination of the occupation; the same visit in the third year may confirm or undermine a career decision. Sequencing is therefore not an administrative convenience but a condition of pedagogical effectiveness.

6. Supporting Mechanisms

Pathways depend on conditions. Without supporting mechanisms, well-designed activities remain isolated events that disappear when the individual who organised them moves on. Four mechanisms are particularly important.

6.1. Faculty Development

Teachers are the most important medium through which professional sentiment is conveyed, and sentiment is caught as well as taught. A teacher who takes craft seriously, who explains why a standard matters and who treats students as

future colleagues conveys more than a teacher who delivers the same content as a requirement. This is why the development of teachers' own professional commitment is not a preliminary to the real work but part of it.

Capacity building should address three things: the ability to identify genuine value questions within a discipline, the ability to design courses in which those questions are examined rather than announced, and the ability to assess the results. Specialised training, teaching competitions, professional development studios and peer observation can all contribute, provided that they are connected to the teacher's own subject rather than delivered as generic instruction in morality.

The "dual-qualified" teacher agenda, which requires teachers to have both pedagogical qualification and industry experience, supports this work by keeping teachers in contact with contemporary practice. Periodic placements in enterprises prevent the drift that occurs when a teacher's knowledge of the workplace stops at the point of graduation.

Collaborative teaching teams are a further condition. Teams that include subject teachers, ideological and political education teachers, enterprise mentors and counsellors can combine disciplinary knowledge, normative expertise, workplace judgement and knowledge of students' personal circumstances. Counsellors and class advisers are particularly well placed to notice changes in a student's orientation and to intervene early, and their work is most effective when it is integrated into a wider system of student support [17].

6.2. Evaluation and Assessment

Evaluation shapes behaviour more reliably than exhortation. If curriculum-based ideological and political education is to be taken seriously, its implementation and outcomes must appear in the criteria by which teachers are assessed, promoted and rewarded.

At the faculty level, this means including course design, teaching outcomes and documented cases of exemplary practice in performance evaluation, and treating them as criteria in appointment, promotion and award decisions. Positive incentives, such as a teaching innovation award, should be paired with credible expectations, so that the policy is understood as a requirement rather than an invitation.

At the institutional level, evaluation should involve multiple perspectives: students, peers, enterprise mentors and alumni. A single rating by students captures satisfaction rather than learning, and a single rating by administrators captures compliance rather than quality. Developmental evaluation, in which evidence is collected over time and used to revise practice, is more useful than a one-off inspection.

At the student level, the sector needs instruments that measure professional identity and professional sentiment with acceptable psychometric properties. Such instruments should be supplemented by portfolios, reflective writing and behavioural indicators, since dispositions are poorly captured by a single score. The purpose of measurement here is diagnostic rather than disciplinary: it should help programmes see where their students are struggling, not rank them.

6.3. Cross-Disciplinary Teaching and Research Platform

The separation of academic affairs, student affairs and ideological and political education is an organisational cause of the "two skins" problem, and it requires an organisational response [18]. A cross-disciplinary platform can bring the relevant actors together around concrete tasks: joint lesson planning, the co-development of cases, shared teaching resources and collaborative action research.

A case repository is a practical starting point. Cases developed jointly by subject teachers and ideological and political education teachers are more likely to be both technically credible and normatively serious than cases developed by either group alone. A shared repository also reduces the duplication that occurs when individual teachers develop materials in isolation.

Action research gives the platform a method. Teachers who investigate their own courses, document what changed and revise their practice accordingly generate knowledge that is local, usable and cumulative. Cross-programme projects, in which students from different disciplines work on a common problem such as assistive technology or rural health services, extend the same logic to students and give them experience of working with other occupations.

6.4. College–Enterprise–Family Collaboration

Vocational colleges cannot produce professional sentiment on their own. The workplace and the family are the two settings in which students' beliefs about their occupation are most strongly confirmed or contradicted.

School–enterprise cooperation should move beyond recruitment and equipment provision towards shared responsibility for development. Modern apprenticeship programmes, customised training classes and industry-specific colleges provide structures in which enterprises contribute real projects, workplace culture and mentors. A functioning dual-mentor system, in which an enterprise mentor and a college teacher share responsibility for the student's progress, gives students a model of how experienced practitioners think about their work.

Families need to be brought into the process rather than informed of its results. Parent education workshops, open days and professional experience days can give parents a concrete sense of what their child is learning and what the occupation involves. The aim is not to persuade parents to abandon their concerns but to give them better information with which to interpret their child's choice.

Government and industry bodies have a role in changing the public framing of skilled work. Recognition schemes, media coverage of skilled professionals and public reporting on the contribution of vocational graduates affect the social standing of the occupations that vocational colleges prepare students for. Collaboration between colleges, enterprises and families should also include feedback mechanisms, such as shared growth records, that allow the three parties to follow a student's development rather than assess it only at the end.

7. Conclusion

This paper has argued that professional identity and professional sentiment should be cultivated together. Identity supplies the cognitive and normative foundation, sentiment the affective and evaluative force, professional mission mediates between them, and practice is the arena in which the relationship is realised. The developmental sequence runs from cognition through emotion, value internalisation and behaviour to identity reinforcement, and it recurs across the study cycle.

The diagnosis identified four weaknesses: shallow occupational cognition, values education detached from specialised teaching, fragmented practical training, and

evaluation that rewards skills over dispositions. These weaknesses arise from societal, familial, institutional and pedagogical conditions that reinforce one another. The response combines three pathways—curriculum-based ideological and political education, structured practical training and skills-oriented campus culture—with four mechanisms: faculty development, evaluation reform, a cross-disciplinary platform and college–enterprise–family collaboration. These mechanisms are not ancillary: they determine whether a pathway becomes institutional practice or remains the work of an individual enthusiast.

The contribution is conceptual: an integrated account of two constructs usually studied separately, a diagnostic framework linking challenges to causes, and a design vocabulary for colleges to examine their own arrangements. Its practical implication is that moral education cannot be delivered as a separate programme; it has to be built into courses, placements and institutional rituals, and assessed through evidence that includes but is not limited to measurement. The study relies on published evidence and is grounded in the Chinese vocational system, so its propositions remain to be tested.

Future research should develop validated measures of both constructs, follow students from entry to early career, compare structured with conventional placements, and examine whether simulation and learning analytics affect sentiment, as distinct from knowledge. Cultivating identity and sentiment together is not an ornament added to technical education; it is part of what makes technical education count.

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