

The Development Model of Kindergarten Teachers' Professional Identity in Hubei, China

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Abstract

This study aimed to 1) understand kindergarten teachers' life stories about their professional identity; 2) identify the influencing factors of kindergarten teachers' professional identity; 3) examine the relationship between the influencing factors and kindergarten teachers' professional identity; and 4) explore a development model for kindergarten teachers' professional identity. The quantitative and qualitative methods were used to study the kindergarten teachers' professional identity. First, the interview data of 9 kindergarten teachers were analyzed for the influencing factors of kindergarten teachers' professional identity by using the Grounded Theory. The findings revealed that there were four influencing factors in kindergarten teachers' professional identity, namely self-image, self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and social support. These findings were used to design a questionnaire that was distributed to 396 kindergarten teachers to investigate the relationship between the influencing factors and kindergarten teachers' professional identity. The SEM model revealed that self-image significantly and positively affected professional identity ($CR=6.042$, $P<0.001$); self-efficacy significantly and positively affected professional identity ($CR=5.438$, $P<0.001$); job satisfaction significantly and positively affected professional identity ($CR=4.533$, $P<0.001$); social support significantly and positively affected professional identity ($CR=6.027$, $P<0.001$). Finally, a focus group of 4 experts was organized to confirm the emerging development model. The results of this research can be used to develop strategies to enrich existing kindergarten teachers' professional identity as the guidelines for all kindergartens in similar contexts.

Keywords: Kindergarten Teachers; Professional Identity; Influencing Factors; The Grounded Theory; SEM

Introduction

Early childhood education (ECE) is fundamental to children's future learning and national development, emphasized by various global education policies. New Zealand's Early Learning Action Plan 2019–2029, Australia's National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (2022), the United States' Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, and China's Education Modernization 2035 all highlight the importance of high-quality ECE as a foundation for lifelong learning and national progress.

In China, the emphasis on ECE has shifted from merely increasing resources to improving their quality. High-quality kindergarten teachers are in demand, yet educational attainment among these teachers remains low, with a significant percentage holding only junior college degrees or less. Additionally, the attrition rate among kindergarten teachers is high, attributed to challenges such as job dissatisfaction, poor commitment, and burnout (Liu, 2021).

Research indicates that professional identity negatively correlates with teacher burnout and turnover rates, suggesting that a stronger professional identity leads to greater job satisfaction and longevity in the teaching profession (Madigan & Kim, 2021; Qadach, Schechter, & Da'as, 2020). Enhancing teachers' professional identity is essential, as it influences work attitudes, professional development, and commitment (Ma, Zhou, & Liu, 2021).

To strengthen teachers' professional identity, it is crucial to understand the factors that affect it. Qadach et al. (2020) emphasize the link between professional identity and burnout, highlighting its importance for educational policymakers and administrators. Göncz (2017) reviews the influence of teacher personality in educational psychology, while Vizek Vidović and Domović (2019) explore the development of teachers' beliefs during initial teacher education. Cheng (2021) discusses the impact of EFL/ESL teachers' emotions on their professional identity, focusing on factors like pedagogical beliefs, emotional experiences, environmental influences, and perceptions. Additionally, Namaziandost et al. (2024) highlight the significance of teacher immunity and emotion regulation for professional identity, autonomy, and work motivation, which are critical for teacher well-being. Understanding these factors is essential for promoting the development and well-being of teachers' professional identity in education.

Therefore, this study employed a mixed-methods design which used both the qualitative and quantitative methods to understand kindergarten teachers' life stories about their professional identity,

to identify the influencing factors of kindergarten teachers' professional identity, and to examine the relationship between influencing factors and kindergarten teachers' professional identity, to explore the development model for kindergarten teachers' professional identity.

Research Objectives

1. To understand kindergarten teachers' life stories about their professional identity
2. To identify the influencing factors of kindergarten teachers' professional identity
3. To examine the relationship between the influencing factors and kindergarten teachers' professional identity
4. To explore a development model for kindergarten teachers' professional identity

Research Methodology

1. Research Site

This study selected three cities in Hubei Province as research sites, namely Wuhan City, Jingmen City, and Qianjiang City.

2. Research Population

In this study, 33239 kindergarten teachers from three cities were the population of the study.

Table 1 Information about kindergarten Teachers in the Three Cities

City	Wuhan	Jingmen	Qianjiang
Kindergarten teachers	28786	3202	1251
Total		33239	

3. Research Sample Groups

(1) In this study, narrative research was adopted to gather stories about the life of 9 kindergarten teachers by using purposive sampling. According to Day and Gu (2010), teachers were categorized into 3 groups, novice (0–5 years), experienced (6–14 years), and expert (15 years and above). Thus, the nine teachers in the study represent these three groups.

(2) Based on the formula of Yamane (1967), 396 samples emerged through the Stratified Sampling method for the questionnaire survey.

(3) In this study, 4 experts were selected to meet in the focus group arranged by the researcher to critically analyze the proposed model. Experts in the field of early childhood education were selected from Yunnan Technology and Business University (2 experts), Hubei Normal University (1 expert), and Krirk University (1 expert).

4. Research Instruments

This study used a mixed-methods approach, which combined qualitative and quantitative data analysis techniques. The first instrument was a life story interview and the second instrument was the kindergarten teachers' professional identity questionnaire. The third instrument was a focus group.

Research Results

Step 1: This study aimed to analyze the kindergarten teachers' life stories with grounded theory to get influencing factors. Strauss and Corbin (1990) explain that grounded theory procedures consist of three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Through the analysis of the interview data, the four influencing factors of kindergarten teachers' professional identity were self-image, self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and social support.

Step 2: Compile a questionnaire and test the questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into three parts. Part one was the participants' information. Part 2 was designed by the four influencing factors. Part 3 adopted Wei's Maturity Scale (2008) to detect the kindergarten teachers' professional identity in China.

1. Questionnaire

This research questionnaire mainly consists of three parts:

Table 2 Questionnaire Component Information

Part	Items	Category
Part 1	1–10	Basic information: age, gender, major, education background, teaching years, professional title, marital status, kindergarten nature of work, kindergarten's location, monthly salary
Part 2	1–28	Influencing factors: self-image, self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and social support
Part 3	1–18	Professional identity: professional value, role value, professional sense of belonging, professional behavior tendency

Influencing Factors: In this study, these four influencing factors were adopted to construct the questionnaire for 396 kindergarten teachers. This instrument consisted of 28 items: Self-image sub-scale = 8 items; Self-efficacy sub-scale = 7 items; Job satisfaction sub-scale = 8 items, and Social support sub-scale = 5 items. On a 5-point Likert scale, where 5 is 'Strongly Agree', 4 is 'Agree', 3 is 'Neutral', 2 is 'Disagree', and 1 is 'Strongly Disagree', each item was rated.

Professional Identity: For this part, the study adopted Wei's Maturity Scale (2008) to detect kindergarten teachers' professional identity in China. The reliability coefficient is 0.893, the validity coefficient is 0.921. In recent years, experts and scholars have carried out several practical tests on it, and the results have proved that the scale has good reliability and validity. The scale is divided into four dimensions, namely professional value, role value, professional sense of belonging, and professional behavior tendency.

2. The Pilot Test of the Questionnaire

Reliability and validity:

In this study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each influencing factor are 0.896, 0.872, 0.881, 0.873, 0.895 and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the total influencing factor is 0.943. Thus, its complete fulfillment of the design requirements indicates that the questionnaire has good credibility.

The validity was verified using KMO and Bartlett's test, the coefficient result of the KMO test was 0.927, and Bartlett's test chi-square value was 6981.908 (Sig.=0.000<0.01) indicating that the data were suitable for factor analysis.

3. EFA Analysis

The purpose of EFA analysis is to find out the potential structure of the questionnaire and further optimize the content of the questionnaire, including the deletion and modification of the questions. In this study, the Rotated Component Matrix is used to find factors. After preliminary rotation analysis, Self-efficacy 7, Self-image 8, Job Satisfaction 8, and Job Satisfaction 7 factors inconsistent with the overall theoretical conception were eliminated. To ensure the accuracy of the study and the consistency of the theory, these factors were excluded in the subsequent analysis. A total of four factors were extracted, and the factor of each item was greater than 0.5, and the distribution of factor items was consistent with the theoretical conception.

4. Formal questionnaire

Reliability:

The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each factor are 0.922, 0.919, 0.913, 0.900 and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the total factor is 0.933. Thus, its complete fulfillment of the design requirements indicates that the questionnaire has good credibility.

5. CFA Analysis

The Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was used to verify the validity of the formal questionnaire.

Discrimination Validity:

Discriminative validity means that when different isomorphisms are measured, the observed values should be distinguishable from each other. The discrimination validity is generally tested by comparing the AVE square root with the phase relation value. If the AVE square root is greater than the phase relation value, the discrimination validity is good.

Table 3 Discrimination Validity of the Scale

Factors	Self-image	Self-efficacy	Job satisfaction	Social support
Self-image	0.797			
Self-efficacy	0.422***	0.821		
Job satisfaction	0.435***	0.429***	0.800	
Social support	0.389***	0.413***	0.375***	0.806

Note: The diagonal line represents the square root of AVE

Table 3 shows that by using AVE (mean-variance extraction) to evaluate the correlation between roots and factors, it is found that the square root of AVE is greater than the correlation coefficient between factors. This result shows that the scale used has good discrimination validity.

Model fit indices:

For the questionnaire data, this study utilized Amos 21.0 software for parameter estimation and fitting to solve the constructed structural equation model.

Table 4 Model fit indices

Key index	Adaptation standard	Value	Whether it reaches the standard or not
CMIN	–		
DF	–		
CMIN/DF	<5	3.119	YES
RMR	<0.05	0.036	YES
IFI	>0.09	0.924	YES
TLI	>0.09	0.914	YES
CFI	>0.09	0.923	YES
RMSEA	<0.08	0.073	YES

CFA Model:

The confirmatory factor analysis was employed to assess the fit of the ideal four-factor model derived from the exploratory factor analysis. Ultimately, a fully standardized solution for the four-factor model of kindergarten teachers' professional identity was obtained. The analysis results are depicted in Figure 1.

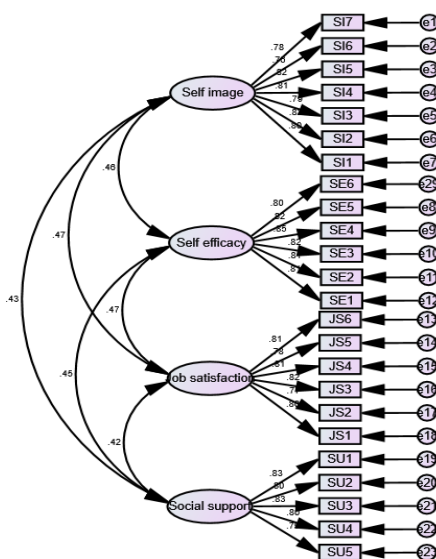
**Figure 1** CFA Model (Source: Made by researcher, 2023)

Figure 1 shows that the model fit indices meet the criteria and the scale has structural validity.

Step 3: The questionnaire responses were analyzed with SEM to examine the relationship between the influencing factors and kindergarten teachers' professional identity.

SEM Analysis:

According to the evaluation index, the CMIN/DF value is less than 5, and the actual value is 3.119, which meets the requirements. The RMR value is less than 0.05, and the actual value is 0.036, which meets the requirements. The values of IFI, TLI, and CFI are all greater than 0.09, and the actual values are 0.924, 0.914, and 0.923, respectively, which meet the requirements. All these indicators meet the criteria for goodness-of-fit, and therefore further in-depth research and analysis can be continued.

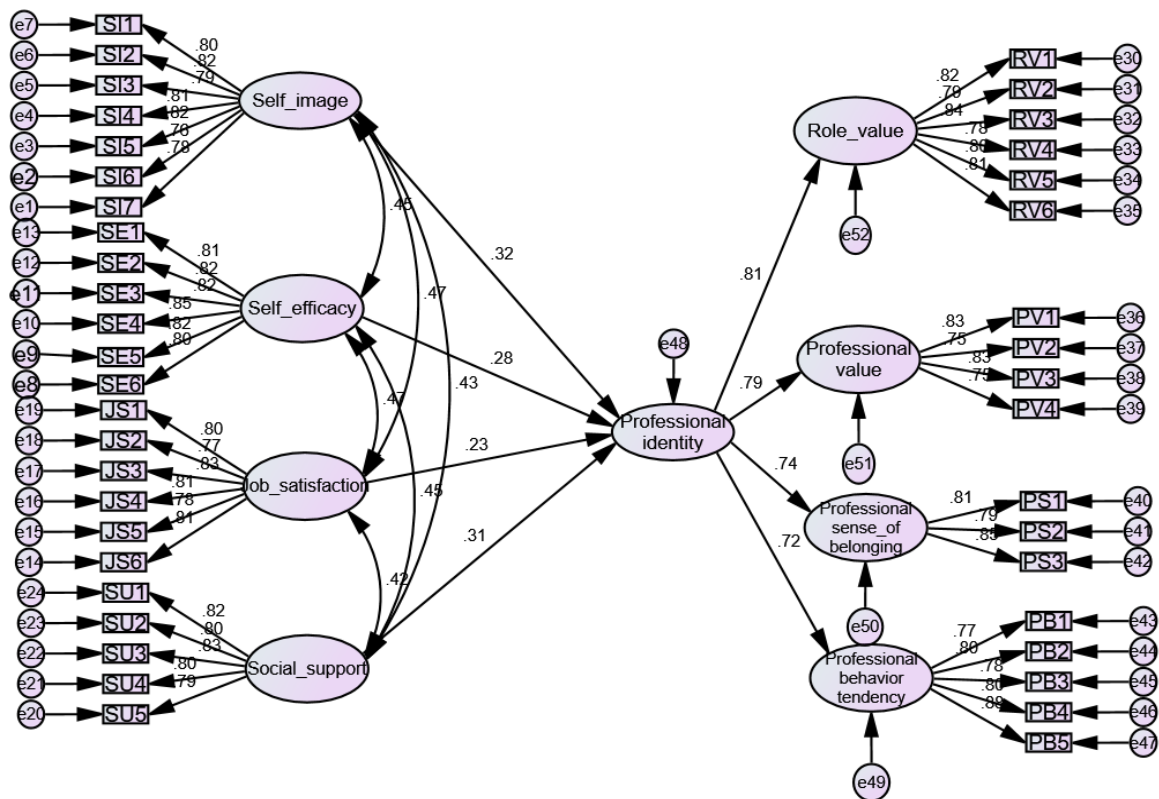


Figure 2 SEM Model (Source: Made by researcher, 2023)

Path analysis:

Path analysis is a subset of SEM. It focuses on analyzing direct and indirect relationships between variables in a hypothesized model.

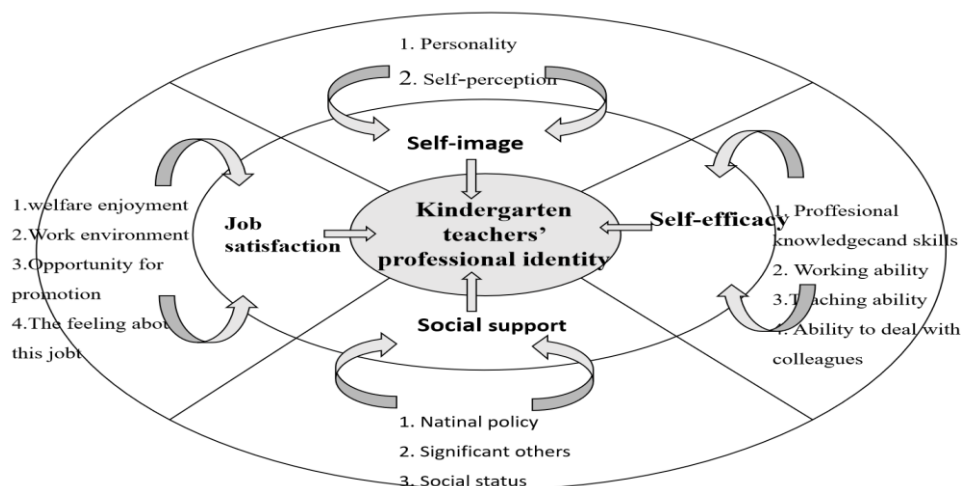
Table 5 Path Analysis Results

	Path	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Label
Professional identity	<--- Self-image	0.176	.029	6.042	***	Set up
Professional identity	<--- Self-efficacy	0.177	.033	5.438	***	Set up
Professional identity	<--- Job satisfaction	0.152	.034	4.533	***	Set up
Professional identity	<--- Social support	0.183	.030	6.027	***	Set up

In this study, according to the results of path analysis, self-image significantly and positively affects professional identity (CR=6.042, $P<0.001$); Self-efficacy significantly and positively affects professional identity (CR=5.438, $P<0.001$); Job satisfaction significantly and positively affects professional identity (CR=4.533, $P<0.001$); Social support significantly and positively affects professional identity (CR=6.027, $P<0.001$). Comparison of the degree of influence (standardized coefficient), from highest to lowest, were self-image, social support, self-efficacy, and job satisfaction.

Step 4: The emerging model was confirmed by a focus group with 4 experts.

Based on the SEM model, four experts in the field of early childhood education participated in the discussion of this SEM model and discussed the development model of kindergarten teachers' professional identity. The four experts all supported this SEM model and believe that self-image, self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and social support have an impact on kindergarten teachers' professional identity.

**Figure 3** The Development Model for Kindergarten Teachers' Professional Identity

Discussion

Emerging issues found in this study were as follows:

1. Self-image significantly and positively affects kindergarten teachers' professional identity ($CR=6.042$, $P<0.001$). A strong self-image is crucial for effectively navigating life, providing a framework for understanding past actions, making sense of present experiences, and predicting future behaviors. Conversely, a weak or negative self-image can result in confusion, uncertainty, and unpredictability in one's actions and motivations (Beijaard et al., 2020). Therefore, fostering a positive self-image through various aspects of teacher training, leadership, curriculum implementation, and professional development, especially in kindergartens, is essential for enhancing teachers' professional identity. An empowering self-image influences how teachers perceive themselves, impacting their confidence, resilience, and sense of purpose in their professional roles. It enables teachers to take initiative, embrace challenges, and strive for continuous growth and improvement, fostering a robust professional identity characterized by competence, dedication, and fulfillment (Shavardova, 2020).

Furthermore, fostering an empowering self-image among kindergarten teachers has broader implications for the educational environment. It can create a positive and supportive culture where teachers feel valued, respected, and motivated to give their best efforts toward student learning and development (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). This, in turn, enhances the overall quality of education and enriches the learning experiences of young children in kindergarten settings. In conclusion, an empowering self-image is vital not only for individual teachers' professional identity but also for creating a positive and thriving educational ecosystem in kindergartens (Bandura, 1997). Targeted interventions, support mechanisms, and reflective practices aimed at nurturing and strengthening teachers' self-image can yield significant benefits for both educators and students alike.

2. Self-efficacy significantly and positively affects kindergarten teachers' professional identity, with a strong correlation ($CR=5.438$, $P<0.001$). Promoting self-efficacy among teachers is crucial for their professional growth and effectiveness (Beijaard et al., 2000). Kindergartens can support this by providing professional development opportunities, mentorship programs, constructive feedback, and a supportive work environment that encourages continuous learning and growth. Empowering teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy enhances their teaching practices and positively impacts student outcomes and the overall educational experience (Choi, 2005). Research shows that self-efficacy is

linked to teachers' sense of autonomy and job satisfaction, with confident teachers more effectively handling challenges, making decisions, and engaging students, leading to greater job satisfaction and commitment (Derakhshan et al., 2019; Ortan et al., 2021).

Furthermore, self-efficacy plays a crucial role in teacher resilience and coping strategies in the face of adversity or stress (Bandura, 1997; Klassen & Chiu, 2010). Teachers with strong self-efficacy are more likely to persevere and overcome obstacles, maintaining a positive and adaptive mindset (Fisherman & Weiss, 2011). This resilience is vital for navigating the complex and demanding nature of the teaching profession, particularly in kindergarten settings. Additionally, fostering self-efficacy among kindergarten teachers can positively affect the entire school community, leading to effective collaboration with colleagues, meaningful engagement with parents, and contributions to school-wide initiatives (Elyashiv & Rozenberg, 2024). In conclusion, nurturing self-efficacy among kindergarten teachers benefits their professional growth and creates a positive and thriving educational environment, empowering teachers to reach their full potential and significantly impacting student learning and development.

3. Job satisfaction significantly and positively affects kindergarten teachers' professional identity ($CR=4.533$, $P<0.001$). Studies indicate that job satisfaction plays a crucial role in shaping teachers' professional identity, with high levels of job satisfaction reinforcing their commitment and sense of purpose in their roles (Xing, 2022). Teachers who are content with their work are more likely to view teaching as a meaningful and rewarding profession, which strengthens their professional identity and dedication to their students' lives (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Additionally, job satisfaction influences teacher retention and turnover rates, with satisfied teachers more likely to remain in the profession, contributing to greater stability and continuity in educational settings (Liu, Lin, & Zhang, 2020; Nguyen & Hunter, 2023).

Job satisfaction has been linked to various positive outcomes in educational environments, such as higher levels of student achievement, improved classroom climate, and better teacher-student relationships (Judge et al., 2020; Putri et al., 2024). Satisfied teachers are more motivated, engaged, and committed to their students' success, ultimately enhancing the overall effectiveness of the education system. Kindergartens play a crucial role in fostering job satisfaction by addressing factors such as workload, cooperation, leadership styles, professional development opportunities, motivation, and compensation. By creating a supportive work environment that values teachers' contributions and

promotes collaboration and continuous improvement, kindergartens can enhance job satisfaction, engagement, and teacher well-being (Collins et al., 2014). In conclusion, investing in teachers' job satisfaction benefits both educators and students, leading to improved educational outcomes and a thriving educational environment.

4. Social support significantly and positively affects kindergarten teachers' professional identity ($CR=6.027$, $P<0.001$). National policies, social status, and social interactions such as peer collaboration, family support, mentorship, and engagement with colleagues play crucial roles in shaping how teachers perceive themselves professionally. National policies, like the universal Pre-Kindergarten expansion in New York City and international education policies, create new expectations and demands, prompting teachers to adapt and redefine their roles (Akaba et al., 2022). Social status also impacts job selection, satisfaction, and retention, with studies highlighting that social recognition at work leads to higher job satisfaction, engagement, and commitment. These factors collectively influence career decisions, enhancing job satisfaction and ensuring teacher retention (Anderson et al., 2019; Meoli et al., 2020).

Furthermore, peer support, colleague support, mentor influence, and parental involvement are critical in the negotiation of teachers' professional identity (Beaton, 2022; Walters et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2020). Mentorship programs, in particular, are vital for professional identity formation, providing guidance, feedback, and support to novice teachers (Corcoran et al., 2019; Tristani et al., 2021). Organizational support, including supportive leadership, collaborative work environments, and professional development opportunities, fosters a positive professional identity among teachers (Osterman, 2023). Recognizing and valuing teachers' contributions, providing adequate resources and training, and promoting a culture of teamwork and continuous improvement are essential for enhancing teachers' sense of identity and belonging. Engaging with these strategies allows kindergarten teachers to navigate the multifaceted influences on their professional identities, leading to enhanced job satisfaction, professional growth, and overall effectiveness in the education sector.

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