A Study of the Relationship Between Social Support and Professional Identity Among Preservice Preschool Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Professional identity is a key factor in shaping preservice teachers' career choices and long-term engagement with the profession. For preservice preschool teachers, developing a solid professional identity during training is crucial for their future decision to enter the teaching profession and remain committed to teaching. Social support has been identified as a key factor in strengthening professional identity among preservice teachers. However, the specific mechanisms through which social support fosters professional identity remain limited. This study investigated the association between social support and professional identity among preservice preschool teachers in China. A cross-sectional correlational quantitative design was adopted. Questionnaire data were collected from 531 preservice preschool teachers enrolled in preschool education programs. Social support and professional identity were measured using validated self-report instruments. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to examine the levels of the main variables. Pearson correlation analysis to explore their associations and simple linear regression analysis to test the predictive effect of social support on professional identity. Findings indicated that both social support and professional identity were at a moderate level among preservice preschool teachers. The results of Pearson correlation analysis showed a significant positive correlation between social support and professional identity. Regression analysis further confirmed that social support significantly predicted professional identity, with greater perceived social support corresponding to higher levels of professional identity. This finding showed that support from family members, peers, teachers, and educational institutions may contribute to preservice preschool teachers' professional cognition, emotional attachment to the profession, and readiness for future professional roles. This study underscores the importance of providing a supportive environment in teacher education programs.

Keywords: preservice preschool teachers; social support; professional identity; teacher education

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (ECE) is widely recognized as a critical foundation for children's lifelong learning and development. The quality and sustainability of ECE systems largely depend on a stable and well-prepared preschool teaching workforce (OECD, 2022). Therefore, professional identity, as a key factor influencing the career development of preschool teachers, is receiving increasing attention. Professional identity is a critical psychological construct in teachers' professional development. Research has consistently shown that teachers who possess a strong professional identity demonstrate higher levels of career commitment, job satisfaction, and professional engagement, whereas those with weaker professional identity are more likely to experience burnout and intention to leave the profession (Hong, 2010; Timoštšuk & Ugaste, 2010; Hen & Gilan-Shochat, 2022).

The preservice stage is a key stage in the formation of professional identity (Moseley et al., 2021). For preservice teachers, professional identity plays a crucial role in shaping teachers' career choices and long-term engagement with the profession. More specifically, for preservice preschool teachers, developing a strong professional identity during their training is essential for their future success in the teaching field. Given the dual role of preservice teachers as both students and future educators, their college training and learning experiences play a

crucial role in shaping their professional identity (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011; Yurtsever & Dulay, 2022; Duraku et al., 2022).

Among the various factors influencing professional identity development, social support has been identified as an important external resource in strengthening professional identity among preservice teachers. Social support can be understood as the provision of physical, emotional, and informational resources that individuals receive from their social relationships, including family members, teachers, peers, and college environment (He, 2013). Previous studies have suggested that supportive learning environments and interpersonal relationships can foster preservice teachers' confidence, motivation, and identification with the teaching profession (Zhang et al., 2021).

However, empirical findings regarding the relationship between social support and professional identity remain inconsistent. While some studies have reported that social support significantly predicts professional identity among preservice teachers (Chen et al., 2020; Fitzgerald et al., 2023; Ye & Wang, 2024), others have found nonsignificant or weak associations in different educational contexts (Huang et al., 2022; Yang, 2022). These mixed results indicate that the role of social support in professional identity development has not yet been fully clarified, particularly among preservice preschool teachers.

Given the critical role of preservice preschool teachers as a future workforce in early childhood education, it is necessary to further explore how social support relates to professional identity. Accordingly, this study focuses on preservice preschool teachers in China to investigate the relationship between social support and professional identity, with the aim of clarifying the role of social support in professional identity formation during teacher preparation.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Participants were preservice preschool teachers enrolled in associate degree programs at public normal colleges in China. All participants were third-year students majoring in preschool education and were in the final stage of their training before entering the teaching profession. At this stage, they had completed most theoretical coursework and had gained practical teaching experience through kindergarten internships. Ultimately, 531 valid data points were collected.

Measures

Professional Identity

Professional identity was evaluated with the Student Teacher Professional Identity Scale for Preservice Kindergarten Teachers (STPIS-PK), developed by Zhang and Wang (2018). The scale was derived from the Professional Identification Scale for Normal Students originally proposed by Wang et al. (2010). In the Chinese educational context, the term normal students refers to preservice teachers. The instrument includes 12 items distributed across four dimensions: professional values, professional efficacy, professional willingness, and professional volition. Responses were collected on a five-point agreement scale, where higher scores indicated a stronger sense of professional identity. Prior studies have reported satisfactory reliability and validity of the STPIS-PK among preservice preschool teachers (Wang et al., 2018; Zhang & Wang, 2018; Zhu et al., 2019). In this study, the scale demonstrated high internal reliability (Cronbach's α = .945).

Social support

Social support in this study was assessed using the Social Support Questionnaire for Preservice Preschool Teachers (SSQPPT). This instrument was adapted from the Social Support Questionnaire for Preservice Special Education Teachers developed by He (2013). The original version contained 25 items covering four domains, namely family support, teacher support, peer support, and college support. Participants responded to each item using a five-point response format, with options ranging from strong disagreement to strong agreement. Higher total scores reflected stronger perceived social support. Previous research has demonstrated the applicability of this scale in studies involving preservice teachers (Feng & He, 2014).

To ensure suitability for preservice preschool teachers, five items related specifically to special education teaching contexts were revised to reflect the preschool education context, and one item unrelated to preschool education was removed. This adaptation retained the original theoretical framework and dimensional structure of the instrument. After the adaptation, the Social Support Questionnaire for Preservice Preschool Teachers (SSQPPT) consists of 24 items across the same four dimensions. In the present study, the scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of α = .943.

Procedure

A questionnaire-based survey was implemented among preservice preschool teachers studying at public normal colleges in Shandong Province, China. The survey was distributed online in the form of a web link and completed responses were submitted through Wenjuanxing, a widely used Chinese survey platform. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Prior to responding, all participants were provided with information regarding the purpose of the research. To protect privacy, no personally identifiable data were collected and all responses were recorded anonymously. Following data collection, completed questionnaires were reviewed for completeness and quality, and only valid responses were retained for subsequent analyses.

Data Analysis

Statistical analyses were carried out with SPSS software (version 27.0). Descriptive statistics were first calculated to summarize participants' demographic characteristics. Mean values and standard deviations were then calculated to describe the overall levels of social support and professional identity. To assess the association between the two core variables, Pearson's product–moment correlation coefficients were computed. Subsequently, a simple linear regression model was fitted to determine whether social support could significantly account for variance in professional identity. All statistical tests were evaluated using a significance threshold of .05.

RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics

Table 1 Basic Demographic (N=531)

Demographic Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	49	9.2
	Female	482	90.8
Age	19-20	21	4.0
	21-22	433	81.5
	23-24	77	14.5
birthplace	City	138	26.0
	Country	393	74.0

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 531 respondents. Females constituted the majority of the sample (90.8%), while males accounted for 9.2%. Most participants were aged between 21 and 22 years (81.5%), followed by those aged 23–24 years (14.5%), while a small proportion were aged 19–20 years (4.0%). In terms of birthplace, 26.0% of the participants reported urban backgrounds, whereas 74.0% reported rural backgrounds.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics of Social Support and Professional Identity

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level
SS	531	3.25	.74	Moderate
PI	531	3.26	.92	Moderate

Note. SS = Social Support; PI = Professional Identity.

Descriptive statistics were computed to examine the levels of social support and professional identity. Following the classification criteria for five-point Likert scales proposed by Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995), mean scores between 1.00–2.49 indicate a low level, 2.50–3.49 indicate a moderate level, and 3.50–5.00 indicate a high level. As shown in Table 2, both social support and professional identity were at a moderate level. The mean score for social support was 3.25 (SD = 0.74), while the mean score for professional identity was 3.26 (SD = 0.92). The level of professional identity variables was slightly higher than that of social support.

Correlation Analysis

Table 3 Pearson Correlation Matrix of Social Support and Professional Identity

Variables	Social Support (SS)
Social Support (SS)	1
Professional Identity (PI)	.358**

Note. $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

Table 3 presents the correlation between social support and professional identity. The results indicate a statistically significant association between the two variables ($r = 0.36$, $p < .01$). According to Cohen (1988), correlation coefficients of approximately 0.10 indicate a small effect, around 0.30 indicate a medium effect, and 0.50 or above indicate a large effect. Therefore, social support was positively and moderately correlated with professional identity. The findings suggest that higher levels of social support are moderately associated with stronger professional identity among preservice preschool teachers.

Simple linear regression analysis

Table 4 Results of Simple Linear Regression Analysis Predicting Professional Identity

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Constant	1.809	0.164	—	11.045	< .001
Social Support	0.446	0.050	0.358	8.832	< .001

Note. $R^2 = .129$, Adjusted $R^2 = .127$, $F (1, 529) = 78.013$, $p < .001$.

B = unstandardized coefficient; SE = standard error; β = standardized coefficient.

A linear regression analysis was conducted to examine whether social support significantly predicts professional identity among preschool education students. As shown in Table 4, social support significantly predicted

professional identity (β = .358, p < .001). The model explained 12.9% of the variance in professional identity (R^2 = .129, F (1, 529) = 78.013, p < .001). The unstandardized coefficient indicated that for each one-unit increase in perceived social support, professional identity increased by 0.446 units. The adjusted R^2 value of .127 indicated that the model demonstrated acceptable stability and fit. The overall regression model was statistically significant.

DISCUSSION

The level of professional identity among preservice preschool teachers

Regarding the level of professional identity, the present study found that preservice preschool teachers demonstrated a moderate level of professional identity. This finding is consistent with the results of Dou and Chen (2024) and Zhang et al. (2025), who similarly reported that preservice preschool teachers exhibited a moderate level of professional identity. Qiao (2025) also noted that although the mean level of professional identity among preservice preschool teachers exceeded the median, there remains considerable room for improvement. However, the findings of the present study diverge from those reported by Chen et al. (2023) and Liu and Wang (2024), both of which indicated that preservice preschool teachers demonstrated a relatively high level of professional identity.

This suggests that although students generally demonstrate a certain level of awareness and acceptance of the preschool teacher profession, their professional identity has not yet been fully consolidated. From a conceptual perspective, professional identity refers to individuals' understanding, acceptance, and internalization of their professional roles, values, and commitments (Wang et al. 2010; Zhang et al. 2011). This finding is understandable in light of prior research emphasizing the dynamic and developmental nature of professional identity. Studies have consistently suggested that professional identity evolves gradually through professional socialization, learning experiences, and contextual support(Lamote & Engels, 2010；Hong,2010；Huang et al., 2022；Chen et al.,2023).

Similarly, based on social cognitive career theory (Lent et al.,1994), professional identity is not a fixed attribute but a dynamic and developmental process that evolves through learning experiences, social interactions, and professional socialization. For preservice teachers, they are still navigating the dual roles of learners and future educators during their teacher education programs (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011; Yurtsever & Dulay, 2022; Duraku et al., 2022). Therefore, this highlights the necessity of continuously providing educational and social support during the teacher education stage.

The level of social support among preservice preschool teachers

Analysis of mean and standard deviation revealed that preservice preschool teachers' social support mean was 3.26, categorized as 'moderate'. This indicates they experience moderate levels of social support. This finding aligns with existing literature, which consistently reports preservice preschool teachers' social support as generally moderate or low (Li, 2020; Chen et al., 2023; Cui & Zhang, 2023). However, this finding diverges from the conclusions of Zhang (2021) and Hou (2020), who reported that preservice preschool teachers generally experience higher levels of social support. Concurrently, Li (2023) also observed that preservice teachers' perceptions of social support were at a relatively high level.

This finding suggests that although prospective teachers can draw support from family, teachers, peers, and the broader educational environment, this support has not yet attained a consistently robust or fully integrated state. From a social support theory(SST) perspective, social support depends not only on the objective availability of support resources but also on individuals' subjective perceptions and their capacity to effectively utilise these resources (Cobb, 1976). As prospective teachers remain in the preparatory phase of their careers rather than being fully integrated into the workplace, their access to stable, sustained support networks remains limited. This may partially explain the origins of the moderate support levels observed.

The relationship between social support and professional identity

The findings revealed a significant positive link between social support and professional identity among

preservice preschool teachers. In addition, results from regression modeling indicated that social support served as a meaningful predictor of professional identity. The positive association identified in this study is consistent with a growing body of empirical research highlighting the importance of social support in professional identity development. For example, Mikkola et al. (2018) demonstrated that social support serves as a significant predictor of professional identity, emphasizing its role in enhancing individuals' sense of professional belonging and commitment. Similarly, Chen et al. (2020) reported a significant positive correlation between professional identity and perceived social support, suggesting that external support systems can influence how preservice teachers perceive their professional roles and competencies. These findings align with the present study, indicating that social support functions as an important contextual factor in fostering professional identity among preservice teachers.

However, it is worth noting that the relationship between social support and professional identity has not been uniformly confirmed across all studies. For instance, Huang et al. (2022) investigated junior college students majoring in preschool education and found no significant relationship between perceived social support and occupational identity. Similarly, Yang (2022) reported a non-significant association between professional identity and perceived social support among nursing undergraduates. These inconsistent studies have revealed that the relationship between social support and professional identity may be influenced by contextual factors such as educational level, professional field, cultural background, and the nature of support measured.

In conclusion, preservice preschool teachers who perceive stronger support from family members, peers, teachers, and educational institutions tend to develop a clearer and more positive identification with the preschool education profession. This may be largely attributed to the fact that this group is situated at a critical transitional stage from academic learning to professional practice, during which individuals actively construct their professional self-concepts. Feedback, encouragement, and recognition from significant others—including teachers, peers, family members, and educational institutions—can effectively strengthen preservice teachers' professional cognition, professional emotions, professional will, and readiness for future professional roles.

CONCLUSION

This study highlighted the important role of supportive environments in teacher preparation. The findings extend existing research by providing empirical evidence from the context of preservice preschool teacher education in China and underscore the relevance of social support in professional identity development during the preservice stage.

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