

Investigation and Correlation Study on the Status of Professional Identity and Job Engagement among Early Childhood Educators in Jiangsu Province

Qiao Le

Lianyungang Normal College, Lianyungang, Jiangsu, China

Abstract: In this study, 293 preschool teachers in Jiangsu Province were selected as subjects, and the status of their professional identity, job engagement and the relationship between the two were investigated by questionnaire measurement. The results showed that the professional identity level ($M=4.46$) and job engagement level ($M=4.15$) of preschool teachers in Jiangsu Province were higher. There were no significant differences in professional identity and job engagement among different genders, age groups, and teaching years. The professional identity of preschool teachers in Jiangsu Province has a positive predictive effect on work engagement.

Keywords: Professional Identity; Job Engagement; Correlation Analysis; Preschool Teachers

1. Introduction

Early childhood education plays an indispensable role in advancing China's population strategy and fertility policies, as well as in achieving the goals of early childhood education itself^[1]. The "China Education Modernization 2035" plan, issued in 2019, highlights development objectives such as "universalizing high-quality early childhood education" and "building a highly qualified, professional, and innovative teaching workforce." This emphasis underscores that the widespread availability of high-quality early childhood education and the construction of a robust cohort of well-qualified early childhood educators are integral components of propelling the modernization of education in China. These efforts hold profound significance for enhancing the overall quality of education, promoting societal advancement, and nurturing future talent. Teachers are the linchpins of educational quality; a professional and highly

qualified teaching force can effectively elevate teaching standards and foster comprehensive student development. Building a high-caliber team of early childhood educators not only attracts talented individuals to the profession but also enhances their professional identity and job satisfaction, thereby inspiring genuine commitment to their work. This, in turn, fosters career development and initiates a virtuous cycle. The work of early childhood educators is intricate and multifaceted, with their job performance directly influencing not only the holistic development of young children but also the long-term progress of the national early childhood education sector.

The concept of job engagement was first introduced by Kahn (1990). In this study, we adopt the definition proposed by Schaufeli et al. (2002), which describes job engagement as "a fulfilling work-related state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption^[2]." The level of job engagement among early childhood educators directly impacts the quality of education and care provided in kindergartens, thereby affecting the physical and mental health and development of young children. Therefore, enhancing the job engagement of early childhood educators is crucial for improving the quality of early childhood education and ensuring its sustainable development^[3].

Professional identity refers to an individual's understanding and recognition of their professional role, serving as a critical psychological factor influencing teachers' job engagement. In recent years, as educational reforms have deepened, increasing attention has been paid to teachers' professional identity. Drawing on international research on teacher professional identity and in line with the needs of this study, we adopt the definition by Wei Shuhua (2005), which conceptualizes professional identity as both a process and a

state. The "process" aspect refers to the gradual development and affirmation of one's role as a teacher through personal experiences, while the "state" aspect pertains to the degree of recognition an individual has for their teaching profession at a given time^[4].

Existing research has demonstrated a close relationship between teachers' levels of job engagement and their professional identity. Bai Yuping et al. (2022), through a survey of 1,445 primary and secondary school psychological teachers in Beijing, explored the current status of professional identity, perceived organizational support, and job engagement, discovering positive correlations among these three variables^[5]. Wang Lijing (2019), in her study on the professional identity and job engagement of secondary school physical education teachers, found that professional identity positively predicts job engagement^[6]. Similar conclusions have been drawn in studies on higher education faculty. For instance, Yu Lihong's (2011) research revealed a positive correlation between university physical education teachers' professional identity and job engagement, with structural differences across the dimensions of professional identity at different stages of career development^[7]. Hou Chao (2020) conducted a survey on the professional identity and job engagement of private university counselors, reaching the same conclusion—that professional identity can predict the level of job engagement^[8].

In the domain of early childhood education, scholars have found a close correlation between teachers' professional identity and the quality of education they provide. For example, the research of Zhu Ping and Zhang Quan (2022) demonstrated significant positive correlations between professional identity, teaching efficacy, job satisfaction, and job engagement among early childhood educators, suggesting that enhancing professional identity can bolster job engagement^[9]. Qiu Ruichun (2020), focusing on early childhood educators, found that professional identity significantly predicts job

engagement^[10]. Liu Fang's (2020) study on private kindergarten teachers similarly revealed a significant positive correlation between professional identity and job engagement^[11]. However, research specifically concerning the circumstances of early childhood educators in Jiangsu Province remains scarce. Only when early childhood educators perceive their work as valuable and highly recognize their profession are they likely to willingly and wholeheartedly engage in educational and instructional activities. Understanding the relationship between teachers' professional identity and job engagement is crucial for improving their job performance and well-being, and it provides a theoretical foundation for educational management. Based on existing research, this study hypothesizes that higher levels of professional identity are associated with higher levels of job engagement.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Research Subjects

This study focuses on early childhood educators in Jiangsu Province, specifically targeting teachers from 14 kindergartens across various cities, including Nanjing, Changzhou, Nantong, Huai'an, Yangzhou, Suqian, and Lianyungang. The survey was conducted between August 23, 2022, and September 18, 2022. Data collection primarily relied on the online platform Wenjuanxing, resulting in a total of 322 respondents. After excluding 29 invalid responses, 293 valid questionnaires were retained, yielding an effective response rate of 90.99%. As illustrated in Table 1, the sample predominantly consisted of female teachers (286 women versus 7 men). The vast majority of respondents were between the ages of 21 and 40, accounting for approximately 86.7% of the sample. In terms of teaching experience, teachers with 1 to 10 years of experience constituted the largest proportion, representing around 63.5%.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics of Sample Characteristics

Category	Option	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	7	2.4
	Female	286	97.6
Age	21-30 years	142	48.5
	31-40 years	112	38.2
	41-50 years	28	9.6

	51-60 years	11	3.8
Teaching Experience	Less than 1 year	12	4.1
	1-5 years	96	32.8
	6-10 years	90	30.7
	11-15 years	52	17.7
	More than 16 years	43	14.7
-	Total	293	100

2.2 Research Instruments

2.2.1 Professional Identity Questionnaire

This study employed the "Professional Identity Scale for Early Childhood Educators," developed by Zhou Manqin^[12]. To better align with the specific characteristics of kindergartens in Jiangsu Province, the scale was adapted by selectively omitting certain items to form the tailored scale used in this research. Following multiple rounds of factor analysis, the final scale comprised 11 items divided into three dimensions. The scale utilized a 5-point Likert scoring system (where 1 indicates "completely disagree" and 5 indicates "completely agree"), with higher scores signifying a stronger sense of professional identity. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the three dimensions were 0.825, 0.876, and 0.895, all exceeding the 0.7 threshold, thereby demonstrating satisfactory reliability.

The scale included three items assessing "Role Values" (reflecting early childhood educators' positive evaluations and attitudes toward their professional identity), three items assessing "Professional Behavioral Tendencies" (indicating the educators' ability to meet or exceed job requirements, thus achieving a level of performance that surpasses expectations), and five items assessing "Professional Values" (representing the educators' positive attitudes and evaluations concerning the significance and impact of their profession). The scoring method remained consistent, with higher scores denoting higher levels of professional identity.

2.2.2 Job Engagement Questionnaire

Drawing on the "Job Engagement Questionnaire for Early Childhood Educators" developed by Wang Yanfeng, this study modified the scale to fit the particular context of kindergartens in Jiangsu Province by removing certain items^[13]. After extensive factor analysis, the final version consisted of 12 items grouped into four dimensions. The scale employed a 5-point Likert scale (where 1

denotes "completely disagree" and 5 denotes "completely agree"), with higher scores reflecting greater job engagement. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the four dimensions in this study were 0.912, 0.862, 0.864, and 0.751, all meeting the >0.7 standard for reliability.

The dimensions included: "Work Pleasure" (three items measuring the joy educators experience in their work), "Work Value" (three items assessing the sense of meaning and value educators derive from their work), "Work Responsibility" (three items evaluating the level of responsibility educators feel in their roles), and "Work Focus" (three items measuring the degree of concentration and immersion educators exhibit in their work). As before, higher scores indicated higher levels of job engagement.

2.3 Data Analysis

The data collected in this study were statistically analyzed using SPSS 27.0. The primary statistical methods employed included descriptive statistics, independent samples t-tests, analysis of variance (ANOVA), correlation analysis, and regression analysis.

3. Results Analysis

3.1 Descriptive Statistical Results

As presented in Table 2, the overall mean score for professional identity among early childhood educators in Jiangsu Province was notably high, with an average score of $M = 4.46$. Among the three dimensions, "Professional Behavioral Tendencies" recorded the highest mean score ($M = 4.75$), followed by "Professional Values" ($M = 4.66$), while "Role Values" had the lowest mean score relative to the other dimensions ($M = 3.97$), although it still reflected a high level. These findings suggest that the professional identity of early childhood educators in Jiangsu Province is generally very strong, indicating a substantial recognition and endorsement of their profession.

Regarding job engagement, the study also found elevated levels, with an overall mean score of 4.15. The dimensions of "Work Value" (M = 4.07), "Work Responsibility" (M = 4.68), and "Work Focus" (M = 4.44) all scored high, demonstrating significant engagement in these

areas. However, "Work Pleasure" (M = 3.39) had the lowest score among the four dimensions, indicating a relatively lower but still considerable level of enjoyment derived from their work.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistical Results (n = 293)

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Professional Identity	4.46	0.53
Role Values	3.97	0.93
Professional Behavioral Tendencies	4.75	0.43
Professional Values	4.66	0.55
Job Engagement	4.15	0.71
Work Pleasure	3.39	1.24
Work Value	4.07	0.93
Work Responsibility	4.68	0.52
Work Focus	4.44	0.64

reaching significantly high levels.

3.2 Analysis of Group Differences

An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to explore whether significant differences existed in professional identity and job engagement across variables such as gender, age, and years of teaching experience among early childhood educators. The results indicated no significant differences in professional identity and job engagement based on gender, age, or years of teaching experience. However, it is noteworthy that educators aged 50 and above scored the highest across all dimensions, with mean scores of 4.84 for professional identity and 4.71 for job engagement, reflecting exceptionally high levels. Additionally, educators with more than 16 years of teaching experience also exhibited the highest scores in both professional identity (M = 4.49) and job engagement (M = 4.23), across all dimensions,

3.3 Study on the Relationship Between Professional Identity and Job Engagement among Early Childhood Educators in Jiangsu Province

3.3.1 Correlation Analysis Between Professional Identity and Job Engagement

As illustrated in Table 3, the correlation coefficient between the overall mean score for professional identity and the overall mean score for job engagement among early childhood educators in Jiangsu Province was 0.794, indicating a significant positive correlation. Examining the individual dimensions of the two variables, each of the three dimensions of professional identity was significantly correlated with each of the four dimensions of job engagement.

Table 3 Correlation Analysis Between Professional Identity and Job Engagement and Their Dimensions Among Early Childhood Educators in Jiangsu Province

	Professional Identity	Role Values	Professional Behavioral Tendencies	Professional Values	Job Engagement	Work Pleasure	Work Value	Work Responsibility	Work Focus
Professional Identity	1								
Role Values	.893**	1							
Professional Behavioral Tendencies	.707**	.416**	1						
Professional Values	.823**	.557**	.557**	1					
Job Engagement	.794**	.724**	.546**	.640**	1				
Work Pleasure	.688**	.691**	.407**	.496**	.905**	1			
Work Value	.725**	.707**	.427**	.562**	.906**	.791**	1		

Work Responsibility	.621**	.418**	.643**	.584**	.678**	.427**	.496**	1	
Work Focus	.615**	.488**	.479**	.575**	.792**	.561**	.613**	.632**	1

Note: ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

3.3.2 Regression Analysis of Professional Identity and Job Engagement

Table 4 presents the results of the regression analysis, revealing that professional identity accounts for 63.1% of the variance in job engagement ($R^2 = 0.631$) among early

childhood educators in Jiangsu Province. The regression coefficient was found to be significant ($p < 0.001$), further substantiating the predictive power of professional identity on job engagement.

Table 4: Regression Analysis of Job Engagement on Professional Identity

Predictor Variable	Outcome Variable	R^2	β	F	t
Professional Identity	Job Engagement	0.631	0.742	497.218	22.298

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Characteristics of Professional Identity and Job Engagement among Early Childhood Educators in Jiangsu Province

This study, drawing from a sample of 293 early childhood educators across 14 kindergartens in seven cities within Jiangsu Province, aimed to assess the current state of professional identity and job engagement among these educators, as well as to explore the relationship between these two constructs. The statistical results revealed that the average scores for the four variables, each measured on a 5-point scale, were notably high. Specifically, the average score for professional identity was 4.47, indicating a generally elevated level of professional identity among early childhood educators in Jiangsu Province, a finding that aligns with the research of Zhang Li and Ye Pingzhi (2021). When examining the three dimensions of professional identity, "Professional Behavioral Tendencies" scored the highest, followed by "Professional Values," while "Role Values" received the lowest score. This suggests that early childhood educators in Jiangsu Province exhibit a strong recognition of the value of their profession and are highly effective in fulfilling their work tasks; however, their positive self-evaluation and attitude toward their professional identity are comparatively lower.

The mean score for job engagement was 4.15, reflecting a high level of engagement, consistent with the findings of Jia Chunyu (2022). Among the four dimensions of job engagement, "Work Responsibility" scored the highest, with "Work Focus" and "Work Value" also reaching high levels. Conversely, "Work

Pleasure" received the lowest score among the dimensions. The mid-to-high average scores for "Work Responsibility," "Work Value," and "Work Focus" indicate that early childhood educators maintain a strong sense of responsibility and value in their work, demonstrating a high level of focus and dedication. However, the moderate level of "Work Pleasure" suggests that while educators are driven by a strong sense of responsibility and value, their enjoyment of their work is relatively lower. This highlights the need for targeted strategies to enhance the sense of pleasure and satisfaction that early childhood educators derive from their work^[14].

The analysis further indicated that there were no significant gender differences in professional identity and job engagement among early childhood educators in Jiangsu Province. However, significant differences were observed across different age groups and years of teaching experience. Educators aged 50 and above, as well as those with more than 16 years of teaching experience, exhibited the highest overall mean scores in both professional identity and job engagement, as well as in all their respective dimensions, reaching exceptionally high levels. This finding suggests that educators in these groups typically possess a wealth of teaching experience and professional knowledge, which fosters a deeper understanding and appreciation of their profession. Their continued acquisition of new knowledge and skills enables them to confidently address the various challenges encountered in educational practice. Over the years, their accumulated sense of professional fulfillment as educators has led to an increasingly strong recognition of their profession. Consequently, they approach their

work with greater enthusiasm, willingly dedicating substantial time and energy to their roles, embracing challenges, and fully immersing themselves in their work with focused dedication.

In summary, the levels of professional identity and job engagement among early childhood educators in Jiangsu Province are generally high. As China's economy continues to develop rapidly, alongside the introduction and implementation of various educational policies, Jiangsu Province—being a major economic and educational hub—has progressively heightened its emphasis on early childhood education. This has reinforced the social standing of early childhood educators, enhanced their societal influence, and provided a favorable social environment for their professional development. Consequently, these factors have bolstered the professional identity and job engagement of early childhood educators in Jiangsu Province.

4.2 Analysis of the Relationship Between Professional Identity and Job Engagement Among Early Childhood Educators in Jiangsu Province

The study revealed a significant positive correlation between professional identity and job engagement among early childhood educators in Jiangsu Province, identifying professional identity as a crucial factor influencing job engagement. This finding aligns with the research outcomes of Mu Shengdiao (2019), Cheng Li (2021) Zhu Ping (2022), and Qiu Ruichun (2020).^[15-18] Specifically, when early childhood educators possess a stronger sense of identification with their professional role and identity, they are more likely to exhibit higher levels of job engagement. This identification encompasses not only a deep-seated passion for and responsibility toward the field of education but also an acknowledgment of their professional value and an enhanced sense of self-efficacy. The greater the level of recognition, the more energized and enthusiastic educators become in their work, driving them to proactively address challenges and diligently fulfill their professional responsibilities.

A regression analysis of the collected data further substantiated these findings, demonstrating that professional identity could explain 63.1% of the variance in job engagement among early childhood educators

in Jiangsu Province, with the regression coefficients proving to be statistically significant. This result underscores the pivotal role that professional identity plays in shaping the extent to which early childhood educators commit to their work. The more educators value their professional roles and the significance of their work, the more likely they are to invest themselves actively in their duties, better confronting challenges, and deriving a sense of joy and value from their work, thereby enhancing their overall task performance. Specifically, a strong professional identity can motivate educators to dedicate more time and energy to daily teaching activities, actively participate in various educational initiatives and training programs, and improve their professional skills. When educators perceive their importance in the developmental process of children, they are more inclined to immerse themselves in their educational duties, demonstrating greater enthusiasm and creativity in their day-to-day teaching practices. Moreover, a strong sense of professional identity can foster a collaborative spirit among educators, promoting team building and creating a positive educational atmosphere, which further enhances job satisfaction and well-being.

Overall, the professional identity of early childhood educators in Jiangsu Province not only contributes to the advancement of individual career trajectories but also lays a solid foundation for the overall improvement of teaching quality within kindergartens. Therefore, strengthening the professional identity of early childhood educators emerges as a critical strategy for enhancing job engagement and educational quality.

5. Conclusion

The findings indicate that the levels of professional identity and job engagement among early childhood educators in Jiangsu Province are relatively high. There were no significant differences in professional identity and job engagement across different genders, age groups, or years of teaching experience. However, educators aged 50 and above, as well as those with over 16 years of teaching experience, consistently scored the highest in both professional identity and job engagement across all dimensions, reaching exceptionally high levels. Furthermore, professional identity

was found to be a significant predictor of job engagement among early childhood educators. The high-quality development of early childhood education is intrinsically linked to the educators themselves, requiring both a profound identification with their profession and a wholehearted commitment to their work. For early childhood educators, a strong identification with their professional role can ignite their enthusiasm and initiative for engaging in early childhood education, fostering a proactive and even passionate attitude toward their daily caregiving and educational responsibilities. Recognition of the value of their profession encourages educators to delve into the principles of early childhood education and engage in educational research, thereby enhancing their sense of professional achievement and, in turn, reinforcing their professional identity, creating a virtuous cycle. Future educational policies should focus on enhancing the professional identity of early childhood educators, creating an improved working environment and offering greater opportunities for career development. Such measures would bolster educators' motivation and ultimately raise the quality of education. These findings offer valuable insights and recommendations for the enhancement of early childhood education quality in Jiangsu Province and provide effective references and guidance for the professional development of early childhood educators in the region.

Acknowledgments

This paper is supported by 2023 Jiangsu University Philosophy and Social Science Research Project. Research on the influence mechanism of professional identity of preschool teachers on job engagement in Jiangsu Province (2023SJYB1869)

References:

- [1] Zeng, L. (2009). The Relationship Between Subjective Well-being, Job Satisfaction, and Social Support Among Early Childhood Educators. *Chinese Journal of Health Psychology*, 17(07), 815-816.
- [2] Kahn, W. A. (1990). Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement at Work. *Academy of Management Journal*, (4).
- [3] Zhu, L. (2024). The Relationship Between Professional Identity and Job Engagement Among Early Childhood Educators: The Chain Mediating Role of Emotional Intelligence and Professional Commitment. *Journal of Guizhou Normal College*, 40(02), 31-37.
- [4] Wei, S. (2005). Professional Identity and Professional Development of Teachers [Doctoral dissertation]. Qufu Normal University.
- [5] Bai, Y., Huang, F., & Xiao, J. (2022). The Relationship Between Professional Identity, Perceived Organizational Support, and Job Engagement Among Psychological Teachers in Primary and Secondary Schools. *Mental Health Education in Primary and Secondary Schools*, (16), 14-19.
- [6] Wang, L. (2019). The Relationship Between Professional Identity, Teaching Efficacy, and Job Engagement Among Secondary School Physical Education Teachers [Doctoral dissertation]. Shanxi Normal University.
- [7] Yu, L., Tang, G., & Gao, K. (2011). The Relationship Between Professional Identity and Job Engagement Among University Physical Education Teachers. *China Sport Science and Technology*, 47(06), 136-141.
- [8] Hou, C. (2020). A Study on the Relationship Between Professional Identity and Job Engagement: A Case Study of Private University Counselors. *China Market*, (28), 108-110.
- [9] Zhu, P., & Zhang, Q. (2023). The Chain Mediating Effect of Professional Identity on Job Engagement Among Early Childhood Educators. *Chinese Journal of Health Psychology*, 31(01), 65-70.
- [10] Qiu, R., & Wang, X. (2020). A Study on the Relationship Between Psychological Capital, Professional Identity, and Job Engagement Among Early Childhood Educators. *Education Modernization*, 7(56), 99-102.
- [11] Liu, F. (2020). An Investigation Into the Professional Identity of Novice Teachers in Private Kindergartens: A Case Study of Sichuan Province. *Education Observation*, 9(24), 42-43+108.
- [12] Zhou, M. (2021). The Relationship Between Social Support and Job Satisfaction Among Early Childhood Educators: The Mediating Role of Professional Identity [Doctoral dissertation].

- Huaibei Normal University.
- [13]Wang, Y., & Qin, J. (2010). Development of a Job Engagement Questionnaire for Early Childhood Educators. *Psychological Development and Education*, 26(05), 534-542.
- [14]Zhang, L., & Ye, P. (2021). The Structure and Characteristics of Professional Identity Among Preschool Educators in Guangdong Province. *Higher Education Exploration*, (12), 110-115+122.
- [15]Jia, C., & Jin, F. (2022). The Relationship Between Psychological Capital and Job Engagement Among Early Childhood Educators. *Chinese Journal of Occupational Medicine*, 49(01), 67-70.
- [16]Huang, H. (2023). The Relationship Between Professional Identity, Perceived Organizational Support, and Job Engagement Among Early Childhood Educators. *Education Horizon*, (28), 27-31.
- [17]Mu, S. (2019). The Relationship Between Work Stress and Professional Well-being Among Rural Early Childhood Educators: The Moderating Role of Psychological Capital. *Journal of Longdong University*, 30(04), 141-144.
- [18]Cheng, L., & Chen, S. (2021). The Impact of Professional Identity on Job Engagement Among Rural Kindergarten Teachers. *Journal of Huanggang Normal University*, 41(04), 83-87+133.